After Derrida—Or the Science of an Oeuvre

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Comme si je n'aimais que ta mémoire et confession de moi mais qui serais-je, moi, si je ne commençais et finissais par t'aimer, toi, dans ma langue privée de toi, celle-là même, l'intraduisible, où le bon mot nous laisse à terre, gagnants et perdants comme le jour où une préméditation de l'amour m'avait dicté pour l'immortalité, non, pour la postérité, non, pour la vérité.

[As if I loved only your memory and confession of your love for me, but who would I be if I didn't begin and end by loving you in the private language I use for you, the inexpressible, where the right word keeps us anchored, winners and losers like the day when a premeditation on love spoke to me of immortality, no, of posterity, no, of truth.]

—Hélène Cixous

According to the daily that so admirably bears its name, Le Monde, that international institution which enjoys a readership of some quarter of a million in France and one and half million abroad, Jacques Derrida, died in Paris on October 9, 2004. A week before his death, a rumor out of Sweden had him pegged as a frontrunner for the Nobel Prize. So, we eagerly anticipated celebrating the new Laureate in literature. At 1 p.m. on October 7, as Derrida lay on an operating table, the news broke that the Nobel jury had chosen the Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek. The Swedish jurors had lacked intuition. They had had the chance to honor the life of a great mind at the very moment when the man himself was fighting for his life. Forty-eight hours later, Derrida was pronounced dead (Droit 7). Thankfully, thought never dies. On learning of his death while attending a conference in Chicago where he had lectured many times, I instinctively delved again into his book The Act of Mourning, a collection

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of farewells and tributes he had addressed over the previous twenty years to the irreplaceable friends he had lost: Roland Barthes, Edmond Jabes, Sarah Kaufman, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard, and many others. For every death, there is, he wrote, “an end of the world,” suggesting that the world could end many times (The Act 4–5). And so the act of creating may, after all, have a purpose in that not only Derrida but also Iqbal Ahmed, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Susan Sontag—what John Keats aptly called “bright stars”—who vanished before him, still live in our memory. Although they are all gone, they did not die in vain, for unlike those who die without leaving any other trace of their presence on this earth than a cross in a cemetery bearing their name and a date, Derrida, Bourdieu, Said, Iqbal, and Sontag, each left us a monumental oeuvre to guide us through the maze.

The lead article in Le Monde was by Roger-Pol Droit, Derrida’s distinguished colleague at Le Collège de philosophie—the institution Derrida cofounded with Jean-Luc Nancy in 1981 (111–46). It is difficult to imagine so concentrated and estimable a degree of attention paid to any other contemporary philosopher’s death, except in France and in his case, which despite the difficulty and intransigence of his philosophical deconstructive work even drew a memorial tribute from President Jacques Chirac.2 (One can hardly imagine George Bush standing on the lawn in front of the White House paying handsome tribute to Edward Said or Susan Sontag). In this regard, France seems to know better than any other country in the world the importance and value of the intellectual. This also explains the enormous loss Derrida’s death represented, just as it says something about the startling yet sustained force and influence of his thought.

Derrida is best understood, I think, as perhaps the greatest of Nietzsche’s modern disciples and, simultaneously, as a central figure in the most noteworthy flowering of oppositional intellectual life in the latter part of the twentieth century. (The only other great figure who might have shared the stage with him is Michel Foucault, who died twenty years earlier—in 1984, to be precise). Along with Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Blanchot, Georges Canguilhem, Lucien Goldman, the Group Tel Quel, Philippe Sollers, Alain-Robe Grillet, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and Pierre Bourdieu, Derrida emerged out of an extraordinary, revolutionary concatenation of Parisian aesthetic and political currents, which for about forty years produced
such a concentration of brilliant work as we are not likely to see again for many generations to come. In what amounted to a genuine upheaval in modern thought, the barriers between the disciplines and indeed languages were broken, then the fields separated by these barriers were reshaped from beneath the surface to their most complex superstructures. Theory, images of astonishing fecundity, and vast formal systems—to say nothing of idioms that seemed barbarous at first but soon became fashionable—poured out from these figures, whose ancestry was a contradictory amalgam of the academic and the insurrectionary. All seemed to have been affected by Marx and to a lesser degree Freud. Most were taught by extraordinary teachers—the names of Gaston Bachelard, George Dumézil, Émile Benveniste, Jean Hyppolite, and Alexandre Kojève (whose famous lectures on Hegel seem to have formed an entire generation) recur frequently—as much as they were influenced by surrealist poets such as André Breton and Paul Éluard, and postcolonial poets and critics such as Aimé Césaire and Franz Fanon. Yet, all of them were also rooted in the political actuality of French life: the Vietnam and Algerian colonial wars, the response to European communism, the Chinese revolution, and May 1968.3

