

Saying Good-bye A Home Video

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I guess the question is how to constitute and assume his legacy. My fatigue and dispiritedness make it hard to offer lucid assertions or prophetic clips at this juncture, so I thought that I would roll back the curtains on recent and faraway scenes, observing some of the traumatic episodes that bound us these past months. Or, ditching traumatic punctuation marks (assuming this to be possible), I might screen some moments that, given the relentless intensities of the last year and a half, I could not until now *read*—I just went along, pulled by a lethal logic, once in awhile able simply to acknowledge the squeeze it put on me. Inevitably and anxiously, I am inserting myself in a narrative in a way that unsettles me. I should have preferred to efface my traces when writing of Derrida, clearing the runway for the singularity of his narratives. I don't at all like the narcissistic surplus that I see spilling ahead; I should have removed or recused myself, but then this ducking action may have required of me in turn a sort of critical essay, or that I keep silent. Also an option. Still, I am taking a call by which I feel obligated, even if it unravels the nobler pose that I would like to have held: no narcissistic annexation ("he's a part of me"), no abandonment to his own, incomparable stature ("he doesn't need me"), just a silent vigil, responsibly strong, deliberate.



March, 2004. It was at breakfast one morning. No, mornings were hard for him. I did most of the talking—the prompting, actually. It must have been lunch. The French consulate, I think it was, had asked him to choose a university at which to break the publication of *L'Herne*, the last publication of his that he was to live to see (they keep coming, living-on style). At lunch—we had just done some meditating and bodywork—he said: "I want it to be in New York." It was to be his last stopover. He

wanted to say goodbye to us, give his last class—give *us* his last class—and on some afternoons we'd sit together to plan the seminar.

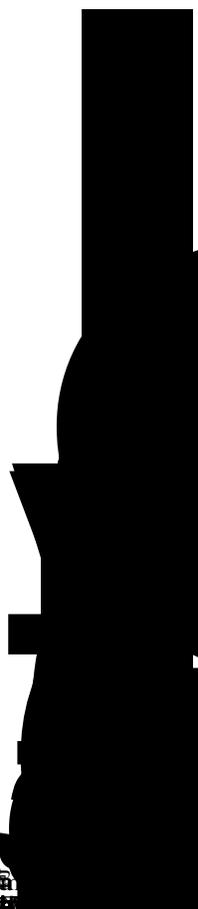
He had given previous seminars, one on forgiveness recently and another on memory, in which he revisited, with sharper language, some of his thoughts on the works of Paul de Man; his critical review of de Man had stirred some controversy, the atmosphere in the bloated NYU classroom was tense, excited. He was going after de Man, and with laser precision. Not everyone was ready to see that happen. In March he proposed to offer lectures this time on "Sovereignty and the Beast." At least, that's how I had translated the course title, wrongly but purposively, I thought. On closer inspection, the title ought to have been "The Sovereign and the Animal." Who knows how many hours I had spent sizing up the pros and cons of different versions of each title I'd skim off of his blueprints. He was pursuing his line on animal exclusion from conventional philosophical holding pens, scanning traditional determinations, including, according to their peculiar idiomatic swerves, those demarcations separating man from beast that prevailed in the works of Levinas and Heidegger. He planned to start up the speculative engine with a reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, whose last name (I saw this when preparing the novel for the joint venture) had been tra

