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## The Future of the Present, an Incomplete Reflection

### I

The “legacy of theory” — how unsettling, disquieting an invitation, I murmur to myself as I begin preparations to write. A solicitation to mourn the present, when only just a year ago, at another symposium,<sup>1</sup> it was still the question of the *future*: “Moving *Critical Inquiry* On” (Miller). Could this future have already passed, its interminable projects accomplished (terminated, assassinated, surrendered to productivity)? Are we to speak today of this strange enterprise of ours — neither philosophy nor literature, neither one thing nor the amalgam of many, but the incessant contamination and heterogenization of every (claim to) “distinction” — as if its audacious and still young experiment (for lack of better word named “theory” in the title, although I prefer the plural “deconstructions”) has been done with? And in any case, have we come to receive or to lay claim to, to bequeath a legacy (for a future yet to come but which may be already on course to forgetting us)?

In the meantime, between the preparation and the writing, a real death has occurred. This is not the time — it is too soon for me in any case — to mourn Jacques Derrida publicly, in writing. (“Comme toujours,” wrote Jean-Luc Nancy the next day in *Libération* with graceful economy and restraint: “le temps du deuil n’est pas celui de l’analyse ni de la discussion.”) But if I could erect a prosopopoeia, if such personification opening the terrible and real

<sup>1</sup> Symposium hosted in 2003 by *Critical Inquiry*. For contributions, see *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004).

danger of a personality cult could be risked — I would speak of the death of the Archivist (in the manner he himself spoke of Mnemosyne, as the song speaks of the day *Music* died). Just a few days before this death, the last person to speak a language in China died — and Language itself was diminished, forever. But who could predict the future (for “the archive [is] an irreducible experience of the future”) that comes after the “disparition” of perhaps the last Archivist, in whose interminable anamneses an archive, our entire disjointed inheritance (between Greek and Jewish, faith and knowledge, politics and friendship), has “survived” — continued to live on and been given a magnificent after-life?

This untimely “disparition” could not but dislocate, disorient on the temporal plane a gathering such as ours, precisely on legacy, reversing as it does in the order of time the direction of responsibility, transforming as it does — retroactively, in mid-stream — a speculative concern with survival (sur-vivre) into an immediate and pressing obligation — which, however, cannot be met today, for which we do not have the strength today; whose proper time, Jean Luc Nancy says, is not now. Once again, thus, we find ourselves placed, doubly, before the impossible by Jacques Derrida: the posthumous gift that provides a belated but urgent justification, indeed, irrecusable necessity to speak of legacy *today*, cannot be received today; on the other hand, for this same reason, the gift also outstrips and has turned in advance into an anachronism (neither anachronic nor untimely) any abstract and general “speculation” on the subject I might have prepared in advance.

Finding myself thus at once too early and too late, I will try to meet my obligation — to the “gift” of Derrida and to the contract bidding us here to speak of legacy — obliquely. I therefore begin again to return to my opening remarks, which themselves may have been too quick to pass judgment over this concern with legacy (and all the metonymic associations it sets free with “death” and the “end” of theory) as premature.

For regarding the future, has not a certain catastrophic (rather than apocalyptic) “tone” been set by philosophy? Have there not been signs consistently arriving since over two decades of a dissipation in place of heterogenizing disseminations, of unfettered productivity taking the place of the interminable (task, revolution, reinvention, deconstruction), of moralizing rather than ethics, of tribunals in place of merciless justice, in short, of “biodegradable” writing taking up and over precious “legible” space? (Derrida 1989). Deleuze, in a 1980 interview to *Liberation*, spoke already of

a “period of reaction,” of a “sterile phase” (25-34). And even before that — in 1977, apropos the new philosophers, whose thought he judged “nulle” and only signaling a “problem more general” — did he not diagnose a weak variety of *exhaustion* overcoming the spirit (Deleuze 2003, 127-34). (For now I leave suspended in between parentheses the rigorous, that is, philosophical meaning Deleuze gives to this word, distinguishing in the last essay published in his life time between the *exhaustion* of the possible itself, which I will read here as work, and *fatigue B* the mere [subjective] impower/impussiance to “possibilize,” to realize objective possibilities [152-74]). And still in the same text, which today reads prophetically untimely, did he not lament already the lassitude and mental laziness of the “philosophical market,” of a philosophy marketing a new type of discourse: the interview thinking, “la pensée entretien, la pensée-minute,” which Derrida over two decades later will call “media philosophy”? And did not Foucault — to limit myself only to three giant figures from the last great generation that has just closed — did not Foucault, also a few month before his death and also in an interview, call “for the end of lies” (70-77)? Or lament the “fact” that “serious work carried out at universities encounters the greatest difficulties” in finding publishers? That the “vitrines” are occupied by hurriedly written books that recount whatever “mensonages en pataquès” about the history of the world since its constitution, or reconstitute the most recent history (histoires) by “slogans and ready made phrases”? Or again, that the very function of critical work itself has been forgotten? And as for Derrida, does he not speak — again in a last interview, also just a few months before his death — of a similar exhaustion, of a theory propagating (spreading, promoting, cultivating, implanting) “doxa”; that is — discourses formatted by the powers of the media, themselves manipulated by politico economic lobbies, often academic and editorial?<sup>2</sup> And lastly, does not Derrida present himself already not as the last of a great and strong generation but as the last *guardian* of a *legacy*, the defender of an “at once differentiated and yet common heritage *against* everything and everyone” — public opinion, the media, the imaginary reader of a generalized and formatted discourse?

