Most Interesting: Derrida & the Interest(s) of Literature

Abstract

[This article homes in on the adjective 'interesting' in Derrida's assertion that 'literature is the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world'. While this claim is often quoted, and glossed, what Derrida means by 'interesting' has gone unexamined in the critical literature on this interview. This is the more interesting insofar as 'interest' is often a category that seems to be deprecated in Derrida's work. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's illuminating work on interestingness as a specifically *aesthetic* category, the article explores why and how it might be that literature is superlatively and exorbitantly interesting for Derrida. In doing so, it focuses in particular on the thinking of interest in *Given Time*, which text - it argues - is at least as interested in interest as it is in the impossible gift, offers the most thorough-going thinking of literary interest in Derrida's work, and posits such interest as itself a gift.]

Keywords: Jacques Derrida; interest; literature; Sianne Ngai; *Given Time*; the gift

Derrida's aphoristic, epanorthotic, statement that 'literature is the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting *than* the world' - which glitters gem-like in the middle of his interview with Derek Attridge, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' - is more often quoted or adduced than it is analysed (Derrida 1992a, 47). Even those who go as far as to gloss it, or ponder it, or entitle their work after it, seem not to focus on what is (arguably) the most interesting thing about it, namely that adjective 'interesting' itself. Culler, in his article entitled 'The most interesting thing in the world', glosses the lines with a 'because': 'because it exceeds the actual but includes its possibilities, opening their condition of possibility' (Culler 2008, 9). Kamuf clarifies that 'it is the possibility of world, of possible, virtual, fictional worlds, of other worlds' (Kamuf 2005, 144). And Royle, in a chapter called 'The Most Interesting Thing in the World' wonders how something can 'be in the world, but apparently not in it, be more interesting *than* it', going on to suggest that this formulation permits us to 'sense... something of the uncanny unsettling of inside and outside that is associated with the exorbitant, supplemental strangeness of deconstruction' (Royle 2003, 85-86). In each of these expositions, unimpeachable and indeed interesting as they nevertheless are, 'interesting' itself is - ostensibly at least - overlooked, or taken as read.

This is perhaps not terribly surprising. 'Interesting', after all, is precisely the kind of inoffensive adjective that passes under the radar. Its banality, and affective coolness, mean that - as a category of aesthetic judgement - it is itself frequently felt to be *un*interesting. Indeed as Sianne Ngai has shown, in her cultural-theoretical monograph *Our Aesthetic Categories,* its utterance in everyday speech tends to function as a sort of place-holder, pending - and tacitly promising - a more detailed and textured critical judgement to which it will cede in due course (Ngai 2012, 170). It registers the difference of its object with respect to the hinterland against which that object comes to view but is indifferent to, and silent about, the nature or qualities of the object itself (Ngai 2012, 112). Literally *anything* may in principle be dubbed interesting (Ngai 2012, 120). But if 'interesting' is usually characterised by its quotidien blandness, almost-neutrality, promiscuity of application, and tendency to efface itself (so that, as Ngai has also pointed out, it has a paradoxically *dis*interestedquality) then this makes Derrida's extravagant hyperbolising of it the more remarkable (Ngai 2012, 135). Unusual too are both his connection of this hyperbolic interest with one particular kind of 'thing' above all others, and the way in which his epigrammatic appraisal of literature's superlative interestingness appears as a summative, rather than prevaricative, judgement. With a reflexivity which frequently attends discussions of interestingness, these singularities render Derrida's use of the adjective 'interesting' itself interesting, and so worthy of further attention.

For readers of Derrida it is the more interesting given the fact that 'interest' - at least in its economic and political senses - seems often to be derogated in his work. In *Given Time,* for example, Derrida repeatedly demonstrates through his readings of Marcel Mauss that 'every gift is caught in the round and contract of usury' (Derrida 1992b, 26), an argument often taken up by expositors (both sympathetic and sceptical) of this text as a repudiation of such usurious returns, at least insofar as they countermand the pure donation of the gift. We might cite as indicative Céline Surprenant's argument that, notwithstanding Derrida's earlier 'deconstruction of the metaphysical rejection of calculation', in *Given Time* he seems to reject calculation itself, keeping the gift distinct from 'calculation and the market economy', and so from the logic of capital loan/investment and returns with interest (Surprenant 2011, 34). Meanwhile, and drawing on an adjacent but not identical sense of 'interest', where it means to have a stake or concern in some matter, Sean Gaston points out that 'on the few occasions when Derrida refers in passing to disinterest [...] it is more often than not to warn of a concealed economy of *interest* behind any proclamation of disinterest' (Gaston 2005, 2). He quotes from 'Plato's Pharmacy', where Derrida writes that 'one must always [...] be careful to diagnose the *economy*, the investment and deferred benefit behind the sign of pure renunciation or the *bidding* of disinterested sacrifice'(Derrida 1981, 120). Interest, in short, spells the ruin both of the generous gift, and of the impartial and selfless action or judgement. Like the proverbial bad penny, its returns seem inevitable; indeed, it names the inevitability *of* (some) return, some supererogatory pay-off or restitution for self or sender. The very predictability of its reoccurrence distinguishes it negatively from the hens' teeth rarity of its opposites, and makes it less interesting than these - as evidenced, indeed, by Gaston's underscoring of the scarcity value of mentions of *disinterest* in Derrida.