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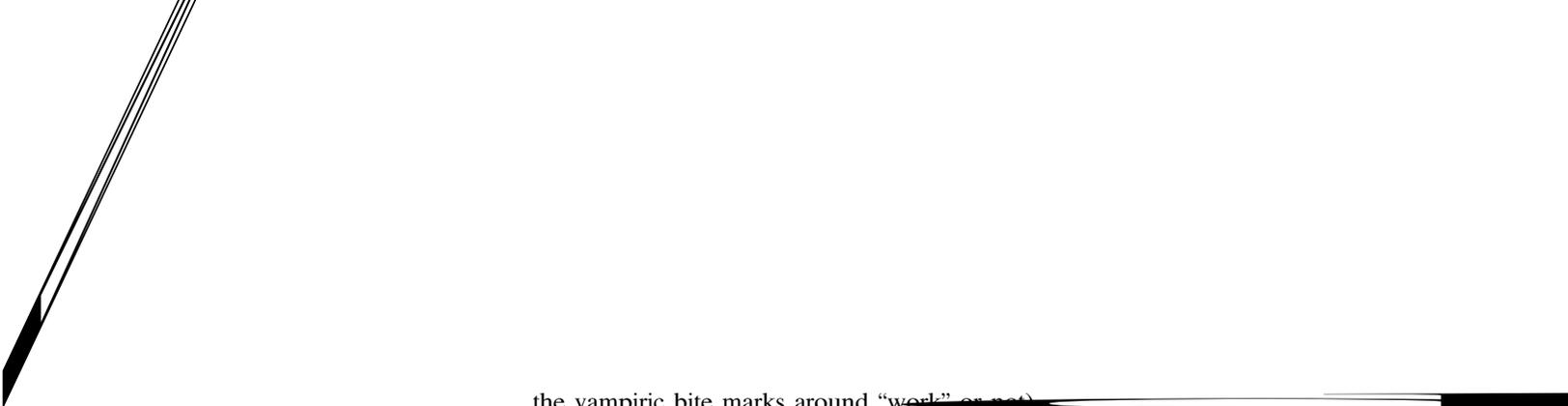
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only in terms of a citational mode that resurrects the other, restoring language to the now voiceless one. Yes, clearly, that is his due: that we sing praise to and in his words, retoning and releasing them, to be heard according to different pitches, weighted by sorrow, lifting on a note of inextinguishable awe. Derrida! Derrida! I would want to have had the courage of addressing you, or at least to deliver a cluster of language that could be addressed to him. Even though I think I caught him on the telepathic channel—we shared a whole network of superstition and taboo as well as private mysticisms—he was cleared of that clandestine interference with the others, I observed, very straight up, socially fit (uncannily so for a philosopher, o those brutes! but that's another story), but with me, he let me get spiritual and, let's just say, philosophically weird, remote-controlled by an unlocatable command system but, then, who isn't when it comes to subjecting oneself to greater things such as freedom, love, sacredness; how do we even know what or who it is that prescribes the categorical imperative, as I believe Jean-Luc once asked. I see that I have approached themes that weld transmission systems, parasitical utterance, and ghostly formation. These themes, not always thematizable occurrences, actually, are disclosive of the way I'd sometimes cable over to him, according to the secret protocols of our encounter. Other times, I'd have to be down to earth and downright classical in the matter of language usage. He'd have suddenly switched tracks on me and expected a kind of uncompromising clarity from me. I'd feel the strain but endeavour to deliver.

If I had more strength, I would want to write a series of *cartes postales* whose destiny and destination, forever suspended, would alight on your name, maybe I could take as my main or at least initial theme something like the Age of Derrida—how to measure, calculate this recalcitrant age, where it began, how they begin, him and “deconstruction” (for brevity's sake). In my own work, if I can call it that—he: mother and father, baby and friend “O my friends there is no friend,” but that's another story—he was the fateful site (“father” and “fate” are irrevocably linked by Freud: I might add that to the *Carte postale's* lexicon of Heideggerian *schicken, Schicksal, Geschick*, etc), the materno-paternal engine of my so-called own work—I stutter, I stagger, tripped up by the presumption of positing that pushes me on or down, can't tell, same difference—Ahem. In my “own” work, then (ten-minute pause about whether to put



the vampiric bite marks around “work” or not),

was KO'd at least once a month, Lacan was spun out of our orbit, and, with the exception of one or two trouble-makers, the theory girls hadn't even shown up yet on the boy-scanners. I was the fastest pun in the West, but that was nothing to boast about in those days. The only one who had some holding power was Foucault, cleaned up, straightened out, and identitarian. So the dispatch, the postcard and *envoi* came to me from China—the news of the fate of deconstruction. For me, the report of its destiny and destination came from an altogether unexpected horizon, and the Minister, who became my friend, opened the scene for an alternative “Purloined Letter,” pointing to its location right there, in front of my nose yet resolutely invisible. As in a Kafka parable, I received the broadcast of Jacques Derrida's fate as philosopher from a sentinel who held the secret of a genuinely possible and strongly inflected future. As Derrida has taught us, there are many futures and even more returns.