Even in this unique, exceptional company, Derrida stood out. For one, he was most learned. For another, he seemed the most committed to study for its own sake—"le plaisir du savoir," as Bourdieu would later have it (Esquisse 111). And so with his death, one is reminded of the end of an era that was intense and radiant when it first dawned onto the world stage. "It happened," Perry Anderson writes, "after 1964, the year Sartre refused the Nobel Prize. It was in that otherwise (in)famous decade that Lévi-Strauss developed into the world’s most celebrated anthropologist; Braudel established himself as the most influential historian; Barthes became the most distinctive literary critic; Lacan started to acquire his reputation as the mage of psychoanalysis; Foucault to invent his archaeology of knowledge; Deleuze to evolve into the philosopher of the century; Bourdieu to develop the concepts that would make him its best-known sociologist, and Derrida to grow into the grammatologue of the age.” The concentrated surge of ideas, Anderson adds, "was indeed astonishing. In just one year (1966–67) there appeared side by side: Du miel aux cendres (Lévi-Strauss), Les Mots et les choses (Foucault), Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme (Braudel), Système de la mode (Barthes), Écrits (Lacan), Lire le Capital (Althusser), and, of course, De la Grammatologie, not to mention L’Écriture et la différence and La Voix et le phénomène. Whatever the different bearings of these and other
writings, it does not seem altogether surprising that revolutionary fever
gripped society itself the following year” (“Dégringolade” 6–7). The
reception of this effervescence abroad, Anderson goes on to argue,
varied from country to country, but no major culture in the West, in
addition to Japan and the Third World, was altogether exempt from it.
This owed something to the traditional cachet of anything Parisian,
with its overtones of mode as much as of mind.

True, but it was also an effect of virtuosity, style, and artistic daring.
Lacan’s Écrits, which is closer to Mallarmé than Freud in its syntax, and
Derrida’s Glas, with its double-columned interlacing of Genet and Hegel,
represent extreme forms of this strategy. Not to mention Deleuze’s
whispers of philosophy, Foucault’s oracular gestures, mingling echoes of
Artaud and Bossuet, Lévi-Strauss’s Wagnerian constructions, and
Barthes’s eclectic coquetries, which belong to the same register. To
understand this development, one has to be aware of the formative role of
dictée and lycée, cahier de texte and Baccalauréat, CAPES and
Aggégation, devoir de synthèse and concours national, Goncourt and
Académie française, percolating through the dissertation, in the upper
levels of the French educational system in which all these thinkers—
khagneux and normaliens virtually to a man—were trained, as a potential
connector between literature and philosophy. Even Bourdieu, whose
work took as one of its leading targets this tradition, could not escape his
own version of its cadences. The potential cost of literary conception of
intellectual disciplines is obvious enough: arguments freed from logic,
propositions from evidence. It is this trait of the French culture of the time
that has so often polarized foreign reaction to it, in a seesaw between
adulation and suspicion. Balanced judgment here will not be easy. What
is clear is that the hyperbolic fusion of imaginative and discursive forms
of writing, with all its attendant vices, was also inseparable from every-
thing that made this body of work most original and radical. Its vitality lay
in a multitude of éminences grises: Bataille, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze,
Bourdieu, Cixous, and, of course, Derrida, who towered over everyone
else for nearly half a century.4

At the risk of drawing an inventory à la Prévert, one could make a list
of the pretenders to the throne Derrida occupied. The number scholars
who owe him nearly everything in claiming a position in the sun is so large
that a trim is in order. Think of Soshana Felman, Barbara Johnson,
Drucilla Cornell, Eve Sedgwick, Stanley Fish, Geoffrey Bennington,
Christopher Norris, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and of course, Geoffrey
Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom and Paul de Man—the gang of
four who formed The Yale School. One must also mention those who sat at the opposite side of the fence from him: John Searle, Richard Rorty, Fredric Jameson, and Terry Eagleton come to mind. To all this, one must add the list of universities that associated their names with his and ended being contaminated by the scourge that is deconstruction: Yale, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, New York University, and the University of California at Irvine where he deposited his archives last year (Eagleton, “Don’t” 4).

There are many possible ways to reflect on Derrida, none of them adequate but some less misleading than others. One can begin on safe ground, surely, by saying that he held an exemplary position in the world of letters; that he was the philosopher-critic who gave the world concepts like Supplement, Trace, Deconstruction (a kind of negative dialectic à la Adorno, which appeared for the first time in 1967 in De la grammatologie) and Differance (which came into being in 1965 in an essay on Antonin Artaud, understood as a way to mark how signification works—one term referring to another, always relying on a deferral of meaning between signifier and signified but also a characteristic of an ethical relation, the relation to the Other). He also gave us a way of doing them. Simply to single him out, Derrida ipse, would be to mistake the inquirer’s meaning if he wanted to know who Derrida really was. But having said all this, one has really done no more than mark off a space in the (by now) quite familiar ongoing project known as deconstruction. Derrida signs on, so to speak, at the point where most interpretation signs off: with the idea that putting one’s name to a text can never be a simple gesture of containment in that the claim to authorial copyright is an event that cannot be meaningful without having divided itself between work and text while referring back to the one and the other by birth:

I was born and grew up in Algeria, in a household where there were no books. It was at school where I first discovered Rousseau and Nietzsche, then Gide and Valéry. At the beginning, I didn’t make that much of a difference between philosophy and literature. I really wanted to write novels or poems. It was when I enrolled in hypokhâgne in Algiers that I switched to philosophy while pursuing my interest in literature. That is why I am always accused of mixing the genres. An old problem. (qtd. in Giesbert 80)