The specifically *aesthetic* valence of 'interest' in Derrida (which is what interests us most here) is less often discussed than its economic and political senses, but we can see how a similar boomerang logic might be thought to beset this kind of interest too. Certain comments made by Timothy Clark are illuminating here. In his *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* Clark - testing the merits of different fictional and artistic works of climate fiction - laments '[t]he tragedy that climate change is not 'interesting'" (Clark 2015, 175). His argument is that the mechanisms by which interest is solicited in works of climate fiction - compelling characterisation, humanly identifiable story arcs, and so on - precisely endorse and bolster the individualism and human-scale thinking which in an Anthropocenic context are part of the *problem*, even while climate change itself is not interesting *unless* individualised (Clark 2015, 177-8). Literary interestingness, in this context, is understood to operate according to the closed loop of a self-serving economy, and so - insofar as it is ostensibly being deployed in the service of fostering a global awareness, an an-economic ethics and an inventive politics - has an auto-immune function. No less than usurious profit, or personally- or politically-motivated action or judgement, 'interest' in this 'aesthetic' sense *returns*, comfortably gratifying the reader who has invested her time in, or tendered her curiosity towards, the literary object in question.

Clark's comments about aesthetic interest echo the emphasis on the recursivity of interest found in expositors of Derrida's thinking of its economic and political senses. That he makes them in the context of a discussion of the climate crisis suggest further why it might be interesting to return to the question of Derrida and his notion of supra-worldly literary interest *today.* Ours is a moment when, on the one hand, the demands of the so-called 'attention economy' mean that interest and the piquing of interest has become commodified as never before, and, on the other, activists and critics facing down 'apocalypse fatigue' evaluate literary texts for their capacity to interest readers in topics of global concern.1 One would do well here to avoid the kinds of hyper-inflation which beset academic bids for readerly attention, and to resist asking for credit that one will not be able to repay, let alone - or not even - with interest. But it is certainly true to say that, within such contexts, Derrida's so-quotable comments about the interestingness of literature take on a new piquancy. This is a piquancy sharpened by a number of recent theoretical works on interestingness, including that by Ngai, already mentioned, alongside work by Epstein, Mieskowski, and others - and in what follows I will draw on that work, as I show why it is that the interest of *literature*, in Derrida's hyperbolic and exorbitant thinking of it, breaks with the solipsistic feedback loops heretofore identified. While my readings are broadly informed, I will cleave closely to two texts in particular, published within a year of one another, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', and *Given Time*. It is in these that Derrida draws in the most explicit ways on the interesting as an *aesthetic* category. Some of the dynamics limned will be familiar to readers of Derrida - and indeed, as with any other specialist writing, I credit my reader *with* that familiarity, even while I draw *on* it, as on a capital resource. Nevertheless, and this must be the speculative risk taken also by an article such as this, my wager is that the underlining of *interestingness* as a feature of Derrida's thinking of the gift, of the ontico-ontological difference, and of the secret, will bring a certain interesting novelty to ongoing scholarly work on those topics.

