

Dead Again

W. J. T. Mitchell

In the United States, deconstruction still seems to be dying quite a bit.

—JACQUES DERRIDA

Shortly after Jacques Derrida's death in October 2004, the editors of *Critical Inquiry* began discussing the possibility of a special issue in his honor. The question was, of course, not whether to do this, given *CI*'s long relationship with Derrida, but what form it should take. How could we hope to do justice to Derrida's body of work, his contributions to philosophy and the entire range of the human sciences? The task seemed impossible in both its quantitative and qualitative requirements. Thousands of intellectuals across the world have been, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "touched by deconstruction," and that word has now become part of everyday vernacular across many languages. And the range and variety of Derrida's work seems to make any thematic emphasis immediately collapse in the face of the almost infinite topicality of Derrida's own capacious intellect from A to Z, from the Animal to Zoographia.

We did, however, form a consensus on two principles. The first was our sense of appropriate topic, and this seemed to come to all of us simulta-

This special issue would have been impossible without the devotion and hard work of the entire editorial group and staff of *Critical Inquiry*. Lauren Berlant, Bill Brown, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Arnold Davidson, Beth Helsinger, Françoise Meltzer, Richard Neer, and Joel Snyder provided key moments of editorial judgment and guidance throughout. Bill and Françoise worked aggressively to secure several of the contributions, and Arnold spent so many hours working with the contributors to improve their essays that it seems only proper to share with him the credit for editing the entire project. Jay Williams negotiated the labyrinth of copyright and permission issues that surrounds Derrida's writing as well as guided the editing of the manuscripts, which he and Jeff Rufo—with assistance from Anat Benzvi, Burke Butler, Kate Gaudet, Robert Huddleston, Elizabeth Hutcheon, and Abigail Zitin—completed with their usual expeditious mastery. J. Hillis Miller provided crucial inspiration and practical help at all stages of the project. For all Derrida's skepticism about *Mitsein*, this project was all about being with others, and my hope is that this will be evident in the pages that follow.

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neously in a phrase that was inevitably and spontaneously uttered in the immediate aftermath of his death: “The Late Derrida.” Here is an extract from the letter that went out to potential contributors:

We propose an issue entitled “The Late Derrida” with all puns and ambiguities cheerfully intended. Under this rubric we mean, of course, the late *work* of Derrida, the vast outpouring of new writing by and about him in the period roughly from 1994 to 2004. In this period Derrida published more new books, essays, and interviews than he had produced during his entire career up to that point, and many of them on important new concepts in ethics, politics, and religion. At a minimum, the shape of Derrida’s career, and the evolution of his ideas, are still only imperfectly comprehended. We do not yet know (and may never know in some basic sense) what it all amounted to, and there will be a period of continued reading as his last works are translated, disseminated, and critiqued. But it does seem clear to us that this late or final period in Derrida’s life was marked by incredible productivity, and of new turns that have yet to be digested in the way the earlier “classic” texts on difference, deconstruction, and grammatology have been.

We want to keep open, however, the question of “lateness” in the most capacious possible way, and we do not intend simply a stock-taking of Derrida’s recent work in the narrow or literal sense. We would also hope for (in fact count on) a deconstruction of the very idea of lateness, lastness, finality, finitude, and, of course, death itself—the entire problematic of the “post-” and the various “ends” or “deaths”—of theory, of history, of humanism, of deconstruction itself, that marked the final decade of Derrida’s life. We would hope for a debate about the very notion of periodizing Derrida’s career, the question of the continuity of his work versus its broaching of new, unsuspected issues; the frequent claim that he “turned” in his final years to more worldly issues of politics, law, and ethics—that he “finally” got around to Marx and capitalism and justice. Were these turns merely thematic? Or did they register a deep shift in his thinking? We also wish to address (and hear from) those whose work was deeply indebted to the “early” or “middle” Derrida, and who may now feel the need to update their thinking, to go back to their previous works with second and third thoughts.

