

Preface: Alterities – Politics of In(ter)vention

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‘Alterities’ — *Altérités* — originally published in France in 1986 (Paris: Osiris) is something of a curiosity. It is the transcription of a *colloque*, a small conference (one afternoon and evening session from 4 to 10), held at the *Centre Sèvres* in 1984 and organised by Pierre-Jean Labarrière, director of the *Faculté de Philosophie des Jésuites en France* and also founding and directing member (together with Jacques Derrida and others) of the *Collège International de Philosophie*. A group of about thirty people from the *Centre Sèvres*, the *Institut Catholique de Paris* and the *Collège International de Philosophie* and a few other universities attended this event. This is what the back cover announces:

The Other and the others... Difference and *différance* ... Alterity and alteration¹... The Other as Other and as relation... The logic of the break (or of interruption) and the logic of mediation... These are some among other related topics around which the *Centre Sèvres* organised a conference and in which about thirty people were invited to take part. The quality of the exchanges this encounter produced prompted us to present it to a larger public, in the hope that this may constitute an original contribution to what is probably one of the major debates within modern thought.

Alterities contains two papers, delivered by Francis Guibal and Stanislas Breton respectively, on the topic of alterity as it appears in the work of Jacques Derrida, and in Pierre-Jean Labarrière’s *Le Discours de l’Altérité – une logique de l’expérience* (Paris: PUF, 1982). It is accompanied by the immediate reactions and questions raised by the conference participants. These two parts, together with the replies by the two authors, find their validity reinforced in the more detailed discussion they evoked. In *Part Three* of this small volume we summarise the main arguments that were the object of this exchange.

Why this translation now? Why translate this text at all if it is something of an ‘oddity’, so ‘French’ in its setup and its format, in a time when ‘French Theory’ is supposedly, at last, as many would say, falling out of fashion? Somewhere between apocryphal and *à contretemps* this short text is interesting for several reasons: one is historical in that it might help to create a better understanding of the variety of French thought, the fundamental disagreement about its own traditions; a plurivocality which did *not* always make it across the Atlantic and across the Channel into literature and cultural studies departments. The belatedness of *Alterities* could thus be seen as being part of an alternative history of ‘French’ Theory. Seen from this point of view, as a process of reevaluation, the current ‘post-theoretical’ moment suddenly also seems no longer so certain. There is a great deal more to say about how and in what form

(some) ‘French’ theory was translated, what was ‘lost’ and ‘gained’ in these translations, and what other translations might have been possible, are still possible; and maybe most importantly, what kind of *retranslations* are occurring as a result of the specific Anglo-American ‘experience’, or even ‘invention’ of ‘French’ Theory.

This is precisely the main interest in François Cusset’s recent study, *French Theory – Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis*,² in which Cusset speaks of a peculiar ‘time-lag’ which only really became apparent during the Sokal affair,³ ‘a time-lag concerning intellectual history in the sense that the Theory-Wars in France during the 1970s, which have long been settled in France (namely in favour of a new “anti-totalitarian humanism”), are still inflaming the American campuses to this day, and have done so for more than twenty years’ (*French Theory* 14-15). Cusset’s entire study is devoted to exploring what he calls ‘the political and intellectual genealogy and the effects of a productive misunderstanding [*malentendu créateur*] between French texts and American readers still felt by us today, a literally structural misunderstanding’ (15). ‘Post-theory’ may therefore be thought of as that state of theory in which theory undertakes a critique of its translation processes and in particular starts questioning what Cusset calls ‘the invention of French Theory’ – which, in a sense is of course also an invention of a (necessary but inevitably ‘narcissistic’) other with secondary effects of alteration – and what lessons may be drawn from this ‘American experience’ (23). As a result, in a similar vein to the anti-globalisation lobby (or rather as they call themselves in France, the *altermondialistes*), a different form of ‘global(ised) theory’ becomes thinkable.

This preface attempts several things: it tries to reconstitute the original context of *Altérités*, the ‘event’, its conceptualisations of the ‘other’, its stylistic variety. At the same time it provides some preliminary reflections on the incredible ‘success story’ of ‘alterity’ and its vehicle (Theory) in the Anglo-American context and argues for the beginning of a systematisation of the conceptual usages of the ‘other’. Finally, it proposes some ways in which the questions that are raised in this volume have gained rather than lost in relevance, nearly twenty years after its publication.

Every act of translation is walking a tightrope between faithfully reconstituting the original and demonstrating the interest of the translated for the target audience and the target language. The specific issues and decisions that arise out of the translation of such a heterogeneous text as *Altérités* are the following:

1. Translator's notes (TN): the scholarly apparatus of the original I think it is fair to say is for usual academic standards rather poor. Wherever possible I have tried to provide short bibliographic references that were missing. I have also produced some background information in places where readers who are less familiar with the 'French' Theory scene (both understood as 'Theory' in France and 'French' Theory in the Anglo-American context) might need some help. This of course is entirely subjective and many other contextualising notes are thinkable and maybe would have been necessary. By implication, needless to say, any notes not preceded by 'TN' are notes in the original given by the respective authors or commentators.

2. Omissions: in the discussion sections I have decided in order to increase the readability of the text to cut those aspects that relate too closely to what in an English context would be called 'housekeeping' (the keeping of time, the calling up of respondents, the taking of questions) and what, in terms of 'politeness' would pass in English at times as rather quaint and deferential. I believe that nothing that is of any importance at the conceptual level for the discussion about alterity as such has been erased.

