

Jacques Derrida, 1930–2004

In an interview with *Le Monde* published a couple of months before his death at the age of 74 from pancreatic cancer on Friday 9 October 2004, Jacques Derrida confirmed what many already knew, that he was ‘dangerously ill’, ‘at war against myself’. If questions of ‘survival’ had always ‘haunted’ him, this, he said, took on new meaning in the light of both his pressing health problems and people’s tendency to see him as ‘the last representative of a “generation”’ (*Le Monde*, 19 August 2004). It would not have surprised him, then, to find that it is this generational context which has, for many, served to frame his passing as more than simply another individual loss to contemporary intellectual life (however significant), but as something like the effective conclusion to a whole era of thought. In a moving piece from 1998, written on the occasion of Lyotard’s death, Derrida remembered an earlier testimony for Deleuze: ‘I seem to recall having said that I could feel us quite alone now, Jean-François Lyotard and I, the sole survivors of what has been identified as a “generation”.’

Derrida was born in 1930 into an Algerian Jewish family, and his early schooling suffered under anti-Semitic Vichy laws. Perhaps, in part, because of this, he had a long and difficult entrance into academic Parisian life during the 1950s. Nonetheless, he made several important friends during this period, including Althusser, Bourdieu, Marin and Foucault, as well as beginning the work on Husserl that included his first publication in 1962: a translation of, and lengthy introduction to, *The Origin of Geometry*. Early essays started to appear in *Tel Quel* and *Critique* around this time, but it was not until 1967 that Derrida really ‘arrived’, bringing out three works – *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology* – which, in many ways, formed the basis for everything that was to come. In the years that followed, while teaching and lecturing around the world, Derrida published some seventy books, whose influence has been felt in fields from philosophy and literary theory to law and architecture. At the same time, he also sought to challenge the established institutions of philosophy in France – co-founding Groupe de recherches sur l’enseignement philosophiques (GREPH) in 1974 and the Collège internationale de philosophie in 1983 – as well as involving himself in numerous political activities, from clandestine seminars in cold-war Czechoslovakia to a lengthy commitment to the struggle against apartheid.

If we can trust the mainstream media to have laid out with reasonable accuracy such basic details of Derrida’s life, we can, unfortunately, trust them for little else. Despite a very decent obituary in the *Guardian*, by Derek Attridge and Thomas Baldwin, more typical was a follow-up piece in the same paper the next day, soliciting the opinions of twenty ‘key thinkers’ on this ‘controversial’ figure. While a couple had the good grace to admit a general ignorance, others were not so circumspect, either delivering an unsubstantiated verdict of ‘nonsense’ (Scruton), proffering utterly incomprehensible ‘explanations’ (it’s all about ‘inter-linear analysis’, according to Sir Christopher Frayling) or falling back on the sort of banal formulations that are the stock-in-trade of Alain de Botton, for whom Derrida was ‘a thinker who made it his business to tell us that things are more complicated than we trust them to be’ (*Guardian*, 12 October 2004). As a journalistic exercise, this may have had unintended merit: a middlebrow version of that *Brass Eye*-style exposé of the willingness of ‘celebrities’ to pontificate

on absolutely anything they're asked to, regardless of their actual knowledge of the subject under discussion. And, no doubt, it is entirely futile to get worked up about the travesties it generates, or to bemoan the demands of a sound-bite culture. Yet the sheer level of shoddiness that has characterized Derrida's treatment does call for comment, if only because it attests to the persistence of all those strange – and often frankly malicious – misrepresentations of his thought which served consistently to prevent any real debate concerning the arguments contained within it.

They suggest something else too. For while it may not be strictly true that he was the very last of his generation, he *was* perhaps one of the last philosophers of our time whose name could spark some recognition beyond the academy. Unlike the journalistic presentation of earlier figures, however, Derrida's 'mythical image' was constructed almost universally, from the start, as a metonymy for at best a dangerous nihilism, and at worst a mystifying charlatanism. Once so constituted, deconstruction could all too easily be taken as just another name for relativism, scepticism, or whatever you like, while Derrida himself could be blamed, with no textual evidence whatsoever, for everything from the supposed destruction of the canon in American humanities departments by the forces of 'political correctness', to the 'postmodernist' abandonment of the class struggle in favour of capitalist-friendly 'free play' or the 'glamorization' of 'the homeless as a subject position for social change'. (This attribution to Derrida of some anarchic affirmation of free play is the result of a straightforward early mistranslation of the word *jeu*, which one might charitably put down to a certain misguided Kantianism, in the 1966 essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'.) As this last shameless fiction (copyright Tom Lewis) suggests, nobody comes out with credit from this dismal history. From Habermas's willingness to pass judgement on the basis of a popular secondary account (which he got demonstrably wrong anyway), to the self-righteous expressions of moralistic condemnation that apparently constitute argument for certain celebrated Oxbridge Marxists (who really ought to have asked themselves why Oxbridge was more than willing to accommodate such 'revolutionaries', while battenning down the hatches at any mention of deconstruction), if nothing else Derrida exposed the conditions of an academic Left unable to countenance any questioning of its most cherished dogmas.

It is impossible to offer an adequate assessment of Derrida's work here. Central to any such account would, however, be an explanation of why what deconstruction works to 'reveal' as the conditions of possibility for all 'effects' of identity or presence are, at the same time, their conditions of impossibility. Thus, for example, in a famous reading of Austin, the necessary possibility that a performative might 'fail' is shown to be a structural condition of the very possibility that it 'succeed' at all: failure is inscribed within, and ineliminably 'contaminates', *any* performative, however successful it might appear to be. In the work of the 1960s and 1970s what is at stake in this was most often approached, following Heidegger, through the violently hierarchical structures that dominate a 'metaphysics of presence', in which the self-identity of a privileged term is constituted through an unquestioned logical and ontological primacy over one placed in a secondary, excluded position. Derrida sought to show how, in any such opposition, an essential contamination of the primary by the secondary, by virtue of its necessary reliance upon that which it seeks to exclude in its very self-constitution, necessarily disrupts the structure of pure oppositionality (and thus absolute identity *or* difference) itself. Contra certain currently fashionable positions, there could thus be, for Derrida, *no* pure alterity or event. Presence is always already 'haunted' by an 'originary' difference and non-identical repetition in which identity is constitutively dependent on traces of other identities: 'All experience is made up only of traces, and whether we look to the side of the subject or the object, we will find nothing preceding the trace.' Yet such logical 'priority' cannot produce any new metaphysical principle in so far as it is not itself identifiable, nor has any existence, outside of these 'effects' of difference and

repetition. It is such 'quasi-transcendentals' that Derrida famously 'nicknamed', in an always provisional form, the trace, *différance*, the supplementary, and so on.

There is nothing specifically 'linguistic' (let alone 'semiotic') about this, although it is true that many of Derrida's early essays started from those problems of language and signification prevalent within the philosophy and human sciences of the time. Rather, it holds, logically, for *any* effect of identity or presence. Moreover, it has certain more general consequences for both philosophy and the human sciences (and, for that matter, the natural and mathematical sciences), which follow from the necessary re-inscription of the transcendental–empirical opposition that it produces. For, on the one hand, it can be shown that all attempts simply to reduce or 'explain' the philosophical from a supposedly external position, such as those elaborated by various positivist tendencies within the human sciences, will always be undermined by their need to generate a



'new' transcendental term to do the job of 'explanation': a 'transcendental contraband', the very 'philosophical' nature of which they are constitutively unable to think. It is this argument that was the basis for the early critical readings of Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Benveniste and Valéry, as well as for the beginnings of a long engagement with psychoanalysis. It provides the basis for a resistance to any crude materialist or empiricist inversions of philosophical idealism. On the other hand, and for the same reason, philosophy cannot, through its own explicitly transcendentalizing gestures, ever dominate or reduce without disruptive remainder, a contingency, historicity or facticity that is a necessary condition of any such gestures.

Most misunderstandings of Derrida have derived from a failure to understand what was entailed by this unavoidable movement of 'negotiation', irreducible to juridical–moral rules, and which was, from early on, thought in terms of the possibility of a 'lesser violence' in an unsublatable 'economy of violence'. In much initial reception of his work, whether positive or negative, there was a tendency to stress the second argument outlined above, imagining that, because he sought to demonstrate that the philosophical idea could not be purely separated from, say,

its linguistic or idiomatic 'expression', Derrida was arguing that philosophy was *nothing other* than a particular language game, rhetoric or literary genre. By contrast, later 'critiques' often presented him as precisely the epitome of the classical transcendental philosopher, subjecting the human sciences to an unknowable and mystified Law that denied all radical transformative praxis. Both can be shown to miss the 'double movement' that, in principle, Derrida's articulation of deconstruction insists upon.

