

Derrida: the reader **

How did Derrida transform the way in which people like me do philosophy? Let me begin negatively with a couple of caveats and confessions. I was never a structuralist and always found Saussure's linguistics a deeply improbable approach to language, meaning and the relation of language and meaning to the world. Therefore, Derrida's early arguments in this area, particularly the critique of the priority of speech over writing in the hugely influential *Of Grammatology*, always left me rather cold. Talk of "post-structuralism" left me even colder, almost as cold as rhetorical throat-clearing about "post-modernism". So, in assessing Derrida's influence, I would want to set aside a series of notions famously associated with him — like *différance*, trace and archi-writing, what Rodolphe Gasché used to call the "infrastructures"— in order to get a clearer view of what I think Derrida was about in his work and what we can learn from that work.

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

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** Palestra apresentada no dia 25 de agosto de 2005 na PUC-Rio a convite do NEED — Núcleo de Estudos em Ética e Desconstrução, coordenado pelo professor Paulo Cesar Duque-Estrada.

One of the things that I have always been anxious to show is that although there is a strong tendency towards formalization in Derrida's work, in particular the formalization of aporiae, Derrida's work is not a formalism. That is, it is not the sort of philosophical approach that can be criticised as formalism in an analogous way, say, to how Hegel criticized Kantian formalism. Deconstruction is a praxis, deconstructions (Derrida always preferred the plural) are *praxoi*, a praxis of reading.

In my view, Derrida was a supreme reader of texts, particularly but by no means exclusively philosophical texts. Although, contrary to some Derridophiles, I do not think that he read everything with the same persuasive power (let's face it, there are better and worse texts by Derrida; how could it be otherwise?), there is no doubt that the way in which he read a crucial series of authorships in the philosophical tradition completely transformed our understanding of their work and, by implication, of our own work. In particular, I think of his devastating readings of what the French called "*les trois H*": Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, who provided the bedrock for French philosophy in the post-war period and the core of Derrida's own philosophical formation in the 1950s. Despite polemics to the contrary, the readings of Husserl are scintillating in their rigour and brilliance, his engagements with Hegel, particularly *Glas*, on which I've worked a lot, are a wonderfully imaginative immanent dismantling of Hegel's system. I think that Derrida was the best and most original philosophical reader of Heidegger, in particular the *Geschlecht* series and *De l'esprit*, but Heidegger informs just about everything Derrida writes, his shadow extends furthest over his work. I will come back to this below.

Far beyond this, Derrida's readings of Plato, of Rousseau and other 18th Century authors like Condillac and his relentlessly sharp engagements with more contemporary philosophers like Foucault, Bataille and Levinas, without mentioning his readings of Blanchot, Genet, Artaud, Ponge (I think the book on Ponge is too little read) and so many others, are simply exemplary. Allow me a word on Derrida's readings of literary texts, which are often different from his approach to philosophically canonical authors. Derrida's readings of philosophical texts, although they often proceed through the identification and articulation of some graphic parapraxis or blindspot (a footnote, a marginal remark, an aside, an elision, a quotation mark), habitually have a systematic approach to the authorship under consideration. Derrida will read texts by Hegel, Husserl or Heidegger as elements in the systematic expression of a body of thought and he will play down questions of the developmental shifts

in a corpus of work, whether “young Hegel” against “older Hegel”, or “Heidegger before 1933” versus “Heidegger after 1933”. If he reads philosophical authorships as a piece, although not as a unity, then his approach to literature is very often in terms of the *singularity of the literary event*, whether a couple of words by Joyce (the word “yes”, for example), or a single word in Blanchot (*pas*). The name “literature” becomes the placeholder for the experience of a singularity that cannot be assimilated into any overarching explanatory conceptual schema, but which permanently disrupts the possible unity of such a schema.

We should also mention Derrida’s constant attention to psychoanalysis in a series of stunning readings of Freud. As my colleague and distinguished Derrida translator Alan Bass said to me, Derrida had two grandfathers: Heidegger and Freud. Anecdotally, I remember sitting in a launderette at the University of Essex as an undergraduate reading “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and watching the metapsychology spin before my eyes like the clothes in the dryer. Incidentally, I first read Derrida in the Essex University Communist Society, where comrades obviously assumed that Derrida was a Marxist and we tried for several weeks to work out how his work could be reconciled with the weird cocktail of Althusser and Gramsci that we were drinking at the time. Let’s just say that although Derrida was not a Marxist in any conventional sense, Marx *survives* in Derrida’s work in a decisive manner.

