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Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years much stress has been put on accommodating 'difference' in British education. This ranges from trying to tackle assumed differences between the ways in which boys, girls and children from ethnic minorities learn, to teaching tolerance of different/other cultures. Attempts to accommodate such differences form part of a liberal/progressive approach to providing a just education that does not simply cater for the dominant group (white) or the highest achieving group (white girls). This push towards providing equitable treatment in education manifests itself in both pedagogical strategies and, more importantly for this paper, the inclusion of curricular content that will incorporate an understanding of 'other' cultures. The thinking on these issues tends to reflect a set of metaphysical assumptions about difference: differences across ethnicity and gender are seen as being 'present'.

The aim of this paper is to question metaphysical assumptions about 'otherness' by focusing principally on Derrida's discussion of this issue; Judith Butler's early work on gender (influenced by Derrida's philosophy) also makes an appearance. Derrida argues that a metaphysical understanding of difference/otherness represents a failure to account for the otherness within language itself. For Derrida, difference/otherness is not something that is simply 'there' but is performed through a language that (in various complex ways) is other to itself. Through drawing attention to the 'phonocentrism' and 'logocentrism'[1] of dominant Western traditions of thought, he shows how the fullness (the 'presence') so often ascribed to 'sameness' and 'otherness' is an effect of language—a linguistic performance (Butler calls this performativity). In this paper, I argue that the liberal/progressive goal of accommodating difference is undermined by its failure to recognise the performative aspects of otherness/difference. The last section of the paper includes a reading (found in the National Curriculum for England and Wales) of the distinction between courses of study based on an 'English Literary Heritage' and 'Texts from Other Cultures and Traditions'. However it will first be necessary to discuss some dominant themes that emerge from Derrida's work in the philosophy of language.

PHONOCENTRISM, LOGOCENTRISM AND THE MARK

Let us begin by considering what Derrida has to say about the phonocentrism which he believes characterises the history of the philosophy of language, indeed, the history of thinking generally. Here is Derrida:

> The system of "hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak" through the phonic substance which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.
>
> With an irregular and essentially precarious success, this movement would have apparently tended, as toward its *telos,* to confine writing to a secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general), technics in the service of language, *spokesman,* interpreter of an originary speech itself shielded from interpretation (Derrida, 1997, pp. 7-8).

When we speak we feel a closeness to our words, a command over them, a sense of control. Therefore, the spoken word does not seem isolated from its utterance, unlike the written word, which already seems to render a sense of dislocation. When we speak, our words 'seem' to register something internal whereas writing 'feels' external, distant and supplementary. Therefore speech appears to be present to thought whereas, in contrast, writing seems to embody absence. When we read a book, the author is not there, we cannot speak to him. Also, the things, which the words refer to, are not in front of us. We might therefore say that writing (conceived of in the traditional sense) connotes absence and therefore otherness in relation to our words. We will come back to this shortly.

Related to the phonocentrism described above is a certain logocentrism. To think logocentrically is to adhere to a belief in truth that is beyond or above history. This vision of truth sees various truths as having the quality of metaphysical presence that is internal to them. Such truth is 'internal' and therefore superior to all forms of 'exteriority' whether they are cultural, historical or textual. It seems obvious that language originates with speech—we speak before we can write! It therefore appears equally obvious that speech is somehow closer to the *logos*.

> As has been more or less implicitly determined, the essence of the *phone* would be immediately proximate to that which within "thought" as logos relates to "meaning", produces it, receives it, speaks it, "composes" it. If, for Aristotle, for example, spoken words (*ta en te phone*) are the symbols of mental experience (*pathemata tes psyches*) (de interpretatione, 1, 16a 3) it is because the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind (p. 11).

As mentioned earlier, when we speak we get the impression that our speaking reflects an outpouring of our thoughts. Spoken words are therefore 'symbols' of our thoughts. This way of thinking creates a hierarchy in which thought (*logos*) comes first, followed by speech and then writing: before history, knowledge and culture, there is presence. Plato's writing on 'the forms' provides a clear example of logocentrism—the very goal of philosophy is the reappropriation of presence that can only take place

(in however partial a fashion) if one seeks to commune with the eternal forms. The text as such, is only an aid/supplement to this process.