3. Square brackets: I have tried to keep the disruption of the reading flow to a minimum. Alternatives or untranslatables (like puns, deliberate ambiguities etc.) that are essential for the argument are indicated by square brackets in the text. There are also some equivalents to Greek philosophemes that were 'presupposed' in the original (e.g. *kairos*, *metaxu* etc.) and which I have tried to transliterate.

4. Style and 'untranslatability': the greatest difficulty in translating a text like *Altérités* – a mixture of written and read papers, asides, improvisations, transcripts of discussions with or without editing – is the incredible variety of styles. Inevitably a translation will to some extent 'homogenise' and therefore flatten out this variety of spoken and 'written' or at least pre-recorded interventions. In the case of Derrida this is however somewhat problematic, because style is something that Derrida keeps reminding his readers to be aware or even wary of.⁴ Derrida's often descried 'opaqueness' or obscurity (sometimes rashly identified with obscurantism) is a question of deliberate stylistic choice. Language with its inherent metaphysical

concepts is what is at stake in deconstruction. But since there is no metalanguage (which is what Derrida's (in)famous phrase *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* means), language has to be played out against itself, or somehow placed beside itself. Derrida's discourse therefore has to be undoubtedly 'French' (maybe even more 'French than French' – this is the paradoxical idea of 'purity' so easily misunderstood in *The Monolingualism of the Other*)⁵ and at the same time entirely 'other', the 'other' (of) French language. The result is an alienated French that puts the very instinct of the French native speaker to the test by focusing on the necessary reliance on ambiguity, ambivalence, double-binds, polyphonies, homophonies etc. in a language and any language. Derrida's French, arguably, is what has prevented his work from having the kind of impact (at least not initially) it maybe ironically had in the United States. However, it could be said that if there is a singularly French 'genius' – and Derrida relies on this when he provocatively calls himself the most 'French' of all philosophers writing in French⁶ – it does not lie in some social form of idiomacy or norm but in these polysemous connections, these specific ambiguities, the aporias peculiar to a language. And untranslatability concerns precisely these language-specific 'absurdities', puns, associations, which does not mean that interlingual puns are not possible: switching languages is commonplace in many of Derrida's texts and is one of the greatest sources of 'enrichment', either personal or communal, for any multilingual speaker. But it is in these cases that a translator cannot strictly speaking translate but has to 'reinvent' – or in other words, has to find an equivalent but also an entirely other ambiguity that is 'typical' of the target language. But would that still be a translation according to the conventions?

Most of Derrida's discourse demands to be translated literally – and it is in fact almost perfectly 'transliteratable' into any language most of the time, almost as if it had been written with 'translation in mind'. It is almost as if, despite being 'perfectly' French, it has been written 'in translation' and 'for' translation, except for these what one could almost call in a Lacanian manner, *points de caption*, these 'knots', where on a conceptual level the language breaks down. The best example of this is probably still the famous *différance*. Moreover, this linguistic 'oddity' is infectious. It is traceable through most of Derrida's commentators in any language – in this volume, in Francis Guibal's essay, and probably even in my preface.

Thus I would like to put forward this hypothesis about style and translation: style is impossible to translate where it is bound up with conceptual content – this is

the case most of the time for the ‘non-Derridean’ contributions in this volume. What translators usually do in this case is they translate the ‘meaning’ and find a suitably neutral or elegant style in the target language to express it. Where style becomes translatable and is in fact vital for translation is whenever it is self-conscious and aware of the question of translatability or untranslatability – which is the case for Derrida most of the time, even in his ‘improvised’ spoken contributions to the debate. So while Derrida is perfectly translatable most of the time as long as the translator uses ‘transliteration’, the other speakers, especially Breton and Labarrière, are ‘untransliteratable’ most of the time and demand some work of ‘interpretation’ by a translator.

Thanks to ‘French’ Theory not only the conception but also the style and strategy of translation has changed. The traditional demand of the ‘invisibility of the translator’ has been exposed as a potentially harmful myth and as an ‘ideologeme’.⁷ Instead the very process of translating and its motivations have moved into the foreground with regard to questions of (linguistic, cultural and idiosyncratic) specificity and untranslatability. ‘Translating the untranslatable’ is not merely some phrasal casuistry but points towards traditionally neglected issues like power, violence and desire at work in translation. Untranslatability begs translation – deconstruction in a nutshell. The other ‘begs’ translation.

Thus to return to the question – why this translation, now? – really is asking about its ‘politics of in(ter)vention’. It is, on the one hand, an attempt to ‘(re)invent’ another (French) Theory and ‘prevent’ an all too smug retranslation – returning the ‘French’ letter received some thirty years ago to its presumed ‘sender’, i.e. the ‘French’, in the context of (Anglo-American) globalisation. On the other hand, it is informed by a desire to ‘circumvent’ the arrival of the next fashion, the next ‘sexy’ vogue, partly informed by academics who want to make a name for themselves, partly by publishers who systematically go through the back catalogue of ‘French’ philosophy to see what has not yet been translated and what could sell. Like many of the recently hyped-up figures, for example Alain Badiou and Bernard Stiegler, the contributors to *Altérités* have been around the block a few times mainly without being noticed outside France. There is nothing ‘new’ in the fashionable sense, about this volume. It is in fact a ‘classic’ in that it deals with a question that is as old as humanity itself: what about the other?

