

# THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL

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*Michael Wyeld*

Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality*, Picador, London 1995, £14.99 hardback.

The press have begun to use Andrew Sullivan as a touchstone and soundbite whenever the need to discuss 'the homosexual question' arises. He has become so recognisable as a celebrity, particularly in the United States, that he has joined the likes of Miles Davis, John Wayne, Sonic Youth and Leonard Bernstein in posing for advertisements for clothing giant The Gap. The press release for his book, written by Sullivan's press agent at Hobsbawm Macaulay Communications Limited, introduces the themes evident in press reviews, which creates a series of questions in its own way. For example, do the press actually read the books they review? The implication in press release is that Sullivan, the editor of the *New Republic*, is now a welcome spokesmodel for homosexuals in Europe and America.

Andrew Sullivan ... has written the most important book about homosexuality ever to be published: *Virtually Normal*, a crystal-clear exploration of the arguments about homosexuality from the Catholic Church to today's liberal and conservative politics.

In this era of controversy about homosexuality, from gay marriage to gays in the military, Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* will set off an unprecedented debate.

In the corporate publicity business anything can be made to seem credible and interesting, so it is no surprise that after actually reading Sullivan's book, it is nothing like 'the most important book about homosexuality ever to be published.' Nor does the book discuss 'the controversy about homosexuality, from gay marriage to gays in the military', although it does discuss gay marriage *and* gays in the military. It is more simple an argument than the press have claimed and, surprisingly for an editor the likes of Sullivan, it is rather dry.

Nevertheless the publicists have won this round, their contracted enthusiasm for Sullivan has leaked into the press. For example, in a preamble to an interview in the 'new man' magazine, *Maxim*, Sullivan is 'as near as dammit to being a gay icon.' November 1995's issue of *Maxim* then uses Sullivan to speak on behalf of, if not all homosexuals, then at least on behalf of all gay men:

Gay men and straight men have so much in common – far more than either

of us share with women. I mean, basically we're all lads who want to go out and get drunk with our mates ... There's a genuine equality in gay relationships. Both partners are autonomous and often self-supporting. And there are no 'norms', so everything gets negotiated from scratch. You have to decide on basic things like commitment, fidelity, how much time to spend together. And gay relationships often allow each partner a little bit of infidelity, which creates a feeling of space. Although I realise a lot of women wouldn't feel comfortable with that at all.

Sullivan's argument in *Virtually Normal* goes something like this: there are four basic approaches to homosexuality – The Prohibitionists, The Liberationists, The Conservatives and The Liberals. Sullivan seeks to show that everyone who has an opinion on homosexuality fits into the first four approaches or some combination of them. His own approach – the privileged one – involves a desire to reclaim Christianity, maintain a political conservatism and be homosexual.

Andrew Sullivan's is the kind of discussion that is frighteningly authoritative – it feels like something that cannot be questioned by mere mortals. The tactic is rather simple – by explaining all the possible moral approaches to homosexuality that political science has to offer, Sullivan wants to indicate his expertise. In other words he knows you better than you do. His expertise is underscored by his publicists and the press – he got a first at Oxford, he got a PhD from Harvard, he is the editor of the *New Republic*. And he hasn't merely *been* to Oxford, he was president of the union. Ignored in the discussion is the diversity of opinion found among the stakeholders – homosexuals. Sullivan claims he knows what lesbians and gays need, no matter what experience might have to say. In Sullivan's world view it doesn't matter how many lesbians and gays get involved in the peace movement or start S&M groups or advocate multiple partners, what they really want is a strong military and the right to get married. His notions about the 'gay scene' leave one wondering if Sullivan lives in a parallel universe with an entirely different collection of homosexuals to this one. In one of Sullivan's less thoughtful moments, he writes: 'I also learned how the subcultural fact of gay life rendered it remarkably democratic: in gay bars, there was far less socioeconomic stratification than in heterosexual bars. The shared experience of same-sex desire cut through class and race; it provided a humbling experience, which allowed many of us to risk our hearts and our friendships with people we otherwise might never have met. It loosened us up ...' (p203).