Yet one can also understand the genuine frustration that at least some of these critiques reflected, even if one must remember that frustration has never amounted to refutation. Undoubtedly there *are* justifiable reasons why his work – particularly as it seemed to develop in the 1980s, with its associated elaborations of an *unconditional* 'originary affirmation', 'law before the law' or 'gift before exchange' – might seem

to have resulted only in the interminable analysis of such irreducibly aporetic (quasi-) transcendental conditions in an all-too-traditionally philosophical way. However, if something like an 'originary affirmation', or 'response' to the other, must be thought of as necessarily independent of any and every determinate context, it is, equally, never present *outside* of context, being always imbricated in concrete singular ways with the sphere of facticity. As Derrida wrote in the late 1980s, it still remains necessary to 'articulate this unconditionality with the determinate ... conditions of this or that context; and this is the moment of strategies, of rhetorics, of ethics, and of politics'.

The questions raised by this necessity no doubt motivated, in part, the apparent shift in emphasis, in the later writings, towards more explicitly 'political' issues; a shift perhaps also provoked by the so-called Heidegger and De Man 'affairs' of the late 1980s, and the gleeful attempt on the part of some to have finally done with Derrida through guilt by association. Yet, notwithstanding a seemingly new stress on the ineliminability of a 'certain experience of the *emancipatory* promise', the notion of a 'messianicity without messianism', for example, is in many ways entirely consistent with that argument concerning the quasi-transcendental which is present from the very beginning of Derrida's published work. Thus he was to insist that, if Benjamin was primarily concerned with the 'privileged moments' of messianic power opened up within particular 'historico-political phases', a messianicity without messianism was explicitly construed as 'naming' a *universal* structure of experience which would be the condition of (im)possibility of any praxis at all. It is not hard, then, to show why most criticisms of Derrida's politics have been misjudged: they simply miss the 'level' at which his arguments are pitched. Nonetheless, it is also fair to say that there does indeed remain an issue of precisely how a quasi-transcendental level of analysis *is* to be 'articulated' with determinate 'historico-political' contexts. Despite the over-hasty attempts by some to assimilate Derrida to the terms of a Levinasian ethics, the real problem that Derrida leaves us with may be what, as early as 'Structure, Sign and Play', he defined as a political 'problem of *economy* and *strategy*'. How is the force of orientation of a 'strategy without finality' to be understood (as it must be) outside of any teleological horizon, utopianism or regulating Idea, yet in relation to specific social forms and relations?

This is, perhaps, just to say that Derrida's own work – which was, first and foremost (if not only), the work of a philosopher – is *not enough*. Of course! It leaves us with problems. What thinking worthy of the name does not? Despite certain appearances to the contrary, despite the desire on the part of others for discipleship, it may be that Derrida frustrated a good many people precisely because he did not fulfil the conventional role of the French intellectual master, resisting the lure of political posturing and the construction of theoretical models or programmes that would relieve us of the responsibility to think and to engage.

For many who were students in the 1980s and 1990s, Derrida was a crucial figure who decisively transformed our thinking, philosophical and political. Nonetheless, I'm somewhat shamefully aware that, for a while now, some of us have rather avoided mentioning his *name*, even when his thought is most clearly presupposed, perhaps because it entails so many difficulties, opening up, yet again, 'arguments' we're sick of having. In doing so, unhappily, we have risked becoming complicit with the kind of academic fashion industry for which Derrida is simply yesterday's news, a moment of 'negativity' and 'critique' now displaced, most often, by a version of that constructivist 'immanence' affirmed by his friend Deleuze. This 'displacement' obscures both the affinities and the genuine divergences between these two thinkers, and frequently results in a caricature of each. Such a caricature is particularly prevalent in cultural studies and contemporary art theory. It takes up a long-standing demand that deconstruction be succeeded by some new 'construction'. Yet such an argument simply shows how little what Derrida meant by deconstruction was understood in the first place.

David Cunningham

Remembering Derrida

I do not want to remember him, I want to invoke him. I want to quote Auden's harsh words:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

We are buffeted by this daily punishment, by the amazing mainstream hostility that is visited upon his name. They seem to have forgotten even the conventional courtesy to the dead.

Starting from the 1968 essay 'La Différance', in which Derrida undertook to explain his method to the doyens of the French philosophical establishment, his style has been a teaching style. This rankles for those who are not used to learning.

There can be no doubt that Derrida knew more than most of us about teaching – from the intimacy of a small seminar in French to the long distance and remote spectrality of the Internet; from English to the many languages of the world. There is authority – what other word can we use? – in his implicit model of the classroom as the workshop of the production of collectivity. 'How many are we' (the refrain in the classroom-based *Politics of Friendship*), ever, in a classroom?

A single teacher's students, flung out into the world and time, is a real-world example of the precarious continuity of Marxism in the lowest reaches of global activism today. There is often a slow but tenacious change of mind, quickly dismissed by the metropolitan establishment. This is reflected in the repetitive burrowing gestures of Derrida's style. After the collapse of international communism as a structured state-system, and the freezing or loosening of left parties, in reaction or coalition, it is in that open form, that call – of indefinite, and often unrecognizable collectivities, with little possibility of ever coming together across insuperable linguistic and spatial divides – that 'Marx' survives as at least the possibility of resistance in the far-flung global grassroots. Our hope for a persistently moving democracy that tries for its own salvation even as it salutes the other, lies here: Derrida's 'New International'. To be able to think this is so rare, so outside the established lines of recognizable good politics, that it is no wonder that he causes such profound unease in the establishment.

In the pages of the *New York Times*, Edward Rothstein, for example, felt that he could simply mock this man for saying, in his opening remarks (not as a conclusion, as Rothstein implies) in *Philosophy in A Time of Terror*, that the contraction of the events of 11 September 2001 into '9/11' or other short forms shows that we do not know what we are talking about. Remember, that event, thus contracted, was part of the obscenities of the electoral campaign. On the other hand, so contracted, it can allow mourning. A great deal could be added to this. It was Derrida's virtue that he thus saw both enabling sides, without claiming that they were equivalent, yet without claiming the power of knowledge: logocentrism is not a pathology, but it is deconstructible.

The only thing that Derrida's careful statement – which, even out of context, can be seen as respecting the unqualifiable in its singularity – cannot provoke is mockery. Jürgen Habermas, the other philosopher in the exchange that was published as *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, came to understand that 'deconstruction is essentially praxis'. In Derrida's own memorable words, 'the simultaneous generation, by graft, of the performative and the constative'.

A word here about religion: friends who understand the need for secularism in today's conflicted world sometimes misunderstand Derrida too quickly. I refer to two things: first, his correction of Kant in 'Faith and Knowledge' that the so-called secondary matters (*Nebengeschäfte*) of buying and selling salvation must be taken into account as irreducibly imbricated with the religious; and, second, his courageous remark on the anniversary of Levinas's death that, by remaining silent about the earthly Jerusalem, Levinas forgot that the state of Israel was daily breaking the commandments.

Speaking at Columbia University on the work of mourning, Derrida had remarked that without an intuition of the transcendental, one can neither execute nor mourn. The austerity of his own burial, with no mourning speeches apart from his own anodyne words read by his son, and the absence of any religious functionary, was a valediction forbidding mourning that showed religion to be no more than performative conventions, even as his staunch opposition to the death penalty had interdicted the other example.

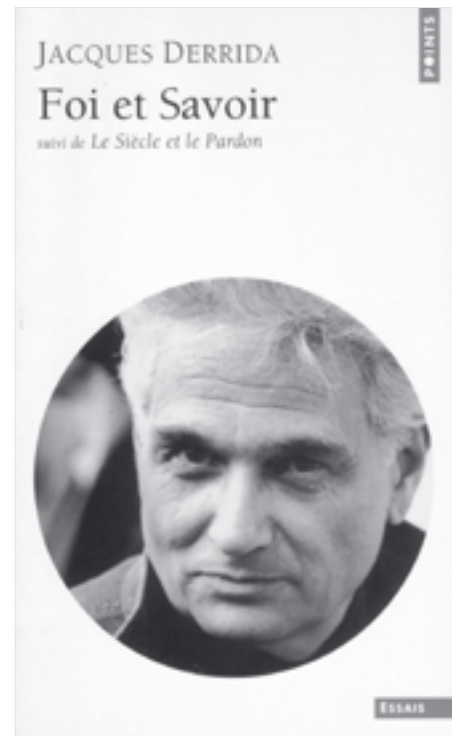
I will now say what we all know and feel: we will not see his like again.