From this position of elevated dislocation, of studied self-removal, Derrida produced the most complex and demanding body of work of any postwar French philosopher-critic. His books, eighty-four at the last count, occupying as they do an ambiguous space between philosophy and
literature, are haunted by solitude, and disciplined by a need to understand the anxieties of the written as opposed to the spoken word. To ask how he achieved that point of vantage is to be reminded that his work is still to an unusual degree unread. As a wanderer twice displaced, in sentences of great precision and balance, Derrida reanimated the dilemma of the postcolonial experience—the pathos of marginality and inner exile, the fear of casting oneself into a void and the failure of the liberated “I” to remake its home elsewhere.5

The line of similar postcolonial cultural amphibians includes several of the most eminent figures in postmodern France. Think of Albert Memmi, who gave us a portrait of the colonizer and colonized as early as 1955; Hélène Cixous, who has been called a black widow because she dared to write a narrative on the cusp between floating signifiers; Isabelle Adjani, who attends French country-house parties as devotedly as Madonna drops in on fashion shows, and, of course, Jacques Derrida, who appointed himself Algerian jester to the French court, fully aware of how exhilarating as well as dangerous the move was. The French relished Derrida’s mimicry of them but suspected that imitation was the sincerest form of mockery. (It is V.S. Naipaul, another demigod from the colonial contact zone, who coined the phrase “mimic men,” the title of one of his more lugubrious novels.) Derrida’s use of the French language is a shade too polished and perfect; the genuine French aristocrat of the postmodern era uses words like “grammatology,” “economimesis” and “limited inc.”

And indeed, without the rest of the tribe (Louis Althusser, Albert Camus, Albert Memmi, Hélène Cixous, Isabelle Adjani, Abdelatif Benazzi, Yves Saint Laurent, Guy Bedos, Zineddine Zidane, Chabb Khaled), there would have been precious little French Marxist theory, Feminism, cinema, rugby, high fashion, humor, vintage soccer, or even Raï music to boast of. Who better placed to cogitate philosophy, ponder feminism, play soccer and design chic clothes than those who know the natives’ language and conventions from within, yet are also foreign enough to cast a sardonic eye on their sanctities? The Algerians did not only have to send the French their taxes and dates and olive oil; they also have had to write most of their great philosophy, literature, and theory for them.

In Algeria, one of the most revered of all native customs is getting out of the place. The Atlas mountains, somewhat unusually, are not ringed around the coast like the mountains in Ireland, say, as though divinely arranged to keep the natives in; but from the bay of Algiers drifters, émigrés and other people of a halfway house, could usually rely on being driven out by mosque and state to Paris or Poitiers. Although Derrida
found himself hemmed in by a sea rather than a mountain range, crossing it proved to be one-way passage, as it did for James Joyce in another time and place. Like Joyce, Derrida abandoned his country early but never ceased to revisit it in imagination; having escaped in reality, he could then find his way back in fantasy. Joyce once remarked that it was this freedom from English social and literary convention that lay at the root of his talent. Deprived of a stable tradition, the colonial writer has to pillage, to parody, to make it up as he goes along, so that displacement and experiment go together like Laurel and Hardy. It is not surprising that Ireland was the only region of the British Isles in the early twentieth century to produce a flourishing indigenous modernism. Algeria, too, was the only French ex-colony to bear a postcolonial crop at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Otherwise, Britain would have had to import its modernism, along with its Ford cars and chinoiserie, and France its deconstruction, along with its silk worms and vanilla (Eagleton 35–36).

Derrida is not nearly as avant-garde a writer as Joyce (who is?) but he has been both blessed and afflicted by a similarly skewed relationship to the metropolis. Joyce leapt over the imperial capital of London into the arms of the continentals, with whom Ireland had enjoyed a fruitful cultural relationship ever since the monastic émigrés of the Middle Ages. (His fellow Dubliner Samuel Beckett was to do much the same a few years later). As Algerians, however, neither Derrida nor Cixous have such an organic affinity to continental Europe; it was France or nothing. To cap it all, as Derrida reminds us, he finds refuge in the “margin, to which I will more or less keep” (44–45). (La marge dans laquelle, à quelque dérive près, je me tiendrai). This, indeed, is marginality dragged from the cloister, dusted down and made freshly relevant to suffering, ecstasy, and compassion for others.

One can sketch a parallel between Memmi/Derrida/Cixous and the litany of other cultural refugees—say, Joyce/Wilde/Beckett, to mention only a handful—who stand out in that they are the ones who are adamantly on the side of an organic social order (mannered, devious, and stratified) in which their thought could flourish more vigorously than would it have in the ex-colony. And émigrés do not kick a hole in the lifeboat they are clambering aboard; they compensate for their outsider status by becoming honorary aristocrats—but aristocrats of wit and style rather than of blood and property. From Kundera to Todorov, from Naipaul to Rushdie, exiles intent on out-Frenching the French or out-Englishing the English resort to humor, satire, and an acerbic vein of sagacity. In doing so, they
become spiritually superior to the philistine middle class who simply wants to ship them back home (Eagleton, "Mind" 43).