Otherness may reside in the to-come (the future may be radically other, but, on the other hand, it also may not), but it is just as well in the ‘present’ (the other is already here) and the past (the other has always [already] been here, without necessarily ‘being’ (made) ‘present’). How to ‘relate’ to the other, on the one hand, as an ethical, political, social, historical question – how to ‘handle’ the other’s otherness and its effects, the changes that may arise, etc., in short the question of ‘alteration’ as Labarrière calls it; on the other hand, how to experience, receive, deal with the ‘irruption’ of the other, how to make sure that what arrives, arrives? A point which is closer to a theological or rather quasi-theological question, a theological question without God, or as Derrida would prefer, a kind of ‘messianism without messiah’, ‘pure messianicity’.⁸

It is thus not so much a question of ‘inventing’ the other, the other as fiction, ‘as if’ another other was possible, i.e. an ‘alternative’ (which could be falsely etymologised as merely being an ‘other-native’, a return to the ‘same’ through the detour of an identified difference); it is rather necessary to recognise that it is the other who does the inventing through its ‘advent’, an arrival that announces itself, calls, interpellates and asks for, in return, a response, a call-back, or a countersignature. Every reading, every translation is such a call to an other who may have been announcing itself, may already be here. This is Derrida’s point in ‘Psyché: The Invention of the Other’:

...to offer a place for the other, would let the other come. I am careful to say ‘let it come’ because if the other is precisely what is not invented, the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in unclosing, destabilizing foreclosure structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other. But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming. The coming of the other or its coming back is the only possible arrival, but it is not invented, even if the most genial inventiveness is needed to prepare to welcome it: to affirm the chance of an encounter that not only is no longer calculable, not even an undecidable still caught up in the process of decision making. Is this possible? Of course it is not, and that is why it is the only possible invention.⁹

But this call to the other, *viens*, is not the kind of passive nihilism of which deconstruction is often accused. There is a lot of work and preparation to be done to be able to articulate that call properly, because even though it is unconditional it is not uncontextualised. Why *this* other, *here and now*? How to deal with the aporia that lies in alterity, every alterity, every single other/ness: the other as relation (to the same, the different, the ‘self’ etc.) and the ‘entirely’ other, the otherness at which ‘price’ the other is other. The whole dilemma of ‘Western’ metaphysics, the whole ‘problem’ of

inheriting Hegel, is encapsulated in what I think is one of Derrida's most important almost formulaic statements, here, in *Altérités*:

Of course, in order to respect the entirely other of alterity, alteration itself — which always presupposes a contact, or an intervention, a socio-political, psycho-etc. transformation — alteration itself would have to be impossible. If the other remains at an infinite distance, and this is the condition on which the other is other, not only can the other not touch me, or affect me, but the other cannot even alter anything. This relation to the entirely other would ultimately leave everything unchanged, unaltered. And it is of an irrefutable logic that pure alterity should be incompatible with the logic of alteration. There is a moment, I feel, when one must re-start negotiating — this is a political or historical concern. This means that if one restricts oneself to the pure respect for this alterity without alteration, one always runs the risk of lending oneself to immobilism, to conservatism, etc., that is to the obliteration of alterity itself... There is no reasonable, rational response to this question. There is no logic.

Derrida upsets any neat and tidy differentiation between 'alteration' and 'alterity', between 'relation' and 'essence', and instead demonstrates that they are in fact linked, but aporetically. He is at once concerned with the limitation of any 'respect' for the other's alterity, which in fact can and has been appropriated by 'postmodern' forms of racism: if the other is really other all the more reason to either discriminate against him, her or it, or demand his, her or its unconditional assimilation. On the other hand, change or alteration can only occur through the arrival of the other, through contact, proximity, irruption, a face-to-face etc. and hence in relation to some form of sameness or ipseity, in the form of an 'appropriation'. Not only is the relation to the other incompatible with the very concept of otherness, and hence, strictly speaking, a relation to the other impossible; it is, nevertheless, also inevitable, absolutely necessary for there to be identity, change, ethics and politics, in the first place. Derrida's escape route here is what he calls 'Necessity' – there is 'Necessity', a call that precedes any 'me' and makes me responsible and responsive – and this 'Necessity' is a singularity, it calls for responsibility each and every time, or as Derrida says elsewhere: '*tout autre est tout autre*'.¹⁰

Alterities started off as the first of a series of 'afternoon sessions' at the Centre Sèvres in Paris ('Les entretiens du Centre-Sèvres'; see www.centresevres.com/presentation). The Centre is located in the *Faculté jésuite de Paris* which teaches theology and philosophy to clerics and teachers. The setting for the original conference is therefore not without importance in that it clearly frames the debate and maps the concept of alterity onto questions of secularity and spirituality. Otherness, with its inevitably mystical echoes, is arguably first and foremost a theological notion, or at least, first

has to be ‘reclaimed’ from theology, secularised, for wider, either psychological or anthropological usage. When Jean Paul Sartre and other existentialists speak about the other, usually referring the other human, their usage is not entirely void of a certain religiousness in the form of humanism and idealism. But that otherness is also an obstacle, a challenge, a Hegelian ‘complement’ asking to be overcome, posited and ‘sublated’ on the philosopher’s way to establishing *SA – Savoir absolu*, or Absolute knowledge.

It is against these limited understandings of alterity and against ‘ontologised’ structuralism, that *les philosophes de la différence* – Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault and many others, including Labarrière (and also to some extent François Laruelle)¹¹ – helped by a climate of cultural change around May ’68, have rebelled.¹² But maybe the label ‘philosophers of difference’ is still too broad because it seems that while Deleuze and Foucault’s work (and to some extent also Lyotard’s) certainly focus on revaluations and also ‘celebrations’ of difference – which were subsequently very influential in producing a certain ‘relativist’ and pluralist postmodernism – others, especially Derrida, Levinas, and also Labarrière are probably better served by the phrase ‘philosophers of alterity’.