**Quid interest; or what's the difference?**

When Derek Attridge, at the very start of his interview with Derrida about literature, asks him to 'expand upon' a statement he'd made in his thesis defence, concerning what Attridge glosses as Derrida's 'primary interest in literature' (Derrida 1992a, 33), he is drawing on the conventions of intellectual biography and employing interest to mean 'a feeling of concern for or curiosity about a person or thing' (OED sense 7a). This definition, whose initial English usage OED dates to 1771, emerges at roughly the same moment as, and in tandem with, the aesthetic term 'interesting', first found in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). As Ngai has helpfully established, we are licensed in referring to this term as an '*aesthetic* category' insofar as it is a 'feeling based' and so 'subjective' judgement, whose utterance has a discursively 'universalising' impulse, and implicitly promises further justification, thus opening itself to 'public disputation' (Ngai 2012, 119). Littré cites earlier (late seventeenth-century) uses for these same senses in French, but in both French and English, interest's psychological and aesthetic inflections are relatively late-coming with respect both to the word's monetary or economic meaning, and to what we might think of as its more 'political' sense. As regards the former, 'interest' originally referred to compensation for losses incurred if a debt was defaulted on, and came then to be used as a synonym for usuary, initially (when the practice was forbidden) as a duplicitous fiction covering over usurious practices, and subsequently simply by force of usage.2 In terms of the latter, it names having a stake in some matter, business or affair, a stake which might be narrowly 'self-interested', or more altruistically concerned with the general or public interest.3 The precise relation between these earlier senses is unclear as to priority or etiology, as is the question of quite how they might inform the more modern sense (Williams 1988, 172). It is certainly an overdetermined and polysemic web on which many literary writers, from John Hervey and Olaudah Equano, in the eighteenth century, to Meg Wollitzer in the twenty-first, have drawn in their production of 'interesting narratives' (Sider Jost 2020).4 But all the word's senses ultimately if circuitously, derive from the Latin interesse, 'to concern, make a difference, be of importance', and literally 'to be between'. And when Derrida uses the word, he often makes it hum with this etymological valence. 'When I write 'what interests me' he says 'I am designating not only an *object* of interest, but the place that *I am in the middle of,* and precisely this place that I cannot exceed' (Derrida 1995, 67). This usage is at once idiosyncratically idiomatic and yet linguistically and historically informed. It thus plays out in miniature, in its own locution, the dynamics it also articulates, reframing and situating interest *qua* private predeliction in more structural and foundational terms. The already-interestedness Derrida names marks 'my' dynamic situatedness within a world which I cannot in principle stand outside: the condition of, for example, being 'in a text already where [I] believe [myself] to be' (Derrida 1990, 62).

All this begins to explain the context for Derrida's apparent *pique* when Attridge, in his opening question of the interview about literature, rephrases the affirmation in 'The Time of a thesis: punctuations' that his 'most *constant* interest' has been 'directed towards literature' (Derrida 1983, 37), and makes it into an assertion of his '*primary* interest in literature'. 'What can a "primary interest" be?' he asks, apparently rhetorically and perhaps a little irritably, going on to avow that 'I would never dare to say that my primary interest went toward literature rather than toward philosophy' (Derrida 1992a, 33-4). Attridge's bungled iteration of Derrida's earlier words replaces the latter's autobiographical reflections on the *duration* and *persistence* of his literary interest with a claim for its temporal or hierarchical *priority*. To accord primacy to a single (object of) interest is to ignore the ways in which interests emerge relationally within contexts of involvement, and indeed name the dynamics of such contexts. By the same token, the idea of 'interest' as a purely private faculty is untenable - something legible, indeed, in the curiously reversible transivity of the word itself, whereby my interest in a thing can also be described as the interest *of* a thing, and I can either have, or take, an interest in it. It follows from Derrida's thinking of interest that, if 'I' am interested, I am not self-identifical, self-present, replete, but involved, concerned and tendered, a between-being or being-between, strung out in time and space, inter-esse indeed.5 As Gaston puts it 'the decision of interest is a dis-interest of the subject' (Gaston 2005, 15). This is to say that, while interest might return to a subject, it is to a subject altered *by* its interest; and that interest, in the 'first place', marks the subject's non-self-identity, its orientation and openness towards, its investment and involvement, not to mention its inscription, in other things. To this extent, interestedness and disinterestedness start to swap places, with a contronymic, uncanny (il)logic which - as several critics have demonstrated - often attends the interesting (see Ngai 2012, 130 and Mieskowski 2006, 137-8).

So, to recapitulate (to return to our headline, which is to say also our 'capital'), 'interest' for Derrida, is not simply the property of the subject, nor simply of an object, but names a 'place', a differantial context of dynamic involvement. These arguments suggest why Derrida rejects Attridge's suggestion that his '*primary* interest' is in literature. But what they *don't* get to, is why Derrida, later in the same interview, goes on to suggest that 'literature is the most interesting thing in the world'. And in this context it is perhaps worth pointing out that Gaston's incisive and extremely wide-ranging study of (dis-)interest in Derrida's work - which cites some one hundred texts from across the chronological length and discursive breadth of the oeuvre, and to which my readings here are multiply indebted - neither cites nor mentions the interview on literature, and its so-memorable celebration of a superlatively interesting thing. Is this because the celebration is anomalous? It is certainly a curiosity: at odds both with the beginning of the interview itself and with Derrida's thinking of interest, as we have thus far limned it, elsewhere in his work. For if 'literature is the most interesting thing in the world' then it *is* - after all - a thing of *primary* interest, insofar as this superlative places it as being in the 'highest rank of importance' (OED primary, sense 2). What happens between the repudiation of a notion of primary interest at the start of the interview, and the affirmation of literature as a superlatively interesting thing, at its mid-point?