Few writers have a shrewder understanding of what has been called the margin, and few are more adept at analyzing the myths of the powerful West than Derrida. Rare is the writer as exquisitely talented as he, who is so long on observation and so short on sympathy for the center. He does not seem to know the meaning of geniality, which may well be the ultimate judgment of the colonial system under which he grew up, for if culture is integral to colonial power it is equally central to Eurocentrism, so that he was able to transport his "culturalism" from the colonial periphery to the metropolitan center. The colonial background that set him askew to Gallocentrism also, paradoxically, lent power to his elbow as a philosopher-critic of a media-ridden, consumerist, post-imperial Europe, for which culture was increasingly a significant political and economic issue, and which was undergoing in its own way the kind of identity crisis it had once induced in its colonials. By sheer coincidence, his emigration to Paris in 1950 coincided with another season of migration to the North, that of a group of unlettered characters, an underclass of maids, chauffeurs, gardeners, harrying messengers and laborers, what Driss Chraibi shrewdly calls "goats and billy goats," who would be treated like cattle in France—a bitter reality immortalized with an acerbic irony in De l'hospitalité française and Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille by Tahar Ben Jelloun—another postmodern savage, the only Maghrebian writer to be awarded The Goncourt Prize (in 1987 for his novel La Nuit sacrée) since its inception in 1903. Flight from home, the father, the family—colonial, circumscribed, insecure—to Paris, moving from the margin to the center of the imperial world where the migrant is unable to attempt even to lay claim to a portion of the earth, can be traumatic to say the least. "I am an outsider twice displaced" (je suis d'ailleurs et d'ailleurs), Derrida later wrote of his rootlessness (Du Mot 22). His life is a dislocated half a life, lived in half-and-half worlds. The only way forward was to negate who he was so that he could be reborn in the image of a dream.

Algerian immigration was to throw up problems of culture and identity in the metropolitan heartlands that Derrida, as an intellectual in opposition as well as an émigré with papers, was particularly well placed to dissect—so that in this sense, too, the margins shifted with him to the center. He may in fact be said to resemble George Simmel's stranger: in but not wholly of his society. His in-betweenness meant a heightened awareness of cultural questions, which put him at odds with the French,
but also gave him a feel for the subaltern. In time, he would marry the sign to the meaning in what he aptly called the “thinking of writing,” which is a familiar habit of the colonial subject, but it is also an occupational hazard of the metropolitan literary thinker, and Derrida combined the two (33). He was the cross-grained outsider who spoke up for the subculture and, himself a foreigner, came from one such cultural margin. The note is perfectly struck in *Tourner les mots, L’Autre cap, L’Oreille de l’autre, La Contre-allée, De l’Hospitalité, Cosmopolites de tous les pays, Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, which chart the extraordinary spiral of displacements that make up his career. It is a life in which one fantasy gives way to another, one fiction is concealed within a second, one potential homecoming turns out to be yet another appointment with strangeness. A *miqe-en-abîme* of sorts. This insider/outsider status within the country of the mother tongue, which the colonial relation to France simply writ large, was a social one too: the family was middle class, furnished with some rudimentary knowledge, but socially impoverished. Along with the *émigré*, the foreigner occupies an honorable niche among the architects of French literature. It was from this Janus-faced social stratum (“*contradictions incarnate,*” Marx called it) that the major narrative of criticism of the latter part of the twentieth century was fathered (*Oeuvres* 163). Squeezed precariously between the social establishment and the impoverished plebs, Althusser, Derrida, Cixous, Memmi lived out the conflict between aspiration and frustration, individual ambition and communal loyalty, which also marks the works of so many other ex-colonial writers (Amin Malouf, Kundera, Khatibi, and Meddeb spring to mind).

If the *émigré* is literally foreign, the native middle class are internal migrants. They are inside and outside conventional society at the same time, peevish, resentful, and pathologically insecure (think of Jean Genet, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes), yet powered by a formidable drive for cultivation and respectability. The impulse to belong and the urge to break away fight it out in a narrative controlled in tone and in tempo. If the native middle-class writer manages to break through at home, the colonial writer’s talent, which allows him to portray his own people, is also what cuts him adrift from them. To write about your people is already to write your way out of them. The act of portraying from the inside is also inescapably one of alienation; in possessing yourself in the act of authorship, you come to dispossess yourself of your place in the world.

Childhood for most of us is a time when one has no idea what on earth is going on, but for the young Derrida this state of ignorance was painfully compounded. His own experience was profoundly strange to him, as
though the usual human faculties for orienting and identifying had simply crumbled. Not knowing others, in a fractured, unstable society cobbled provisionally together and cut loose from history, he could know nothing of himself or the environment around him. French Algeria was a borrowed culture, a belated society with that sense of having entered the cinema long after the film has started. Violence and counter-violence permeated the place like an invisible gas. The books (by Nietzsche and Heidegger in particular) that he devoured as a young man growing up in Algiers were an imported product, the fruit of an organized metropolitan knowledge that he lacked. The forced feeding he was subjected to in the French Algerian classroom would later come back to haunt La Métropole, but, this time, from within.