An activist approach to concepts

Immediately after Derrida's burial, I flew to Seoul to deliver a lecture at a conference on 'Globalization and the Imagination'. My title was 'Is Language "Local"?' My words turned out to be an immensely simplified homage. I reproduce them here, in part, because of the brutal remark of a perfectly proper Americanized local female academic: 'His face was more beautiful than his philosophy.' O my friend...

Derrida was a controversial figure. He was controversial because he was not interested in exposing error, but, with an altogether relentless honesty, he investigated the way we produce our truths. He looked at our inconsistencies, at our exclusions, because they allowed us to live. Among these exclusions, he noticed again and again that, in order to enter democratic structures, the woman must become an honorary male. The male-dominated tradition found such attention intolerable. There are at least two reasons for this: first, because we are not accustomed to scrutinizing ourselves in such detail, Derrida's style was sometimes found absurd; and, second, since the dominant trend in philosophy leaned towards ordinary language, his scrutiny has seemed non-philosophical.

In fact, Derrida's is an activist approach to concepts. No concept that needs to be practised can ignore detail, as we find out if we are trying to do something rather than merely talk or think about it. Attention to detail is the secret of successful labour, manual *or* intellectual. Historically and structurally, a majority of the world's women and all manual labourers have been forced to remember this. This is also true of natural science. Disciplinary philosophy and official history have been able to ignore this for the sake of saving the argument, except when they are quantitative. Disciplinary anthropology trades performative attention to detail for ethnographic consistency. The vehemence with which Derrida was rejected is a kind of mechanism of denial of such things. Derrida submitted intellectual labour to the test of manual labour, scientific labour, women's work. It is because of this, I believe, that Jürgen Habermas has written that 'Derrida's deconstruction is essentially a praxis.' Habermas understands that Derrida's attention to detail does not mean giving up. It means persistence, repetition, circling back, for the job is never quite done.



Such a way of working and thinking can be related to the question of globalization and language. This is a particularly important issue for women because, all over the world, with very few exceptions, women and manual labourers have less control over language. I have discussed at length elsewhere why simply giving them apparent access to information and communications technology may not be as humanitarian as it is made to sound.

In his 2003 book *Voyous*, Derrida noted that Plato and Aristotle, philosophers who used classical Greek as their mother tongue, noticed problems of detail with 'democracy', a Greek word, which we, who have fetishized the word and even make it an excuse for military intervention, have decided to forget. Plato put the leaders above the law. Aristotle warned us about the inbuilt problem of conflict between merit and numbers. This attention to a language in use is not 'local' in the sense of 'cut off from the global'.

There is no doubt that globalization – having the same system of exchange all over the world and managing that through information and communications technology – can be the condition and effect of a just world. If we apply the standards of manual labour to this dream, as did Jacques Derrida to all intellectual labour, unceasingly, we would see that such a project necessarily involves incessant exclusions and inconsistencies. Languages in their idiomatic detail, in so far as they are singular yet pulled into translation, however imperfectly, are protection against the 'denial' symptoms of globalization, a denial of the irreducible untranslatability of idiom by imposing a single hegemonic language, impoverished and instrumental.

A sociology of knowledge looks into the ways in which social forces determine our way of knowing. A way of knowing – epistemology – brings with it a way of shaping what we know – constructing an object of knowledge. The new sociologists of knowledge suggest that, as a result of the explosive advances in information technology, our very way of knowing, our very way of intuiting space and time, have changed. Marshall

McLuhan was the first to suggest this, in the 1960s. Today this has become a common presupposition or assumption for many people. The most often acknowledged are, in alphabetical order: Manuel Castells, Saskia Sassen, Paul Virilio.

These intellectuals propose that those who think outside the virtual channels of telecommunication are not in keeping with our postmodern society. To put it in Castells's powerful and influential words, they are still thinking 'place' when the real world of the virtually connected megacities of the information society is made up of the flows of 'space'. The exclusion here is clear: everyone unconnected with the world of telecommunication. This excludes not only the rural poor and the underclass of global North and South but also those of us who might still believe in that archaic instrument called the book. It excludes those who believe that it might take time to train the imagination. In the world of telecommunication speed is king.

The movement of data is indistinguishable from the movement of finance capital. That is because the value-form of finance capital, negotiable capital instruments that need not necessarily be converted (or realized, as the old word goes) into money or goods – in that sense the 'purest' form of capital – is the data-form. The value-form of finance capital is the data-form. What Antonio Gramsci called 'the organic intellectual', the intellectual who speaks and thinks for this new conduct of capital, will convince us that the world (in this case the globe) is created by telecommunication and groups that do not think, do not really belong to our world. This is not conspiracy theory. It is common sense.

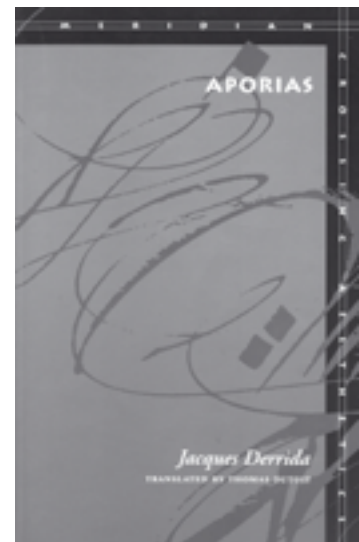


These are the major exclusions of the cultural theory of globalization. The major inconsistencies begin with the fact that minds do not change at the same speed as institutions. Castells celebrates the cultural theory of the disappearance of the book in three sequential books. The theorists of the new mind-set or episteme suggest that the inhabitants of this brave new world think space and time differently. Some of us think that, although we can think of different ways of thinking of space and time, and thus organize our thinking of space and time in different stories, in fact the human being thinks – does, as in performs – space as extension and time as sequence and this does not change. Derrida reminded us of this in *Aporias*.

Let us look at a more obvious inconsistency, an inconsistency in argument. I turn to Castells because his trilogy on the information society is massive, thoughtful and outstandingly documented. In his second volume, Castells tells us that certain movements have arisen in reaction against the virtuality of information theory. They are identity movements that tell us we are flesh and blood, that we exist: feminism, culturalism, fundamentalism. There are at least two inconsistencies here. If these movements arise in reaction to the abstractions of globalization, they must in some way, however inchoate, be part of that abstraction. Do they belong to the postmodern world of virtual reality or not? Castells does not discuss this.

A further inconsistency is lodged in the history of these movements. Culturalism as nationalism, fundamentalism as xenophobia, and feminism, ‘as itself’, have such long and variegated histories that to put them together simply as reactive to the information society seems unwise. And the most glaring inconsistency is that feminism has had an oblique relationship to the other two movements.

Derrida would read the claims of the organic intellectuals of the information society with an immensely scrupulous micrology or attention to detail. That scanning eye is now closed. It is imagination that lets us look closely at these exclusions and inconsistencies. I will define imagination as that which can make us, or allows us to, act against self-interest as well as think what is not present. This is the vaguest possible definition that may be useful only when set to work. Such a definition will always be tied to the situation in which it is set to work. (Is auto-affection self-interest is the kind of question that will pop up, for instance.) Derrida defined this tied-in-ness as ‘trace’ as early as 1968 and suggested that to take such situational constraints into account prevented the easy ‘transgression’ (his word) into universalization. For example, when my definition is taken by someone who teaches the humanities and the verbal arts of literature, it is tied to professional self-interest and thus prey to the inconsistency that it criticizes. And, attempting to be inclusive, it excludes the very globalization whose exclusivity it deplores, unless they come around to our side and thus serve the self-interest that our definition excludes. We cannot launch this definition to add to the grand definitions of the imagination that Europe has given us since the eighteenth century. Whatever effect it has will be in spite of itself. But it works fine to give a rough account of language. For language nourishes the imagination, and, as soon as you put something in language, you assume that it is not immediately present.



A slow learning

Let me repeat here the common-sense description of learning a first language that I often use: language is there because we want to touch another. The infant invents a language. The parents learn it. By way of this transaction the infant enters a linguistic system which has a history before its birth and will continue to have a history after its death. Yet during its life this infant, grown up into a human being, will think of this

language as his or her most intimate possession, and will mark it in a way, however small, which will be incorporated into its impersonal history. Only the first language is learnt this way. It activates a mechanism once in a lifetime. Derrida wrote of this in *Of Grammatology*.