For a start, we can suggest - and without simply psychologising - that Attridge's inquiry into Derrida's 'primary interest' piques Derrida's interest, and that - by the same token, and appearances to the contrary - Derrida receives it as a gift. At the risk of being a bit boring - the risk, always, of another's interest - let us briefly track that movement. Requoting Derrida's words *to* him, by way of an interlocutionary opening gambit ('You said to your thesis jury in 1980 that 'my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if that is possible, has been directed towards literature' (Derrida 1992a, 33)) and following up straight away with a supplementary rephrasing of these words which shifts their meaning and emphasis ('Could you expand upon that statement concerning your primary interest in literature...?), Attridge repays the borrowed words with supplementary interest, while asking *for* a supplementary exposition ('can you expand upon') himself. But Derrida appears to rebuff both the request, and the gratuitous addition, accepting no jot or tittle beyond his original formulation, and expatiating on the impossibility of the demand for expansion, rather than acquiescing to it. While he queries the formulation, however ('what can a "primary interest" be?') he does not simply return it to sender. This question of a 'primary interest in literature' seems to function as a sort of goad or provocation, so that he comes back to it across the length of the interview. Thus, picking up on the language of intellectual and psycho-biographical 'interest', he discusses in turn 'what interests me today' (ibid, 34), 'the first texts I got interested in' (35), an 'obsession with the *proteiform* which motivates the interest for literature' (ibid, 36), the necessity to 'be interested in those situations in which writers say things which are not allowed' (ibid, 38), the difference between his 'interest' in 'the possibility of fiction' and an *enjoyment* of fiction (ibid, 39), his 'deep down (or rather on the surface!)' *lack* of interest in 'telling or inventing stories', an 'interest for the signifier' (ibid, 44) and 'in the functioning of language' (ibid, 45), before returning to the question of 'what interests our desire under the name of literature' and the assertion of literature's superlative and supra-worldly interestingness (ibid, 47). This odyssean trajectory thus allows him to 'come back to [Attridge's] first question' and sketch the '"place" so difficult to situate" in which his 'interest in literature crosses [his] interest in philosophy or metaphysics' (ibid, 48).

The 'first' question - which is also a question of what *is* first for Derrida, temporally and in terms of importance - is thus returned to, though the return takes us to a cross-roads, and one difficult to situate. If Derrida has received Attridge's inquiry about a 'primary interest' as a gift (even while, and indeed by dint of, not appearing to recognise it as such) then - after the term which a gift requires - he is here returning it once more *with interest*. It turns out that he has, appearances to the contrary, been interested *in* it. And his return *to* it becomes a turning *of* it, the emphasis shifting from 'interest' as a private property, or subjective orientation, and towards the idea of the literary thing 'itself' being interesting, and indeed not only superlatively but exorbitantly so. In the context of a thinking of interest, this is what is most remarkable about Derrida's statement. In what we are calling the 'psychological' and 'aesthetic' senses, interest, to reiterate, is a result of a set of orientations and contextual relationships: a reversibly transitive relationship between my interest in the thing, and the so-called interest 'of' the thing, the latter itself a function of that thing's dynamic difference with respect to other things. Derrida's fixing of literature as 'the most interesting thing' flies in the face of its fundamentally comparative nature. As Ngai quotes Schlegel as saying, 'there can be no *endpoint* when it comes to the interesting' (Ngai 2012, 121. And then the (almost literal) exorbitance of the claim that it is perhaps 'more interesting than the world' removes it altogether from the orbit within which any dynamic comparison is imaginable. It is as if, in naming literature as 'the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting *than* the world', Derrida is suggesting that there is '*an interest of the thing itself*, thus an interest that cannot be derived from anything other than the thing' (Derrida 1992b, 42). Those words come from *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, and their quizzical italics underscore the oddity of the phenomenon they describe. They arise in the context of Derrida's reading of Mauss's *The Gift*, and in the vicinity of another superlativising of interest: at the point where Derrida has identified what he calls 'the most interesting idea ... of *The Gift*' - the idea, precisely, that the gift possesses an originary interest. Here we have a suggestive set of correspondences: the lexical repetitions interest/interesting, thing/thing, the appeal to something superlatively interesting, and the idea of an interest that precedes any other thing - 'than the world', 'that cannot be derived' . The connection between literature and the gift in Derrida's work is of course a matter of record and critical discussion (See for example Royle 2003, 138-142; Rosenthal 2022 *passim*), and indeed is worked out in *Given Time* itself. But the connection of literature and gift in terms of the *superlative and original interestingness* of each seems not to have attracted the attention it deserves. Let us turn to this conjunction, by taking a detour through *Given Time*, with an eye on its thinking of interest.

