

In Memoriam Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida was the most imaginative philosopher of his time. Historians of philosophy will, I think, describe him as standing to Heidegger as Heidegger stood to Nietzsche. Just as the writings of Hume, Kant, and Hegel are now read as making up a dialectical sequence, so will those of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida.

But just as Kant can hardly be called a disciple of Hume, nor Hegel of Kant, so it would be wrong to think of Derrida as working in the shadow of either of his two great predecessors. His work is inconceivable without theirs, just as it is without Freud's. But he read their texts in ways they could never have anticipated. As a person, Derrida was tolerant, unassuming, and generous. But when he sat down at his desk he wrote to please no one but himself. He made no concessions to anyone else's expectations. His self-confidence and intellectual courage enabled him to do truly original work.

Those who think that philosophy should be a quasi-scientific, problem-solving discipline—one in which definitions are spelled out, premises identified, and assumptions made explicit—had no use for Derrida, nor he for them. But philosophy will always degenerate into barren scholasticism unless, at intervals, someone like Hegel, Wittgenstein, or Derrida comes along and sweeps the old pieces off the board. Figures such as these have the influence they do, not because they develop new methods for solving the old philosophical problems, but because they enable us to look quizzically at those problems, and perhaps even to laugh out loud at them.

Derrida will not be remembered for having invented a method called "deconstruction," any more than Wittgenstein will be remembered for having invented one called "ordinary language analysis." Nor will either philosopher be associated with some particular doctrine—some thesis the truth of which they succeeded in demonstrating. Both will be remembered, rather, for having liberated their readers' imaginations. President Chirac struck exactly the right note when he said that Derrida "sought to find the free movement which is at the root of all thinking."

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Some hours after the passing of Jacques Derrida, I do not wish to try to characterize his work in a few words.¹ Even less do I wish to encapsulate it with a label. I wish only to recall some moments of a life and of a mind that I was fortunate enough to have known as a student, as a colleague, and as a friend.

I remember his arrival at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where I was studying for the *agrégation*.² Preceded by his reputation as “the best phenomenologist in France,” Derrida was for us first and foremost the author of a dazzling essay on Edmund Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, in which he had extracted the question of the historicity of truth from the debates between sociology and psychology. Right away he grappled with the most difficult question: the conditions of possibility of proof, as he took it from a problem of formal certitude to a problem of reproduction in time, thus anticipating his important thematic of the “trace” or of the connection between the activity of thought and the materiality of writing. His lectures were eloquent, but above all rigorous in establishing concepts and in the reading of texts (as they would always remain; one need only read *Politics of Friendship*). Years later I discovered that I had retained entire developments of his lectures, thanks to the clarity and the strength of his interpretations.

To this practice of great teaching I would like to add a more general lesson. Derrida, who became a media figure throughout the world, never ceased to work at the university and to regard it as the fundamental place for philosophical activity (even if, at least in his own country, the university barely acknowledged him). With such initiatives as the *Etats-Généraux de la philosophie* in 1979 or the creation of the *Collège International de Philosophie* in 1983, he attempted to help the university out of its hierarchical rigidity, its disciplinary exclusivity, and its nationalism (all the more sterilizing when, as in France or the U.S., it believes itself to be the bearer of “universal” values by birthright). It is true that such a university, which Derrida called a *university without condition* in a lecture given at Stanford in 1998, would set itself—beyond the boundaries and the controls of power—the task of rethinking all human works and of expounding the possible (or even the impossible) at a time of mechanization and globalization.

I remember in 1967 the publication of the three manifestos of this new methodology that later would be known as “deconstruction”—*Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*—and their subtle crossings between philosophy and literature. I remember the great controversies with Lévi-Strauss about the reading of Rousseau, with Foucault about the reading of Descartes, with Lacan about the truth and the letter (in regard to Edgar Allan Poe), which today one can reread as so many founding “quarrels” of philosophical structuralism, where its demarcation from metaphysics is played out, and already the virtuality of its transformation into a poststructuralism—that is to say, into an internal critique of the idea of structure (in particular of its claim to represent “totalities”). However, the critique is not given from the point of view of humanism or of the liberty of the subject, but from

the point of view of the *differences* that complicate our idea of man (therefore, the “aims of man” and the rights of man), and in underscoring their irreducible ambivalences: the conscious and the unconscious (and the “crypt”), body and language (and the “metaphor”), masculine and feminine (and the “neuter”), life and death (and the “specter”). For all these differences comprise a *surplus*, irreducible to binary and formal oppositions. Such a surplus of meaning (which he calls the *originary supplement*) leads to the violence of exclusion, the imposition of identities, and the strategies of *appropriation* of “being” and of the world, but also to *the new beginning* and the infinite *multiplication* of interpretations, to “the invention of the Other.” One finds here the seed of the important themes of his later years, in particular his concept of event as an incalculable *to come*, in which individual or collective responsibility is taken to the extreme, not because we would be capable of mastering “performatively” the consequences of our actions and our words, but because we already know that they will lead ad infinitum to the reopening and the reformulation of the problem of rights, law, and justice.

