

Resounding *Glas*

Mairéad Hanrahan, Martin McQuillan and Simon Morgan Wortham

One of Jacques Derrida's most complex, intriguing and challenging texts, *Glas* is a work of resounding importance for philosophy, for literature, and for the relationship between the two. It has a unique status within his work and indeed *as* a work. *Glas* not only has much to say about the fetish but, itself as a book is something of a fetish object for readers of Derrida. Its peculiar size and shape, the double columns, the multiple type-face, the rogue quotations, and so on, all make *Glas* look more like an art book for the coffee table than a work of disciplinary philosophy. Nevertheless, whatever its iconic status and whatever the reputation it enjoys among those interested in Derrida's oeuvre and post-War philosophical writing in Europe, there is a surprising lack of commentary on it. Something about *Glas* resists explication. How should we interpret the fact that this extraordinary work has produced far fewer reverberations than other texts by Derrida? Is it the exemplary *hérisson* or hedgehog of poetry that Derrida describes in 'Che cos'è la poesia?', that turns out its quills in order to prevent being opened up?¹ As a piece of writing by Derrida, *Glas* may have most in common with the 'Envois' section of *La Carte Postale* (1980) as a sustained attempt to find another idiom in which to move beyond the polarizing choices of literary fiction and disciplinary philosophy. Or idioms. If *Glas* so resists explication, is it especially because of the unprecedented way that it complicates literature and philosophy, situates each in the margins of the other, emphasizes both the relation that folds them inextricably within each other, and the

difference that no less forcefully separates them? As Derrida repeatedly signaled in his early glosses on the book, *Glas* is not a hybrid of philosophy and literature. We might say rather that it stages their encounter.

As early as 'The Ends of Man' (1968), Derrida had speculated upon the idiomatic choices of deconstruction; a choice that is never really a choice between attempting an exit from metaphysics by using its own resources to repeat what is implicit in its founding concepts and original problematic, or attempting to change the terrain by affirming an absolute break and difference in order to disrupt the order that one addresses. Both choices can of course easily fall back into the same perspectives they set out to challenge, naively restating the old in the newest of ways. But for Derrida this risk does not annul the need for a new idiom for thought:

A new writing must weave and interface these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once (...) what we need, perhaps, as Nietzsche said, is a change of 'style'; and if there is style, Nietzsche reminded us, it must be *plural*.²

Glas would seem to be an example of the sort of writing Derrida imagines here. It is an attempt to reinvent the philosophical idiom, moving between the deconstruction of the edifice of Hegel using the stones available in the house of speculative dialectics, combined with an irruptive refusal of the protocols and dominant style of institutional philosophy in a lyrical and personal response to Jean Genet. *Glas* is a text with style, and it is plural.

However, *Glas* remains conspicuously under-read; by this we mean undone by critical oversight, for as a fetish object of deconstruction it has no shortage of 'readers' who have attempted to make head or tail of it without notable success. The conference organized at the University of Kolding in Denmark by Roy Sellars in 2001, in the presence of Jacques Derrida, was entitled 'Glossing *Glas*'. It took the organizing principle of each speaker (including Geoffrey Bennington, Peggy Kamuf, and Jonathan Culler) commenting on a skein of the text in an attempt to gain greater leverage on the whole or to point in the direction of a better understanding of the wider text of Derrida. The author himself responded to each of the presentations; the effect of the entire event was to suggest that the task of reading *Glas* was analogous to an exercise in Talmudic scholarship. This current collection takes up the challenge of the Kolding readers. It owes its origins to a series of events organised through the The London Graduate School at Kingston University and New York University in 2014, to mark both the *Glas*'s fortieth birthday and ten years since the passing of Jacques Derrida. It is perhaps no accident that these anniversaries provided the occasion for a return to *Glas*. For the book is profoundly concerned with the annular, the circular, both in terms of the 'alliance' or ring exchanged in marriage that founds the family, the moment of the Hegelian dialectic that from the outset Derrida declares his point of focus, and, especially, in his concern to explore the alliance generated when the circle – of the family, of philosophy, etc. – is complicated by its excluded outside. As he says in one of the moments of meta-commentary that a number of the following pieces investigate: 'What I am trying to write – gl – is not just any structure whatever, a system of the signifier or the signified, a thesis or a novel, a

poem, a law, a desire or a machine, but what passes, more or less well, through the rhythmic stricture of an annulus.’³

This volume originates, then, in a desire to hear *Glas* ring out again, in the belief that there remains much to learn from how it resonates/has resonated, and that what remains of Derrida’s text today can help us to understand the landscape of the Humanities transformed by new political and theoretical configurations (remains, of course, are a considerable philosophical stake in *Glas* itself). The emphasis here is on reading the plurality of *Glas* in all its singular moments, rather than attempting to monumentalize the work through transcendental or exhaustive critical accounts. The readings themselves take different, indeed on occasion opposing, perspectives. Perhaps the value of *Glas* as a text is that it forces us to read it in the exemplary manner that the work itself identifies with reading. To read *Glas* is to read as *Glas* teaches us to read.

It is impossible to get your head around *Glas*, that is to say, all of your head, all of the way round. It is a work that remains to be read and re-read without ever setting itself up for the possibility of mastery. One might say, of course, that such an evasion of mastery is itself the ultimate form of mastery, particularly when a deconstruction of mastery and the master, Hegel, is so significant an issue in *Glas*. However, if that is the case then this is a peculiar kind of sovereignty. Given its resistance to analysis and its under-representation in commentaries on Derrida, one can hardly refer to *Glas* as a master text. In fact, the master text of *Glas* itself has disappeared; there is no record of the manuscript in either of the Derrida archives at UC Irvine or IMEC. Rather, this masterly, sovereign work is

endlessly generous in what it gives up for the patient reader. We can return to it again and again without beginning to approach the possibility of exhausting it.

Derrida offered his own definition of a 'classic' text in his essay on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a work that can bear 'innumerable repetitions, each staked in its particular way, under the same name'. There is a world of difference between a master text and a great work, a classic like *Glas*, which in compelling the return of new readers, 'belongs to the series, to the still-living palimpsest, to the open theatre of narratives which bear this name. It survives them, but they also survive thanks to it'.⁴ We are then no closer to a definitive *Glas*, forty years after it was first published. However, it is hoped that these essays in this volume will result in many happy returns to a work worthy of our most profound consideration.

NOTES

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', translated by Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, edited by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

² Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972), 135.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, translated by John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 109a.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism, Countertime', translated by Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1991), 432.