

...to think is always to  
reckon with what  
escapes...

## Three Phrases by J.D.<sup>1</sup>

*Jean-Luc Nancy*

Allow me to begin by saying that I am speaking on behalf of many friends from far away who were eager to convey their greetings here, today: Franson Manjali in New Delhi, Ginette Michaud in Montreal, Marc Froment-Meurice in Nashville, Peggy Kamuf in Los Angeles, Avital Ronell in New York, Heba Machhour in Cairo, to name, rather arbitrarily, only a few of those who would have liked to be here with us.

At the same time, I am also speaking for the whole team at Galilée, which is here with us now just as it was with him so often over the course of more than thirty years, accompanying him in a way that goes well beyond what one normally understands when one thinks of an editor and publisher.

As well, I have been receiving many messages from people who are at a distance from the world of philosophy or from the university: this has to be emphasized. One of them said to me: "It is only when a great thinker dies that you understand how much has been entrusted to them, this activity of thinking that is so necessary but for which so few of us have the time or the energy."

I would also like to add, with a smile—in response to the smile that Jacques gave us last Tuesday—the words of a very young child, the daughter of Christine Irizarry, one of Jacques' translators in America. As her mother was explaining to her that she is not allowed to scribble on the walls, she said, "But what if you want to write something important, like 'Derrida is dead.?'” Using a mural as her medium, the little girl was repeating the quotation marks that Jacques put around the phrase, "Maurice Blanchot is dead": impossible phrase he said, a phrase that could only ever be a *citation*...

For today, I will remain at the level of phrases: at the edge of discourse, in other words, on the *margin*. Without accent, without ceremony, without mincing matters (*sans phrases*) in the sense one so rightly expresses with "*la mort sans phrases*"—just a recitation, then, in order to maintain the simplicity of things that must only be lightly touched upon, so as to respect the sadness

and also the presence, that bitter-sweet presence of his which is haunting us.

I would like to cite three of Jacques' phrases, to bring them back, repeat them, hear them anew: not written phrases but spoken ones, to remain close to his voice, if possible, for a little while longer. For it is the voice that carries traces and makes differences. It is vocalized writing and not, of course, a silent or transcendental voice. Regarding exactly this proposition, moreover, we could cite yet another of Jacques' phrases, one he made in Cerisy in 1980 during a group discussion in the garden. Certain people wanted to discredit the voice—and he: “But I have never said anything against the voice!” (Imagine his voice saying that, with a certain rise in pitch, that classic El Biar de-tonation of his that accompanied all his exclamations...)

Three phrases, then. Three phrases from three different periods and in three registers, that have continued to resonate with me.

One is on writing, the second on thinking, the last is on the body.

The first is old, doubtless from around 1970. I had been experiencing a moment of doubt and discouragement and was telling Jacques that I thought I did not have, or no longer had, anything of importance to say. Almost angered by what I was saying, he gave me this clipped response: “Yes, I know, these are the pretexts one gives oneself to avoid writing.” I was taken aback, which is probably why I have never forgotten this phrase (as he had, later on). I had never imagined that

“writing” could present itself as an obligation that one might try to refuse. I am still not sure if I have understood correctly, even though, as the saying goes, “I’ve been warned.” Nonetheless, this phrase of Jacques has remained with me as an axiom or an imperative. The risk in writing must not be avoided: the risk of trying to register what has never been and perhaps never will be. Thus it is important that we not seek to protect ourselves from that to which we are exposed through writing, even if it—writing—could nonetheless appear and function as an instrument of power or complacency. For one cannot and must not be contented with what has already been said—one must not simply say it again, not repeat it, but say it anew, always, and there can never be too many voices.