The Algerians, Althusser once said, are botched parodies of the French, but France was also a fantasy as discovered in the pages of Montaigne, Racine, Descartes, Voltaire, Flaubert, Gide and a few other literary imports, on which Derrida and others modeled real-life Algeria around them (Writings 45). The young Derrida had to translate the French classics into his own Algerian terms in order to make them work—though he would later come to realize that writing is also a kind of translation, distilling and distorting the actual world into aesthetic shape. When he left for France, he no longer saw the nation that had previously existed for him only as a dream, but one full of French people pretending to be French. If the Algerians were mimic men, the French were mimics of themselves, self-consciously performing their Frenchness like a second-rate drawing room comedy. At the same time, the social reality of France served to dispel the literary fantasy: the more Derrida knew France, the less he felt in possession of its philosophy and literature. A country of the mind was forced to yield to the reality. Knowledge was thus inescapable from loss.

What Derrida did not know at the time, however, was that he had suffered disgrace and humiliation at the hands of the French: he had been ostracized because he was not French through and through. The instance is narrated with admirable acuity in La Carte postale:

France now, the French University. You accuse me of being pitiless, and above all unjust with it (scores to be settled perhaps): did they not expel me from school when I was 11, no German having set foot in Algeria? The only school official whose name I remember today: he has me come into his office: “You are going to go home, my little friend, your parents will get a note.” At the moment I understood nothing, but since? Would they
not start all over, if they could, prohibiting me from school? Is it not for this reason that I have forever ensconced myself in it in order to provoke them to it and to give them the most urgent wish, always at the limit, to expel me again? (87–88).

To this extent, Derrida’s knowledge of his heritage is mixed with a saving ignorance, a salutary blankness that lies somewhere at the origin of his art, the beauty of which can be found in the margin and that manifests itself in a novel Derrida wrote when he was only fifteen, a time when he dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player. In time, he would content himself with watching his countryman, Zineddine Zidane, playing the game he loved most, lift the 1998 world cup and the 2000 Euro cup while he, even he, announced the demise of the Western philosophical tradition and its complicity with an age-old metaphysic that subjugated writing to reading. The true motive behind this dislodgement is aimed at removing the aura from the Western ethos, by breaking the links that had originally placed it in a position of absolute superiority.

One of the most tenacious of all academic myths is that philosopher-critics like Derrida do not go in for close reading. Whereas traditional critics are faithful to the words on the page, philosopher-critics see only what their pet doctrines allow them to see. Like the belief that Naipaul is a reactionary or that an extraordinary number of male Australians are called Bruce, this is now such a received idea that it seems almost indelicate to point out that it is completely false. In fact, almost all of the best known cultural critics engage in close reading: witness Roman Jakobson on Baudelaire, Bakhtin on Rabelais, Michel Foucault on Raymond Roussel, Roland Barthes on Balzac, Frederic Jameson on Conrad, Julia Kristeva on Mallarmé, Edward Said on Jane Austen, Paul de Man on Proust, Gilles Deleuze on Kafka, Gérard Genette on Flaubert, Hélène Cixous on Joyce, Harold Bloom on Wallace Stevens, J. Hillis Miller on Henry James, Terry Eagleton on Oscar Wilde, Stephen Greenblatt on Shakespeare. But none of the above can rival Derrida, who is so perceptively myopic a reader, doggedly pursuing the finest flickers of meaning across a page, that he exasperates some of his opponents with his supersubtlety, not his airy generality. As a matter of fact, his notion of discourse as a play of traces, revisions, supplements, erasures, repetitions and the like—which holds an obvious attraction for anyone concerned with writing as material practice and process, rather than as a finished product to be critically inspected—is in a different league altogether. One suspects that his notions of language and difference have much to do with
his provenance: an ex-colonial from Algeria. They reflect political convictions, not just methodological innovations (Eagleton, "You May!" 14).9

It is true that a good many critics read as though their work were composed by, as well as on, a computer. Just as some doctors cannot heal themselves, so some critics cannot write. But it is too rarely pointed out that some of the most distinguished names in the field—Adorno, Barthes, Foucault, Williams, Jameson, Hartman, Eagleton, Cixous—are remarkably fine stylists. In line with this judicious assessment, Derrida not only rejoiced in the pantheon of philosophy and literature but also read works of art contrapuntally and against the grain. In some superbly original chapters, crafted with the attunement to verbal detail of a practicing poet, he shows that Artaud’s poems are less framed and finished products than fragments of a larger discourse. Images circulate from one poem to another, one poem flows into another or acts as raw material for it, and the whole process is crisscrossed by resonances, redundancies, repetitions. This provisional, revisionary, open-ended mode of writing, so Derrida argues, undermines the monolithic and hierarchical. There is no master form, no simple linearity or controlling center. A constant buzz of intertextual allusion subverts any suggestion of pure presence. In Derrida’s (in)famous phrase, there is nothing outside the text—which is not to suggest that everything in the world, including elements of poems, is “textual,” intricately bound up with something else, incapable of standing gloriously, arrogantly alone. For Derrida, the opposite of “textual” is not “real” but “falsely autonomous” (“Les Voix” 34). In fact, Derrida was one of the latest in a group of anti-philosophers, stretching from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger to Wittgenstein, Adorno, Benjamin and, Rorty, who can say what they mean only by forging a new style of writing, one that dismantles the traditional opposition between literature and philosophy, the aesthetic and the analytic. These thinkers cobble together fable, sermon, anecdote, epigram, joke, speculation and poetic fragment to produce not a theory of modernity, but a modernist way of theorizing. As modern art grows more abstract, modern theory waxes more poetic. As an exegete, Derrida is superb. His commentary on Plato, Kant, Rousseau, Heidegger, Marx, Freud, Beckett, Célan, and Mallarmé, to name a few, is hugely enlightening as well as invigorating.