It was Labarrière’s *Discours de l’altérité* which in fact inspired the whole event recorded in *Alterities*.¹³ Although stylistically very different from Derrida – almost scholastic in form, rigorously systematic in scope and approach – Labarrière’s main opus shares the same unease with the inevitable – *incontournable* – but also deeply disturbing Hegelian inheritance (mediated and disseminated by the equally *incontournable* Alexandre Kojève).¹⁴ Labarrière situates himself in relation to both structuralism and philosophy of difference and seeks to embrace structure *and* movement (alterity *and* alteration) and ‘anchor’ them within a ‘logic of experience’, that is, in discourse. It is thus a complementation of structuralism with the retrieved question of same and other and their relation, rather than ‘post-structuralism’ in any teleological sense, that is at stake when Labarrière puts forward his most pressing concern: ‘in the beginning is (already) a relation’ (*DA* 15), or to paraphrase in a Derridean analogy, there is nothing outside relation or relatedness (or difference, for that matter) and experience.¹⁵ But this experience is grounded in alterity as ‘structures-in-movement’ in the form of a ‘mutual presupposition of the “given” and the “constructed” – of alterity and discourse’ neither of which are self-sufficient (*DA* 14-15). ‘True alterity’, for Labarrière, and thus ‘the one that has significance for man,

cannot be the one of the simple given, which in every respect remains irreducible, but rather that which is posited and recognised as such by a discourse which upon encountering this difference will have renounced its tendency to return everything to the fixity of its own structures' (DA 10). Labarrière's aim is thus ultimately to move from an 'alterity of difference' to an 'alterity of relation' (and hence of identity; DA 319, 340). It is philosophy's task to recognise and think through, at once, the desire for identity (which constitutes discourse) and the quest for alterity (which equals experience: DA 61). The central concern in the relation between self and other is freedom:

There is no discourse of freedom which does not emerge from an alterity, a properly relational (related and relating) alterity; and there is no alterity – at least among those forms of alterity which reject any vain attempt at functioning through exclusion – which does not emerge within discourse, in which it thus, justly, gains its signification with regard to freedom. (DA 334)

In terms of politics this translates into a rejection of liberal pluralism (DA 350) and – in a typically 'republican' reflex – instead affirms plural unity (DA 351-2, 356).

Labarrière makes his position on alterity clear in after Guibal's paper when he insists on bringing in the term 'mediation' (or relation) into the discussion from the start. He thereby emphasises the fact that any relation to the other is already an alteration because it takes place at the level of representation, and that this altering relation is if not mutual then at least taking place in 'both directions', that is to say it is also an issue for the other (something that for example becomes visible in questions about 'inverted' orientalism, or 'occidentalism' in postcolonial studies, where 'othering' is usually understood as a representational process of 'stigmatisation', a 'marking' of the other in view of a disempowering relation to 'self-affirmation'). There is thus no reason to idealise any othering of the other, done by the other.

The best initiation to Stanislas Breton's work available in English remains the interview which Richard Kearney conducted with him in 1982, published in this remarkable resource, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*.¹⁶ As Kearney explains, Stanislas Breton joined the Passionist order of Catholic priests where he received a thorough schooling in the Thomistic and scholastic traditions before moving on to study theology and contemporary theories of phenomenology, logic and mathematics at the Sorbonne. He taught at the Pontifical University in Rome and later in Lyon and at the *Institut Catholique de Paris* and the *Ecole Normale*

Supérieure, together with Derrida and Louis Althusser. Kearney describes him as ‘the most eminent Catholic thinker living in France today’ (Kearney 90). Breton’s philosophical starting point is the scholastic logic of relations to which he also refers in his essay on Labarrière in this volume. Breton’s thought constantly moves between a metaphysics of relation – to be understood as being-towards, movement, ‘in transit’ – and ontological self-identity – or ‘being-in’, which unifies existence. These two fundamental ‘desires’ of human existence cause the fact that ‘we do not coincide with ourselves’ and thus opens up an ideological space – or a space for ideologies – in which the ‘form’ of thought never fully coincides with the ‘being’ of which it is the thought. What Breton shares with his ‘post-hegelian’ contemporaries is a deep scepticism of the System and the ‘temptation’ of absolute knowledge in Hegel. Instead he explains that ‘one can never reduce the infinite richness of our existential experience to the totalizing limits of Reason’ (Kearney 100). Philosophy is both critique and commitment for Breton, inevitably utopian, which explains his rather unique blend of Marxism, Christianity and phenomenology.¹⁷

The reason why Labarrière is quite unhappy with the way in which Breton characterises his thought is that, as Derrida also later comments, Breton seems to be intent on ‘re-hegelianising’ the *Discours de l’altérité*. Instead, as Labarrière explains in his reply:

This is is the point from which I try to draw what I call a primacy of relation, which, for me, has no reductionist connotation whatsoever, but, on the contrary, relation puts the foundational abyss, the unavailable and the entirely other in the midst of this discourse; and I say in its midst, not in its origin or its end. This is because the beginning here in question is not a beginning from which one departs: I call this the central abyss from which there proceeds what proceeds, so that this foundational primacy of relation is what, in an outrageous way, and in a way that remains totally inexpressible in clear discourse, aims at honouring precisely, in the same movement, difference and the effort towards coherence...