**The gift of interest**

Derrida's point of departure, the reading of which occupies the first half of *Given Time*, is Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*, and here the relation between the gift and interest is one of hierarchical opposition. Interest forms part of a set of linked economic phenomena - capital, exchange, return, speculation, investment, usury etc - whereas the gift is *by definition* aneconomic. The argument is often-rehearsed, and we have already touched on it in our discussion of interest's returns: for a gift to be a gift, it must neither solicit nor receive any recompense or return, of or in any kind; it must not enter into a circle of exchange, or be speculated upon. And this is impossible. What a reading of Mauss discloses, willy-nilly is that 'every gift is caught in the round or the contract of usury' (Derrida 1992b, 25). The simple exchange of gifts, or the return of a favour, are quite evidently economic in some way, and so is the repayment of a gift with *gratitude*, with self-complacency on the part of the donor, or even with ingratitude. And to that extent, even the frisson of recognition that one is giving a gift is enough for something to return to the donor, be that frisson conscious or unconscious. So, the 'pure' gift is impossible - there is always *some* return: the gift always solicits or generates something like interest, a supplementary repayment on the initial outlay. These arguments are repeated, and circled back on, throughout the book, to the evident *ennui* of certain readers.6 There is perhaps, indeed, some performative intent behind this reiterative looping. And critics too participate in this obsessive returning to the boomerang logic of the gift. Some commonsensically reject Derrida's claims about the impossibility of the gift, insisting that generous donations happen all the time (Eagleton 2020, 104, 109); some celebrate its excessive and mad impossibility (Royle 2003, 141); some tease out the implications of Derrida's connection of gratuity and unconditionality (Ungureaunu 2013); some read the gift in relation to environmental concerns (Fritsch 2015), and so on. In all of this *Given Time* is *received as* a 'discourse on the gift' (which is how Derrida describes Mauss's Essay (Derrida 1992b, 60)). But we might wonder what happens if we flip the coin. What if - this is the speculation here - on its reverse side *Given Time* offers Derrida's most sustained deconstructive thinking of *interest*, not only in its economic but also in its aesthetic senses?

The thinking of interest really kicks in when Derrida is discussing what he calls 'the most interesting idea' (Derrida 1992b, 40) in Mauss's book. This is the suggestion that the solicitation of restitution engendered by the act of gift-giving is understood within particular cultures to be *an original property* of the gift itself. Identifying a force, spirit or 'virtue' understood to be possessed by the gift - *hau* in one, much discussed, Maori version of this idea, as limned by Mauss - becomes a way of explaining the mechanism of or motivation for reciprocation in gift-giving, without reducing gift-giving to a simple structure of debt and restitution-with-interest. The notion that the gift possesses a *hau*, a 'virtue' which in-and-of-itself solicits restitution has, throughout the history of the reception of Mauss's book, been one of the chief bones of contention, the place where he is felt to have reneged on his own best insights, and the object of accusations of mysticism, and misunderstanding.7 (Indeed, we might add that the peculiar *scholarly* interest of Mauss's invocation of 'hau' - the way it has a capacity to generate supplementary critical commentary has itself become a recursively acknowledged aspect of *hau* itself, so that the very concept of *hau* is itself figured as *hau* (Sahlins 1972, 149; Stewart 2017, 8)).8 It is Levi-Strauss's structuralist critique which sets the course for much that follows. He argues that the invocation of *hau* functions as a needless 'supplemental quality', only invoked because Mauss is adopting a partial view of gift-giving from within its sphere and time of operation, and so is prey to 'the subjective illusion of ethnographers' (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 75, qtd Derrida 1992b, 75). That is to say, he condemns Mauss as theorising from in amongst the beings and the world he describes - as being, as it were, inter-esse. An 'objective' position, adopting the purview of the structuralist who imagines herself able to survey the 'reality' from without, would, Lévi-Strauss argues, understand that 'the primary, fundamental phenomenon is exchange itself, which gets split up into discrete operations in social life' (ibid 47, qtd Derrida 1992b, 76). The outlines of a deconstructive critique of such arguments can be easily traced. Lévi-Strauss's analysis can account neither for the force of the 'split' which differentiates exchange's functions in space and defers them in time; nor for the ways in which, for his analysis to hold, 'exchange itself' would have to *give itself to be read*, as a totality, without remainder; nor for the position outside exchange from which exchange is understood by Lévi-Strauss to be legible, which is to say *received* as a total structureby a structuralist reader. My italics underscore Lévi-Strauss's own implication *in* the logics of exchange. In short, then, his analysis cannot account for its 'own' interest (an interest here as much structural and dynamic as a question of personal predeliction), *nor* for the 'inter-esse' effect - the 'split' into 'discrete operations', the betweenness of the elements of the structure - upon which its analysis is predicated.