On the other hand, however, if ours is indeed a “desert time” — of fatigue rather than exhaustion, of epigones, reductionists, of what René Char called in another but not dissimilar context “simplificateurs claquemurés” —

2 English translations in the text are mine.

should not our question be: is this weakness not precisely our legacy for the future? In other words, should we not ask today whether and by what measure our plural and heterogeneous enterprise (theories or deconstructions) is responsible — in the strongest, i.e., deconstructive sense of responsibility as being answerable, ready to present itself to answer) for this *legacy*, which is the “withering” — and these are again the words of Derrida arriving from the same last interview B of an Aethos of writing and of an intransigent that is to say incorruptible thought”?

I do not know whether I have the strength or am capable of doing justice to these difficult, indeed, interminable questions; in this brief presentation in any case, all I can do is to open one of two inexorably linked trajectories for some future speculations/reflections that would have to be pursued simultaneously, even if time permits me to properly outline only one of the two, and if the diachrony of narrative in any case would permit only their consecutive discussion or presentation. *Along the one path*, a rigorous discourse would assume *theoretical* responsibility for this legacy B that is, without yielding an iota of territory to reductive vulgarizations, be they the virulent attacks and accusations (of nihilism, relativism, collaboration, political irresponsibility — see the debates and responses in the infamous de Man and Blanchot “affairs”) that have been leveled against deconstructions since the beginning and from the outside (from terrains always already in deconstruction), or be they discourses that while claiming to speak in the name of theory or deconstruction, in their proliferation and endless capacity to adjust and reduce threaten to homogenize and bury the very intransigence of this thought? (In the other scandal, the “Sokal affair,” both these tendencies find reciprocal support.). The refection of the future, however, will neither enter into debate with nor subject to merciless criticism the discourses of the desert, or rather, desertification. Instead, it will re-inscribe the “desert time” in the heart of deconstructions so as to affirm it as their proper legacy and own effect.

*Along the other path*, whose direction here will only be able to intimate in the form of a hurried postscript (but which I outline elsewhere<sup>3</sup>), a theoretical discourse or critical inquiry — simultaneously with the claiming of this legacy — would venture to detect the first signs of an “aftermath” in the literal sense of this word: the new growth that follows great upheavals

3 “Remember to remember the future”: cinema, memory, history,” forthcoming.

(deconstructions rather than a destruction) and appears only in deserts. These fruits of the desert I can only intimate here in advance as the work of the cinema, or rather of a new cinema: “a form that thinks,” says Godard.

## II

Opening the first path, I must plead for, solicit the assistance of Derrida himself. In the interview with Jean Birnbaum already mentioned and which, I believe, although one can never be sure, was his last (one suspects that the resonance with Heidegger’s last word in *Spiegel* was not left to chance), Derrida speaks of the double sentiment he holds *simultaneously*, as it were, in a state of “indecision” regarding precisely his “legacy.” On the one hand, he believes “immodestly” that “people [on] have not begun to read me,” and despite many good readers (“a few dozen in the world,” perhaps) it is only later that “tout cela” has a chance to “appear”; on the other hand, he swears to believe equally that “fifteen days or a month after my death, *nothing will remain of it*. Except what is kept in the depots of public libraries.”