In my view, what confusedly got named “deconstruction”, a title Derrida always viewed with suspicion, is better approached as *double reading*. That is, a reading that does two things:

1. On the one hand, a double reading gives a patient, rigorous and — although this word might sound odd, I would insist on it — *scholarly* reconstruction of a text. This means reading the text in its original language, knowing the corpus of the author as a whole, being acquainted with its original context and its dominant contexts of reception. If a deconstructive reading is to have any persuasive force, then it must possess a full complement of the tools of commentary and lay down a powerful, primary layer of reading.
2. On the other hand, the second moment of a double reading is closer to what we normally think of as an interpretation (although Derrida’s operation of reading is, in his own words, “*en deçà de l’interprétation*”, on this side of interpretation, in the space between commentary and interpretation), where the text is levered open through the location of what Derrida sometimes called “blind spots” (*tâches aveugles*). Here, an authorship is brought into

contradiction with what it purports to claim, its intended meaning, what Derrida liked to call the text's *vouloir-dire*. Derrida often located these blind spots in ambiguous concepts in the texts he was reading, such as "supplement" in Rousseau, "*pharmakon*" in Plato, and "*Geist*" in Heidegger, where each of these terms possesses a double or multiple range of meaning, a *polysemy*, that simply cannot be contained by the text's intended meaning. Many of his double readings turn around such blind spots in order to explode from within our understanding of that author. The key thing is that the explosion has to come from within and not be imposed from without. It is a question of thinking the unthought within the thought of a specific philosophical text. Derrida often described his practice as parasitism, where the reader must both draw their sustenance from the host text and lay their critical eggs within its flesh. In the three examples of Plato, Rousseau and Heidegger, the crucial thing is that each of these conceptual blind spots are deployed by their authors in a way that simply cannot be controlled by their intentions. In an important sense, the text deconstructs itself rather than being deconstructed (I am also thinking of Paul De Man's early critique of Derrida's reading of Rousseau on this issue)

For me, Derrida's philosophical example consists in the lesson of reading: patient, meticulous, scrupulous, open, questioning, inventive reading that is able, at its best, to unsettle its readers' expectations and completely transform our understanding of the philosopher in question. Because Derrida was such a brilliant reader, he is a difficult example to follow, but in my view one must try. Queer as it may sound, this is what I see as the *pedagogical* imperative deriving from Derrida's work. Deconstruction is pedagogy. Derrida was a teacher, which is something that I think has been too little emphasized in the reception of his work. What one is trying to cultivate with students — in seminars, week in, week out — is a scrupulous practice of reading, being attentive to the text's language, arguments, transitions and movements of thought, but also alive to its hesitations, paradoxes, *aporiae*, quotation marks, ellipses, footnotes, inconsistencies and conceptual confusions. Thanks to Derrida, we have learnt to see that every major text in the history of philosophy possesses these auto-deconstructive features. Auto-deconstruction is arguably the *conditio sine qua non* for a major text — canonicity is deconstructibility.

But there is a wider question at stake here that takes us back to Heidegger's shadow, namely: *why read?* Why should the practice of reading have this extraordinary privilege in Derrida's work? To begin to answer this question

we have to understand Derrida's debt to Heidegger, in particular the later Heidegger, and more particularly still the idea of the history of being which found expression in a vast number of Heidegger's writings, but in particular in his *Nietzsche*, published in 1961 and which exerted a powerful influence over Derrida as can be seen in a wide range of early texts, from *Of Grammatology* to *Spurs*. Crudely expressed, the history of being is the claim that the history of metaphysics, from Plato to Nietzsche, is characterised by the growing forgetfulness of Being. For Heidegger, the history of metaphysics is a sequence of determinations of the meaning of being, from the concept of *eidōs* in Plato, through to *causa sui* in medieval scholasticism, and progressing (or, rather, regressing) into modernity with Descartes' notion of the *res cogitans*. In modern philosophy, the engine that is driving the forgetfulness of being, and what Heidegger see as the distress of the West, is the determination of being as subjectivity that culminates in what Heidegger views as Nietzsche's metaphysics. Nietzsche's word for being is will to power, which completes metaphysics in an inversion of Platonism.