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The second principle was based in our desire to have an issue that would not deal with Derrida's work exclusively from the inside. Like any powerful intellectual, Derrida had numerous followers—"Derrideans"—who devoted themselves almost exclusively to the exposition and analysis of his work. We wanted to escape the coils of what Geoffrey Hartman has called the "boadeconstructors." And this led us to invite contributors who had made important contributions to their various fields independently of their association with deconstruction, but who nevertheless had been touched by the work of Derrida and were prepared to examine their relationship to his work in a sympathetic but critical spirit. If Derrida produced, on the one side, a cult following of sorts, he also (perhaps inevitably) produced an antagonistic cult of those who were prepared to be "critical" by dismissing his work without ever having read it. Our aim was to steer between these two extremes while tacking, it must be said, firmly toward writers who had a profound engagement with Derrida's work, a deep respect and love for the man and the thinker, coupled with a strong sense of their own independent engagements. We believe that the authors assembled for this special issue meet these requirements, and I will have more to say about their contributions in a moment.

As for my own relationship with Derrida, I played three different roles with Jacques: reader, editor, and friend. As a reader and a scholar of words and images, I was first drawn to his seminal work on grammatology and the history and theory of writing, the whole sphere of the *graphic* and *typographic* that played a role in my understanding of William Blake as an engraver and printer committed to a "wond'rous art of writing" against the grain of a dominant emphasis on *voice* in English romanticism. This interest took on a more general tenor as I began to explore the fields of semiotics, aesthetics, and media theory in search of an iconology that seemed like the necessary complement to his grammatology. The centrality of the grapheme at the intersection of writing and painting, the sayable and the seeable, or word and image more generally seemed to lead inevitably into the whole realm of what Derrida called spectrality, the ghostly realm of imagination, fantasy, speculation and the subject of a hauntology that renders all things or objects—all beings in other words—uncanny. Anyone interested in visual culture and iconology also had to take account of Derrida's critique of televisuality as a dominantly Christian globalizing medium and the importance of the Abrahamic (and Islamic) tradition of peoples of the book as the deep core of image theory, especially in its iconoclastic modes.

As the editor of *Critical Inquiry*, I had quite a different relation with Jacques Derrida. We became friends—not close friends, not nearly as close as his more intimate circle, but close enough to have exchanged hospitali-

ties. Close enough to entertain him in my home (he watched Monty Python's philosophers' soccer match—ancients versus moderns—with my teenage son and cheered vigorously for the ancients, who won on a goal by Socrates, while Marx was given a red card). Close enough to enjoy the sight of him chauffeuring my college-age daughter and her friend from his home to the train station (report was that he was a “terrible driver” but completely charming). Close enough to have some sense of the depths of his mind and personality. And close enough to have mustered up the nerve to disagree with him on a number of political issues. Driving him from the airport to the University of Chicago in 1991, at the outset of the first Gulf war, I asked him for his opinion on what I regarded at the time as a terrible and ominous event. He shrugged and said that he could see no other course but to “go with Mitterand” and support the war. I was surprised and disappointed, but also curiously reassured to find that the man who was perhaps the greatest philosopher of the late twentieth century could hold perfectly ordinary political opinions. I use the words *friendship* and *hospitality*, then, in full mindfulness of how seriously he took these words and how deeply he tried to act upon them in his relationships with people like me, whom he knew only intermittently, at a great distance.

In my role as editor, I also watched Derrida's work evolve over what I think will become the canonical “periods” of his career: the early “radical” phase of deconstruction, oriented toward questions of language, writing, and literature and technical discussions of center/margin, and so on; the middle “defensive” period, centrally involved with the Paul de Man affair, when a number of people found the excuse they were looking for to say that Derrida was finished and deconstruction was dead. Then there is the third period; let's call it the late Derrida, since this is already emerging as the name for his work in the nineties and beyond. This is the moment of moving to the borders of deconstruction, to the edges of the conditional, to the realm of the limit or the limitless, the unconditional and unconditioned, the pure, the absolute, and ideal—in short, the undeconstructible, to which he sometimes gave the name of justice.¹ This is also the period when Derrida became a writer on politics, ethics, religion, not just as philosophical topics, but in relation to the urgent issues of the day. He emerges as what, in some sense, he always was, an *occasional* and unsystematic writer, responding to events and contemporary issues at the invitation of others to speak out, almost invariably with surprising, unpredictable results. Among the topics that drew his attention, many of them discussed in this issue, are capital pun-

1. Derrida's first claim that justice is undeconstructible is generally located in Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (July–Aug. 1990): 919–1045.

ishment; animal rights; the university; political sovereignty, democracy, and rogue states; the idea of Europe; television and religion; the “return” of the “Abrahamic” religions of the book; law and justice; ethics, hospitality, and the concept of the gift; and violence, terrorism, and the war on terror.

