The Language of the Back

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David Wills. *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 280 pp.

In *Dorsality*, David Wills offers a linguistic reading of the technological, a technological reading of the linguistic, and a re-conception of the human on the basis of this relationship. Because Wills is a translator and former friend of Jacques Derrida, the appearance of deconstructive influences in the book's methodology is unsurprising. [1] That said, *Dorsality* is by no means an attempt at simply mimicking Derrida's work or extending deconstruction further into the realm of technology. Although there is a line of filiation and a sophisticated engagement with a variety of contemporary deconstructionists (e.g. Eduardo Cadava, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Avital Ronell, Bernard Stiegler) evident in the text, there is also a tenor to the argument that is entirely Wills' own. Wills' thesis on the dorsal turn is important for two reasons: first, it advances detailed readings of a broad range of figures in continental philosophy and literature that tell an innovative story about technology and language, and second, it achieves an ethically and politically significant reorientation in perspective from a familiar *facial* orientation that unconsciously delimits possibilities to a *spinal* one that opens them up.

The key turn in *Dorsality* is the one which moves "back" to language, articulating it "as primary technological system" (14). Although the originality and force of Wills' argument rests on this description of language, I would be hard pressed to offer an exploration or a critique of it before explaining the foundational argument of the first chapter. Here, Wills begins by implicitly acknowledging the thesis on originary technicity according to which the human and the technological are originarily intertwined, and then introducing a complication: the "human" is always turning, and this is a "technological" fact. By this, Wills means that the technological is to be understood in non-linear terms more akin to the play of language than the imaginary rules of some simple mechanism. The linguistic and the technological are similarly twisted, and we exemplify this torsion in our forward movement--a movement that is also always lateral. The dorsal turn--the movement from the back, out of sight--is the means by which the human and the technological supplement one another.

This interpretation accomplishes four things. First, given the dorsal turn, we know that we cannot move forward without also turning to the side and from the back: we turn as we step, constantly correcting our bearing. This unsettles any prioritization of the biological over the technological, and helps us "[make] the case for an originary biotechnology" (and for any sort of posthumanism) (6). Wills here acknowledges the importance of biotechnology, bioethics and biopolitics, but does so while noting the significance of its discursive or rhetorical framing. This is something that he will emphasize time and again. Second, thinking in terms of the dorsal turn constitutes a resistance to the concept of technology as the material instrument of linear progress. If we can maintain "the dorsal chance, the dorsal as the chance of what cannot be *fore*seen" (7), we can avoid the progressivist assumptions of instrumental action. Moreover, dorsal thinking can change our conception of technology to one which "exceeds" the conditions of its production. Third, in corporeal terms, the dorsal turn involves the consideration and privileging of the spine. The work of André Leroi-Gourhan, referenced by Derrida and Stiegler, privileges the frontal visual field, and makes technology and language mere aspects of that field, but we are regularly surprised by that which comes from the back–by that which cannot be fore*seen*. The work of Leroi-Gourhan and his successors should thus be reconsidered in the peculiar "light" of the back.

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, the dorsal turn suggests that operations of reversibility are a property of technology. In "machine" technology, spatial reversals are at work: the piston, for instance, is indifferent to the direction in which the wheel turns. In "human" technology, however, this directional indifference is a function of time: repetition and memory complicate our assumptions about time's linearity (9). At the minimum, this means that any understanding of technology must account for its unpredictability. Wills insists that this temporally grounded claim has political, ethical, and sexual implications. For instance, in the chapters on Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Nietzsche, Wills argues that a dorsal conception of technology makes a politics of "dissidence" and "controversion" possible, while the failure to count unpredictability among the chief characteristics of technology can lead to "protofascism" (209). The dorsal turn makes an ethics that accounts for "the machine in the human" possible, too: by closing off the field of vision and focusing instead on what happens from the back, Wills hopes to develop an ethics that would be adequate to the sort of biotechnology mentioned above that operates non-mechanistically, unpredictably. Finally, in this non-visual context, the dorsal turn makes the back a site of sexual sensitivity: touching it "implies an erotic relation, a version of sexuality …. which implies before all else a coupling with otherness" (11-12).

Having established the political, ethical, and sexual stakes of the argument, Wills turns to language as technological system. He is informed here by a serious criti-

cism of the first two volumes of Stiegler's *Technics and Time* series (1998, 2009), of which he is otherwise appreciative. He argues that Stiegler's appropriation of Leroi-Gourhan, his subsequent focus on technical minutiae, and his thesis on the "disorientation" wrought by modern technology are misguided. Because Stiegler fails to take adequate account of the technological aspect of language and the linguistic aspect of technology, he ends up with a work that is less profound than it might otherwise be (Wills, "Techn*e*ology of the Discourse of Speed"). From this point of departure, Wills argues for an accounting of the "tropological speed of language … a conception of language and its rhetorical turns as high technology or technology of information" *(Dorsality*, 15). This bring Wills to what he identifies as the thesis underlying the entire text:

> in order to elaborate an ethics, politics, or sexuality informed by technology, one cannot simply presume a language more or less adequate to the conceptual framework being developed; rather, one must seek to technologize language, or forms of discourse themselves (14).