Toward the end, he turned his thoughts toward politics, summoning up the democracy *à-venir*, still ahead. Already quite ill, he got on television to advocate, in his special way, for gay marriage. Actually, the state should butt out of marriage sacraments altogether and leave that to religious officiates. Everyone should have access to civil union and those who additionally wanted marriage—an inescapably religious institution—could turn to their local synagogue or church or mosque. He had agitated on behalf of the homeless, illegal immigrants—the famous “*sans papiers*”—and recognized literature as a space for unprecedented dissidence. What may seem to us a disjunctive or disproportionate alignment inclusive of literary clout belongs to the dossier of his achievement—putting literary power right up there with other effects of referential authority, restoring to or seeing in poeticity an unstoppable register of resistance (he writes in the book of that title that “*résistance*” has always been one of his favourite words, whether politically inflected, historically promoted poetically enacted or psychoanalytically toned.) He had gone, years before all this, to Prague, ignoring that government's warnings not to accept an invitation to speak. He felt his duty resided in *not* declining the invitation extended by a group of blacklisted philosophers. The authorities busted him on trumped-up drug charges; he was thrown in jail (I was at his house in Ris with Marguerite and Pierre and Jean and the cat, Lucrèce, at the time; it was amazing to me that a number of

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French ministers of the now-socialist government had been his students, felt the slap, and were determined to spring him from the Czech prison. The authorities in then-Czechoslovakia expressed their astonishment at the power this dissident philosopher wielded, quickly letting him go.)

On the homefront he had never as such joined the French Communist Party, though that was the way the wind blew in his milieu, the direction that magnetized most of his peers at the *École normale sup*. Still, he wrote for "*l'Humanité*" and was friends with its poet-philosopher adherents such as Jean Ristat, whose recent obituary pages and public tribute reminded the readers of Derrida's support and contributions, particularly

an anniversary article stating "Why I Love *l'humanité*." So there were street smarts and philosophical skirmishes, risks taken, including those of uncool non-membership. Without succumbing



to Maoism or communism, like some in his crowd, he never reverted to the right, like some in his crowd. He remained resolutely on the left, in a vigilant and demanding sort of way. Once in a great while he may have blinked, as when he and H  l  ne Cixous perhaps gave too much credit to the new socialist government at the time Mitterand came into power. They joined in and up momentarily but this had its good side, too. Besides arranging his jailbreak, they gave him other breaks, as when he got the permit to create the *Coll  ge international de philosophie* on rue Descartes—the only premier French institution that is open to cosmopolitan contamination, cleared for foreigners to teach and think and profess in France. So, besides his writing and lecturing, Derrida also resignified the university in crucially significant ways, creating solid and traceable rebound effects from the United States to Europe and back again, mirroring pedagogical imperatives and institutional innovation like no other. On his home territory he was denied professorships or a chair at the *Coll  ge de France*, even though they made him apply and present his work and humble himself before committees with the assurance beforehand that it was a done deal; all you have to do is show up. (I was at his thesis defense, the entry ticket for beginning the whole process, and I was there when he carried a boxload of his books and papers to present to the grand committee. One of the undeclared side

effects of Derrida never getting an appropriate job in France is that he had no assistants or secretarial help so he had to locate, photocopy, collate, and carry everything by himself in days and cultures where there were no friendly neighbourhood Kinko's and such. Well, I am attentive to material concerns such as these, seeing him schlepping his encumbering carton of books to subject himself to a committee's interrogation—that sort of thing belongs to my internal album of anxious reminiscence.)