So, roughly and readily, the Heideggerian claim is that between Plato and Nietzsche, between Platonism and its inversion, all of the possible determinations of the meaning of Being have been exhausted. It is in this exhaustion of metaphysics, what Heidegger calls "the completion (*die Vollendung*) of metaphysics" —and, crucially, not the "end" of metaphysics— that the question of being can be raised anew as a compelling philosophical issue. Now, Derrida submits the Heideggerian history of being to a devastating deconstruction, in particular questioning the valorization of being as presence, that is a constant feature of Heidegger's work, and the link between being as *logos* to *phone*, to the voice and the primacy of speech over writing and all forms of the graphic, of absence and exteriority. However, what Derrida does adopt in his work is a drastically revised version of Heidegger's historico-metaphysical schema: the history of being becomes the history of writing and metaphysics becomes logocentrism.

My point in underlining this issue is the following: if deconstruction is not, as I have claimed, reducible to some form of textual formalism, then this is because there is a historico-metaphysical specificity to deconstruction. That is, deconstructive reading is not something that takes place *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is rather the consequence of a determinate historico-conceptual situation and gives expression to a specific experience of historicity. This is why I have always tried to place the concept of the "closure of metaphysics" (*clôture de la métaphysique*) at the core of any consideration of Derrida's work. As Derrida

will tirelessly insist, the closure is not the end and he persistently places himself against any and all apocalyptic discourses on the end (whether the end of man, the end of philosophy or the end of history). In my view, allowing for the considerable philosophical differences between Heidegger and Derrida, the closure of metaphysics is a variant of the completion of metaphysics.

This is where we return to this issue of reading. At the time of metaphysics' closure, we cannot and should not hope for any new determination of the meaning of being, for this would be to fall back into metaphysical thinking. On the contrary, within the closure of metaphysics, we read, we open ourselves not to the Heideggerian experience of the thinking of being, but to an experience of reading that dismantles or de-structures the conceptual schemata that have shaped what all too complacently call "the West" for the past few millennia. As Derrida points out in various places, the word "deconstruction", a word whose fame he viewed as an unhappy fate rather than something to be celebrated, attempts to translate Heidegger's *Destruktion* and *Abbau*. Although the thesis of the closure of metaphysics drops out of Derrida later work, and one can see much of his work from the late 1970s as an almost parodic distancing of his concerns from Heidegger's history of being, where the univocity of the Heideggerian sending (*envoi*) of being becomes the playful plurality of the letters, billets-doux and sendings (*envois*) of the long, first part of *La carte postale*, Derrida's work is never a-historical or anti-historicist. Through to the final stage of his work, from *Politics of Friendship* to *Rogues*, one can find a defence of the idea of *heritage*, which renders another Heideggerian theme of *Erbe*. But such an experience of heritage is never the comfort and security of a given and established tradition. Deconstruction is the practice of reading as the *discomfort* of a heritage. The philosophical assumption driving this practice is that if we are to begin to understand who, what and where we are and to begin to change who, what and where we are, then this requires meticulous attention to the heritage that constitutes who, what and where we are. Derrida's practice of reading is at the very antipodes of any alleged bibliophilia.

In the long, fascinating and now rather saddening interview with *Le Monde* from 19th August 2004, republished after his death, Derrida describes his work in terms of an "ethos of writing". Derrida cultivated what I would call a

habitus or a *praxis* of uncompromising philosophical vigilance, a vigilance at war with the governing intellectual common sense and against what he liked to call—in a Socratic spirit, I think—the *doxa* or narcissistic self-image of the age. There was something deeply Socratic about Derrida's gadfly abilities to sting the great fat rump of our traditional philosophical assumptions wherever their posterior was reared into view. And there is perhaps something deeply Platonic about Derrida's predilection for forms of indirect communication, where he wrote not dialogues but what he called "polylogues" for multiple and multiply-gendered voices. Derrida was a ventriloquist.

Now, let me draw breath for a moment, as this is something that I've always wanted to say in public and publish in print. Derrida's treatment by mainstream philosophers in the English-speaking world was shameful, utterly shameful. He was vilified in the most ridiculous manner by professional philosophers who knew better but who acted out of a parochial malice that was a mere patina to their cultural insularity, intellectual complacency, philistinism and simple jealousy of Derrida's fame, charisma and extraordinary book sales, not to mention his good looks and snappy dress sense. There are exceptions to this rule and some mainstream philosophers in the UK and the US took Derrida seriously, for example Richard Rorty, whatever one may think of what he says, and I also think of Samuel Wheeler's work on deconstruction and analytic philosophy.