The second phrase comes later and concerns thinking. We were discussing a line in *Speech and Phenomenon* which reads, “Infinite différence is finite.” I had emphasized its difficulty. He said to me, “You know, I’m not sure I understand either.” He was smiling, but he wasn’t joking. On that day, I understood that thinking could escape from him too—his own thinking eluded him, through some extremity—and I realized that to think is always to reckon with what escapes, with the inaccessibility of what escapes even in the event of its becoming accessible. Jacques never believed himself to have brought a thought to definitive completion. And that is precisely what is meant by “différance”: not a simple distinction between Being (*l’être*) and being (*l’étant*), but the thought of Being that differs from itself within being. Being (*l’être*) that consists of separating within itself from

itself, from substance or subject, thus from the concept as well. Rereading on page 102 yesterday, I noticed that the phrase, printed in italics, is immediately preceded by these words: “the finitude of life as an essential relation with oneself and one’s death”—this is the infinite, or better, this is what *makes* the infinite. It is this unthinkable that truly makes us think: it takes away all our assurances, even those that concern life itself. This is not mortifying, though—it is persevering. It is, simply and absolutely, *rigorous*.

The third phrase is a very recent one, close to death. It was the night before, at the hospital. Marguerite was there. Jacques had had an operation and, making an allusion to my heart transplant, he said to me: “Now I have a scar that is as big as yours.” He was joking—he always loved to laugh—but his fatigue and anxiety were such that the tone was not very jovial. I was not expecting a phrase like this one, any more than I was the other two. Beyond its humour, it touched me in another way: as if there could be an amicable rivalry in suffering, in the incision, in the inscription of the body. As if, from one scar to the other, there could be competition—for what, though? For the incision and the inscription of what? For the incision and inscription of our finitude, whose line makes our infinitude appear in “the *sans* of the pure cut,” as he once wrote.

But I do not want to make him say any more than he actually did.

There you have it, then—simply, these phrases that continue to resonate, just as his face, his charm, his gestures and his voice all do—*skéma kai phone*, says the stranger in *The Sophist*: the schema and intonation of the singular, of the non-substitutable, of the proper in its inaccessible, inimitable, in-appropriable archi-property, the proper such that it properly speaks itself, such that it thinks itself and suffers itself, such that he remains—in us, in himself, finally—in himself then, which is also to say, outside of him, exiled, exscribed, ek-sisted, beyond—where, finally? Here, with us.

*Translated by Sarah Clift and Cory Stockwell*

#### Notes

1. Nancy delivered the French version of this text at the “Homage to J.D.” which was held at the Collège *international de philosophie* in Paris on October 21, 2004.

2. [Translated literally, the phrase would be “the *without* of the pure cut,” but the resonance of the French *sans* with *sang* (blood) and *sens* (sense, direction) are both important. In leaving *sans* in French, we have followed Bennington and McLeod’s translation of the phrase for *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1987. p. 83). —Trans.]

# Generous Beyond Praise

*Jean-Luc Nancy*

1. The time has already come—Derrida demands this much of us—to go beyond praise, beyond the eulogy. The eulogy or the blessing (*bénédiction*), since it is the same thought (thanks to a few accidents of linguistics) both in Greek and Latin: that of pronouncing the good, the worth, the unique quality that must be recognized in someone. The eulogy is a payment of debt, a restitution of dues, and we have been and shall always be indebted to him, for having been and for eternally (timelessly) being what he is: thinker, friend, host, guest, watchman, passerby, speaker, writer, *vivant*, presence.

In thus restoring to him all that returns to him—all that which, having come from him and emanated from his power, having traversed, irrigated, aroused and disturbed us, indeed irritated us (in the Socratic sense of the word), must in all justice be recognized—we express our gratitude to him: we return to him his grace, in every sense of the word. But in so doing, we come to sense something that is lacking in the eulogy and indeed in all praise, something that praise cannot help but lack: the ability to undo this economy of restitution and re-appropriation (in thanking you I return to you what you have given, and at the same time I appropriate it for myself in the very act of praising). We thus understand that we must go beyond praise, and we understand this, yet again, because of him.

It is again he who has made us aware of this necessity—an urgent necessity—to go beyond restitution. But this thanks that we must give him is hence something like a last return or a last sending, which traverses him at the same time as it returns to *him*, a thanks given but forever impossible to give back to him—to him, Jacques Derrida.