Finally, I remember all the circumstances—from the aid to the “dissident” intellectuals of Czechoslovakia within the Jan Hus Association founded with Jean-Pierre Vernant, to the stand for the rights of the Palestinian people and the reconciliation between the adversaries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the defense of the right to asylum in Europe against the politics of security and the stigmatization of “foreigners,” of course, I could go on—in which we tried to contribute, as intellectuals without enrolments, which is not to say without commitments, to the emergence of what he called (in *Specters of Marx*) a “New International.” Not that we always entirely agreed on our analyses or on our historical references. But there again with many others, and often on his initiative, we shared the conviction that intellectuals and artists have their own role to play in instituting a multiform and multipolar resistance to the hold of the sovereignty of the State or of the market that engenders mass violence and feeds on it in return. This is achieved by the deconstruction of their positions and by the constructive dialogue between adversaries (as he did when he joined forces with his old “enemy” Habermas to dismantle the machine of endless war propaganda against terrorism and the “rogue States”).

All this—whether it be the future of the university or the philosophy of what is *to come*, the responsibility of intellectuals and their place in the world of global communications—is more difficult to think about without his contribution, but we will not cease to seek inspiration in his example and his writings for a long time. Farewell, dear Jacques, or rather until tomorrow.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the article published in *L'Humanité*, October 11 2004. English translation by Arielle Read, University of California, Irvine.
2. In France, a high-level competitive university examination for the recruitment of teachers.

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In recent years it seems that everyone engaged with Derrida's work has claimed friendship with him to one degree or another. We find an archive of testimonies to this friendship in the work of innumerable translators and interviewers, esteemed critics and commentators, conference organizers and filmmakers. Many of these friends have written eloquent and moving expressions of mourning since Jacques Derrida's death on October 8, 2004. Those of us who cannot furnish such claims in our prefaces or acknowledgments might almost feel inadequate to the task of Derrida scholarship, let alone to the task of mourning. Why am I entitled to write this brief tribute to Derrida's life and work? Jacques and I were not friends, at least not in the usual sense of exchange, mutual recognition, and companionship. It was an unreciprocated friendship, if such a thing is possible, if one can be a friend to a great philosopher's work.

Derrida courted such friendship. We probably know more about his life than we know of just about any other philosopher's life. We have gazed at photos of him as a toddler and as a young soccer player, and read about his early life in Algeria. We have watched him eat breakfast while listening to the morning news, peered into his work space, and witnessed clips of his white hair falling onto a salon floor. There is an element of seduction in all of this—beyond voyeurism. Derrida inspired us with his provocative ideas, but he also charmed us. He was something of a rogue—a vagabond or *enfant terrible* of the philosophical establishment—but for many of us who read him with delight and fascination, his rebellious and humourous spirit nurtured our passion for revolutionary ideas.

The first essays I ever read by Derrida were "Passions: An Oblique Offering" and "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject." I was struck by the desire for justice one finds in these essays—"and deconstruction is mad about this desire for justice," Derrida once wrote—and by the rigorous method he employed to crack open the binaries of our philosophical baggage, binaries that threaten to stifle our political practice,

our views of subjectivity and identity, and our reading of texts. I could never understand why some would claim that Derrida's work was apolitical, nor that he made a dramatic turn in later years toward ethical and political themes, since this urgency was there all along: in the 1960s when he said that every philosophy colloquium has a political significance, when he warned that Levinas's thought can make us tremble, and when he said we should never choose between the opening and the totality, between unity and multiplicity. We could read his entire corpus as an example par excellence of Derrida's own demand that we "linger and rush" in the task of responsibility that is the philosopher's. There is urgency even if reflection is lengthy (as he demonstrated on numerous occasions) because the structure of urgency itself is aporetic: it must always be interrupted, which creates a situation of *contretemps* between the decision and the responsible action in politics and ethics.

Like hundreds, if not thousands, of other avid readers of Derrida, I made my way to Paris one year to attend his weekly Wednesday afternoon public lecture. In that motley crowd of international students and scholars, local Parisians and Derrida's ubiquitous friends, I did not find the "circus" others had warned me about, but the only congenial crowd I would encounter in Paris that year. As for Derrida, speaking on *le peine de mort*, with readings of a cast of characters from Hugo and Baudelaire to Blanchot, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche, he performed like a gracious host, seducing his listeners into the texts that occupied his thoughts, pausing for questions or jokes, or once, to berate the camera crew of what would become the film *Derrida* for being intrusive. While a body of work certainly has a life of its own apart from its author, there are reasons why many of us are thrilled to encounter the life that penned the work. Perhaps it is in the name of a friendship that will never be reciprocated, an unacknowledged gratitude for being touched by an idea, a thought, a life's work.

Derrida did his best to acknowledge such gratitude, with grace and probably a good dose of frustration and fatigue. In a chance meeting with him alone, unaccompanied by his usual entourage of friends, I marveled that he agreed to meet with me. It doesn't matter now that this meeting resulted in several fleeting conversations in the elevator at the *École des Hautes Études*, running along beside him on an errand, or accompanying him to the lecture hall, encounters that always extracted confessions of fatigue from him. It is difficult to say no to anyone, he told me once. I can smile now at the memory of the meeting that finally occurred in his office, at his yawning and surreptitious glances at his watch, at my nervous but eager attempt to have an intellectual and friendly exchange with this man who seemed so familiar to me after years of immersion in his writings.

On the day I learned of Derrida's death, I ran out to my local bookstore and picked up two of his books not yet adorning my shelves. It seemed a fitting gesture, being a friend of Derrida's work. The thought that there will be no new commentaries from him on the events of the world, no new readings of our favorite old texts, no more astute essays in *Le Monde*, and no more glimpses of those sharp eyes looking over the audience on Wednesday afternoons, is indeed an unspeakable loss to be mourned. For any friend of Derrida's work, however, consolation lies in the life—the passion and the energy—of his texts.

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