He was, on some days, his own proletariat, at least according to the standards of American visitors and inscriptions. He told me that Harold Bloom, in the days when they were speaking (one day we walked past him; he was sitting on his stoop at Washington Square; it was a hot day in 2000, and Harold refused to get up to greet his old friend who stopped his gait at the other's gate, waving and prepared to embrace, chat, remember their common past; Jacques was hurt and for awhile obsessed with the denied greeting; Uli, as usual, was caught in the middle, having worked with both of them, whereas I as usual had no split loyalties to tally)—well, anyway, when Harold met Jacques in the old days of friendly interlocution and active visitation and saw his house, especially the small attic into which Jacques had squeezed himself in order to write—a scant wire heater did little to change the teeth-chattering cold; in those days the master would write with a scarf wrapped around his neck, wearing sweaters, sometimes a coat—Harold Bloom expressed his dismay and surprise that this was where the great works signed “Jacques Derrida” got the green light, upstairs in an unheated attic. A lot of American academics of that generation, with their big old Victorian houses and comfortable studies, were taken aback, some of them muttering something about *piet noir* aesthetics or housing arrangements. Derrida's personal architecture of study was modest—it was not until the last five or so years that he and Marguerite added a studio annex to the house, with a loft-like bed upstairs and a wide space for his two or three desks downstairs, his massive holdings. This was the bed to which he would repair on afternoons when he was sick, taking a book with him to read as he drifted into his two- or three-hour nap.

The books were unmanageable. Major pile-up syndrome. People sent him books every day. In the early years some books did not footnote

him but the author instead wrote a personal dedication on the order of “without you I could never have written this work; my debt to your work is tremendous, inestimable,” and once I asked Jacques about that—I loved reading the dedications, including those of Blanchot, and I remember that *Allegories of Reading*, if that’s the one, unless it was *Blindness and Insight*, said, very elegantly I thought: “Ineffaceably, Paul”—so I asked him about the debt named in handwriting, and which remained invisible in the public and published version of the text. He responded with an ironic smile that this happens all the time, people consistently disavow yet sneak in their thank-yous. Maybe that’s why I laid it on thick when it came to naming my debts to him, but it was something I wanted to do and I’m not cheap about that sort of thing; I am a creature of gratitude; I am elated when it is possible to thank, even in the most thankless situations. I like to end my yoga practice with gratitude poses, something that I taught Jacques. How happy I was when reading the first time Heidegger’s purposeful conflation of thanking and thinking, *Danken, Gedanc, Denken*. But now I am getting off track, driven by a nearly compulsive desire to offer thanks, perhaps a reactive defense meant to stave off the depressive pressure of the incalculable loss I bear and toward which I remain thankless. I wanted to go on another ramp, following the micro- and geopolitical maps that Derrida had us read.

He had been thinking, via Marx, about political mourning and what we think we’re doing when we celebrate the death of Marxism—or Marx. He was concerned about the e

a symptom of the work in progress of mourning, with all of its phenomena of melancholy, jubilant mania, ventriloquy [. . .]”¹ Before submitting this passage as a fairly accurate prediction of what would drag his corpse for a few extra rounds, I want to switch for a nanosecond to a largely sidelined aspect of his political inquiry: namely, the steadfast loyalty to America that Derrida has shown. For now I will skip the description of his marriage to Marguerite in Boston, or the fact that when others canceled us out, he flew to New York shortly after 9/11 at a time when everyone expected that more was coming, or the division of his labour between the east and west coasts, the many inscriptions of “America Is/In Deconstruction” or the famous “States of Theory” lecture delivered at Irvine, or his relationship with such arch-Americans as Paul de Man and Richard Rorty and Gayatri Spivak and Peter Eisenmann and the lawyers and artists and professors and curators and philosophers, reactive or hospitable, depending on who or where or even what.