It would, nevertheless, probably not be unfair to draw a clear distinction between Labarrière’s (and Breton’s) others and Derrida’s (Guibal’s and Levinas’) notion of alterity. For the former group – to whom we could also count, to a certain extent at least, Lacan and most postcolonial theorists – alterity has to be thought as a relation (mediation, identification) *first*. In brief: no ‘self’ without ‘other’, which naturally leads to a focus on politico-ethical deliberations on ‘normativity’ in some form. The fundamental difference between these notions of alterity is that the relational approach despite all attempts by Labarrière to emphasise openness, plurality and difference, inevitably remains focused on identity and selfsameness even in their

negation. Not returning the ‘letter’ to the selfsame in this context ironically still means returning it, this time to the other (who thus merely becomes another self). It is a fundamentally dialogical, almost Bakhtinian, imagination. It is that part of alterity which is even without admitting it ultimately more concerned with alteration than with alterity as such. To use a Habermasian phrase, it is asking the question of the ‘inclusion’ of the other – the German title of Habermas’s work in this context is *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*.¹⁸ *Einbeziehung* literally means ‘relating’ or ‘drawing in’ which of course conceptually presupposes that the ‘relating (force)’ originates somewhere outside the other, in the space where the selfsame finds its mystical locatedness, somehow ‘inside’.

In contrast to this logic of alteration, relation, mediation etc. Francis Guibal’s reading of Derrida’s (and Levinas’) notion of alterity focuses on the necessary ‘precedence’ of the other to any possibility of relation. If there is a relation worth speaking of it ‘comes’ from, is initiated by the other. The dependence of the self on the other is not a question of volition, decision or strategy. It is what gives rise to a self that *après coup* reinterprets the original interpellation in terms of self-justification. Instead of *Einbeziehung* or inclusion of the other, Derrida would emphasise the question of ‘hospitality’ and even ‘hostipitality’.¹⁹ Instead of the traditional metaphysical ‘economy’ or rather ‘oikonomy’ which always takes the existence of a ‘home’ space for granted and into which the other may or may not be received (i.e. the ‘laws’ of hospitality), Derrida emphasises the precedence of the other, who is (always) already ‘there’ even before any decision between inclusion and exclusion can ‘take place’. ‘Locating’ the other (the other human or inhuman, an otherness before any form of identification) is already part of a ‘home economics’, a return to the selfsame, an appropriation. While Derrida is not necessarily advocating a radically different politics of (im)migration, his idea of ‘hostipitality’ temporarily inverts the self-assurance principle²⁰ of hospitality and instead emphasises the ‘hostage’ character of the host, or any self in fact. Any ‘I’ is hostage to his or her other(s). There is an aporia, a necessary contradiction in the very law of hospitality, of receiving the other, namely that, on the one hand, hospitality is unconditional – it is not subject to choice, because even turning away the other is already a form, in this case a negative form, of hospitality. One cannot not be hospitable in that sense because the degree of hospitality is always measured against the unconditionality of this law. On the other hand, it is only the arrival of an other that poses the question of

hospitality for the selfsame. This opens up a possibility for a radical rethinking of hospitality as such – a hospitality before any differentiation between host and ‘guest’ can be drawn and a new ‘cosmopolitanism’ may arise.²¹ The tissue of the self is always already scarred with the mark of the other, to take up the theme in Reynald Drouhin’s cover image to this volume. This is where Derrida’s and Levinas’ precedence of the other converge without fusing however, as Derrida himself so eloquently explains in *Alterities*.

Francis Guibal²² in his essay takes up some of the points already raised in his excellent study of Levinas, in which he provides the kind of mutual re-reading (or ‘chiasmic’ relation) subsequently advocated in Simon Critchley’s *Ethics of Deconstruction*.²³ Guibal explains that: ‘Levinas’s entire work is a praise of exteriority, an apology of the Other. But the exteriority of the Other is only real – which is to say absolute – if it arises in a world which has no need for it and is not expecting it. One has to begin by experiencing in all its plenitude the immanent economy of the Same in order for the meta-physical Desire to emerge in all its wonderfully transcendent truth. Only then can a theory of subjectivity-facing-the-Other be sketched’ (p. 19). For Guibal, Levinas’s project and Derridean deconstruction are eminently compatible and complementary: ‘Approached through its polemical aspect, Levinas’s work seems like a long and patient effort of deconstruction with regard to all systematic enterprises which attempt to absorb differences, to reconduct the multiplicity of separate beings to unity. Reduction to the One or participation in the Being, incorporation in the Whole or “sublation” in the Concept, all these classical moves of thought barely disguise a fundamental anxiety: namely of living a plural and differentiated reality which is thus considered to be a decline, a degradation, or fall’ (p. 96). What Levinas in turn provides for deconstruction lies in the ethical reminder that: ‘it is not merely a question of deconstructing, or indeed knowing how to deconstruct, it is also to know why and *with a view to what* to deconstruct’ (p. 136).