Stiegler's originary technicity misses what, for Wills, is the essential Derridean point: technology and humanity supplement one another in a linguistic context, but language is itself a technology of the human. Neither technology, humanity nor language come "first," and any analysis of technology must therefore be "tropological"--not mechanistic (14).

The rest of the text is dedicated to exploring this thesis. Wills approaches the task from a number of different angles, undertaking dorsal readings of Homer, the Marquis de Sade, Arthur Rimbaud, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce and Hermann Broch, among others. One of the great virtues of *Dorsality* is that these readings are not isolated case studies: both within and between chapters, the readings connect. For instance, in the second chapter, Wills recapitulates Stiegler's thesis concerning Heidegger--that the connection of being to time can only be understood if we take account of technology, and that Heidegger's earlier, "technological" work should therefore be read in terms of his later, "linguistic" work and vice versa--and, accepting it, undertakes a sort of reversible reading of Heidegger's later work. The poetic language on which Heidegger's reflective thinking is modeled thus comes to be "purely technological," denatured "even as it purports to revert to the animal" (31). Technology is then similarly re-conceived in terms of language.

Wills extends this principle of reversibility into a technological interpretation of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. Drawing on Judith Butler, Wills argues that hailings, usually understood in linguistic terms, should instead be understood in terms of power and technology. Upon being hailed, the subject turns back into

itself, and hence into subjectivation. But while subjectivation is an inevitable process, its results are far from certain. Because hailings are tele-technological ("no hailing operates without a delay or distancing"), they can be misrecognized: "because of that irreducible effect of distancing and delay, there is no telecommunication that *simply* arrives at its man" (39). In Wills' hands, Althusser becomes a theorist of technology.

Wills moves smoothly from Althusser's version of interpellation into that of Emmanuel Levinas': interpellation as "the role of language in the 'immediateness' of the face-to-face" (42). Just as the results of political hailing cannot be perfectly predicted, so too is the ethical relation far from symmetrical; it is not a relationship between two equals, but between myself and another situated at a transcendent height: "[t]he Other doesn't appear in front of me, facing me, so much as turn or incline itself toward me, summoning me as responsible from outside my consciousness or perception" (45). Wills therefore advances an interpretation that situates the Other not face-to-face, but face-to-back. The chapter culminates in a brilliant reading of the second section of *Totality and Infinity* (1969) in light of *Otherwise than Being* (1998), where Wills finds technology--coded linguistically--in the heart of the ethical relation. If the body is to be held up as an interiority which is distinct from any exteriority, then it must be read as a type of house. For Levinas, the house is a privileged tool: it is the condition of possibility of human activity, and it engenders a distinction of the personal inside from the alterior outside which is at the same time the means of passage between interior and exterior. Describing the house from the simultaneous standpoints of technology, tropology, and initiator of the ethical relation, Wills makes a technological reading of Levinas' ethics convincing.

The connections established in the second chapter between Heidegger, Althusser, and Levinas extend immediately into the third chapter, which begins with domesticity. Lacking the space to give an account of the work done here on Homer, Joyce, and Broch, I will note only that the transition between these chapters is not only smooth but also eminently productive. Wills employs Derrida's concept of the Odyssean paradigm to disrupt the presumptions that the traveler sometimes makes about the homogeneity of the domestic and the heterogeneity of the foreign, and he does so on the basis of the previous analysis of interiority and exteriority. Moreover, he extends this dorsal logic--one which is finally moving through the ocean itself--into explicitly political territory, offering a "technotropological" critique of "the sense of home as national identity, … a founding fiction whose attempt at literality--drawing the line, defining the border--is problematized by its own rhetorical excess" (81). When that criticism reappears two chapters later in the reading of Schmitt, it bears the extra weight of this layered understanding.

I might use these last words to note my minor criticisms of the text--its relatively

shallow reading of Heidegger's notion of *Gestell*, for instance, or its overly tangential (though hilarious) critical evisceration of Suzanne Bernard, or the sometimes cryptic style of the final, ostensibly "political" chapter--but these would be small complaints about an otherwise inspiring work. *Dorsality* aims to enact its thesis--not just to represent a concept or describe a figure, but to perform a turn that is politically, ethically, and sexually significant with every turn of the page (16). This is an ambitious goal, and Wills should be commended for trying to meet it.

Notes

[1] Derrida dedicated *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998) to Wills.

[2] The brilliant sarcasm of the pages devoted to Bernard--"argrégeé de l'université, docteur ès lettres, paragon of excellence of French literary scholarship and editor of the Garnier edition of my graduate school days"--is hardly something to complain about, anyway.

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