For many lesbians and gays on the left it is difficult to imagine 'one of their own kind' who votes Conservative. But it happens, and there are large numbers of lesbians and gays who align themselves politically as Conservative. This is really no surprise. As has been suggested by various 'Queer' commentators, sexual attraction is insufficient to explain someone's politics. Lesbian and gay conservatives, like Andrew Sullivan, are quick not only to advocate a more conservative economic agenda, they also support a more conservative moral

agenda. Although perhaps shunned by traditional (read straight) conservatives, they are nevertheless part of what has become known as the New Right. Jeffrey Weeks, although not recognising that there are homosexuals who would identify with the New Right, notes,

In the New Right vision of social order the family has a policing role. It ensures carefully demarcated spheres between men and women, adults and children. It regulates sexual relations and sexual knowledge. It enforces discipline and proper respect for authority. It is a harbour of moral responsibility and the work ethic. This is contrasted to the ostensible moral chaos that exists outside.<sup>1</sup>

1. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, Routledge, London 1985, p43.

High on the agenda for gay conservatives has been marriage rights. Perhaps within this agenda is the desire that other homosexuals might gain new respect for conservative ideals like work ethics and respect for authority, if only they were part of a legally recognised family. In the *Maxim* article mentioned earlier Sullivan remarked, 'A lot of us pretend that we don't [want gay marriage]. We say that it's patriarchal and heterosexist. But that's just rationalisation – we don't want what we can't have. Marriage is the most central institution there is.... New research suggests that committed relationships between gay men last longer than those between heterosexuals or even lesbians.'

In the wake of the terrible image thrust on gay men in the aftermath of the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, the image of the healthy, wealthy, gay professional in a stable, monogamous relationship has been welcomed by the gay community. Sullivan is keen to promote this view of homosexuals, 'We are your businessmen and -women, who built and sustained this economy for homosexual and heterosexual alike ... We need nothing from you, but we have much to give back to you' (p176). There's no doubt Sullivan's intentions are honest. The final chapter, the best written section of the book, is a sentimental look at his own life. Its effect is minimised by the conclusion drawn from his experiences of 'coming out'.

In the book's press release, Sullivan is quoted as saying, 'this is the argument of my life and I have to win it.' Sullivan's attitude indicates a man who believes that the world operates like an Oxford Student Union debating society. It doesn't. He is no radical, no spokesperson. He is just a loudmouth magazine editor with an expensive education, who just 25 years ago would have preferred the safety of his closet full of Gap T-shirts.

# RESPONSIBILITIES ON THE FAR SIDE

*Stephen Bygrave*

Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1994; £35.95 hardback, £18.25 paperback.

It seems the deconstructive bandwagon has rolled past, from English departments at least: apparently we are at 'the point in critical history where textual deconstruction is taken as a natural (even *passé*) condition', and we can get on to history.<sup>1</sup> This is a condition Paul de Man anticipated, and parodied, while the bandwagon was undoubtedly still rolling, and this book is evidence that deconstruction will not go away – or be so blithely incorporated as the quotation suggests.<sup>2</sup> It continues an argument about the status of the activity of deconstruction – or of the figure of Derrida – as a third term within the faculties it most obviously contests, philosophy and literature. For Rodolphe Gasché deconstruction is an activity ceaselessly to be gone through and it is to be gone through in the writings of Jacques Derrida rather than in some separate transcendental realm. He wants to situate Derrida as a transcendental philosopher, and to save him from what befell Edward Lear in Auden's poem – 'he became his admirers.'

Gasché wants to describe Derrida as a theorist of reflection, and the question of identity is therefore crucial for him: 'deconstruction's response to speculative thought is a response to the strong concept of identity' (p218). Identity is, on the one hand, repetition or replication; on the other, identity with itself, or essence. Identity, like freedom, is obviously a differential term; just as freedom entails the question freedom *from* what, identity entails the question identity *with* what? (Similarly, difference *from* what, the other *of* what?) Difference presupposes identity – that is, it presupposes sameness, as in the differences within a genus. To reify 'difference' is to make all differences the same, or to make a genus of difference and, paradoxically, to make differences into identity. Thus one essay here, which complains about the popularity of the word 'difference' in the titles of books and complains that their authors misunderstand it, Gasché calls 'The Eclipse of Difference.' Derrida's inventiveness with such a notion is not to be derogated as idiosyncratic free play. Inventions must be capable of being tested and even reproduced: Gasché wants to function as their patent office while retaining Derrida's 'singularity':

It cannot be a question of who is right or wrong, of simply deciding about the essential Derrida versus what of him has been appropriated and

1. Donald Ault, 'Foreword' to Martin Walker (ed), *Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner': An Experimental Edition of Texts and Revisions, 1798-1828*, Station Hill Literary Editions, New York 1993, p xv.

2. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1979, p3.

distorted. Rather the question is what in his very singular reworking of traditional forms of thinking ... always escapes for essential reasons any essentialist determination, and thus, implicitly, also the possibility of a distortion of the authenticity of his thought. One must seek in his writings precisely those structures that singularize, extend and overflow such totalization (pp20-21).

The rhetoric of limits, of impossibility, leads to essays on the infinite, on Hegel's absolute, and on God. In this last, Gasché's efforts to keep Derrida within the protocols of philosophy and disprove the 'accusation' (p152) that he is a negative theologian actually tend to suggest that this is a pretty good description of Derrida's impossible enterprise.

In his introduction Gasché opposes the suggestion that Derrida may be ready to be 'congealed', as he quotes Richard Rorty as saying, 'into one more set of philosophical views, suitable for doxographical summary' (p9). Like Rorty, Gasché wants to keep Derrida's writing 'fluid'. For him it does not furnish concepts capable of summary but rather, as he claimed in his earlier *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986), 'infrastructures' (such as trace, supplement, hymen, re-mark, and so on) which are both anterior to and the remains of identity. However, Gasché wants not to conflate Derrida's writing (as he says Habermas does) with 'the project of extending the sovereignty of rhetoric over logic, or of pursuing a systematic aestheticization of philosophy' (p62); and he opposes Rorty's distinction of an earlier Derrida, still engaged in a critique of the western philosophical tradition, from the later writer of more private and 'literary' texts, of which *Glas* is usually cited as both the first and the *nec plus ultra*.

The earliest of the essays here, putting right Derrida's literary enthusiasts, still serves as a good introduction to deconstruction. There Gasché exemplifies it through Derrida's immanent critique of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*. In Husserl's phenomenology reflection cannot coincide with itself; similarly, reversing the hierarchy of terms in a dyad does not lead simply to a reversal of that hierarchy. The principal dyad is that of presence/absence which for Derrida is constitutive of western metaphysics from Plato to Husserl and from which is presumed the derivative status of signs (in *Of Grammatology*, the derivation of writing from speech). However, for Gasché, de Man turns the notion of 'trace' into a reflexive notion, confident that a space outside literary language from which it can be approached is underwritten by an older conception of 'text'.

Despite this, he allows more to the proponents of a 'literary' Derrida – the figure whom Rorty calls a fantasist – than he did in *The Tain of the Mirror*. For instance, he risks with a question on his very first page – 'How does one read works that do not limit themselves to making a point but also perform and enact it?' (p1) – the answer, 'well, for good or ill, the way one reads literary texts.' Gasché has a long footnote on how the singularity of *Glas* might be read, within an essay in which he only reads the left-hand column of that work – only, that is, the column on Hegel and not the 'literary' text from Genet that

faces it. His meditation on the Hegelian 'band' can then only be, as it were, a single bind. Above all, he rests his case for a rigorously philosophical Derrida primarily on earlier texts. It is left to the final essay in the volume to confront head-on this objection to his claims for Derrida.

On the one hand, then, Gasché has a specific argument with the way Derrida's theories were extrapolated and applied in the 1970s to the 'regional science of literary criticism' (p28) while leaving its categories and institutions undisturbed. On the other hand lies that philosophical tradition – largely post-Kantian and therefore for Gasché also postmodern – within and outside of which Derrida needs to be read: outside, because Derrida is to be seen as largely *sui generis* (p121); inside, because Gasché argues, *pace* Rorty and others, for a rigorous, transcendental Derrida.