For it is a question of knowing to whom, to what, the restitution of praise returns. To what subject, to what unique being, to what name, to what unnameable beyond the name. He would have said it better than anyone, and indeed he did say it in many ways: the giving of thanks—its gratitude, its *grace* (the grace which is said like that which is granted or that which charms)—neither comes from nor returns to anyone.

2. This logic governs not only gratitude but also the gift, genius, faith, thought, prayer, generosity. It is the general logic of all forms of sending, of address or destination, to which no point of emission or arrival can be assigned—sendings which thus cannot *return to themselves*, or, for that matter, return in any way.

*Generosity* is the best example. This word is being taken up again and again with regards to Derrida, in homages, celebrations and eulogies. Nothing could be more just than the seemingly endless accumulation of testimonies to his generosity—with his time, his attention, his words, his very person. It is nonetheless true that Derrida himself insistently cautioned against the use of this word. I am all the better placed to speak here since it is to me that he addressed this critique and this warning: “Giving through *generosity*, or because one is *able* to give (what one has), is no longer giving.”<sup>1</sup> And it was his desire, finally, to abandon the word “generosity,” since it designates the proper power to dispense of a proper good—and hence, in the final instance, to reassure the owner (*propriétaire*).

Going beyond praise will thus mean passing beyond the restitution to Derrida of a generosity that would be *his*—exceeding this attribution of a quality proper to him. As effectively proper to “Jacques Derrida” as it may be, and in as undeniably singular a way as it demands to be recognized without reserve, this generosity cannot and must not be “recognized.” Or (what amounts to the same thing), “J.D.” must not be recognized in such a straightforward and unified manner.

His generosity is not “his act,” “his gesture,” without him first being the gesture or the effect of another generosity in him, one which, passing through him, makes him possible: a coming from nowhere and from no one that chose, selected, specified and reserved him to be this “generous” being whom we praise.

3. Imagining the death of the “last writer,” Blanchot writes that what arises at the moment of this death is not silence but an “incessant murmur,” an “errant speech,” to which the writer had lent a singular voice. The voice, the generous

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voice, of J.D. gathered such a murmur onto itself—vocalized it, phrased it, gave it resonance. This murmur is that of a time, of a world; within it lies a generosity anterior to any genitor or genius, to any genesis or genealogy: that of the very murmur that awaited, and thus made possible, a voice. “J.D.” is the signature of a time.

It is not the only one, and there is always and must always be more than one voice (it is again Derrida himself who tells us this). The voice of Deleuze, at the very least, as well as that of Lacan, form very different vocalizations and take on entirely other intonations. One day we will have to decipher their polyphony, their counterpoint without resolution, just as we will also have to decipher the counterpoint of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Bataille.

Derrida’s generosity must therefore resolutely, unconditionally, bring us beyond “him,” for it is in this way that it is generous, and above all it is *with* this gift that it is generous: what it gives forth goes above and beyond any identifiable, appropriable “Derridean message.” It is not a private but a common property, an unconscious or a super-consciousness in excess of any “I”: it is the indistinct murmur of a time that ruminates over its own closing and its unforeseeable opening, it is the deaf rustling of a sleepless time, generous both with expectations and with tremblings.

“Beyond praise”: we sometimes use this expression when we feel incapable of pronouncing someone’s merit or excellence. But in fact this turn of phrase quite clearly reveals what is at stake: no praise can be bestowed upon a subject, a name or a face, without bringing this subject infinitely beyond itself, and into the gratuity and graciousness of its own birth, into the contingency of its necessity.

The *truth* of praise is located precisely there, where it is pulled away from its own generosity, an emotional, exaggerated, affected generosity that is always in danger of self-contentment. The truth of the blessing is that it speaks a good that infinitely surpasses both the one who receives the blessing and the one who gives it.

And we understand this truth, today, *thanks* to the one to whom we offer this praise—Derrida demands this much of us.

*Translated by Sarah Clift and Cory Stockwell*

#### Notes

1. *Le Toucher...*, p. 36. It would, of course, be necessary to reread and analyze the entire passage.