In my local context, in England (small island, close to Europe, awful food, hateful people), the incident which brought matters to a head was the initial refusal in late Spring 1992 to award Derrida an honorary doctorate at the University of Cambridge, a refusal that found support amongst prominent voices in the Philosophy Faculty, with the notable exception of Tom Baldwin and Susan James, both of whom left Cambridge during the following years. The slightly embarrassing technical problem here was that the philosophers who were offering censure against Derrida had not, of course, read him. Not at all. Not even a word. They just knew it was rubbish. The logic of the situation here is a little like that described by the great Irish satirist Flann O'Brien, in one of his legal cases from the utterly fantastical Cruisekeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction. The topic that is being debated in the court is literary immorality or dirty books. I quote,

After Mr Lax had made several further submissions, his Honour remarked that the punctilio of judicial processes should occasionally be cast aside to afford the bench some small clue as to the nature of the issue it was called upon to determine.

‘Gentlemen’ he added, ‘is this book you have here any good? I mean, is it...very bad?

Is it disgusting, I mean?’

Mr Lax: it is filthy my Lord.

His Honour: Have you read it, Mr Lax?

Mar Lax: Certainly not, my Lord. I would not soil my eyes with such nefarious trash, my Lord.¹

Flann O’Brien describes the behaviour of certain analytic philosophers with regard to Derrida perfectly. They just know it is very bad, it is filthy nefarious trash without having read it.

To return to the Cambridge affair, after finally receiving the honorary doctorate with his usual civility, humour and good grace, a letter was sent to the University of Cambridge from Ruth Barcan Marcus, the then Professor of Philosophy at Yale, and signed by some twenty philosophers, including Quine, who complained that Derrida’s work “does not meet accepted standards of rigor and clarity” — as if we or they knew what they were when they were at home. I would like to take this opportunity to register in public my gratitude to these know-nothings for the attention they gave to Derrida because it helped sell lots of copies of my first book — *The Ethics of Deconstruction* — that also came out in 1992 and paid for a terrific summer vacation.² So, thank you.

One would like to imagine that things have changed or improved since 1992, and in some ways they have, but one still finds tremendous hostility to Derrida that is in direct proportion to the learned philosophers’ ignorance of his work. For example, Habermas’s hostility (and I was involved in setting up a secret meeting between Derrida and Habermas in Frankfurt during June 2000) lessened when he actually started to read what Derrida wrote and realised that despite their philosophical differences they had surprising common political stances on a broad range of issues.

However to choose two counter-examples, Simon Blackburn, the present professor of philosophy at Cambridge, wrote an obituary on Derrida for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (November 12th, 2004), along with a piece by myself and a couple of others. Like some headmaster in a minor private school, Simon wrote that he thought that, “Derrida had tried hard, but failed philosophically”. Now, I know Simon, I have drunk beer with Simon, Simon is a

1 Gopaleen, M. *The Best of Myles*. London, Sidney: Picador, 1967, p.141-42. I’d like to thank Joe Booker and Peter Goodrich for giving me this reference.

2 See Critchley, S. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 / Second Edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

nice man, but he hasn't read Derrida. How dare he pronounce judgement on his work with such authority! I wouldn't dare to do the same in the case of someone like Quine or Davidson. It seems to me that we are confronting a huge institutional blind spot in philosophy, or perhaps a cultural blind spot whose symptom is the name "Derrida" and which explains some of the embarrassing cultural epiphenomena we have witnessed in the UK and the US over the years, the most recent distressing example being the awful *New York Times* obituary which ran with the headline, "Jacques Derrida, abstruse theorist, dies at 74". It seems to me that the entire intellectual and cultural formation of the resistance to Derrida is a phenomenon that requires careful deconstruction.

But I have been saving the best until last. Brian Leiter, professor of law and self-appointed aficionado of graduate programs in philosophy in the English-speaking world, runs a weblog, *Leiter Reports*. In the days following Derrida's death, there was an extraordinarily ill-informed discussion on his blog about the ruckus caused by the *New York Times* obituary, at the end of which Leiter wrote,

If he (i.e. Derrida, s.c.) had become a football player as he had apparently hoped, or taken up honest work of some other kind, then we might simply remember him as a "good man". But he devoted his professional life to obfuscation and increasing the amount of ignorance in the world: by "teaching" legions of earnest individuals how to read badly and think carelessly. He may have been a morally decent man, but he led a bad life, and his legacy is one of shame for the humanities.