Derrida writes in his early essay 'Différance' that 'this radical alterity as concerns every possible mode of presence is marked by the irreducibility of the aftereffect, the delay.'<sup>3</sup> For Gasché the 'radical alterity' he finds in Derrida's thinking itself entails that work on Derrida cannot go from exposition to the summary Rorty thinks 'inevitable' and should not bypass even for now – should in fact be delayed by – an argument for its relation to the notions and practices of the tradition(s) it invokes. Gasché's may be a selective view of Derrida's 'tradition' – there are, for instance, only two (passing) references to Freud in his book – but his argument depends on our taking (or continuing to take) the constitutive power of that tradition seriously and, as John Llewellyn has also suggested, entails responsibility towards it.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere Gasché insists that 'play' is substitution (as in the *play* of light on a surface) rather than fun and games: 'Thinking, with *différance*, becomes a response to multiple heterogeneities and entails a responsibility to establish their commerce with the dominating concepts' (p81). If Derrida's term '*différance*' is hardly ever used in his later work, Gasché's move from the term 'response' to the term 'responsibility' is an ethical move. He tries to substantiate his footnoted claim that philosophical decisions are also ethical decisions (p260n) in the last essay from this volume, 'On Responding Responsibly.'

The essay reads 'Ulysses Gramophone', a piece in which Derrida responds to *Ulysses* and which was originally given as the opening address to the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium in Tokyo. Gasché's aim is to establish that this unlikely text (as it seems to him) 'belongs to philosophy' (p231) – although perhaps not *with* philosophy, for here there is a bolder claim for Derrida's being *sui generis*, 'Derrida remains a stranger ... to both the philosophical and literary project' (p233) but nevertheless he can only be read *from* philosophy.

For Derrida, *Ulysses* is the epitome of the encyclopaedic text; that is, of a text which renders commentary redundant. This must have amused his audience – earlier Gasché found humour 'which escapes only the totally insensitive reader' in Hegel's *Science of Logic* (p213), which did escape this reviewer, but here he works hard to 'dispel the appearance of frivolity' (p249) from Derrida's essay. He can establish that it is not 'private' if only because it accords with certain

3. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Harvester Press, Brighton 1982, p21.

4. John Llewellyn, 'Responsibility with Indecidability' in David C. Wood (ed), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, pp72-96.

minimal standards of intelligibility we could call 'public', but we are still a long way from a more regulative conception of philosophy like that of Habermas.

Seemingly 'an irresponsible spinning out of private fantasies, wild jokes, and totally arbitrary associations' (p231), Derrida's essay questions the 'yes' which opens and closes Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*. This 'yes', normally a response, a signature and an agreement, is thus doubled – not only is it a response but also it is repeated. In these terms, Derrida's essay can also be claimed to interrogate Being (or perhaps *may-be-ing*, a 'yes' rendered as a 'perhaps'). As it turns out, though, this is largely because of the same dubious claim for enactment made on Gasché's first page, that 'exposition and performance are indistinguishable' (p249).

I have dwelt on this essay, firstly because for Gasché the theme of 'responsibility' addresses a question – a non-issue for many of Derrida's anglophone admirers – of whether he is to be taken as a 'rigorous' philosopher or a playful literatus. (Derrida himself says in an interview that he was attracted to literature by, among other things, its 'irresponsibility' and it is significant that there is no naturalized term for a writer of literary texts parallel to the honorific title 'philosopher'.) Secondly, beyond what may be only a 'regional dispute', 'responsibility' names a problem for any non-foundational theory. If we are not to have recourse to founding principles, how can we judge the effects of actions? This is a problem of ethics (a word as fashionable in the titles of current books of literary criticism as 'difference' was in the late 1970s.)

An ethical and even theological turn finds a warrant throughout Derrida's texts and might be squared with Rorty's urbane insistence that it is perfectly possible to be *non-foundationalist* without having to be *anti-foundationalist*. The tradition just needn't have the power it is assumed to have. This is particularly unsettling for Gasché's case since it is so firmly based on such an assumption. We do not have to agree with Rorty that Derrida 'simply drops theory' in favour of 'fantasy' and 'fun'<sup>5</sup> to see the likelihood of what he also suggests – that Derrida won't have to be 'gone through' because there will be another model to take our attention. Recent literary critical fashions – as in my opening quotation – suggest Rorty may be right. Deconstruction might have to prove itself within the institution without its being present.

5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1989, pp125-26, 238-39.