To show how Derrida provides a critique of phonocentrism and logocentrism, it will be helpful at this point to introduce Saussure and his theory of the linguistic sign. The sign, according to Saussure, is made up of the signifier (an 'acoustic image') and the signified (a concept). Language is a structure made up of signs. For Saussure, the signifier is in an arbitrary relationship with the signified—there is nothing 'cowish' about the word 'cow'. Language is structured according to differences—'cat' is different from 'bat' by one letter, and this difference in the signifier leads to two completely different signifieds. It should be noted that Saussure's theory is clearly phonocentric:

> In every case, the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself (p. 11).

For Saussure, the signified belongs to/is located in the mind. Because the voice seems more immediately connected to our thoughts, it is closer to the signified. Consequently, the 'notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf. This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (p. 12).

Derrida's reading of Saussure is not wholly critical. Let us set this out schematically:

1. Derrida agrees with Saussure that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, but argues that Saussure fails to account for the implications of this. Having seen that there is nothing cowish about the word 'cow', Saussure turns away from the more radical possibilities that accompany this recognition and turns toward the logocentric assumption that there is some fullness of meaning that exists behind the sign, which is then embodied in speech.

2. Derrida argues that if we take Saussure's argument to its logical conclusion, then the arbitrariness demonstrated by the latter demonstrates a dislocation, a fundamental otherness that characterises the relationship between the *mark* of the signifier and the *content* of the signified—in this sense the signified is, in an original sense, absent from the mark.

3. To go one stage further, if we can only think in words, and yet our words as referents bear no necessary relationship to their meaning, then the logocentric hierarchy (thoughts—speech spoken words—writing as supplement) is in a sense inverted. It would seem that the mark comes first.

4. If we take this logical reordering seriously, then it would seem that 'full presence' is in fact an illusory effect of language (or something produced by language). Meaning is not out there waiting to be worded. Rather, words as they come into being word the world. Consequently, the signifier does not represent the signified, but brings it into 'presence'—brings it into being as an effect.

5. Therefore, the figure of the linguistic sign (with its unity linking signifier and signified) is no longer adequate to the task of understanding how language works, and Derrida replaces the figure of the sign with that of the 'mark'. The 'mark' is an indicator of absence rather than presence. It exists in the form of the trace, the graphic representation of the word prior to its signification.

To summarise, Derrida's discussion of the mark demonstrates the unravelling of the binary distinction between speech (as indicative of presence) and writing (as supplement). This distinction depended on the passage from fully present non-linguistic truth passing through into the words of the speaking subject present to that truth. This subject could then turn to the supplementary function of writing. However, if the 'mark' comes first, then, in a sense, writing comes first. However, our understandings of presence, speech and writing have all suffered a sea change—writing can no longer be thought of as simply the secondary representation of speech. Speech is not bound to 'presence', as 'presence' is an effect of the mark. When Derrida talks about 'writing' he is referring to a 'general' writing, which need not be thought of as the word on the page. So, for example, a social group whose culture does not involve writing (in the traditional sense) is still subject to writing in the general sense. The fact that the mark may not take a materialised form is, in a sense, immaterial. So, when Levi Strauss maintains that African tribes, because they do not write (in the traditional sense) are in some ways more innocent than Westerners, he fails to recognise the general writing, the 'markness' that characterises their language.

THE OTHERING OF THE OTHER

The account as it has so far been developed strips language of its otherness in regards to metaphysical/logocentric truth. Truth as such is produced by language rather than being anterior to it. Therefore notions of difference understood in essentialist terms have been undermined, as truth must now be conceived of as a linguistic 'performance' of some kind. At this point it might be useful to consider how Judith Butler's treatment of the term 'performativity' demonstrates how identity is bound up with a form of linguistic performance. In this citation from Butler, she acknowledges her debt to Derrida:

> I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's 'Before the Law'. There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the

context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration (Butler, 1999, pp. xiv-xv).[2]

I want to highlight several features of Butler's understanding of performativity. Firstly, she clearly establishes a connection between foundationalist approaches to knowledge and legality, therefore emphasising the problematic aspects of a tradition that makes truth claims coterminous with fixity. 'Knowledge' as regards gender is shown to be the effect of a performance that she calls 'conjuration',[3] emphasising the magical aspects of a process that performs its own essence, which is then made external and originary. Butler sees the 'invocation' of performativity as very much an ethical matter. For Butler, language performs us; various discourses designate who and what we are. This understanding of performativity has an ethical dimension because it works against essentialistic or biologistic performative discourses. Of course the biologization of difference is no neutral phenomenon. The inscription of biological determinants into language, will invariably favour the dominant group— usually the white western male. Consequently, the history of the West is characterised by various discourses of superiority and inferiority, often hidden by a sugar-coating of positive connotations—black people are good at music and sport, but are they fit for political office? Women are pretty and delicate, but do they have the stomach for business?