We read, really, to find out what we do not know, for no writing is transcribed thinking, because even if we knew what was going through the writer’s mind, reading it would be impossible. I am inclined to think that my remembering of Derrida is slightly different from other remem-
brances in that it does away with tethers, forcing me to figure out exactly what has been going on in his life as half a life. It also plays with the idea of "my homeland, the text" and its own illusion, always reminding me of this set of questions: What is an event? What is a proper name in that a name is never purely individual? What is an authorial intention? What is a signature, and under what conditions is it possible? This inquiry, working its mysteries, by indirections finding directions out, is conducted in spite of the concept of origin which has, of course, radically changed (and was, no doubt, already being challenged in practice): the individual’s autonomy, with its concomitant social and linguistic authority, has been seriously eroded. The text now creates the fictions of a self rather than the reverse. Derrida’s philosophical critique of presence, of origins and the full subject, meticulously deconstructs many of the premises of conventional original forms, as do Lacan’s psychoanalytic writings on the predominant role of intersubjectivity in the constitution of the subject. With the Cartesian subject standing "on trial in process" as Julia Kristeva would have it, the possibilities of the formation of an origin (or its very desirability) have to be rethought (Étrangers 45). For the colonized Other, these radical alterations in language have turned origin into a model for writing, a self-reflexive mode with its subject dispossessed, if not eliminated. Derrida has described the problematic status of autobiography thus:

Wherever the paradoxical problem of the border is posed, then the line that could separate an author’s life from his work, for example, or which, within this life, could separate an essentialness or transcendentality from an empirical fact from something that is not empirical—that very line itself becomes unclear. [...] When this identity is dislocated, then the problem of the autos, of the autobiographical, has to be totally redistributed. (Ear 44)

Derrida’s argument insists that each element of the opposition life/text is already not individual to itself, thereby compounding the complexities. Derrida once defined his project with the aid of a metaphor from the biblical story of Jonah and the whale. It was a question, he suggested, of “vomiting up” philosophy and restoring her to the “sea of texts” from which she had proudly withdrawn. Those who would like to take the allegory farther may argue that Jonah was not in fact disgorged into the sea but onto dry land, and he lost no time in prophesying doom to the great city of Nineveh. In this sense, the much quoted phrase “there is no
‘outside’ to the text” may be interpreted that we, as readers, have no legitimate business with the extra-textual or the “real,” or whatever lies outside language. And yet texts exist in the absence of the “real” on the one hand, and on the other, if reality is structured through and through by the meanings we conventionally assign to it, then the act of suspending or “deconstructing” those conventions has a pertinence and force beyond the usual bounds of textual or literary interpretations. Perhaps, the least sympathetic interpretation of the deconstructive questioning of “representation” or “reference” is that it makes it impossible to escape from the context which is synonymous with culture (En Marges 211).

In the last decade before he died, Derrida revised the notions of writing and language, which he had until then treated as animated by a given text—the history of philosophy, for instance, or the idea of narrative as a theme in prose philosophy, or the possibility of the impossible. What concerns him now is how a subject is constituted, how a language can be formed—writing as a construction of the Self. The first attempt he makes at this kind of writing can be found in D’Ailleurs—Derrida in which he reflects on his hyphenated identity and split origin. The essay shows him as someone who is no longer able to live an uncommitted or suspended life vis-à-vis the country of his birth: he does not hesitate to declare his affiliation with the other subaltern—the Algerian sans papiers, this time. There is a definite, almost palpable discomfort to such a position of reclaiming a rootedness that is Algerian in the first place, especially given the irreconcilability of the two constituencies Algérien/Français, and the two lives (Algérien/Parisien) they have required. “I dream of writing an anamnesis of what enabled me to identify myself or say I am Algerian” (La Contre-alle 66). La Contre-alle also intertwines theoretical reflections on origin, birth, burial, memory, exile and the threshold, the habitus of thinking, language and, most of all, proper name. The latter says: the first question is not that of the subject ipse, but more radically that of the very movement of the question out of which the subject happens. It translates not only the inability to have a name and lieu of one’s own, since the question is turned back to the very place from which one thought one could begin to speak, but raises the question of the beginning, or rather of the impossibility of the beginning, of an uncontested first origin where the logos would be inscribed as well.