My three periods should be considered, of course, as already deconstructed in advance, as the essays by Stephen Melville and Frances Ferguson will make clear.² If the early Derrida was perceived as a radical whose deconstruction of Western metaphysics was an alternate pathway to the disappointed revolutionary hopes of the sixties generation, and the middle Derrida was upstaged by the more explicitly political and historically minded Foucault, the late Derrida was revealed at last to be something of a liberal, perhaps even a libertarian, reaffirming the fundamental relevance of the European Enlightenment and defining the terrain of difficult political and ethical choices in terms that echo the familiar liberal double bind or negotiated settlement: on the one hand . . . on the other hand.³

And yet one gets the impression of a deep continuity in Derrida’s thinking, as if in some sense it was all fully formed very early, while at the same time it was not all that easy to predict what he would say about any specific topic. His great gift was to provide what Slavoj Žižek has called a parallax view, an intervention that changes the angle of vision ever so slightly, with momentous consequences. His opening gesture in rereading Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* after many years away from it was an expression of his sense that something was waiting for him in that text that he had imperfectly remembered. And of course it was there in the very first sentence—“A specter is haunting Europe.” His opening onto the question of capital punishment was a simple inductive generalization that could easily be falsified: no significant philosopher *as a philosopher*, he argued, has ever mounted a systematic case against capital punishment. On the question of animal rights, his challenge was to notice that the very idea of rights was inevitably grounded in a concept of *human* rights, which have always been defined by

2. “If deconstruction is possible, this is because it mistrusts any sort of periodization” (Derrida, “I Have a Taste for the Secret,” interview with Maurizio Ferraris, in Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Donis and David Webb [Cambridge, 2001], p. 9).

Derrida’s self-image, it must be said, is of someone who never really changed his thinking or moved toward politics and actuality: “I have in fact never been concerned with anything but problems of actuality, with problems of institutional politics or of politics, period” (Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek [Cambridge, 2002], p. 9).

3. Derrida’s radicalism remains in his notions of democracy, justice, and revolution to come in the form of the unforeseeable event or *arrivant*. “It is possible to renounce a certain revolutionary imagery or all revolutionary rhetoric, even to renounce a *certain* politics of revolution . . . but it is not possible to renounce revolution without also renouncing the event and justice” (Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, p. 13). For “on the one hand,” see *ibid.*, p. 15.

invoking the difference between humans and animals. The appeal to animal rights, no doubt a compelling one on “humanitarian” grounds, nevertheless renders the very idea of human rights deeply problematic. On all these issues, the typical effect of Derrida’s intervention was to reopen the *case* in question, to expose received ideas to a subtle but decisive shift that enjoined a radical rereading and enabled a reframing of settled views and new horizons of reflection and research. If, in the world of ideas, the closing of the case is the equivalent of death, nailing the coffin shut, Derrida’s effect on thought was precisely one of continual resurrection, the insistence on opening ourselves to what is to come, or (in more anxious modes) what threatens to come back.

My experience of Derrida’s death is of course heavily mediated by his numerous writings on death and mourning. But it is also framed by an episode that took place during one of his many visits to the University of Chicago, shortly after the appearance of *Specters of Marx* in 1994. One of my colleagues asked him to compare the widely rumored “death” of Marxism to the equally common rumors that deconstruction was dying as well. Derrida’s eyes twinkled at the question:

Yes, it’s true. Deconstruction is clearly dying. But we have to ask precisely *how* it is dying. For instance, last week we read in the newspaper that Nixon was dying, and then that Nixon was dead. Next week there will be nothing in the papers about Nixon dying. But it is not like that with deconstruction. Deconstruction has been dying for quite awhile. The first reports of its dying came to us a long time ago, and no doubt it will continue dying for some time to come. And it seems to be dying more in some places than others. For instance, in France, deconstruction is not dying. It was declared dead long ago. But in the United States, deconstruction still seems to be dying quite a bit.⁴

How can one write an obituary for an intelligence like that? I feel sure that Derrida would have appreciated the headline of his death notice in *The Onion*: “Derrida ‘Dies.’” Like Freud and Marx, he (and the thoughts he inspired) will no doubt be pronounced dead again—and again—in the years to come.