THE 'OTHERNESS' INTERNAL TO LANGUAGE

So, we have seen how language produces difference. Nevertheless, we cannot help but recognise the fact that plenty of people are unwilling to accept the various roles allotted to them by the linguistic construction of difference, not that any of us fully escape or stand outside these discursive parameters. Butler argues that language performs us as subjects in ways that are both negative and positive; in its performative capacity, language can 'do us in'[4] just as it can 'do' (create). Of course, the fact that words do not necessarily do us in needs to be accounted for. To explain this requires a discussion of the otherness internal to language.

To consider what is meant by an otherness internal to language, it will help to briefly return to the notion of difference employed by Saussure. As we have seen Saussure locates difference in accordance with the distinction between different signifiers and their related 'signifieds'. Once we see that these differences no longer reflect some metaphysical ordering then difference must be understood as something internal to language. Words/concepts differ as effects of language. Therefore what a mark/word is depends upon all the other marks/words that it is not. Consequently every word is 'haunted' by what it is not—and must therefore in one sense be radically dislocated and 'other' to itself. Derrida refers to this general difference, prior to all subsequent differences as 'differance', a term he invents. The difference between 'difference' and 'differance' only works (in French as in English) because the distinction is inaudible. In choosing to spell the word differently, Derrida is making a point about the priorness of writing (conceived of in the new way described earlier).

Now, we might say that Butler's discussion of the performativity of gender reveals the otherness internal to our words in the sense that femininity or blackness comes to

represent whatever masculinity or blackness is not. We might therefore say that whatever whiteness 'is' is dependant on blackness. Blackness is 'internal' to whiteness. This is one dimension of what Derrida refers to as the madness of language—all words are hunted/haunted by other words internal to their very possibility of meaning anything. The other dimension of differance can only be accounted for if we move beyond a synchronic picture of language, to a diachronic picture of language in use. As Derrida notes, for words to mean anything at all they have to be repeatable and repeated, iterable and reiterated; they have to be 'used' and used over time.

In linguistics the study of pragmatics concerns itself with language in use. Linguists who adopt pragmatics as a model recognise that issues pertaining to semantics and grammar are insufficient when it comes to explaining meaning. If we are to determine whether an utterance is successful or not then we must understand how it is used in context. So for example if we take the phrase 'would you like a cup of coffee', when said in a coffee shop will mean 'would you like a cup of coffee'. However, if two people meet in a bar and whilst walking home, one says to the other; 'would you like a cup of coffee', then the meaning is quite different.

This all sounds very convincing. However, thinking in this way often leads to what we might see as a simultaneously overdetermined and underdetermined approach to the role played by context. For Derrida, words are subject to an internal force and movement. It is not the case that any single context determines the force of words. Rather, an unlimited number of possible contexts are internal to the words themselves. Therefore, the word or concept is never at one with itself, it is always other to itself. Derrida insists that he is referring not to the polysemy (the multiple meanings) of language but to its iterability. If we perceive the forces in language to be external, then the context determines meaning. This control of context and therefore meaning is central to the tradition that has given speech a particular dominance in the linguistic hierarchy over writing. By showing that words carry their contexts with them, Derrida demonstrates that the fullness and completeness, the presence ascribed to the speech situation is never fully realised; never mind the force of the present context, the words will not allow it (how much confusion has been caused by coffee?). Here is Derrida:

> [A] written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription. This breaking force (*force de rupture*) is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text ... by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating' precisely. One can perhaps come to recognise other possibilities in it by grafting it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it. Nor any code, the code here being both the possibility and impossibility of writing, of its essential iterability (repetition/alterity) (Derrida, 1988, p. 9).

For Butler, drawing on Derrida, the iterability of language means that the same words or forms of discourse can find themselves in all manner of contexts in which they may do damage or act creatively; consider the reappropriation of the words 'nigger' and 'queer'.[5] It is therefore significant that the wordness or graphematic quality of

language be recognised. There is a decided danger in viewing language as 'doing' something in an absolute and full sense, thereby dissolving/deferring the linguistic aspect of language. It is the fixity of the law as it applies to language that Butler finds most dangerous:

> Those who seek to fix with certainty the links between certain speech acts and their injurious effects will surely lament the open temporality of the speech act. That no speech act *has* to perform injury as its effect means that no simple elaboration of speech acts will provide a standard by which the injuries of speech might be effectively adjudicated. Such a loosening between act and injury, however, opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back, that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link. Thus the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has its auspicious implications: it begins a theory of linguistic agency that provides an alternative to the relentless search for remedy (Butler, 1997, p. 15).