Such breathtaking moralistic stupidity leaves me speechless and I cannot even begin to bring myself to comment on it. I would cite Proposition VII of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in my defence, if that did not risk concealing such muck under sweeter smelling blooms. But that is not all. Not only did Derrida lead a bad life and apparently single-handedly undermine the humanities (quite an achievement, all things considered), he is also the efficient cause of Reaganism and *a fortiori* of Bushism (I guess Leiter would know, living in Texas). Warming to his theme, Leiter continues, and I assure the reader that I am not making this up,

Was it entirely accidental that at the same time that deconstruction became the rage in literary studies (namely, the 1980s), American politics went off the rails with the Great Prevaricator, Ronald Reagan? Is it simply coincidental that the total

corruption of public discourse and language—which we may only hope has reached its peak at the present moment—coincided with the collapse of careful reading and the responsible use of language in one of the central humanities disciplines? These are important questions, and I wonder whether they have been, or will be addressed.³

help if Leiter had actually taken the trouble to read Derrida's work before offering philosopher king-like judgements on its merits. And to think that a person that has the arrogance to publish such stupidities sits in judgement on the quality of graduate programs in philosophy and considers himself an authority in Continental philosophy. It is painfully laughable.

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At the heart of many of the polemics against Derrida was the simply weird idea that deconstruction was a form of nihilistic textual free play that threatened to undermine rationality, morality and all that was absolutely fabulous about life in Western liberal democracy. In my view, on the contrary, what was motivating Derrida's praxis of reading and thinking was an ethical demand. My claim was that this ethical demand was something that could be traced to the influence of the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas and his idea of ethics being based on a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. This is the way I read the famous phrase in the Carzodo Law School paper, "deconstruction is justice" where justice is adumbrated in Levinasian terms, "*le rapport à autrui — c'est à dire la justice*" ("The relation to the other — that is to say, justice").⁴ Furthermore, crucially, if deconstruction is justice, then justice is undeconstructable, that is, there is no way of relativizing or dismantling the demand that underpins Derrida's work. At the core of Derrida's work, functioning as an *apriori* structure that is not reducible to a ground or foundation, is an experience of justice that is felt in the other's demand. Against the know-nothing polemics, deconstruction is, I think, an engaged and deeply ethical praxis of reading of great social and political relevance. Derrida's work from the 1990's shows this relevance with extraordinary persistence in a highly original series of engagements with Marx, with European cultural and political identity, the nature of law and justice, democracy, sovereignty, cosmopolitanism, forgiveness, the death penalty, so-called rogue states, the *lex amicitia* about which Peter Goodrich writes so

3 http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blob/2004/10/the_derrida_ind.html

4 Derrida, J. "Force of Law: the 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. D. Cornell et al. London, New York: Routledge, 1992, p.22.

eloquently above and elsewhere, and finally with what Derrida liked to call an alternative possible globalisation, an “*altermondialisation*”. To go back to my rather gnomic remark about Marx, I think it is in connection to the possibility of an *altermondialisation* that Marx survives in Derrida’s work, something that he tries to thematize in the notion of the New International.

Allow me a word in passing on the important theme of democracy in Derrida, what he calls “democracy to come”, *la démocratie à venir*, and which was the theme of one of his last publications, *Voyous (Rogues)*. Derrida concludes *Politics of Friendship* with the following question,

If one wishes to retranslate this pledge into a hypothesis or a question, it would, then, perhaps, — by way of a temporary conclusion — take the following form: is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name “democracy”, while uprooting from it all these figures of friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethnic group? Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court* — I would even say, the Enlightenment of a certain *Aufklärung* (thus leaving open the abyss which is again opening today under these words) — not to found, where it is no longer a matter of *founding*, but to open out to the future, or rather, to the “come”, of a certain democracy (*non pas de fonder, là où il ne s’agit sans doute plus de fonder, mais d’ouvrir à l’avenir, ou plutôt au “viens” d’une certaine démocratie.*⁵

Of course, these are rhetorical questions in the best French style and the answer is “*oui*”. As Derrida admits, this is “*Juste une question, mais qui suppose une affirmation*” (“Just a question, but one that presupposes an affirmation”). The affirmation here is that of *la démocratie à venir*, but the question is: *how* might such a notion of democracy be conceived?