Derrida’s death is, above all, framed for me by a coincidence whose significance I cannot shake off, and that is its proximity to the death of another friend, Edward Said, who passed away one year earlier, in September 2003. I don’t know how many others of my generation felt that Said and Derrida were both fundamental, in quite different and even antithetical ways, to

4. I am recalling this comment from memory, so these may not be Derrida’s exact words.

their formations as scholars and intellectuals. For me, though, the work of these two men exemplified the polarities of the critical-theoretical possibilities of our time: on the one hand, the role of the committed public critic, addressing contemporary issues with passion, conviction, and insightful independence from any party or ideological program; on the other hand, the role of the groundbreaking theorist, exploring the limits of deeply entrenched systems of thought. And I don't mean to confine either of them exclusively to one side of this polarity. Both men addressed public issues and introduced new concepts that changed the world. Deconstruction and postcolonial theory were in a sense invented and founded by them, and both movements became something of a burden, a legacy that they viewed with a considerable sense of irony. Derrida refused, in recent years, to define deconstruction, a word he had coined but which had clearly gotten out of his control. And Said disavowed his status as the founding father of postcolonial theory, never failing to point out that it was a bit premature to argue that colonialism was in the past in the age of globalization.

It of course occurred to me immediately that the deaths of these two great intellectuals within a year of one another marked the end of an era for criticism and theory. Between them, they had become the dominant figures in the study of culture in the last quarter century. But the real point of comparison was not their deaths as the end of anything but their lives as the provocations for what Said called "beginnings" and Derrida named the "to come of justice and democracy." Both were intensely futuristic and utopian thinkers who remained deeply critical of their own communities, refusing to settle for either Jewish or Arab identity as the horizon of their thought.⁵ Both were engaged without being committed, aligned with causes at the same time they insisted relentlessly on critical independence and unpredictability. Both were rootless cosmopolitan exiles whose stories of coming to America are central to their careers and central to the intellectual and cultural relations of Europe and America. Is it not somehow fitting that an Algerian Jew and a Palestinian Christian should wind up playing such central roles in the formation of American intellectual life in the late twentieth century?

As befits giants who define and stand above their age, they did not get

5. See Derrida, "I Have a Taste for the Secret," pp. 38–39, for Derrida's account of his alienation from both French culture and Judaism. Compare Gil Anidjar, "Once More, Once More': Derrida, the Arab, the Jew," in Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, trans. Samuel Weber et al., ed. Anidjar (New York, 2002), p. 18, for discussion of doomed Jews in the Nazi death camps as "Mussulmans." Said's *Freud and the Non-European* (London, 2003) should also be read next to Derrida's meditations on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, which stages the figure of the Egyptian Moses as the founding father of Judaism.

along that well. I don't believe they appeared together very often, if ever, except perhaps in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*. Said, whose sympathies leaned more toward the institutional and political criticism of Foucault, tended to regard Derrida as something of a mandarin, responsible for what he thought of as the obscurantist navel-gazing of contemporary theory.⁶ I don't know that Derrida ever made public comments on Said, but it seems safe to assume that he would not have found him especially compelling from a philosophical point of view. Said rarely interrogated a concept with the kind of obsessive depth and rigor that was the hallmark of Derrida's writing. Both men had blind spots that come into focus when their positions are compared. Said's was his relative indifference or hostility to religion, his insistence on secular, worldly frameworks as the limit of his thinking.⁷ Derrida's—at least from Said's point of view—was the question of Palestine, which, as far as I know, he never commented on except in diplomatic sentiments condemning the violence on all sides and urging the withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlements from the Occupied Territories.⁸

One issue that both men confronted in the last few years and in fact galvanized the entire critical universe that they dominated was the question of terrorism, provoked by the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. As a Palestinian, Said had been the recipient of accusations that he was a professor of terror, and Derrida's deconstructive practices have routinely been characterized as a form of “obscurant terrorism.”⁹ These sorts of charges were symptomatic of the intellectual poverty of those who lodged them, revealing the blatantly ideological character of the concept of terror itself. But, for that very reason, the onset of the “war on terror” also provided an

6. Said's discussion of Derrida and Foucault as “textual theorists” appeared in Said, “The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions,” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978): 673–714. Said commented particularly on Derrida's gnostic notion of the text as the container of an imperceptible secret.

7. Said's secularism, however, is considerably more complicated than one might imagine. See Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Autumn 2006): 52–77, and W. J. T. Mitchell, “Secular Divination: Edward Said's Humanism,” in *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation*, ed. Homi Bhabha and Mitchell (Chicago, 2005), pp. 99–108.