It is in this context that Derrida's celebration of Mauss's 'most interesting idea' must be read. He takes up Mauss's invocation of *hau,* reading in it a reworked notion of interest *tout court*, insofar - he suggests - as it posits *interest 'itself'* *as original*. Interest is Derrida's word not - in this context - Mauss's, which is 'virtue [vertu]' (Mauss 1966, 34, 37, 48).9 Whereas 'virtue' suggests a metaphysical plenitude of potential, or virtual potency, shimmers with piety, and is perky with virility, 'interest' retains its compromised, hands-dirty and derivative status, even *while* it comes to name precisely the (compromised) condition of possibility that analyses such as Lévi-Strauss' cannot account for. In a phrase we have already partially-quoted, Derrida glosses Mauss's discussion of the virtue of the gift as 'an interest of the thing itself, thus an interest that cannot be derived from anything other than the thing, an interest of the given thing, of the thing that calls for the gift' (Derrida 1992b, 42). In the beginning - that is to say - there is interest. There is interest at the origin. Derrida connects this originary/originating interest with the Heideggerian 'es gibt' (there is, it gives), from which everyday German locution Heidegger adduces an account of Being as an originally donating force, which erases itself in its enaction (Heidegger 1998, 254-5). We might in turn suggest that - *toutes distinctions gardées* - it is homologous with the force of the 'split ... into discrete operations' for which Lévi-Strauss is unable to account. But Derrida's strong reading of Mauss in this context polemically rewrites a notion of original *donation* (however self-effacing) as an understanding of original *interest*. On the one hand, interest is here dislodged from simply referring to a difference and relationship between pre-existing monadic beings, and accorded an 'ontico-ontological' function. 'Interest' - at least under the pressure of Derrida's interest *in* it - names the disclosive flicker whereby the world, and everything in it, is given to us 'as such'. On the other hand, insofar as this originary function is no longer primordially conceived in terms of 'gift' or 'donation', it is dethroned, de-glamourised and de-metaphysicized. The agonisingly impossible, vanishingly generous, Gift is here - to heark back to the title of Ngai's work on the curiously underwhelming quality of our guiding term - rendered as *merely* interesting. There is a kind of de-capitation or de-capitalisation: the positing of interest as 'original' contests the idea that there is some capital simply there in the first place - some source or resource which precedes a structure of debt, involvement, sharing. And the etymology here once again gives the clue. While inter-esse here *doesn't* simply refer to transactional or discursive relationships between monadic beings, or discrete subjects, at the same time it has no absolute anteriority with respect to them. We might say that it refers to the betweenness *of* being. The cranking up of Derrida's statement to a quasi-transcendental proposition therefore makes of interest one of those quasi-concepts which translates *différance*, or supplementarity, or iterability, or indeed 'the gift', or any other link in that chain of supplementary aliases and eke-names whose simultaneous singularity yet similarity testify to the destinerrant course of Derrida's 'own' interests.10 In fact, we might describe that series itself as a gift *of* Derrida's interests, as indeed are the texts (the Heidegger, the Rousseau, the Mauss etc) from which its terms are pilfered. How many readers of Derrida today, we might wonder, come *to* these texts through Derrida, and so receive them marked already by his interest in them? More generally is not our reception of the gift of any text not enabled for us by some interest, benign or otherwise, our 'own' or another's? For all these reasons, and spinning now the coin which at the beginning of this reading we flipped, we might suggest that - just as the gift is ineluctably interesting - so *interest is a gift*, is even, perhaps, *the* gift.

**The interest of literature**

What, then, of the superlative interestingness of literature? In *Given Time*,

Derrida links interest (in this redescribed sense) to writing, and then to *fiction*, via a reading of Baudelaire's short story 'Counterfeit Money ['La Fausse Monnaie]'. This brief and enigmatic story of a number of financial and verbal exchanges, between the narrator, his friend and a beggar, centres around the friend's giving the beggar a coin, which he later confesses to have been counterfeit, and the narrator's speculations as to motivations for and consequences of this act. It does not employ the word 'interest' itself, but in representing (in several senses), as well as reflecting upon, the fruits of financial gift-giving, while generating multiple interpretative possibilities and enigmas for its reader, and itself thematising such interpretative speculation, it is a text which plays with interest in a number of senses, senses underlined by Derrida as he reads. I'll home in on two particularly interesting instances - his reading of the *title*, and his account of the moment when the friend confesses the coin is counterfeit. In doing so I will at once capitalise on the foregoing elaborations of interest, and bend my readings back in the direction of the Attridge interview, and its more abstract reflections on the interest(s) of the literary.