The iterability of language (the fact that language is not at one with itself) makes room for the unexpected—what Derrida calls the arrivant. A 'written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted' and therefore words regularly find themselves in surprisingly new territory. It is the iterability of language that makes room for counter-speech and a new set of linguistic performances that undermine fixed categories of sameness and otherness.

ORIENTALISM

We have already seen how the iterability within language makes words other to themselves. Indeed we have also considered the ways in which language produces the effects of metaphysical presence that serves to mask the otherness internal to language. Part of this linguistic operation involves the production of conceptual difference—concepts take on the appearance of separate, different entities that exist in the ether (in the abstract). Of course, as both Derrida and Butler show, not only does this effect of difference establish identities; it also establishes a hierarchy of identity reflective of power relations within society/language. However, the disorder/otherness internal to language that accompanies its iterability, in undermining the effects of presence, allows for the emergence of the *arrivant*.[6] Words are not under our direct control and can take us somewhere else. We can see an example of this in Edward Said's use of the term 'Orientalism'.

For Said, the Orientalist believes that he is studying the 'Orient' in some sort of objective fashion that treats the 'Orient' as though it were an 'inert fact of nature' (Footnote). In contrast to the Orientalist, Said begins with the assumption that the Orient is 'not merely *there* just as the Occident is not just *there* either' (Said, 1986, p. 4). He argues that:

> Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed

it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness (p. 7).

Said shows how the Western distinction between Orient and Occident represents the construction of differences at a distance. He shows how the Orientalist, believing that he is engaged in a descriptive activity contributes to the performance of difference. What the Orientalist fails to see is that the differences produced by differance are differences internal to the creation of the discourse of the West—what the Orient 'is' is what the Occident is not. The very production of a narrative of Westernness or Occidentalism requires the performative conjuration of the Orient. We can see this trend in the binaristic thinking that characterises Enlightenment humanism. Enlightenment humanism conjures a realm of inhuman unenlightened culture as though such a thing were simply *there*. However, the very notion of the 'human' is necessarily divided and 'other' to itself.

Let us consider what has happened to the word 'Orientalism' itself: its iterability. It is clearly inaccurate to say that Said's way of thinking about Orientalism simply reflects the polysemy of language: it is not the case when Said uses the term that it reflects some other meaning in relation to some other context or set of objects. Rather, the reiteration of 'Orientalism' reflects how Orientalism's understanding of itself as a descriptive discipline shows it to be other to itself. We should also note that this understanding of Orientalism, which shows itself as other to itself, is not something that has simply been invented. Rather it was waiting in the wings to 'arrive' and show itself in this way as one of the future meanings of the term. The kind of deconstruction pertinent to the speech/writing distinction also applies to the supposed difference between the Occident and the Orient. The destruction of the Occident/Orient binary allows for the arrival of a new understanding of Orientalism. It should be noted that Said does not 'deconstruct' the opposition—this is not something that the reader/writer is in control of. It is something he/she bears witness to.

ORIENTALISM WITHIN THE CURRICULUM

In British schooling, the Orientalist approach to other cultures finds it crudest manifestation in the treatment of culture in terms of food, dress, customs etc. However, it takes a more complex form in relatively recent attempts to 'accommodate' writing in English from other cultures into the curriculum. In some respects, we might see this as a form of progress, representative as it is, of an attempt to accommodate difference and handle a cultural realm that was previously excluded. However, the limitations of such a well-intentioned 'inclusive approach' can be noted in the National Curriculum for English in the distinction between courses of study based on an 'English Literary Heritage' and on 'Texts from different cultures and Traditions':

English Literary Heritage

2 Pupils should be taught
a how and why texts have been influential and significant [for example, the influence of Greek myths, the Authorised version of the Bible, The Arthurian legends]
b the characteristics of texts that are considered to be of high quality
c the appeal and importance of these texts over time.

Texts from different cultures and traditions

3 Pupils should be taught:
a to understand the values and assumptions in the texts
b the significance of the subject matter and the language
c the distinctive qualities of literature from different traditions
d how familiar themes are explored in different cultural contexts [for example, how childhood is portrayed, references to oral or folk traditions]
e to make connections and comparisons between texts from different cultures.