8. See, for instance, Derrida, “Interpretations at War,” which was given as a lecture in Jerusalem in 1988, during the Palestinian intifada that began in 1987. Although Derrida begins with a promise that he will address “the current violence, here and now,” he also notes that his topic—the “German-Judaism” of Hermann Cohen, who argued (now unbelievably) that American Jews should have sided with Germany against France and England because Germany is the true spiritual homeland of Judaism—has only an indirect and mediated relation to “that which demands *immediate* response and responsibility.” Derrida also expressed a wish “to participate in a conference where Arab and Palestinian colleagues would be officially invited” (Derrida, “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German,” *Acts of Religion*, p. 137).

9. This phrase is quoted by Ferraris in a question put to Derrida in Derrida, “I Have a Taste for the Secret,” p. 15.

occasion for a major convergence of the intellectual currents that had been unleashed by the revolution in criticism and theory that swept through all the disciplines of the human sciences in the preceding half century; revolutions in religion, in media and technology, in the world's political and economic systems had been accompanied by momentous transformations in the conceptual frameworks for understanding these things. The "theory revolution" was both a symptom of and a critical response to these momentous changes, and the onset of the "war on terror" brought that revolution a major test. On every side one heard that theory was dead, and the *New York Times*, even as it was urging the nation to carry the "war on terror" into the catastrophic (and theory-driven) misadventure of Iraq, announced that "the latest theory is that theory doesn't matter."¹⁰ Meanwhile, Said's diagnosis of the futility of the global war on terror and its linkage with the local war of occupation in Palestine was being worked out in his final book of political writings, *From Oslo to Iraq*, and Derrida was pondering the deeper systematic character of terror in "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," his dialogue with Giovanna Borradori.¹¹

I will return to Derrida's diagnosis of terrorism in my own contribution to this volume, but for now I want to turn to the other contributors to give readers a sense of what they will find in these pages. We open straightforwardly with Vincent Leitch's masterful account of the full range of themes in Derrida's late work, which then turns its focus to the specific concept of sovereignty and the linked themes of community, the rogue state, and the subject. This is followed by J. Hillis Miller's canny reflections on the isolation of the subject in Derrida's thought, his separation of Heidegger's *Dasein* from *Mitsein*, and its implications for ethics and politics. The focus then narrows in my essay to a single text, Derrida's first interview after September 11, 2001, and the linkages among deconstruction, autoimmunity, and terrorism. Rodolphe Gasché then provides a rigorous unpacking of Derrida's thinking on the idea of Europe, as a heritage, a responsibility, and a mourning that is wracked by the split between Platonism and Christianity. Frances Ferguson and Stephen Melville then turn us to the question of lateness and the periodizing of Derrida's career. Ferguson retraces Derrida's critique of linear, chronological orderings as an issue not only in the account of any life or career but also in the practices of nonlinear and nonhermeneutic reading that Derrida introduced, his lessons for readers. Melville offers an

10. Quoted in Mitchell, "Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* Symposium," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 324–35.

11. See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, trans. Luis Guzman, Michael Naas, and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago, 2003), pp. 85–136.

alternative version of the late Derrida, treating him as a guest who has not yet arrived at the parties (and perhaps the funerals) we have arranged for him, especially those parties that take place in universities, a subject of central concern in Derrida's late writing. Geoffrey Hartman turns us from lateness to nowness and the copresence of disparate thinkers from different eras in Derrida's writing, most dramatically exemplified in the simultaneous appearance of Hegel and Genet in *Glas*, the finest virtuoso performance of "a literature-reading philosopher, a species close to extinction."

Two poetic contributions round out this issue. Hélène Cixous's marvelous elegiac prose poem treats Derrida as a shape-shifting Proteus, as if folding up the late philosopher in a winding-sheet of language. And two of Michael Fried's short poems conjure up memorable images of Derrida's final decade—his ever-prolific Macintosh computer, and an imagined gathering of animals at the edge of a frozen lake. "The Message" is a comment on the final gift from Derrida to be read at his memorial service. Next comes Jean-Luc Nancy, whose interview summarizes the shape of Derrida's career. We give the last words to the late Derrida himself: his seminar on "the event," delivered at the University of Montreal in 2003, and the words read by his son at his graveside.