To begin with the second of the two hypotheses, “I will not be read in the future,” I do not think we should read into this presentiment an anticipation projecting a fatigue, the image of the future reader and writer, who, looking across the library at the long rows of shelves housing his immense and exhaustive corpus, gives up in advance — murmuring to herself, like the heroine in Deleuze’s reading of Stromboli: “this is too much (for me), “c’est trop beau, trop fort, presque insupportable” (Deleuze 1986, 199). Even if true that, like the King who takes all of Mme Maintenon’s time (in *Given Time*), Derrida’s corpus would take up/demand all our time, and one could even say, a lifetime. I would prefer to propose that the key to this second prediction lies as cause with Derrida himself, or rather, with the writing of Derrida: it is not the reader/writer who is exhausted — tired, overcome by fatigue by the mere thought of the immense and unending task (whose image alone is enough to drain from her the will power to actualize what are objective possibilities); it is rather Derrida, who, in writing or whose writing, has exhausted writing — now in the strong sense Deleuze gives this term: “the exhaustive, the dried up, the extenuated, and the dissipated” (1997, 162). His exhausting and exhaustive corpus has dried up, extenuated, dissipated the possibility to write, drained the whole field of the possible, so that in its place, in the place of this corpus as topos, as topic, writing can no longer possibilize, invent and, in actualizing it, create its possibility. (“Si

j'avais inventé mon écriture, je l'aurait fait comme une révolution interminable. Dans chaque situation, il faut créer un mode d'exposition approprié, inventer la loi de l'événement singulier," Derrida 2004, 12 ).

Derrida's extensive/exhaustive work has done far more than merely to cover" everything, to read for us everyone and everything, to give us and to continue to re-invent our concerns (with survival, death, memory, specters, hospitality, justice, gift, friendship, time — and the list is long); his writing has actively and tirelessly exhausted the possibility of writing, which task it carried to its very end and limit — not to its impossibility, for this too is a possibility for deconstruction — but to the limit of its power to possibilize (so that now exhaustion covers also the impossible — the possibility of a limitrophic writing flourishing precisely at the limit of its (im)possibility.) It is not that Derrida leaves us with nothing or no one to write about; it is rather that his writing deliberately drained writing of its power to (permanently) invent its possibility, to create a rule for itself. So if we cannot properly mourn him today, it is because he exhausted this possibility as well, has done (with) all "the work of mourning" (Derrida 2003). And should we try to script an adieu or mémoire, we would only echo and imitate, that is, betray him.<sup>4</sup> So that if the prediction turns out to be true and he will not be read, this silence in the future will not be a sign of forgetting or fatigue; on the contrary, it will be a silent acknowledgement, a *performative*, in recognition of this very accomplishment, a confirmation of his legacy as the impossibility to write.

Turning next to the other and apparently contradictory hypothesis "I will be read only in the future" — how are we to decipher the plaintive: "no one has read me yet?" An especially troublesome lament, since in the same imaginary library we have just visited, the shelves next to his hold an even more impressive volume of works, now *on* Derrida — or more precisely: on and about and around and against "what might be called in the university my corpus"; or as he writes in the book that so extravagantly carries his proper name as both title and signatory: "besides me and above me, *on* me but also *for* me, in my favor, toward me and in my place" (Bennington and Derrida

4 Peggy Kamuf's tearful "adieu," which will follow my presentation at the conference, evades this rule only by deliberately citing — in a moving evocation, as if in a prayer (that operates on an altogether different register than meaning or communication), as if he himself were present, mourning himself — the words of mourning by Derrida.

26). Bennington's "Derridabase" had been already massive in 1991, and already in competition with the master, engaging him in a "duel" for the (in)completion of his corpus (for which the "base" would be a sarcophagus and tomb<sup>5</sup>); racing against him since the beginning, there have been volumes of books, essays, studia, symposia, critical analyses — bent on penetrating the secret "of the logic and grammar, the law of production of every, present and future statement that (he) might have signed" (Bennington and Derrida 28).

In other words, contrary to what we may have said above, and what he himself claims to believe in, writing strives on, parasites the corpus of Derrida. This "base writing," this "fever" to write on, about, around, against, with, and after Derrida, testifies not of a work that is exhausting and which therefore must be given up; on the contrary, it stands as evidence to a body that is inexhaustible and impossible to give up.

It would not be just to imply, however, that Derrida ungratefully complains in this last interview about his readers', commentators', students', and disciples' lack of insight and originality. True, he may risk showing at last some impatience as to our tireless efforts to imitate him, to do without his body, to write his writing ("they are already writing my writing"), to penetrate his most guarded secret ("Personne ne saura à partir de quel secret j'écris"). And while the "plaintiff" Derrida may indeed be tired of this duel, of the solitude that is paradoxically imposed on him by writing that moves too close to his, reads the corpus with and "after" him — that is, on the model of Derrida — a more productive not to say generous interpretation of his first hypothesis — "I am yet to be read properly" — would grant him faith in the future, or as I would like to say (except that this too would "after" him) in "a future reading to come"; a reading that would reinvent the possibility of writing in the place of his corpus, ending its exhaustion, isolation, and *solitude* (he welcomed Jean-Luc Nancy's writing as mitigating his solitude); a reading/writing that instead of "on" or "about" him would once again possibilize in the place or topos of his corpus — *in ways at once unforeseen and unforeseeable, unprojected and unimagined by deconstructions*. In other words, this future writing would be a reading of Derrida that leaps away from the past, taking flight from the writing that hitherto has always been ahead of us, anticipating, planting our every move.