There will be global English only when English is learnt this way by every child in the world. I am of course deeply troubled by claims to global English. I should perhaps include Chinese here. For it is sometimes claimed that the Internet can go Chinese. I



think that in order for that to happen, Chinese will probably have to go beyond simplified characters, and confine itself to the twenty-six letters of the pinyin, make its tonal system contextual. Then, since its grammar is simpler than English, we can make the same troubling pronouncement about Chinese. There will be global Chinese when Chinese is learnt this way by every child in the world.

I must make my last move in the hopeless concession that it is possible that if globalization is as inexorable, powerful and inevitable as it is claimed by its theorists, it is within the realm of possibility that the imagination will have to find its habitat within Chinese and English, two languages whose superb poetic traditions will remain inaccessible in their globalized versions, because imagination, implicit in poetry, takes time to train, and is therefore inconvenient.

It is obvious that self-interest drives globalization. Even the plans for world governance and the eradication of poverty are tainted by simplified versions of the civilizing missions of old imperialisms. Unlike my lopsided definition of the imagination, the agents and the system of capitalist globalization will, as I mentioned earlier, work by exclusion and inconsistency – the agents unselfconsciously or deliberately, the system by its inner laws of working. The very forces we are fighting will make sure that, even without the humanities fighting for languages on the level of teaching, not everybody will have access to the powerful uniformity of a global language. If globalization is to work, every child will not learn the global language in the way of a first language. We take shelter in that apparent sign of inequality, turn loss into gain. In my estimation, a successful globalizing *socialism* will also move towards the uniformity of speed-oriented world languages, perhaps with greater alacrity because, presumably, there will be more real equality under socialism. In theory, the only difference between capitalism and socialism is in the redistributive impulse of the human beings who run the state. For both systems to work, capital-formation, the driving force of globalization, must be assumed. And redistribution is against self-interest. It cannot happen without a highly trained sympathetic imagination; and the imagination is nourished by the slow learning of the other's language, with the memory of that first learning in the works. The learning of one's first language (the native language, the mother-tongue, marked by birth) is at once slow and fast, linked, as the philosophers of artificial intelligence and neural networking tell us, to the very telecommunication that needs to make uniform the multiplicity of languages.

Although most of us cannot perform Derrida's fine-tuned reading of the Greek language within the history of Europe's self-representation, and the history of words like 'democracy', a crude summary like the one I have just offered asks for such a fine-tuned reading of the word 'social' – and its companions in German and French – together with their transformations in the languages of Asia and Africa.

Here, and again by way of summary, let me point out that 'capital' and the 'social' of socialism both work by abstraction. The 'abstract' is produced by the imagination, for it is not the here and now. But the *work* of the abstract requires the wiping out of singularity, the repeatable difference. Most of the workers for globalization do not

produce the abstract, but accept it as given, and systematize within it. As I am insisting, the wiping out of singularity involves the destruction of the multiplicity of languages of the world, not because they are local, but because they are singular, translatably different. To give you a sense of this repetition and difference at work, I cannot know how the English word 'singular' plays with 'local' in Korean, with its own pattern of contradictions. Korea is a major player in telecommunications technology. I am citizen of a country, India, which is also becoming competitive in information technology. As Derrida plays between ancient Greece and global modernity, so should we be able to plot the passing of the grand ethical abstractions of Buddhism passing from classical India into Korea and see their displacement into the abstractions of global modernity. For this we need different lines of communication between the world's (not the globe's) multiplicity of languages. Here I have described a linguistic singularity and economic violence which are a displacement of ethical singularity and political violence.

The last time I appeared in public in front of an audience with my friend Derrida was in New York in 2001, at a belated celebration of his seventieth birthday, in a synagogue on the Lower East Side. I insisted then, with the obstinacy of an old friend who acknowledged the absolute superiority of the other's intellect and learning in every possible way, on repeating my criticism of his reading of Marx. Some of you may know that he had chided me on this in print. On this occasion too he chided me, affectionately, but did not question the substance of my criticism, as he had not in his published remarks. My point was that, if one considered industrial capitalism, which was Marx's subject, one would see the human being, female and male, 'spectralized' (Derrida's word) in abstract average labour, labour power. It is this spectral power that socialism snatches from capitalism. But, because the power remains spectral or abstract, a merely abstract equalizer of all that is human in the form of value, indistinguishable from capital – human capital – it can become subsumed and an ally of globalization, where all that is human is virtualized in the form of data. It is destructive of the multiplicity of singularities. In order for socialism to become messianic (Derrida's word), we must look outside its boundaries. Derrida has taught me that socialism, like all systems, becomes auto-immune if it continues to account for itself. The activist suppresses this risk at her peril.

As we all know, finance capital has to use world trade. And, in its lower reaches, in spite of all the changes wrought by telecommunication, world trade still operates by the rules of the old industrial capitalism. The intense feminization of labour is one of its proofs. This argument has been made by others. It relates to what I said a while ago: 'The very forces we are fighting will make sure that not everybody will have access to the powerful uniformity of a global language.' As among the rural poor, so here, imagination is potentially fostered in this lack of access. Humanities teaching must supplement this and transform the lack into an excess, the excess of the multiplicity of languages.

This brings me to my final point; but before I can make it, I must repeat something that I have said many times. I do not, indeed cannot, believe that a woman's entire fulfilment is in child-bearing and child-rearing; yet reproductive heteronormativity – in spite of intuitions of originary queerness – has been the norm of the world for a much longer time than capitalism. (I am not speaking as if that norm is necessarily desirable. I am attempting to place myself within my context.) It is in that spirit that I say that the large majority of feminized labour, the large majority of urban and rural poor, are mothers who navigate their children's initiation into the mother-tongue, the



mysterious process that I just described. Melanie Klein has suggested that, from the womb to the first years of childhood, the child constructs the ‘language’ of ethics, by transforming the body parts of mother (and father) into a complex semiotic system. It is this conglomerate ethical semiotic, among the children of the disenfranchised women of the world, separated from the monoculture of globalization, that humanities teaching such as yours or mine can supplement, from above, so that it is not excluded from the definition of our world. This is why I said at the beginning that theories of globalization that announce a general change in knowledge patterns exclude those that believe that it might take time to train the imagination. We professors of the humanities, going on about distant learning, and video classrooms, never think of the fact that we share in this exclusion. Today I am urging that we make use of that common exclusion – from above, learning to learn from below.

To give you an idea of how we might do this, let me tell you a story. I was speaking to a group of managing directors and provincial government officers in southern China who were learning English in order to work with the World Trade Organization. No one in the audience knew ‘who I was’. One of the men said to me, ‘You speak English so well because the British owned you.’ I said, ‘Yes, my brother, you are right. The British had their boots on our neck. But now that you want to enter the World Trade Organization, do not let the Americans do the same thing to you. I love English because I love my mother tongue. The reason to learn a language is not only trade, but to be able to appreciate its poetry. I am learning Chinese because, in my old age, I want to be able to taste your great poetry.’

To these Chinese professionals and administrators I was speaking as a teacher of English. I believe they thought I was a teacher of language. But, as you know, I teach comparative literature – English, French and German, three hegemonic languages – mostly to people who are native speakers. To the students in New York I have been saying, for a long time, control your desire to be ethical at your own convenience under the newly globalized world at your command since the end of the so-called Cold War. Learn the other’s language carefully and well, to be able to access their ethical system. Train your imagination by way of the other’s language.

To those in Asia and Africa I would say what I said to my interlocutor in China: let us love our mother tongues as public as well as private languages so that we can love the global language. Not as the language of globalization but as the language of poetry. And as we come up to universities – let us learn languages from other parts of Asia and Africa than our own, to break the bilateral bond of the West and my own place. It is thus that language can be a protection against globalization, because it can take us on the track of imagining the singularity of the other.

Can, not will. Humanities education strives to rearrange desires. It trains the citizens of the coming world, not merely the traders of the globe. It is the effort of teaching that can put us on the track of imagining the singularity of the other in the other’s language. Imagination expands languages. And this effort of teaching and training, like all teaching and training, must of course be repeated. The schools do not close after one generation’s business is finished. The humanities cannot abdicate their task. Some years ago, the Indian writer in English Khushwant Singh recommended writing fiction only in English to Indians because, he said, you can say ‘blue sky’ in many different ways in English, whereas in Hindi, his mother tongue, you can only say *neela asman*. What this told us was that he had lost the capacity to imagine in his own language.