Although Derrida seems quite happy with Guibal’s presentation of his work he nevertheless also registers some unease, which is worth pointing out because it touches upon the very concept of alterity at work in Derridean deconstruction and which seems to diverge somewhat from Guibal’s presentation. This divergence becomes visible in Derrida’s insistent remark on ‘negative theology’ and ‘mysticism’. It would be wrong, despite the theological setting (a ‘context’, which visibly

disconcerts Derrida to some extent, which manifests itself in his repeated reference to the word 'context'), to see any mysticism or rather mystification in the concept of the entirely other, the 'relation without relation' or the '*différance* of the other'. Derrida is by no means interested in the unknowability of the other as such (what would there be to 'say' apart from negative theology understood as a desire to express the mystical 'being' of God in an 'ultra-ontological' way); instead Derrida's use of alterity is closely related to what he names 'necessity', an unlocatable imperative or an undecidability in the decision that nevertheless calls for a decision. It is the 'necessary' and inevitable mysticism at the heart of rationalism and philosophy, the 'dark' or blind spot of clarity and illumination.

A remarkable analysis of 'Derrida's others' has been provided by J. Hillis Miller in a paper first given at the 'Applied Derrida' conference in Luton, in 1995. A first version was published in the proceedings,²⁴ which later reappeared in *Black Holes*.²⁵ As Miller explains: 'L'Autre has long been a key word in Jacques Derrida's vocabulary' (*Others* 259), and '[g]etting right what Derrida means by "l'autre" is essential to understanding what he says about ethics, selfhood, responsibility, literature, law, psychoanalysis, sexual difference, politics, religion, translation, and the university' (*ibid.* 261). The other, in Derrida, as in all the 'philosophers of difference', is that which haunts Hegel and which needs to be thought through as a necessary supplement to an otherwise inescapable Hegelianism, as 'something that cannot be returned to the same by any form of dialectical sublation or *Aufhebung*' (*ibid.* 261). Derrida's 'tactic' is therefore to call forth this other which precedes but is constantly 'policed' by the order of sameness (this policing or disciplining however ironically leads to an inscription of otherness *into* the same, a self which is constantly 'marked' by its excluded others) whether it is in the area of law, literature, politics, language etc. in order to open up possibilities for a radical rethinking. Crucially, however, Derrida is aware that the 'price' for calling forth any otherness is a 'monstrosity', or a risk, because otherness *is* unknowability, the horizon of knowledge, a radical utopia so to speak, out of which the unforeseen future must arrive at the price of uncertainty. But this risk is what has to be accepted if any fundamental changes to existing metaphysical systems are to be achieved: 'All the civilized conventions of law, ethics, family life, politics, institutionalized religion, international diplomacy, and institutionalized pedagogy may have as one of their main functions to obscure the otherness and singularity of the other', as Miller explains

(*Others* 268). Deconstruction is thus a destabilisation of the differing and deferring of the other (*'la différance de l'autre'*).

Finally, to return to the English-speaking or 'target' context into which this translation of *Altérités* will have taken place, one last word on 'Anglo-American' French Theory and its current 'post-theoretical' desire. Following from Cusset's analysis mentioned above, it becomes clear that a more careful '(re)translation' needs to take place for an alternative form of globalisation not only in terms of economy and culture but also theory. The current strong desire to 'overcome' French Theory in the Anglo-American academy, to return to some form of 'common sense' after the aberrations and exaggerations of 'theorrhoea', after Theory has become a mere jargon or the new orthodoxy, has to be seen in its global context of a new phase of American cultural hegemony after the events of 11 September 2001, the 'War against Terror' and the Iraq War. As Cusset explains, 'French Theory' is in fact an 'American interpretation of French readings of German philosophers' (*French Theory* 319). It is no coincidence therefore that there should be a backlash against such a profound alliance of 'old Europeans', however 'critical' they may be of themselves and their traditions, in the aftermath of the confrontation at the UN between the United States and the majority of Europe. Post-theory is heavily implicated in the developing global geopolitics after the Cold War. But post-theory, if it manages to *faire le deuil* of its Anglo-American in(ter)ventions might in fact not be an end but the beginning, for example, of a new 'European' thought. European not in the sense of exclusivity but, following Derrida's famous statement in *L'Autre Cap*: 'We are younger than ever, we Europeans, because a certain Europe does not yet exist',²⁶ which acknowledges a certain '*plus d'Europe*' – which could be translated as (there is) more than one Europe and (hence) no longer (one) Europe.²⁷

It is an impossible invention that guarantees the intervention of the other. However, the current form of globalisation may also be understood as the time of the general 'disappearance' of alterity. This, in any case, is the kind of conclusion one has to draw from Baudrillard's interpretation. Postmodernism is only so interested in the other, one could even say infatuated with the mysticism of alterity and the discourse on otherness, because there is less and less 'real' alterity available, tangible – a breakdown in any relation to the other and hence the absence of any possibility for alteration. The differences that (economic, political and cultural) globalisation seems

to proliferate (cf. the idea of ‘glocalisation’ to emphasise the various local adaptations in the face of global cultural hegemony) is only a simulacrum of otherness and only exists to hide the fact that an experience of true alterity is becoming virtually impossible. As a result everything seems either too threatening (paranoia) or too boring (hysteria). This in a nutshell is the significance of ‘9/11’ and the meaning of terrorism for Jean Baudrillard, who sees globalisation not as a clash of civilisations but as an ‘anthropological conflict [which] pits a monolithic universal culture against all manifestations of otherness, wherever they may be found’.²⁸