Poets have been rather less touchy than philosopher-critics on the subject. Shakespeare’s sonnets—like much Renaissance poetry—make elaborate play on his and other proper names:
Mustapha Marrouchi

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,
And Will to boot, and Will in overplus.
[ . . . . ]
So thou, being in Will, add to thy Will,
One will of mine to make thy large Will more.

One of his less impressive sonnets—No. 145—apparently plays on the name “Hathaway” (“I hate’ from hate away she threw”), and may be an early love poem written for Anne Shakespeare. And there is the series of punning refrains in Donne’s penitential “When Thou has done, Thou hast not done / And, having done that, Thou haste done.” Interpreters mostly remain content with noting such jeux d’esprit as a habit rather strange to modern (post-Romantic) ideas of poetical dignity and truth, but otherwise a fairly harmless indulgence. Even so, they would be hard put to countenance what the proper name “Jacques Derrida” contains when it offers itself to an exploration, a decipherment: it becomes at once a “milieu (in the biological sense of the term) into which one must plunge,” Barthes reminds us, “and a precious object that must be opened like a flower” (New 34). Put otherwise, if the name (Jacques Derrida) is a sign, it is a voluminous sign, a sign always full of a dense texture of meaning, which no amount of wear can reduce or flatten. The name Jacques Derrida covers everything that memory, usage, culture can put into it; it offers itself to a veritable semic analysis, which Derrida himself does not fail to postulate or sketch out, what Proust’s narrator in À la recherche calls Name’s different “figures”: “I find in the duration of this same name within myself, seven or eight different figures one after the other” (À la recherche 117). One of the numerous figures that inhabit the name Jacques Derrida is postcolonial reason with its hopes and impediments.

Like the Hebrew name of God, Jacques Derrida is a name that should not be spoken. In thus de-nominating himself, Derrida was to make his name memorable. Diminishing it, he augmented it, and not merely for posterity. Even the letter D—as in Derrida—became significant in his own time: différence, dissemination, deterrence, détente, displacement, double bind, destination, decolonization, dérive, désincarnation, destinnerrance, décolonisation, demeure, and, of course, deconstruction (De Quoi 26). Still, one may be tempted to ask the question: “Who is Derrida, anyway?” A simple answer—like Derrida was the recipient of the 1988-Nietzsche-Prize, the 2001-Silone and Adorno-Prizes; the subject of at least three films; a homo academicus at L’École des Hautes Études en
*Sciences Sociales* and co-founder of *Le Collège International de Philosophie*, doctor *honoris causa* of several universities—would not be adequate for most purposes, simply because it points to the bearer of that name. One would need to reply that Derrida was Algerian, that he was born of Algerian parents (names like “aimée,” “rené,” “georgette,” often impossible to decipher even by those who bear them, are encrypted along with several others in *La Carte postale*) before they left for France in the early 1960s, that he is the *author* of *De la grammastrologie*, and that he was a leading proponent of (so-called) “deconstruction.” Using the name “properly” in most contexts of discussion would involve knowing something about his texts and that they signify with a vengeance in terms of current philosophical debate. Thus “sense determines reference,” as Frege once put it, even in the case of proper names, at least where those names are not used in a purely denotative fashion but indicate, on the speaker’s part, a grasp of certain pertinent facts.

For this Derrida, the great conspiracy of three thousand years of Western philosophy is the debasement of writing as a fall into exteriority of pure, interior mental experiences. The voice, or spoken word, on the other hand, is indissolubly wedded to the mind, while the written word can only point to the fullness of meaning of which it is the faintest, interior representative. Philosophy has despised writing for the same reason, Bataille says; we despise the toe, for the same reason Plato’s divided line privileges intelligible over sensible beauty, for the same reason the Christian exalts the soul over the body and God over nature. There is simply a horror—and consequently there is a massive repression—of the material basis upon which spirituality and all dignified superstructures depend. This repression of the material is the ontological version of all other kinds of oppression in the world. Or, to put it differently, both commonsense evidence and a tradition dating back to Plato tend to pin consciousness down to a form of vocalization of the self, to a living voice proving its validity and permanence to being always at hand and identical to itself. Against this alleged evidence, Derrida stresses writing, not as a tool or concept, but as an experience, and this recognition of writing implies the disquieting fact that one leaves a trace that can survive without the presence of its author, without being corroborated by the living agency of its original inscription. In this sense, writing leads to a deeper understanding of the concept of origin and of the paradox of “presence.” It implies in itself the capacity of an endless repetition deprived of any fixed standard of authorization, therefore an ambivalent knot of death and survival. Writing is therefore the trace that cannot be present here and
there without having already divided itself, since it always refers back to another being, to another place. Actually, for Derrida, trace is synonymous with “decapitation” or, even better, “chiasmal double invagination of the edges.” He goes so far as to connect writing to circumcision and explains his lifelong preoccupation with writing, the sense of guilt that he can never separate from writing: Does one ask for pardon in writing, or does one ask for pardon for the crime of writing? Writing anticipates Derrida’s desire for self-surgery, to mark himself: “I am also the Mohel my sacrificer. I write with a sharpened blade. If the page doesn’t bleed, it will be a failure” (La Contre-allée 56). Not to mention the impressive corpus on the other trace, the one that plays up context, intent, face-to-face event and distrusts both archetype recitation and hermeneutic play, although it is adept at both (the search is for plain meaning in a world of appearances).