No, in the era of globalization languages are not local. They are instruments to affect the monoculture of the global. Together let us keep alive the multiplicity of languages and not give up. For nurturing this conviction in me, I remember my friend Jacques Derrida.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

'Affirm the survival'

In his final interview with *Le Monde*, published last August, Derrida offered a set of meditations and inquiries about death. If he could learn how to live, he remarks, he would also learn how to die, and this would mean to die without any sense of resurrection or redemption; this would be an absolute death. It is interesting that at this revealing moment, Derrida should find in Socrates his proper precursor, that he should turn to Socrates to understand that, at the age of 74, he still did not quite know how best to live. In fact, he claims in this interview that he is 'inéducable' on the matter of knowing how to live and how to die. He says to his interviewer: 'So then, to answer you plainly, no, I have never learned how to live. Not at all!' and then, a few lines later, he is clear that he has not learned to live because he has never learned to die: 'I have not learned to accept death.' We can accept what he says, since he is, after all, speaking plainly here, or we can ask what he might mean by this declaration. A paradox emerges, since at the end of the interview there seems to be a nearly ineffable acceptance of his death. We might pause, then, to consider whether learning how to live and to die is the same as a certain capacity for affirmation, a yes-saying.

At the end of the interview, Derrida remarks that everything that he has said, since 1986, about survival 'proceeds from an unconditional affirmation of life'. Survival, *la survie*, is, he explains, the 'affirmation of a living being who prefers living' and, hence, surviving, to death, because survival does not refer to what is left, what remains, but to 'the most intense life possible'. If, then, he is ineducable on the matter of learning how to live and to die, it is because his relation to living and dying is not one that can be instructed or learnt; it is a matter of affirmation, and this affirmation is not learnt or acquired, and it is most certainly not based on evidence that supports the case that, yes, affirmation is warranted. The yes-saying of affirmation is not based on evidence; it proceeds with indifference to evidence, and it takes the form of the 'yes' – though I take it that this 'yes' can happen in various ways.

So knowing how to live and knowing how to die are something that Derrida cannot do, has never been able to do, a task in relation to which he is permanently *ineducable*. He clearly did not expect to achieve that knowledge in this life since, at the time he is speaking, he knows that he is nearing his death. So is this a biographical insight into the person, Derrida? Can we say that Derrida happened to be ineducable in this regard but that surely other people are, that they have successfully learned how to live and how to die? The insight may well be biographical, but it seems to be what he would call 'structural' as well. Derrida remarks,

As for the formula you refer to ['to finally learn how to live', *apprendre à vivre enfin*]; it came to me after the book [*Specters of Marx*] was finished. First of all, it plays, but seriously, with the common meaning of the phrase. To learn how to live is to mature, also to educate. If you shout at someone and say, '*je vais t'apprendre à vivre*' [I'm going to teach you how to live], sometimes in a threatening way, it means I am going to coach you, even train you [*te former voire te dresser*]. And the ambiguity of this play on words – between *enseigner* and *apprendre* – is even more important to me, this sigh (*le soupir*) opens up to an even more difficult interrogation. Living, can it be learned? Can one learn through discipline or apprenticeship, by experience or by experimentation, to accept or, better, to affirm life?

The conversation reminds me of Plato's *Phaedo*, in which the questioner, Simmias, asks Socrates on his deathbed whether it is true that a philosopher is always preparing for death. Socrates answers that 'if a man has trained himself throughout life to live in a state as close as possible to death, would it not be ridiculous for him to be distressed when death come to him?' Simmias answers with characteristic acquiescence, 'it would, of course'. Then Socrates elaborates: 'true philosophers make dying their profession,

and that to them of all men death is least alarming.’ Derrida has failed at this philosophical task; he is, as he tells us, ‘ineducable’ on the matter of learning how to live and how to die, this *sagesse* or wisdom. But if we ask further about Socrates’ vocation, he tells us quite clearly that death is welcome only because there is no wisdom to be attained: ‘a true lover of wisdom who has firmly grasped this conviction ... that he will never attain to wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world – will he be grieved at dying?’ So for a moment, we can see that Derrida is characteristically Socratic in underscoring his ineducability. If for Socrates it is a training and practice that leads him to the conclusion that there is no wisdom that he can acquire on how to live and how to die, it is a certain rigour associated with a systematic asceticism of thought. But once we see this moment of convergence between Derrida and Socrates, they clearly depart again, since Derrida makes clear that there is, regardless of the impoverished state of wisdom in this life, an imperative to affirm this life, a life for which there is no redemption, a life that is not justified through reference to another, more perfect life.

Indeed, there is no afterlife for Derrida, no soul that separates from the body, but there is an afterlife of words. In this final published conversation, he takes up the question of what survives, and so offers, we might conjecture, a certain consolation to his readers and to his friends in much the same way that Socrates spends most of the *Phaedo* doing for those who will survive him.

He is clear about the finality of death, but he returns to the task of affirming what he calls survival, *la survie*. He refers to Walter Benjamin, who, in ‘The Task of the Translator’, makes a distinction between *überleben*, the survival of a part, surviving death, as a book can survive the death of its author, or a child survives the death of a parent, and *fortleben*, living on, continuing to live, the continuation of life itself. Survival carries these two meanings, continuing to live, but also, he emphasizes, living after death. Derrida’s way of thinking about this question is not Socratic, and yet in another way it remains so, once we remember that ‘Socrates’, if he lives on, does so by virtue of Plato – that is, by virtue of Plato’s writing. That writing becomes the matrix in which a certain textualization of the conversation constitutes a survival, one in which the ‘continuing to live’ (*fortleben*) haunts the survival of these words, their *überleben*. Are we hearing from Derrida again, does he still live, or is this what is left of him in the words we read and speak? A certain haunting or spectrality is induced through this equivocation, and this equivocation, he tells us, is structural, even originary. We expect survival to come later, as a concept that follows a life, as a predicament we face upon the death of the author, but Derrida tells us, here, at the end of his life, that the predicament was always there, and that this equivocation, this question of survival, even this imperative to affirm survival, is there from the outset, built into the language that precedes us. He says,

All of the concepts that have helped me to work, especially that of the ‘trace’ and the ‘spectre’, are to be found in ‘survival’ as a structural dimension. It (the notion of survival) is derived neither from life nor from death. This is why I call it an ‘original mourning’ – it does not wait for death to become effective ... [S]urvival is an original concept, that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *da-sein* if you wish. We are structurally survivors, marked by the structure of the trace, the testament. But having said that, I would not want to leave the interpretation there, according to which survival is closer to death than it is to life and the future.

Here it seems to me that he refuses the Socratic claim to be closer to death. And he turns the task around, claiming that ‘all the time, deconstruction is in the corner of the “yes” – the affirmation of life.’

It is important to remember that this is an author speaking, one who, by definition, loses his words in a very precise way when he speaks and when he writes:

when one writes a book for a large audience, one doesn't know to whom one speaks, one invents and creates outlines, but they no longer belong to us. Spoken or written, all these gestures leave us: they start to act independently of us, like machines or, at best, like puppets.... At the moment that I allow 'my' book to be published (no one makes me do it), I begin to appear-and-disappear, like some unteachable ghost who never learned how to live. The trace that I leave signifies to me both my death, either to come or already past, and the hope that it will survive me. It's not an ambition of immortality, it's structural; it is the constant form of my life. Every time I allow something to go forth, I see my death in the writing. The extreme test: one expropriates oneself – one gives oneself away – without knowing to whom one confides the thing one leaves. Who will inherit it now and how? Will there even be inheritors? That's a question that one can pose now more than ever. It preoccupies me ceaselessly.

So there is no ambition for immortality, but there is a kind of survival that preoccupies him without pause. We do not choose the language into which we are born, we are born into a set of traces that have by and large lost their origins, but which constitute the survival of what is irrecoverable.

Derrida understands that he may now have left his traces in the French language, but he is clear that this language never belonged to him, an Algerian, a permanent foreigner, and that it nevertheless welcomed him and that he could welcome it, through a 'refined' form of 'disrespect'. He does not understand himself as inventing a new genre of writing, but only participating in an ongoing revolution: 'in every situation, an appropriate new mode of exposition must be created, a law of the singular event.' And though he understands the pedagogical impulse to teach the student to read, indeed to live, in some way that she is not being taught from any other place, he understands as well that he cannot form his reader, in the same way that no one could teach him, finally, how to live.