La démocratie à venir is much easier to describe in negative rather than positive terms. Derrida is particularly anxious to distinguish the idea of democracy to come from any idea of a *future* democracy, where the future would be a modality of presence, namely the not-yet-present. Democracy to come is *not* to be confused with the living present of liberal democracy, lauded as the end of history by Fukuyama, but *neither* is it a regulative idea or an idea in the Kantian sense; *nor* is it even a utopia, insofar as all these conceptions understand the future as a modality of presence. It is a question of linking *la*

5 Derrida, J. *Politiques de l’amitié*. Paris: Galilée, 1994, p.339.

démocratie à venir to the messianic experience of the *here and now* (*l'ici-maintenant*) without which justice would be meaningless. So, the thought here is that the experience of justice as the maintaining-now (*le maintenant*) of the relation to an absolute singularity is the *à venir* of democracy. The temporality of democracy is *advent*, it is futural, but it is arrival happening *now*, it happens — thinking of Benjamin— as the now blasting through the continuum of the present.

La démocratie à venir is a difficult notion to get hold of because it has an essentially contradictory structure: that is, it has both the structure of a promise, of something futural “to come”, and it is something that takes place, that happens right *now*. In other words, *La démocratie à venir* has the character of what Derrida tends to call “the incalculable”, an irreducible and undeconstructible remainder that cannot simply become the source of a deduction, or the object of a determinate judgement. As such, in my view, *La démocratie à venir* has the character of an ethical demand or injunction, an incalculable experience that takes place now, but which permits the profile of a promisory task to be glimpsed.

Finally, and this is a step that Derrida continually suggests, but does not really take, it would be a question of thinking the ethical imperative of *La démocratie à venir* together with more concrete form of democratic political action and intervention. In this sense, democracy should not be understood as a fixed political form of society, but rather as a process or, better, processes of *democratization*. Such processes of democratization, evidenced in numerous examples (the new social movements, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, *médécins sans frontières*, indigenous rights groups, alternative globalization movements, etc.), would work within, across, above, beneath and within the territory of the democratic state, not in the vain hope of achieving some sort of “society without the state”, but rather as providing constant pressure upon the state, a pressure of emancipatory intent aiming at its infinite amelioration, the endless betterment of actually existing democracy, of should I say what passes for democracy at the present moment.

Derrida's work is possessed of a curious restlessness, one might even say an anxiety. A very famous American philosopher, sympathetic to Derrida, once said to me, “he never knows when to stop or how to come to an end”. In the interview with *Le Monde*, he describes himself as being at war with himself, “je

suis en guerre contre moi-même". He was always on the move intellectually, always hungry for new objects of analysis, accepting new invitations, confronting new contexts, addressing new audiences, writing new books. His ability in discussion simply to listen and to synthesize new theories, hypotheses and phenomena and produce long, detailed and fascinating analyses in response was breathtaking. Like many others, I saw him do it on many occasions and always with patience, politeness, modesty and civility. Derrida had such critical and synthetic intelligence, a brilliance as Lévinas was fond of remarking; "*il est brillant*" Lévinas used to say. The whole ethos of his work was at the very antipodes of the inert and stale professional complacency that defines so much philosophy and so many philosophers. He found the Ciceronian wisdom that to philosophise is to learn how to die repellent for its narcissism and insisted that "I remain uneducatable (*inéducable*) with respect to the wisdom of learning to die".

To philosophise is not to learn how to die. With regard to death, human beings remain gloriously uneducatable, splendidly inauthentic. To philosophise, on the contrary, is to learn how to live. In the words that begin *Specters of Marx*, Derrida ventiloquizes in another voice, as so often in his work, "*Je voudrais apprendre à vivre enfin*" ("I would finally like to learn to live").⁶ The dead live, they live with us, they survive, which is, of course, a difficult thing to say. It is here, perhaps, that Derrida's tireless meditations on the spectral, on ghosts and what he called *survivance*, living on, can be turned, finally, towards him and his work. To pick another Ciceronian quotation, this time the epigraph to *Politics of Friendship*, "*et, quod difficilius dictu est, mortui vivunt*" ("And, what is more difficult to say, the dead live").⁷ Wherever Derrida is read, he is not dead. If you want to communicate with the dead then read a book. Here and now, in the present that holds within itself the promise of the future, the dead live. Derrida lives on.

6 Derrida, J. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée, 1993, p.13.

7 Derrida, J. *Politiques de l'amitié*, p.9.