The title 'Counterfeit Money' most obviously adverts to the tale's treatment of a counterfeit coin. But it then at once also names the tale itself *as* counterfeit money, opens the possibility that all fiction might be conceived of in this way, invites the thought that all money might be counterfeit, and redounds reflexively on itself as a title, so that it might be saying that it is counterfeit, or that it is counterfeit *qua* title, so that *any* title is counterfeit money. Reflexivity and referentiality here knot together in a particularly dizzying and economic fashion, and this text is thus easily identifiable as being of the type described in 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', texts which 'operate a sort of turning back, ... *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution' (Derrida 1992a, 41). Such a turning back is one of the reasons we could describe this title *itself* as interesting, insofar as it capitalises *on itself*, its economical few words generating a fine rate of return. It thus solicits and rewards critical attention and exposition, and so - we night point out - embodies the promissory structure of 'interesting' as a speech act established by Ngai. But to say this much is perhaps to suggest that literary interestingness consists in a compact and lapidary polysemy - rather as it did, for example, for the Anglo-American New Critics. We must point out further, then, that this title, at the same time, and through dynamics of signification so far traced, also separates itself from itself, turns on itself, is not self-identical, 'is', as it were, inter-esse. As a title - and another word for title, as Derrida reminds us, is 'capital' - it de-capitates itself even as it heads things up. This auto-capitalising structure - which spells also the ruin of capital - resembles the '*interest of the thing*' we have just elaborated. Here the literary thing, in its auto-hetero-entitling - in its self-crediting, which at the same time is an exorbitant indebting, a dependence on the ingenuity and attention (for example) of its future readers (see Derrida 1992b, 151)

All that is said of the title is true of the story which depends on and is supended from this title, whose relays, returns and speculations Derrida traces patiently. The metaphorics of interest are never far away here, but the moment when Derrida explicitly blazons the interest of the story comes with his exposition of the sentence 'It was the counterfeit coin [la pièce fausse]'.11 This instance of direct speech, recorded by the first-person narrator, is, as it were, a mise-en-abime of the story as a whole. The friend's confession that the coin the narrator has reported him donating to the beggar was counterfeit is the (fictional) origin within the story *of* the story - the piquant incident which (ostensibly) provides the prompt for the first-person narrator to recount at once the initial donation, the friend's confession and his own ensuing, interested, speculations about his friend's motivations. We have here, as it were, the 'origin' of the interest 'of' the story - but a fictional origin, coming in the middle of the story itself, inter-esse. Analysing the statement Derrida plays at the game (which is also the game of the story itself) of adducing character motivations. He 'speculate[s] and extend[s] credit', offering 'at least three hypotheses' about it, which 'accumulate like a capital of true or (perhaps) counterfeit money that may produce interest' (ibid, 149). But it is the third and last hypothesis Derrida ventures which, he says, corresponds 'to the most powerful and most interesting speculation' (ibid, 151). (We might note here the recourse once again to the superlative, in the vicinity of interest.) This is the only hypothesis not entertained *within* the story itself, even though it is credible in its terms: namely that the friend's ostensible confession that he gave the counterfeit coin is a lie is *itself* counterfeit. This is the 'most powerful and most interesting speculation' because on the one hand it generates a further set of hypotheses as to the character's motivation in uttering it, and because there is no verifiable end-point to it, no final return on the credit we may give to it. It is - as it were - *purely* interesting. And this has to do with the quality of its status as a secret. The question as to whether the coin is counterfeit or not is structurally a secret, insofar as no external verification is able to decide on its truth - not least because the 'coin' only exists as a figment or *pièce* or signifier within the tale. This interesting situation is also an inter-esse situation - it arises out of the fact that 'talking always involves two, at least two' - it happens inter-esse - and there is no court of appeal external to this dynamic. Here we come to the summative statement of Baudelaire's story's interest, a statement which Derrida extrapolates, so that it might refer to any 'analogous text':

The *interest* of "Counterfeit Money," like any analogous text in general, comes from the enigma constructed out of this crypt which gives to be read that which will remain *eternally* unreadable, *absolutely* indecipherable, even refusing itself to any promise of deciphering of hermeneutic. (ibid, 152)

Every text, that is to say, works through an iterable network of repetition and alteration, through traces which relate to other traces, and which mark themselves out in their difference from what they are not. This iterable structure is an inter-esting one, insofar as it has spacing and betweenness in it. And it is the spacing which makes things interesting. For a start, it is at once generative and disseminative of meaning(s) (and we might here point out, as Derrida does, a long philosophical tradition which links interest to off-spring, just as it links Logos, the father and capital). And yet it is meaningless itself, so that there is in principle no programmed end to what it might generate. Such spacing gives a structural effect of secrecy to the most anodyne of statements, such as 'It was the counterfeit coin'. Before any of the interpretations offered of this sentence, we can say that the subject (copula) predicate structure is itself an inter-esse one - the stutter or fold of deferred and referential reciprocity between 'it' and what is said of 'it' bringing this thing into view as a particular kind of thing, craggy with properties and aspects, in the first place. This, we can say again is the *interest of the thing* - and we can see now that such interest is an effect of how a thing is given to us, according to any system of textual remarking.