Alterity ‘after’ postmodernism is thus at once ubiquitous and absent, omnipresent in its disappearance. It becomes therefore more important than ever to understand, ‘deconstruct’ and possibly rewrite history as the discourse of the gradual (dis)appearance of alterity. The present translation must be situated in this context of a ‘remembering’ of the other. In this aim it is quite opposed to an increasing and understandable tendency to overcome the necessary vagueness and the proliferation of discourses about alterity in which all sorts of ‘others’ are ventriloquised. This is often happening when philosophical and ethical notions of alterity are quite unreflectively transposed onto a culturalist context. A great deal of work undertaken in ‘cultural studies’, evoking some more or less specific ‘cultural other’ (in terms of race, gender, sexuality etc.) is more or less guilty of eliding difference with otherness and thus in delivering against all best intentions arguments for re-essentialisations, new forms of racism, sexism and stereotyping in general. The logic of the cultural other often functions like this: any self needs ‘significant others’ in order to construct identity by establishing differences. Hence, the other is ‘different’ (and not other). We therefore have to ‘respect’ the *difference* of the other. The result of which is ‘political correctness’ and cultural constructivism in their worst forms: in the process, both other and self are reinscribed as unscrutable ‘mysteries’, differences are essentialised and political principles relativised.

In this respect it may be helpful to recall Sanford Budick’s notion of ‘secondary otherness’ as the postmodern reconceptualisation of the experience of alterity as ‘crisis’:²⁹

...critical distance, or respect, before another’s being, which is not at all the same thing as knowing, or even directly acknowledging being (‘The other’) itself, is a vital phenomenon in the relationship among others, whether between cultures or within an internally differentiated culture. In crisis we come to recognize that this phenomenon offers no approach to otherness per se. This phenomenon is only the reflection of our need for otherness, only, let us say, a highly secondary otherness. Yet, for all that, secondary

otherness of this kind is that which may enable co-existence with others as well as participation in creating culture. (14)

Secondary otherness even though occurring inevitably at an ‘imaginary’ level is nevertheless necessary for a relation with and to the other. It is thus not very different from what the contributors in *Alterities* are discussing under the name of ‘alteration’. Imagining the other is a failure to know otherness but at the same time it is also a mutuality, the beginning of (an ex)change: ‘It is as if a primary consciousness of self, together with a primary projection of self-as-other, is disallowed by the crisis of alterity, while a secondary consciousness, of a secondary otherness, as well as of a self apprehended secondarily in relation to that secondary otherness, come to the fore, creating the potentiality for an affiliation of selves’ (21). This experience of secondary otherness is nowhere more evident than in translating, where it emerges from an encounter with untranslatability, which should be seen, as every translator will acknowledge, as a positive, necessary and productive, self-reflexive starting point:

Even if we are always defeated by translation, culture as a movement toward shared consciousness may emerge from the defeat. Thus the story of culture does not end with the experience of that which is nothing more than a secondary otherness. In fact, multiple half-lives of affiliation known as culture may begin to be experienced, as potentialities, only there. (22)

The question about the ‘future’ of alterity requires therefore an entirely different, at once much more humble and more careful and precise, singular, engagement. *Tout autre est tout autre* – to do justice to this phrase would require a history of alterities, written through the culturally and historically specific ‘traces’ left by and in the reception or arrival of alterities.

The postmodern ‘ethics of alterity’ – often merely another phrase for some vague ‘respect of difference’ and a kind of imperative that could be called ‘let the other be other!’ (a slogan that on a political level, might lead to a well-intended but utterly banal statement like ‘*Alle Menschen sind Ausländer, überall*’ – all human beings are foreigners, everywhere’) – has rightly come under attack, especially by thinkers who try to incorporate both the legacy of the philosophers of difference and of the ‘event’ as radical alterity and, on the other hand, also want to recuperate a political notion of truth and universalism, like Alain Badiou. His *Ethics* is in fact a counter-ethics, a manifesto against the conservative ‘ethical ideology’ outlined above which in fact serves global liberal ideology perfectly because it discourages any form of radical activism and change.³⁰ Badiou’s ethics is an attack precisely against the

kind of immobilism that Derrida warns of in the passage from *Altérités* quoted above and which it is worth recalling here:

Of course, in order to respect the entirely other of alterity, alteration itself — which always presupposes a contact, or an intervention, a socio-political, psycho-etc. transformation — alteration itself would have to be impossible. If the other remains at an infinite distance, and this is the condition on which the other is other, not only can the other not touch me, or affect me, but the other cannot even alter anything. This relation to the entirely other would ultimately leave everything unchanged, unaltered. And it is of an irrefutable logic that pure alterity should be incompatible with the logic of alteration. There is a moment, I feel, when one must re-start negotiating — this is a political or historical concern. This means that if one restricts oneself to the pure respect for this alterity without alteration, one always runs the risk of lending oneself to immobilism, to conservatism, etc., that is to the obliteration of alterity itself... There is no reasonable, rational response to this question. There is no logic.

Derrida is thus very aware that there is no choice between Levinas and Badiou, there is no ‘logic’ that could sublimate the two positions. Instead justice lies in a combination of both but may be different each time, always seeking a specific articulation that is capable of creating a truth as an event but also as an open horizon. In political terms this poses a serious challenge to any form of multiculturalism that is not prepared to engage constructively *and* justly with incommensurability, conflict and difference on a political *and* ethical level without ever confusing nor separating the two. The discussion in *Alterities* has thus not lost any of its topicality.

NOTES:

¹Translator’s Note (TN): The word ‘*altération*’ in French does not necessarily have the same negative connotations as the English ‘alteration’. Similar to the present participle ‘*différant*’ that allowed Derrida to invent his famous ‘*différance*’, *altérant* and its derivative *altération* express a process or a relation, in this case the process of ‘other-ing’. ‘Othering’ in cultural theory, however, has a very different meaning and is normally used in the context of postcolonial studies (based mainly on an adapted Lacanian notion of the ‘Other/other’ distinction) where it refers almost exclusively to issues of representation and the (more or less violent) construction of identity, or the ways in which colonial discourse establishes mastery over its ‘others’.