Survival is structural – it seems a neatly unpoetic way of replacing the dream of immortality. We inherit the traces of the dead, even when we were not the intended recipients, but in the moment in which we give away our own words, we participate in a certain wild future of inheritance, one for which no framework for kinship exists. We are not sure 'who' survives, but there is a surviving that takes place, spectral, haunted, in and through the trace. I am reminded of Celan, returning to accept an award at Bremen in 1958, returning, as it were, from another landscape, as he tells it, one that suggests that he has survived or that survival is the name for his being there. He addresses the crowd and lets them know that 'Bremen' has always had the sense of the 'unreachable' for him. And then he reads the following sentence:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. The language remained, but it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of a death-bent speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, 'enriched' by all this.

Celan writes that he 'goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality'. Derrida joins Celan perhaps precisely at the moment in which Celan writes that 'not lost, yes in spite of everything'. The 'yes' that wedges itself in there as a *non sequitur*, that inaugurates the phrase that follows with no preparation and with no justification, it is perhaps this 'yes' that Derrida offers *enfin* 'in spite of everything'.

Towards the end of the interview in *Le Monde*, Derrida maintains,

Everything that I say about survival as a complication of the life and death opposition proceeds from my unconditional affirmation of life. Survival, that is the life beyond life, the life that is more than life, and the discourse that I offer is not petrified or mortified – it is the affirmation of a living one who prefers life and surviving death, because survival, which is *not simply* what remains, is the most intense life possible. I am never more haunted by the necessity of death than in moments of happiness and pleasure. Taking pleasure and crying in the face of impending death – for me they are the same thing. When I recall my life, I have

a tendency to think of the good luck I have had in loving the unhappiest moments in my life and even to bless them. Almost all except for one exception that is near [*Presque tous à une exception près*]. When I recall the happy moments, I bless them as well, surely, at the same time that they propel me toward the thought of death, toward death, because it happens, *fini*.

So we learn – if we did not already know it – that Derrida takes the eternal return seriously, and to everything that has happened he says ‘yes’, since no suffering, no loss, no injustice that takes place in life exacts from him a ‘no’ to life itself. I am unsure that I can follow him here. But I know that there is no instruction manual to help me. He says yes to the life that is mortal, but he does not precisely say his ‘yes’ to death itself. That remains the one thing he cannot affirm, and he cannot affirm it precisely because he affirms the singular and finite life that is his. What he does affirm, though, is survival in its equivocal and double sense, the originary structure of existence that turns out to be the originary structure of language as well.



At the end of the interview, after the concession that death does happen, Derrida says ‘*fini*’ and the interview ends. Is this a perfect consonance, in which the word enacts the experience? No, the last word that names the finality of death, the finality of his words, is still an act of naming, an event in language and so continues a certain ‘yes’ to life in spite of everything. The word is as much a trace as it is signifier. And inasmuch as the word *fini* is spoken then, before he dies, it continues to belong to life, to his life, and yet it is there, spoken in anticipation of being read when he is gone, a spectral utterance that equivocates between the life that is continued in the word, and the word that survives a life that is not continuing. It names and mobilizes that equivocation.

At his funeral outside Paris, Derrida left a few lines to be read by his son Pierre. Among them was a certain imperative, ‘*Affirmez la survie.*’

These are the words that survived him, the ones he wanted to be read by his inheritor, the one he knew, even as he knew that survival means precisely not to know where one’s words will go and what kind of inheritance lies in wait for them. Affirm survival, he tells us, and suddenly I am orphaned, since he gives us no instruction, and we are not told how, in the face of suffering, in spite of suffering, this affirmation is to take place. He cannot teach us here, except to let us know that this affirmation is precisely what cannot be taught. *Affirmez la survie* – it is his voice; it is a prosopopeia, it is a demand that he bequeaths to someone, anyone, words that cannot precisely seize and craft us, but words with which we are left. We can try to make better sense of them, but they persist in their spectral materiality, as it were; they are what is left, that they remain. That they continue to live and live on is precisely the point, the point we are always missing, the predicament that is ours as beings who go to language stricken by reality, seeking it.

I am stricken by the reality of Derrida’s death, which has indeed happened, *fini*. But, for some reason I do not understand, I continue now in or with his words, and something else continues there, which claims me prior to any decision. I do not seize upon it; it seizes upon me. Between what is finished and what is left to be affirmed is precisely the equivocation of survival itself, one that proves its structural persistence, for us, in spite of us, without him, with him.

Judith Butler

An ethos of reading

A vital measure of the influence of a thinker on a discipline is the extent to which they transform its customs, protocols and practices in a way that makes it difficult to conceive how things were done before they appeared on the scene. Such transformations are usually simply incorporated into the discipline and presupposed by those who come after. This is why we often have a thankless relation to the most influential thinkers – because their innovations are now the way in which we are accustomed to see and do things. Definitionally, then, great thinkers are often those who change the way we do things in a peculiarly thankless way. Jacques Derrida was a great thinker. He exerted a massive influence over a whole generation of people working in philosophy. His death is an unfathomable loss. In what follows I would like to thank him for what he enabled people like me to presuppose thanklessly in our practice.

How did Derrida transform the way in which people like me do philosophy? Let me begin negatively with a couple of confessions. I was never a structuralist and always found Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics a deeply improbable approach to language, meaning and the relation of the latter to the world. There is no doubt that Saussurean structuralism enabled some stunning intellectual work, particularly Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud and Roland Barthes' brilliant and enduring literary and cultural analyses. But that doesn't mean that Saussure was right. Therefore, Derrida's early arguments in this area, particularly the critique of the priority of speech over writing in the hugely influential *Of Grammatology*, left me rather cold. Talk of 'post-structuralism' left me even colder, almost as cold as subsequent throat-clearing about 'postmodernism'. So, in assessing Derrida's influence, I want to set aside a series of notions famously associated with him – like *différance*, trace and archi-writing – in order to get a clearer view of what I think Derrida was about in his work.

I have a similar scepticism about the popular idea of deconstruction as a methodological unpicking of binary oppositions (speech/writing, male/female, inside/outside, reason/madness, etc., etc.). In my view, this is a practice which led generations of humanities students into the intellectual cul-de-sac of locating binaries in purportedly canonical texts and cultural epiphenomena and then relentlessly deconstructing them in the name of a vaguely political position somehow deemed to be progressive. In so far as Derrida's name, and half-understood anthologized excerpts from some of his texts, were marshalled to such a cause, this led only to the reduction of deconstruction to some sort of formalistic method based on an unproven philosophy of language.

In my view, Derrida was a supreme reader of texts, particularly but by no means exclusively philosophical texts. Although, contrary to some Derridophiles, I do not think that he read everything with the same rigour and persuasive power, there is no doubt that the way in which he read a crucial series of authorships in the philosophical tradition completely transformed our understanding of their work and, by implication, of our own work. In particular, I think of his devastating readings of what the French called *Les trois H*: Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, who provided the bedrock for French philosophy in the postwar period and the core of Derrida's own philosophical formation in the 1950s. But far beyond this, Derrida's readings of Plato, of Rousseau and other eighteenth-century authors like Condillac and his relentlessly sharp engagements with more contemporary philosophers like Foucault, Bataille and Levinas – leaving aside his readings of Blanchot, Genet, Artaud, Ponge and so many others – are simply definitive. We should also mention Derrida's constant attention to psychoanalysis in a series of stunning readings of Freud.

In my view, what confusedly got named ‘deconstruction’, a title Derrida always viewed with suspicion, is better approached as *double reading*. On the one hand, a double reading gives a patient, rigorous and – although this word might sound odd, I would insist on it – *scholarly* reconstruction of a text. This means reading the text in its original language, knowing the corpus of the author as a whole, being acquainted with its original context and its dominant contexts of reception. If a deconstructive reading is to have any persuasive force, then it must possess a full complement of the tools of commentary and lay down a powerful, primary layer of reading. On the other hand, the second moment of reading is closer to what we normally think of as an interpretation, where the text is levered open through the location of what Derrida sometimes called ‘blind spots’. Here, an authorship is brought into contradiction with what it purports to claim, its intended meaning, what Derrida liked to call the text’s *vouloir-dire*. Derrida often located these blind spots in ambiguous concepts in the texts he was reading, such as ‘supplement’ in Rousseau, ‘pharmakon’ in Plato, and ‘Spirit’ in Heidegger, where each of these terms possesses a double or multiple range of meaning that simply cannot be contained by the text’s intended meaning. Many of his double readings turn around such blind spots in order to explode from within our understanding of that author. The key thing is that the explosion has to come from within and not be imposed from without. It is a question of thinking the unthought within the thought of a specific philosophical text. Derrida often described his practice as parasitism, where the reader must both draw their sustenance from the host text and lay their critical eggs within its flesh. In the three examples of Plato, Rousseau and Heidegger, the crucial thing is that each of these conceptual blind spots is deployed by its author in a way that simply cannot be controlled by their intentions. In an important sense, the text deconstructs itself rather than being deconstructed.