So, Derrida's claim about the 'interest' of 'Counterfeit Money' can be extrapolated so that it refers to the generalised structure of textuality, as we receive it from him. What of a more specifically *literary* interest? Here is where Derrida's conversation with Attridge about *referentiality* is pertinent. We might point out for a start that the statement 'it was the counterfeit coin', as a referential predication of a pre-existing 'it', can - in the world - be verified or otherwise. As Derrida says - a third party - for example the beggar - could bite the coin and establish the truth of this proposition. In fiction, this is not the case - the statement is structurally secret insofar as its truth or otherwise can never be disclosed, and indeed the notion that it 'has' a truth is but a ruse of its writing. Literature in this sense is superlatively interesting *because* it is 'merely interesting' - because its structural secrecy precludes any more final judgement that one might make regarding it. *The prevaricative structure Ngai identifies as proper to the judgement of interestingness just is the structure of the literary*. But, flipping the coin once more, we might remind ourselves that the general dynamics of textuality are themselves those of a prevaricative differing and deferral. The 'truth' of any coin's authenticity is not given in itself, but depends on other things, and its functioning as a coin, as a *pièce,* counterfeit or otherwise, arises from this structure of inter-esse interdependency. What we might then say of 'Counterfeit Money' is that it is able to reflect and to speculate on this fact. Here we come to the self-correcting, epanorthotic, super-superlative supplementary claim that literature is 'maybe more interesting *than* the world'. Literature we might say puts on the stage the interestingness *of* the world. The disclosive frisson which which any literary statement might at once conjure a world and point to that world is also the disclosive frisson by which we receive the world *as* a given, by which it comes to view *as interesting*, as a matter for our attention, or concern, or involvement, or boredom, or disaffection. And literary texts - such as 'Counterfeit Money' - can put that frisson itself on the stage, can display for us their own functioning as a *making of interest*.

**Conclusion**

In my introduction, and by way of making a frame within which my slightly nerdish attention to interestingness might interest *you*, I invoked a number of ways in which literary interest is a matter of contemporary concern: in the contexts, for example, of the attention economy, of 'apocalypse fatigue', of the climate crisis and so on. Clearly my readings here cannot be 'cashed in' in terms of a solution to any of these things, and to pretend they could be would be to offer but counterfeit coin. Indeed the point is perhaps rather the reverse. Literary interest, we have suggested, is a gift. Perhaps it is the only gift possible. It follows that any defence we might feel moved to make for the continuing interest of literature, however urgent the case seems to be, should hold off from insisting on any *returns* on it. Literary interest, of course, might always provide pleasurable pay-offs for this reader or that, but the ex-orbitant interestingness of literature names the condition of possibility of such returns in the 'first' place.

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Notes

1. The notion of an 'attention economy' was first coined by Herbert A Simon (Simon 1971). See also Crawford (2015) and Davenport & Beck (2001). For 'apocalypse fatigue' see https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-01-27/apocalypse-fatigue-selective-inattention-and-fatalism-the-psychology-of-climate-change/ [consulted 10th September 2022]. And for an instance of a (particularly wide-ranging) text which evaluates the merits of a range of climate change novels, see Trexler (2015).

2. For a considerably more detailed account, see Taeusch (1942).

3. Gaston (2005, 32-42) gives an excellent survey of interest and disinterest in this sense from 1600-1790. The *locus classicus* for a more detailed account is Hirschman (1977).

4. Sider Jost (2020) focuses mainly on the eighteenth century, but ends with an afterword on Meg Wollitzer's *The Interestings* (2013).

5. See Epstein (2012, 236): 'I can be unpredictable and surprising to myself. The interesting functions as a kind of mediator between me and myself, to the extent to which I *may be* different from what I *am*.'

6. See Hindess (1993, 120) where he writes that 'the exposition seems to circle repeatedly back on itself as Derrida draws further consequences from points which the impatient reader might think had already been exhausted'.

7. Derrida's takes up this afterlife largely with reference to Lévi-Strauss ((1987) and and Benveniste's *Problèmes de linguistiques generales* (1966). See also Michel Panoff (1970:61) who calls the reliance upon the Maori concept of hau to explain the necessity of reciprocity 'the relapse of Mauss'.

8. Georgina Stewart (2017) argues that the discourse on *hau* has ignored the Maori scholarship which gave the notion to Mauss in the first place, but ends by affirming the '*hau* of research', legible in the fact that 'the research archive enables but does not determine any particular question that might be asked' (8).

9. See for example Mauss (1966, 37): 'the material objects of the contracts have a virtue of their own which causes them to be given and compels the making of counter-gifts'.

10. The expository accounts which first gave us to think this as a 'chain of supplements' include Gasché' (1988) and Bennington (1993).

11. Both French and English texts of 'Counterfeit Money' are given as a supplement in the back of *Given Time* (Derrida 1992b).

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