One day I said to Jacques that I found the utterance “God bless America” unbearable and I promised to puke if I heard it again. He looked at me, with a slight ironic smile and informed me that he didn’t find it loathsome at all. Perhaps this isn’t the best example of what I am trying to get across—Drucilla Cornell certainly had no patience for his putting the brakes on my expression of rage—but it indicates his ability to hold back on condemnation, one of the lessons that he brought home with elegance on many occasions. Reflecting on what he could have meant—he was not defending the utterance but saying merely that it provoked no horror in him—I realized that he himself offered blessings and in his last words, read over his grave, delivered blessings to his mourners. But that was not it, either. “God bless America,” though put to pernicious usage and corrupted into a constative statement, has a more difficult itinerary to account for: is it a prayer, a supplication, a wish, a hallucination, as when one asks, may God please bless America? Does it name the *blessure* or wounding that states an absence of blessing, so that one has compulsively to ask for the blessing painfully withheld?, and so forth. As Mary Anne Caws reminded me at the NYU memorial tribute for Derrida, one says, “God bless you” to stop a pernicious spill, to lock out the devil, as when someone sneezes. “God bless America” could be a way of saying “Holy shit!” I’ll leave off now, because I just saw in an email announcing a new article by him that Sam Weber has something

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under the title “God bless America”; I’m eager to see what he’s come up with but too lazy right now, or tired, to email him and find out. So even as we were walking down the street and I was mouthing off, producing an easy target, he had me think about the blessing missing in speech action. From this small and modest example, one can metonymize up

watching the hearings, the pounding questions that were thrust at those held accountable. I am not offering a naïve version of asserted culpability, rating who got snagged and who got away or forgetting what gets swept under the rug of repressive state regimens. Nonetheless, there was a strong leakage of self-denunciation that the world had not seen in the context of other episodes of torture, a genuine struggle with self-accusation—not to say the need to expose activities of torture which, whatever more has to be said—a lot more has to be said and done—does not happen in other political states, not to the extent of televised legal proceedings. That Alberto Gonzales gets appointed, that Bush fixed another election—these are other matters. What Derrida was commenting on was the resiliency and courage that moments such as these hearings tend to demonstrate. Perhaps not good enough, but it is something, maybe a nano-something.

As concerns the supplementary reflections on Marx, the title that Derrida gave his intervention was “Marx, *c’est quelqu’un*.” He asks, Who is this burdensome, interminable Marx whom we know in some sense to be dead but who remains inextinguishable (*incredible*)? He does not ask a question of essence—what—but *who*. I’d like to dwell momentarily in the subtle light of this question, stay with the shift it portends. So Derrida, for us, as he himself says of Marx, was somebody. He was someone and is someone. Many of us worked with him, shared meals, took walks, attended colloquia, called and read him, even fought with him.

But who bears the name *Derrida* now, and what does it bear—also, what contours the bearing of this name, this beautiful name, too often demeaned, persecuted in significant ways, even in death. Lacan has taught us what it means to want to kill the dead. A colleague of his tells me that Searle started circulating an attack piece immediately after Derrida’s death but that, given the outraged reaction to the nasty *New York Times* obit, has refrained from publishing it for a while, until it’s decent to pound the dead. As resentfully piqued as some of these unrelenting assaults may be, they are part of the narrative, not to be quickly discarded or overlooked. They are part of the portrait of risk-taking thought, and the violence of the gentleman academics is only part of the package deal of genuine innovation, heart-stopping questioning. So, do

not remove the stain or sting, the

moment he walked in on us. In the university there are still some traces of the stages of anticipatory bereavement—denial, anger, bargaining, periodic punch-outs. In the few shots pledged to a statement on his legacy, I want to say one or two things that may not have been covered by other contributors.

I've tried to track a marginal perspective meant to be metonymized into the bigger picture. One cannot imagine how whited-out the academic corridor was when Derrida arrived on the scene. There was really no room for deviancy, not even for the quaint aberration or psychoanalysis. Besides offering up the luminous works that bore his signature, Derrida cleared spaces that looked like obstacle courses for anyone who did not fit the professorial profile at the time. He practiced, whether consciously or not, a politics of contamination. His political views, refined and leftist, knew few borders and bled into the most pastoral sites and hallowed grounds of higher learning. Suddenly colour was added to the university—colour and sassy women, something that would not easily be forgiven. In him, Kant re-emerged as a morphed and updated historicity, a cosmopolitan force that placed bets on and opened discursive formations to women. Derrida blew into our town and gown groves with proto-feminist energy, often, and at great cost to the protocols of philosophical gravity, passing as a woman. My first translation of his work was "Law of Genre," where he reworked the grid to the rhythm of invaginated punctures. Not all the folks at the reception desk were cheering such gender intrusions into linguistic pieties. Nonetheless, Derrida could be said to have quickly developed a substantial following, especially in America—Latin and North America.