For me, Derrida’s philosophical exemplarity consists in the lesson of reading: patient,



meticulous, scrupulous, open, questioning reading that is able, at its best, to unsettle its readers’ expectations and completely transform our understanding of the philosopher in question. Because Derrida was such a brilliant reader, he is a difficult example to follow, but in my view one must try. This is what I would see as the pedagogical imperative deriving from Derrida’s work. What one is trying to cultivate with students – in seminars, week in, week out – is a scrupulous practice of reading, being attentive to the text’s language, major arguments, transitions and movements of thought, but also alive to its hesitations, paradoxes, quotation marks, ellipses, footnotes, inconsistencies and downright conceptual confusions. Thanks to Derrida, we can see that every major text in the history of philosophy possesses these self-deconstructive features. Deconstruction is pedagogy.

Returning to the question of influence, although all of Derrida’s training and the great majority of his publications were in philosophy, it is difficult to think of a philosopher who has exerted more influence over the whole spread of humanistic study and the social sciences. The only comparable figure is Michel Foucault. And just

as it is now unimaginable to do historical or social research without learning from what Foucault said about power, subjectivity and the various archaeologies and genealogies of knowledge, so too Derrida has completely transformed our approach to the texts we rely on in our various disciplinary canons. In a long, fascinating and now rather saddening

interview with *Le Monde* from 19 August 2004, which was republished in a ten-page supplement after his death, he describes his work in terms of an ‘ethos of writing’. Derrida cultivated what I would call a *habitus* of uncompromising philosophical vigilance at war with the governing intellectual common sense and against what he liked to call – in a Socratic spirit – the *doxa* or narcissistic self-image of the age.

Derrida’s treatment by mainstream philosophers in the English-speaking world was, with certain notable exceptions like Richard Rorty, shameful. He was vilified in the most ridiculous manner by professional philosophers who knew better but who acted out of a parochial malice that was a mere patina to their cultural insularity, intellectual complacency, philistinism and simple jealousy of Derrida’s fame, charisma and extraordinary book sales. In the English context, the incident which brought matters to a head was the initial refusal in late spring 1992 to award Derrida an honorary doctorate at the University of Cambridge, a refusal that found support among prominent voices in the Philosophy Faculty. After Derrida finally received the honorary doctorate with his usual civility, humour and good grace, a letter was sent to the University of Cambridge from Ruth Barcan Marcus, then Professor of Philosophy at Yale, and signed by some twenty philosophers, including Quine, who complained that Derrida’s work ‘does not meet accepted standards of rigor and clarity’. I would like to take this opportunity to register in print my gratitude to these know-nothings for the attention they gave to Derrida.

At the heart of many of the polemics against Derrida was the frankly weird idea that deconstruction was a form of nihilistic textual free play that threatened to undermine rationality, morality and all that was absolutely fabulous about life in Western liberal democracy. In my view, on the contrary, what was motivating Derrida’s practice of reading and thinking was an ethical demand. This is something that can be traced to the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and his idea of ethics being based on a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. Against the know-nothing polemics, deconstruction is an engaged and deeply ethical practice of reading that is of great social and political relevance. Derrida’s work from the 1990s shows this relevance with extraordinary persistence in a highly original series of engagements with Marx, with European cultural and political identity, the nature of law and justice, democracy, sovereignty, cosmopolitanism, the death penalty, so-called rogue states, and finally with what Derrida liked to call an alternative possible globalization, an *altermondialisation*.

Derrida’s work is possessed of a curious restlessness, one might even say an anxiety. A famous American philosopher, sympathetic to Derrida, once said to me, ‘he never knows when to stop or how to come to an end’. In the interview with *Le Monde*, Derrida describes himself as being at war with himself: *je suis en guerre contre moi-même*. He was always on the move intellectually, always hungry for new objects of analysis, accepting new invitations, confronting new contexts, addressing new audiences. His ability in discussion to listen and then to synthesize new theories, hypotheses and phenomena and produce long, detailed and fascinating analyses in response was breathtaking. I saw him do it on many occasions and always with patience, politeness, modesty and civility. Derrida had such critical and synthetic intelligence – a brilliance, as Levinas was fond of saying. I remember sitting next to Derrida on a panel in Paris and thinking to myself that it felt like being close to an intellectual light bulb. The whole ethos of his work was at the very antipodes of the inert and stale professional complacency that defines so much philosophy and so many philosophers.



Simon Critchley

A death foretold, a life retold

Derrida's press

It was a death foretold. In the lengthy interview with Jacques Derrida published in *Le Monde* last August (recorded in March), his interlocutor, Pierre Birnbaum, clearly found it difficult to begin the conversation. He remarked that Derrida had been almost ubiquitous over the last year or so and briefly chronicled his recent activities. And then he hesitated: 'It's a lot for one year and yet, and you do not hide it, you are...' Derrida interrupted him: 'Go on, say it, quite dangerously ill and going through some unpleasant treatment. But let's leave that, if you don't mind. We're not here for a health bulletin – public or secret.' Derrida was suffering from pancreatic cancer, and that is not a disease that takes prisoners. He was hospitalized in mid-September and died on the night of Saturday 9 October.

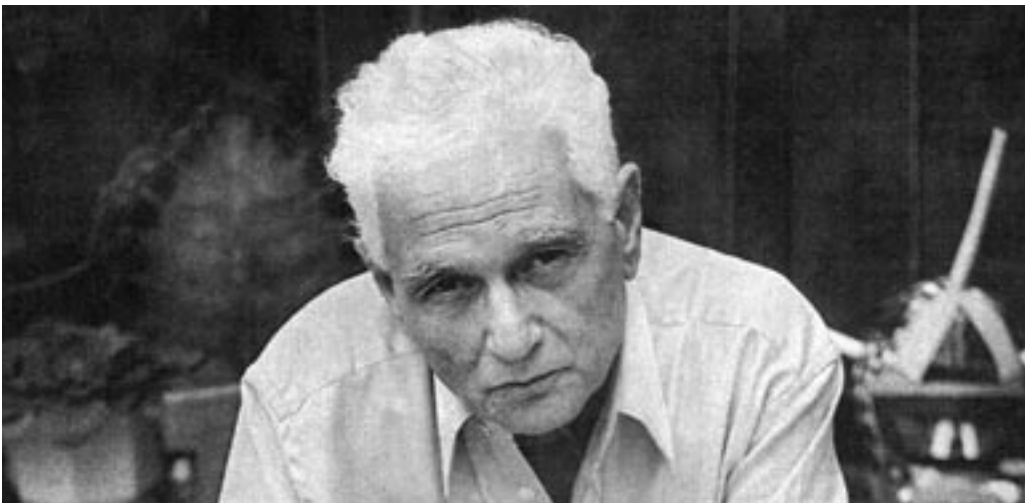
The first obituaries published in *Le Monde* and *Libération* were quite brief and said little that was not in the bald releases from Agence France-Presse. In its 9 October issue (which, thanks to the paper's bizarre publishing cycle, actually appeared on the Monday afternoon), *Le Monde* did little more than note Derrida's death and make some general comments on his career and status. On 11 October, *Libération* published a lengthy dossier (it seems inappropriate to describe it as a 'supplement') written mainly by its philosophy correspondent Robert Maggiori. The next day, *Le Monde* followed with an eleven-page dossier, which included a reprint of the August interview and comments and tributes from various luminaries. There was nothing unusual about this. France is probably the only country in the world where the deaths of intellectuals and philosophers make front-page news. The publication of dossiers like this is part of a tradition that, if memory serves, began with the death of Sartre in 1980, when, in tribute, *Libération* published a 'special edition' running to fifty-six pages. Such dossiers and special editions rarely say anything new about the deceased. They serve as long obituaries that sum up careers, and they allow a variety of friends and commentators to say farewell (in very moving terms, with Derrida's death, in the case of Jean-Luc Nancy and Michel Deguy, both writing in *Libération*). With time, they become historically valuable documents.