The felicitous upshot is that the Derridean writing undermines our usual ideas about writing, texts, meanings, concepts, and identities—not just in philosophy and literature, but in other fields as well. Reactions to this view of things have ranged from reasoned criticism to sheer abuse; deconstruction has been controversial. Should it be reviled as a politically pernicious nihilism or celebrated as a philosophy of radical choice and difference, a way of doing philosophy, of reading theoretical texts; a sustained assault on the Western philosophical tradition? The answer to the question may indeed be a simple one, but by no means complete. One of the most influential schools of thought, deconstruction engages with the political power of rhetorical operations head on—of tropes and metaphors in binary oppositions like white/black, male/female, nature/art, ruler/ruled, reality/appearance—showing how these operations sustain hierarchical world views by devaluing the second terms as something subsumed under the first. Most of the controversy about Derrida’s project revolves around this austere epistemic doubt that unsettles binary oppositions while undermining any determinate meaning of a text, including book, art-object, performance, building. Yet, his views about skepticism are no more alarming than those of David Hume, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Stanley Cavell. His simply revels in it for transgressive purposes, whereas others provide us with ways to dissolve, sidestep or cope with skepticism.

What is perhaps most admirably ambitious about Derrida is that he wanted to “write like a woman” as he makes clear in Demeure. By which he meant he was one of a lineage of anti-nomian philosophers, from Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein, who invented a new style of philosophical
writing. He understood that official thought turns on rigorously exclusive oppositions: inside/outside, man/woman, good/evil, north/south, rich/poor, smart/stupid, high/low, or clean/dirty. Perhaps it is the last of these oppositions that unleashes the most apoplectic anger. As George Bataille reminds us, the fear of the right side of the binary is the fear of death itself (34). Today, we remember Derrida not so much for what he did but for how he did it: he worked tirelessly to undo the fundamental opposition between body and spirit, materialism and idealism, presence and absence, reality and appearance, which he saw as deriving from the fundamental illusion of “logocentrism.” He loosened up such paranoid antitheses by the flair and brio of his writing/reading. He also spoke up for the voiceless, from whose ranks he had emerged.

In doing so, he sought to detail a growing pain at having to see self and other torn apart after a life he characterized as having been lived entirely on merit. Understanding the work of transplanted writers as a means of contributing meanings and values that are necessary and useful to people (readers) is thus vital to comprehending his *ijtihād* (perseverance). It was not an easy thing, to be sure, even during the high noon of the bull market, to scoff at the dot coms, the hedge funds and the Silicon Valley millionaires, the day traders and all the other ephemera of prosperity, but beneath all the prodigious bubbling, counsel to the wise, Derrida stood as a human icon, not easily understood by the earthbound and the pessimistic. We were at once skeptical about him and are more than ever ravenous consumers of his works. Writers like him are interactive beings that earn our loyalty through endless repetition and constant adjustment. A particular sensibility, not a cumulative argument, links his corpus, a perspective that combines erudition, ardor, and heterodox opinion. Derrida was after a different quarry than perspective, color, structure, or tone. He was more a cerebral writer perhaps than a sensuous one. His sharp interrogative approach introduced an awkwardness into our relationship with the world, but that is a virtue; it is one of the ironies of postmodernism that his oeuvre, so daring and jolting to his contemporaries, should have taken on a fully rounded existence in the first decade of the third millennium as testimony to resistance. A staunch member of the Left to his dying breath, Derrida aimed to pry open classical leftist ideas such as Marxism to the marginal, the aberrant; in this sense his project had affinities with the work of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and some of the 1970s-Third World Marxists. With his sharp questions and peremptory demands, he painted life on the edge in all its grand fun, unease and pain. And if
His instruction calmed us, his company and voice
were like high tidings in the summer trees,
Except this time he turned away and left us.
[ . . . . ]
Light has gone out but the door stands open.
("What Passed" 13)

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Notes

1. I thank the department of philosophy at LSU for inviting me to pay tribute
to Derrida after he died. "The Great Palace Now of Light: Homage to Jacques
Derrida" was delivered on 17 November, 2004.

2. See Anquetil 20–1; Giesbert 80–81.

3. I am indebted to Said for the formulation of some of the ideas I develop
here.

4. See Anderson, "Union"; Lindenberg 66; Bourdieu, Esquisse 89–90. I owe
some of the ideas I expand upon in this section to Anderson and Bourdieu.

5. The biographical information I deal with in this section is drawn from my
book, Signifying.

6. For more on the subject, see Eagleton, "Mind."

7. Derrida’s argument insists that each element of the opposition life/text is
already not identical to itself, thereby compounding the complexities. See Ear
44–45; Also see Kristeva, "Le sujet"; Barthes, "Death."

8. For more on the subject, see my Signifying 85–133.

9. I am grateful to Terry Eagleton for insights I develop here and elsewhere.
His influence on my work is paramount.

10. See Derrida, Limited 122; Also see Derrida and Roudinesco, 56–89 in
particular.


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