5 On this writing duel for the (in)completion of the corpus, see Baross.

Paradoxically, inescapably, this flight from deconstruction unforeseen by deconstruction could not be strange or hostile to it. A theory of the future, the flight from it could not but be its own legacy — a confirmation of its faith in a future to come after deconstruction.

*Postscript*

But (how) could the cinema and not (a) writing be the bearer of the thought of the future?

When Godard says “cinema,” he already speaks from the other side of a cinematic break with the past, referring not to another form or medium *in* which to think, but as I have already cited him, “a form that thinks.” (“Une forme qui pense,” this celebrated formula of Godard is repeated throughout his work — fully cinematic, whether or not actualized on screen in real time or remains virtual, transposed to pages of books that are not always writings.) In relation to the thought of the form, not only subject or author but writing and discourse as well stand, not as origin or medium, but as witness. (“Je dirais plutôt que qu’il n’y a qu’un témoin de cette pensée,” 1998, 143.)

The thought that accords with the cinema as form (but not as representation, or reproduction, or narration) is not *in* the image; it is not expressed or communicated, nor can it be expressed or communicated by any one image; nor again is it inscribed as missive encrypted in the field of the photographic referent. It is not a message to the future from the past (world), but something entirely new, a thought that for the first time in history comes to pass (takes place, is actualized) in the abyssal gap of an interval that disjoins (joins as separate, as distant, even heterogeneous) images. A pure effect, such thought flashes up in the “in-between” whenever images (actual or virtual) are effectively brought together by an operation convention calls “montage,” but in fact is a “generalized practice of disjunction” constituting *relations* of disparity wherein each image comes to differ from itself to the same (immeasurable) measure that it brings the other both to resemble and differ from itself.

In his last film, *Notre Musique* (2004), Godard gives us a demonstration or rather a lesson, which in the diegetic context of the film is delivered to students of the film academy in Sarajevo. Playing himself, Godard holds up before the students and the camera two photographic images in succession (also showing that the *form* in question is not the exclusive property of the *moving* image; on the contrary, if the cinema is a temporal object in Husserl’s

rigorous sense of the term, it is not because it photographs *duration*, but because the thought that it alone can effectuate will arise at the dis-junction of anachronic *temporalities*, in between the tectonic plates of time that the apparatus articulates so as to make them collide in an actual historical present, or articulates them as dis-jointed, as irreducibly heterogeneous, exhibiting a deep fracture and fault line in the very order of time). The one image shown by Godard is a photographic cliché whose origin we surmise is one or another Nazi propaganda film and it depicts a grotesquely deformed image of a “Jew”; the other is an image already familiar to those who know Godard’s magnum opus, a meditation in eight parts on *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*: it is a single frame in color from George Steven’s documentary shot in 16mm immediately after the liberation of Auschwitz. It holds the image of the emaciated face of a prisoner in the last stages of his agony. This time it is Godard’s voice that substitutes for or performs the montage: “Jew,” he says holding up the one; “musulman,” holding up the other.

Pages of writing may be required to transcribe the painful and infinitely complex histories that this montage image projects as its own or proper anachronic communication, a communication, which, starting precisely from Sarajevo, or inserting itself into the time-space whose index is Sarajevo, instantaneously traverses plural heterogeneous histories, which it solicits and dislocates from the direction of both the future or futures and of several pasts. For lack of time, I must refrain from this transcription (which I do elsewhere). Opening myself to the same charge of hurried writing I have relied on for Foucault to make, I can stay only briefly with the writing function, whose proper term is indeed *transcription*: the dislocation we experience originates more than ever on the Outside, outside of the cursive, of language; it arrives instantaneously and, illuminating the world around it in a flash, it reverses a hierarchy with a long history: to write “about” this effect is to serve as scribe and witness, as Plato to the image’s Socrates.

And yet, it is not deconstructions precisely that taught us, or gave us this insight, this ethics as legacy to guard, that neither task is secondary or auxiliary. On the contrary, the scribe and the witness live and speak closest to the Archive — an opening to the future, or better still, an actualization of the oldest of injunctions: “remember to remember the future” (Derrida 1996, 113).

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