² (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), reviewed by Peter Brooks, ‘Gallic Invasion’, *TLS* May 28 2004: 5-6.

³ For a summary see *Lingua Franca*, ed *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham that Shook the Academy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

⁴ For a good summary see Rudy Steinmetz, *Les Styles de Derrida* (Bruxelles: De Boeck-Wesmael, 1994).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶ Cf. Derrida, ‘La Langue n’appartient pas – entretien avec Évelyne Grossman’, *Europe* 861-862 (2001, January/February): 81-91.

⁷ Cf. in particular Lawrence Venuti’s work in this respect: *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995) and *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁸ See Derrida's comments about his use of 'messianicity' in *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994) in 'The Deconstruction of Actuality – An Interview with Jacques Derrida', *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 32-33.

⁹ Derrida, 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', trans. Catherine Porter, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 60. Compare also the similarity between what is said here about 'impossible invention' with Derrida's statements about 'monstrous monstrosity' in 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms', in *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 79ff.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), pp. 114ff.; English translation: *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹¹ Cf. Laruelle, *Les Philosophies de la différence: introduction critique* (Paris: PUF, 1986) to which he sets up his alternative of 'non-philosophy' as a non-ontological, 'scientific' thought of the 'One' [*pensée de l'Un*], see for example *Philosophie et non-philosophie* (Liège: Pierre Mardaga, 1989); for a first brief introduction to Laruelle in English see Ray Brassier's 'Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle', *Radical Philosophy* 121 (September/October 2003).

¹² There are of course many accounts of the connection between the 'rise of theory' and the signification of May 68. The following are arguably the two most rigorous that are available in translation: François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2 vols, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* [original title: *Le Même et l'autre*], trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); for the reader competent in French a good introduction to the 'philosophers of difference' is Christian Ruby's, *Les Archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard* (Paris: éditions du Félin, 1989), and, more advanced and more critical: François Laruelle, *Les Philosophies de la différence: introduction critique* (Paris: PUF, 1986).

¹³ For a very useful bibliography of Labarrière's work visit www.jesuites.com/bibliographie/auteurs/labARRIERE.htm; references to Labarrière's *Discours de l'altérité* will be given as DA in the text.

¹⁴ See Descombes, *Modern French Thought*, Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Labarrière provides the following definition for his key term 'relation' (DA 299):

...relation in its proper sense is what, for a being, fundamentally changes the meaning of its connection to an alterity of difference. It is not that this relation abolishes alterity in order to imprison the individual within a monadic auto-sufficiency, but it rather signifies that the individual experiences his or her relation to exteriority as that which it in fact is: a relation to the other of self, a relation to self as other.

¹⁶ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida – The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: MUP, 1984) 89-104.

¹⁷ For a bibliography of Breton's early work (until 1977) see Kearney, p. 104; for more recent additions refer to the general bibliography at the end of this issue. Breton's work is only beginning to be translated into English, but for a good and recent critical introduction see Jacquelyn Porter, 'Stanislas Breton's Use of Neoplatonism to Interpret the Cross in a Postmodern Setting', *Heythrop Journal* 39 (1998): 264-279. To the reader competent in French the best summary of Breton's intellectual 'itinerary' is his semi-autobiographical 'récit de voyage' cum philosophical commentary in *L'Autre et l'ailleurs* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1995; there, for example, he also returns to the discussion on plurality in Parmenides and Plotinus, on pages 140-141).

¹⁸ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Greif (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Cf. Derrida, 'Hostipitality', *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 356-420.

²⁰ Cf. also Derrida's recent use of 'auto-immunity' in this respect, for example in *Voyous – deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003).

²¹ Cf. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²² Guibal teaches philosophy in Strasbourg; his main works are listed in the bibliography at the end of this issue.

²³ Francis Guibal, *...et combien de dieux nouveaux: approches contemporaines II: Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980); Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁴ J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Others', in *Applying: To Derrida*, ed. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 153-170.

²⁵ Hillis Miller, 'The Other Other', in Manuel Asensi and J. Hillis Miller, *J. Hillis Miller; or, Boustrophedonic Reading – Black Holes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 155-169.

²⁶ Derrida, *L'Autre cap* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 14. In this sense I would strongly disagree, on this point, with the editors of this excellent volume (to which in many ways Cusset is the companion piece), *French Theory in America*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (London: Routledge, 2001), when they claim: 'the last French theorists will be American because we are convinced that Americans will keep finding in the overall unpacking of "differences" provided by French theory powerful means to counter law and utopia, or other such satisfactions of negative schizophrenia' (p. 9). Instead I would suggest, rather with Cusset, that a critical post-theory could do worse than learn the lessons of the American experience of French Theory, as the most intimate critical discourse and antidote against a certain American global hegemony available.

²⁷ For a somewhat more elaborate analysis of the 'plus de' or the 'plus d'un' please allow me to refer to my 'Plus d'un: Deconstruction and the Translation of Cultural Studies', *Culture Machine* 6 (2004), <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk>

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Despair of Having Everything', *Le Monde diplomatique* (November 2002), p. 15.

²⁹ Budick, 'Crises of Alterity: Cultural Untranslatability and the Experience of Secondary Otherness', in *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 1-22.

³⁰ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).