The more politically-based offshoots would occasionally disavow him. He regularly got it from the left and right, from those who owed him and those who disowned him (often the same constituencies). In some quarters Derrida's thought, whether Kantian or not, became associated with homos and women, and his poetic sparring with paleonymic language got quickly feminized, seemed somehow too girly and slippery. Based on some of the things that came up, I wrote about the historical backslide of paronomasia, its anal zoning ordinances and the returns, on all counts, to Shakespeare's Bottom. It is interesting how language play spelled trouble. Derrida's language usage, exquisite and

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replenishing, itself became an offense to the more controlled behaviours and grammars of academic language. Perhaps unavoidably, Derrida, like all breakthrough thinkers and artists, continues to provoke rage and attract death sentences even after his announced death. The resentment that he stokes as he downsizes metaphysical strongholds is itself a text to be read—a massive reactivity that belongs to a legacy of a hard-hitting oeuvre. The traumatic impact of his thought—trauma arises from ecstatic opening as well as from catastrophic shutdown—makes it difficult to offer closural solace or to pin down what his work might “represent” for us today.

One of the things that I appreciated about Derrida from the start was the political punch he delivered, often stealthy but cannily effective. I missed the '60s but inherited their beat. I'm probably more politically anxious, faster on the trigger than most of the folks around me; in any case, I look for trouble and aporia in the most downtrodden neighborhoods of thought. Derrida suited my mood at once, though his political investments were more lucid and constrained perhaps than I was looking for, more aligned with Hölderlin's image of Rousseau—on the side of mediation and sober reflection, able to enact the *re-trait* of which Jean-Luc Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe write about. Still, he packed a mighty punch, I thought. He agitated for the poor, the homeless, immigrants, for Nelson Mandela and against apartheid, with the Palestinians, Africa, and every conceivable “liberal” cause. He traveled the world like no other thinker. On a more local station, he went on French TV advocating gay marriage—sort of, asking for the abolition of all marriage as a state-sponsored arrangement and the implementation of civil unions for everyone seeking it. I know I'm repeating myself but I'm in mourning and have the permit in hand: I'm obsessed. Let us continue. Years before that, he tried to reform the French educational system by demanding that philosophy be taught early on, beginning in the second or third grade. He instituted the *Collège international de philosophie*, which is now the only prestigious institution to welcome foreigners (let's face it, the French are in some ways hopeless xenophobes). As with the pressure put on the American university, he knocked down the doors and let all sorts of impurities like us in. By the time he finished his tour of duty, Derrida was respected in France as Aristotle must have been among the ancients. A master teacher, he was seen also to have

historacular powers. Still, he never made it to the top of the line—he was denied a professorship and barred from the *Collège de France*. Even though I think he was considerably injured by such insults, it belongs to the catalogue of what I love about the guy: the way he took institutional assaults, stayed modest and generous and open and continued teaching to the end. When he taught at N.Y.U., his office hours remained accessible to everyone who thought she had an idea to bounce. Now, writing this, I realize that the whole lexicon of his gestures, punts, and attitudes were radically democratic. He held doors open and welcomed nearly anything or anyone (it would be foolish to make a rigorous distinction between the thing and the one, given his work); he was impeccably polite to intruders, hospitable to dissidents of all stripes, and sheltered the intellectually homeless. The last years were devoted to rethinking democracy, and it cannot be a mere coincidence that the last catastrophic elections in the U.S. broke the hearts, again, of those who mourn him.

Notes

1. *Marx en jeu* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1997), pp. 23-24.