One can easily see how the Orientalist conception of other cultures makes itself known in this document. Works from the English Literary Heritage must be 'influential', 'significant' and 'high quality'. None of these factors play any part in the criteria for teaching texts from different cultures and traditions, and their absence speaks volumes. The word 'qualities' does appear but it is used in a 'descriptive' rather than 'evaluative' context. It is made clear to the reader that two different forms of study apply to texts from the English literary Heritage and Texts from different cultures and traditions. As regards the former, the approach to such texts would resemble traditional forms of literary criticism, whilst the latter seems to combine anthropology with linguistics: 'pupils should be taught the significance of the subject matter and the language'. The English literary Heritage is influenced by 'myths' and 'legends' which find their meagre infantilised equivalent in 'oral' or 'folk' traditions—the reference to the 'portrayal of childhood' is telling.

What is perhaps most significant about this distinction between an English Literary Heritage and texts from other cultures and traditions is that it assumes some kind of absolute distinction between these two categories. This assumption fails to acknowledge the fact that so much writing in English from cultures beyond the geographical borders of Britain is a direct response to the English Literary Heritage and the Orientalist discourse that so often runs through it. If the conventions of the English language are reconfigured in these writings then the assumption that this is merely a local expression of dialect to be analysed is both naïve and insulting. Instead we might see such texts as a means of writing back to a language/culture imposed through colonisation, giving words and structure a new resonance that does not simply repeat or reiterate the colonising power of older structures.

The final insult to writing from other cultures manifests itself in the placing of the Poems From Other Cultures section within the GCSE exam[7]. The English GCSE is currently split into language and literature. It is no coincidence that the marks generated from this section contribute to the English language section of the paper.

CONCLUSION

It is important to reiterate the point that many teachers and educationalists will see the inclusion of texts from other cultures and traditions within the curriculum as a progressive move. Equally, a progressive enthusiasm accompanies the various pedagogical strategies designed to accommodate difference. To see the injustice implicated in the binary distinction between a literary heritage and texts from other cultures, we must embrace the 'mad' or perverse workings of language, its difference to itself, its iterability. Of course, we would have no means of talking/writing about anything at all if it were not for the effects of presence—to imagine a language without such effects is to imagine linguistic chaos. To imagine linguistic chaos is to think from the perspective of linguistic 'order', itself an effect of language.

Our very status as speaking subjects, our subjectivity per se can be seen as an effect of language. We believe that we speak language and in doing so, have direct control over our words, yet language speaks us and does so by dividing up the world into different kinds of subjects. We might say that language exacts a kind of murder on its own wordness. The very fact that we come to believe in a metaphysical truth beyond language is an effect of the mark. Therefore, we might say that language in giving the effect of metaphysical presence to both subject and object generates a relationship in which its creations deny it and exact a form of Oedipal revenge on it, a move that ultimately results in blindness. Of course, this does not lead to the obliteration of the linguistic markness of language. Rather, that wordness or markness comes to haunt the speaking subject (and the metaphysics of presence *per se*) through differance/iterability. This 'hauntology' provides the space for talking back and welcoming the arrivant. If the educational establishment is to do justice to the arrivant and the differance prior to difference, then it must undergo a rigorous form of theoretical laser eye surgery.

NOTES

1 *Phone* (in Greek) means 'voice'. *Logos* means 'thought' or 'reason', understood here as immediately present to the mind.
2 This quotation derives from new introduction that features in a more recent Preface to *Gender Trouble*. The first edition of *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990.
3 It is worth saying something about the word 'conjuration'. 'To conjure' is literally and originally 'to swear together', but it commonly means 'to produce something out of nothing'. For example, a conjuror on the stage does a trick whereby he produces a bird out of an empty hat, as if by magic.
4 This is a slang expression meaning 'destroy us'.
5 The word 'nigger' has been seen as the most racist, most offensive term used to describe a black person. It has become customary (particularly within black American popular culture), however, for black people to refer to themselves and each other as 'niggers'. The term 'queer' was a standard term of abuse for gay people, but through the gay rights movement it was gradually appropriated and used by gay people themselves, now with positive connotations. Such instances reflect a kind of talking back as regards the language of oppression.
6 This is a French word that is used in English, and it refers to someone who has newly arrived, probably unexpectedly, perhaps with a suggestion of ghostly presence.
7 English/Welsh students take their GCSE exams at the age of 16.

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