What is slightly surprising is that the extensive coverage was not restricted to *Le Monde* and *Libération*. The very conservative daily *Le Figaro* is not normally noted for its interest in deconstruction, but the various sections of its 11 October issue carried no fewer than six pieces devoted to Derrida. *L'Humanité*, the journal of what is left of the Communist Party, ran two articles recalling his attendance at various of its annual Fêtes. A further article appeared the next day. The Catholic *La Croix* joined in the tributes. Francophone voices from further afield echoed them: *Le Devoir* in Montreal and *Le Temps* in Switzerland.

Slightly later in the week, *Le Nouvel Observateur* published a round-up of the tributes that had been paid. President Chirac, Communist senator Robert Hué, psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco and mayor of Paris Bernard Delanoé all mourned the death of Jacques Derrida. Their comments do not necessarily signal any great acquaintance with his work – I do not suppose that Hué has ever spent much time studying *Spectres de Marx* – but they do express a consensus. France, it was agreed by all, had lost an important thinker, almost a national treasure. Virtually all the newspapers

commented on the sheer quantity of Derrida's output. More tellingly, many people described him as a successful 'export'. In death, Derrida became 'France's greatest philosopher'; in life, he had enjoyed greater prestige abroad than at home. He was never elected to a chair at the Sorbonne or the Collège de France, and probably had as many detractors as admirers. Admirable as it may be, the Collège internationale de philosophie, which he helped to found, is a somewhat marginal institution.

Obituaries and press releases are scarcely the places for expositions of the complexities of Derrida's philosophy (though Maggiori did do a good job). Friends spoke affectionately of a man with a gift for friendship; others paid tribute to his political work. All recalled his Algerian past. In his press release the minister for culture and communications, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, described Derrida as a 'profound humanist' who had devoted his last years to studying the values of hospitality, 'with a particular concern for the link between Europe and the Mediterranean – he was a successful cross between the two – that often led him to speak of the "Nostalgeria" of a boy born in Algeria. He wanted to build an open idea of Europe: the best tribute we could pay to him would be to make his wish come true.'



The contrast with the coverage in the UK press is depressing. The *Guardian*, *Times* and *Independent* all produced fine obituaries: the piece in the *Guardian* by Derek Attridge and Thomas Baldwin (11 October) was particularly good. But both the *Guardian* and *Times* undermined them. In the former's 'G2' tabloid, Stephen Moss asked 'a few key thinkers' if anyone actually understood Derrida. Was there really any point in putting the question to Julie Birchill or Roger Scruton? Was there really any point to *The Times's* leader 'Is Derrida Dead?' (a question also asked by Rod Liddle in the *Spectator*)? Was there really any point to Gary Day's 'witty' piece (*THES*, 5 November), which begins by noting that Derrida's death coincided with that of Christopher ('Superman') Reeves, which was unfortunate as it inevitably meant that he would be compared with the man who saved the world. 'Playful' comments of that kind do no justice to either the philosopher or a good actor and very brave man. Such displays of boastful pride in one's own ignorance and 'not understanding' are not pretty, and, whatever one thinks about 'deconstruction', all the trite 'jokes' about the undecidability of Derrida's death are simply distasteful in the extreme.

In the *Le Point* interview, Derrida spoke of his boyish enthusiasm for Gide: 'For me he wasn't a novelist, but a *moraliste* who was telling us how we should live. For me, that's what philosophy has always been: the search for an ethics and a way of living.' And, of course, of dying. He told *Le Monde* 'When I recall my life, I tend to think that I've been lucky enough to love even the unhappy moments of my life, and to bless them.' Don't mock: begin the work of mourning.

David Macey

A different world

Dogs bark at what they do not understand.

Heraclitus

In *Radical Philosophy* 21 (Spring 1979) I wrote one of the early essays on Derrida in English, 'Introduction to Derrida'. (It was reprinted in Roy Edgley and Richard Osborne, eds, *Radical Philosophy Reader*.) This was an attempt to give a sympathetic (though not uncritical) presentation of the critical resources that Derrida was bringing to the table, in the face of suspicions from the Left that Derrida was a neo- or crypto-conservative, and suspicions from the analytic orthodoxy that he was a charlatan. It was for many a source of despair that on the occasion of his death, the spectre of the culture wars – and the Cambridge Affair – could rise again from the bathtub, and that Jonathan Kandell could entitle his *New York Times* obituary 'Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies at 74'. They offer hemlock even to his dead body. This led to a great outpouring of letters of protest and signatures of support (to the date of writing 3,949) for the outraged 'Letter to the Editor' written by Samuel Weber and Kenneth Reinhard (they are captured on UC Irvine's web page 'Remembering Derrida').

It seems a long time ago that I (and many other English philosophers and graduate students) first met Derrida in Oxford in 1969, the year following the big March 1968 Grosvenor Square anti-Vietnam demo, and the May 1968 student revolt in Paris. My tutor, Alan Montefiore, invited the rising star over from Paris on a number of occasions. My friends and I were captivated not just by the man's sheer intellectual brilliance but by his modesty, openness and extraordinary generosity of time and attention, traits which never left him, and which often surprised those who knew him only from his books. In 1972 Derrida published *Positions*, in which he publicly held his fire against Marxism. Instead he was helping us 'continentalists' work through the positivistic edge of structuralism and the metaphysical aspects of phenomenology. But unlike his entry into the USA ('Structure, Sign and Play' addressed literary theorists at Johns Hopkins in 1966), in the UK Derrida was first addressing philosophers. Though I am no disciple, Derrida indelibly shaped my intellectual trajectory. It would take him twenty-five years to write *Specters of Marx*, and, even then, disappoint the Left. Derrida was always suspicious of dialectizable alternatives, including the victory of liberal democracy over communism, announced by Fukuyama. 'Freedom' was never a straightforward value for him, even as he came to proclaim that nothing was *less* outdated than the Enlightenment ideal.

It seems now like a different world. The main figures listed as reading on my courses have now nearly all died. Heidegger (1976), Marcuse (1979), Sartre (1980), Lacan (1981), Foucault (1984), Althusser (1990), Deleuze (1995), Levinas (1995), Gadamer (2002). This semester I have been teaching a graduate seminar on Derrida. Most of the 'Continental' philosophers I knew in Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s have emigrated – mainly to the USA (David Krell, Robert Bernasconi, Tina Chanter, Jay Bernstein, Geoff Bennington, Simon Critchley). It is perhaps not surprising that it is in the United States that Derrida really assembled a following.

It seems like a different world. And yet here we are again, 'at war' with a globally defined enemy. Here 'we' are again – we academics, intellectuals, philosophers – faced with our impotence in preventing war, torture, genocide, preventing the worst violence. Here we are again, propelled into the future for another four years, after an election that puts in question the very democratic institutions it serves, and that brings the language of good and evil to the lips of those who never believed they could think that

way. Many of us with an address in this rogue state wonder whether living in the lap of the great Satan gives us any greater opportunity to influence the course of events, or any greater responsibility. And in the shadow of this barbaric repetition, it is no accident that Derrida began to talk more about hospitality, about cosmopolitanism, about terror, about democracy, about the European ideal, about the ghosts that haunt us and the (im)possibilities that we can neither anticipate nor give up on.

Derrida was an Algerian Jew, living in the heart of the ex-colonial power, who specialized in inhabiting the uncanny space of the border, the margin, the never completely at home, impropriety. He was not a revolutionary, he had no programme, but he held open the possibility of transformation in every instant, at any time. I doubt I will see his like again.

David Wood

Refusing Deleuze's opposition between tree and rhizome, David Wood has launched a rhizomal Virtual Forest website through which people can sign up to plant a tree (or a whole grove) and even dedicate their planting to a friend or cause. All these tree-promises, with names, and potentially photos, are collected in a 'gallery' on the website. The initial target is 7000 trees by summer solstice 2005, recollecting Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks project in Kassel in the mid-1980s. After that the sky's the limit. The idea is to make the web work as a symbolic-material accelerator, using 'art' to raise awareness, with a multiplier effect on wider material practices, finally to combat global warming. David Wood is planting a Nanten tree in Kyoto in late November, to coincide with the 7th anniversary of the start of the Kyoto talks. He has dedicated another tree in Tennessee to Jacques Derrida, who, he says, was 'going green'. The Virtual Forest website is at www.circularsystem.com/trees.

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