

ARTICLES : SPECIAL ISSUE  
A DEDICATION TO JACQUES DERRIDA - MEMOIRS

## Derrida: Survival as Heritage

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One has never experienced the initial words of "The Ends of Man" spoken so seriously as at the recent colloquium held in Rio de Janeiro, between August 16-18, 2004. The international colloquium "Towards a Reflection on Deconstruction: Issues of Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics" opened with a lecture by Jacques Derrida entitled "Forgiveness, Truth, Reconciliation: What Gender?"<sup>1</sup> It seems to echo incessantly the sentence of the philosopher who claimed in his own *Margins of Philosophy*: "every and any philosophical colloquium necessarily has a political sense."<sup>2</sup>

If before, in May of 1968, the philosopher had already announced this necessary political sense of the philosophical congress, particularly when it concerns an international colloquium, what repercussion would such a meeting have in which a philosopher's last words would have been spoken? And to what extent would the notions of response, responsibility and heritage be given more weight in relation to this "event"?

Not so surprisingly, the avalanche of *post mortis* comments seems to certify the late acknowledgement, whether sincere or not, of the impact of the vast collected work concerning what is termed "Deconstruction," to the extent that Jürgen Habermas recently remarked that "Derrida practically had no match (...) to forge the spirit of a whole generation" and that "under his inflexible view, every context is broken up into fragments; the ground which we believed to be stable becomes unstable, what

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Forgiveness, Truth, Reconciliation: What Gender?" (lecture presented on Aug 8, 2004 at the Jacques Derrida International Colloquium: "Towards a Reflection on Deconstruction: issues of politics, ethics and aesthetics," organized by the Post-Graduate Program in Letters of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, and which took place at the Maison de France Theatre of Rio de Janeiro).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ends of Man*, in MARGINS OF PHILOSOPHY (from MARGENS DA FILOSOFIA 149 (Joaquim Torres Costa e Antônio M. Magalhães trans., 1991).

we assumed to be complete reveals its double depth. (...) The world in which we believed to be comfortable becomes uninhabitable. We are not from this world: in it we are foreigners among foreigners.”<sup>3</sup>

However, despite believing that it is never late for a true acknowledgement, as we believe Herr Habermas’s sincere words and the exact way in which they touch upon fundamental points of Derrida’s work, we wonder whether this would be the task that the philosopher would have bequeathed to us. We know the constant place of the bow in Derrida’s text, which in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (one of the most beautiful works of the philosophical literature) would already have been defined.<sup>4</sup> The moment of departure, when it is observed that the Other is no longer there, is a moment of irremediable courtesy, of the total certification of the absolute asymmetry which rules the relation between the Other and me, but it is also, above all, the moment in which we inherit the unpronounceable secret and we become responsible for this other who does not speak anymore. Thus, it is a pact, but a pact beyond calculation and which can only be conducted by the demand of ingratitude. Ingratitude in the sense that we must take over the other’s task and carry it on, which can never contain the stagnated analytical repetition, in which, instead of allowing the task to happen in its alterity, we only, violently, cloister it in the order of the Same. If, to Levinas, the sense of the work is the Other (that is, the “wholly Other”), to Derrida, the sense of the work is another one (in Levinas’s words, “wholly otherwise”). Not only must its course follow a path towards the Other, but it also follows its own disseminated course of the alterity.

Therefore, in a first moment, the avalanche of bows and posthumous acknowledgements perfectly fit, according to the law of courtesy, but the philosopher taught us that more is required. If in his *Adieu*, there was no room for a deconstruction, for not allowing tears in the eyes and naked and disarmed words, one year later, at another conference. Derrida’s *word of welcome* contained the necessary ingratitude, exactly in order to do justice to the movement of the dear friend’s work. As the philosopher claimed, does one only deconstructs what one loves, the task of a “simple” reading turns into a movement which involves following and tracing, but also “crossing,” “twisting” and “diverting” the text read.

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Presence of Derrida* (from *Presença de Derrida*, FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO at 13 (Luiz Roberto Mendes Gonçalves trans., 17 Oct. 2004).

<sup>4</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *ADIEU TO EMMANUEL LEVINAS* (from *ADEUS A EMMANUEL LEVINAS* (Fábio Landa trans., 2004).

The theme of heritage had already been approached before in *Spectres of Marx*. In his exordium, in which the sentence "I wanted to learn how to live at last"<sup>5</sup> reverberates, the theme of the relation between life and death contains the issue of the heritage of this "phantasmatic" tradition. One only learns how to live (which also means learning how to die) with the ghosts. Thus, one learns how to live in another better way, a fairer one, for the sentence asserts that this act of "being-with" the ghosts, other others, is not restricted to the simple act of "being-with" the others, because it opens a politics of memory, heritage and generations. According to Derrida, "generations of ghosts" that, precisely, break with the temporality and the "metaphysics of the presence," for these others are never present, presently alive or present in the living present of the word, here and now. That is why "it is necessary to speak *about* the ghost, even *to* the ghost and *along* with it, as no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seem possible, thinkable and *fair* without acknowledging in its principle the respect for these others who no longer live or for these others who are not there, presently alive, whether they are already dead or are not born yet."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, like Hamlet's phantasmagorical revelation ("enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost"), we receive a secret and a task from the philosophical tradition of doing justice to this same phantasmagoria which breaks with the temporality and the ideal of a presence so that we start towards the act of responding for the responsibility in relation to every other, alive or dead, mortal or immortal, human or non-human, past, present or future. It is the task of the thinking, through the structural gaps of the writing itself, to let speak a multitude of ghosts, assumed or not, announced or repressed, that the very text cannot avoid amalgamating in its construction as a *construct*. And it is this act of doing justice that leads life beyond the present life, not towards death, but towards *survival*, that is, a trace "in relation to which life and death would only be traces and traces of traces."<sup>7</sup>

We can certainly state that this seems to us to have been Derrida's task since his first writings, in the sixties, when we observe, in *Grammatology*, the almost-concept "trace" presented as being not only the disappearance of the idea of origin, but a "concept" that, in its own rise, destroys itself, for, as the trace is neither absence nor presence and it is not the origin, it is simultaneously the origin of the origin, as the

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<sup>5</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *SPECTRES OF MARX* (from *ESPECTROS DE MARX* 9 (Anamaria Skinner trans., 1994).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* (slightly modified).

very idea of origin was composed by a non-origin. That is, “if everything begins through the trace, above all there is no original trace.”<sup>8</sup>

This trace, as it is the only possibility of preserving the alterity as such, is the path through which difference works and acquires its sense, and that is why Derrida is not interested only in differences, but even more in the very producing movement of differences, the *différance*, being, therefore, that which would allow the articulation between the sensitive and the intelligible, as among the several oppositions constitutive of the Metaphysical, not in order to formulate an inversion in the order of these pairs which define each other mutually, but in order to promote a displacement through the assumption of the “differentiality” itself (the principle of differentiation), which, then and at last, would open up room for a new conception of experience.

If the concept of experience remains such as the one presented by tradition, designating a relation with a presence, we could never think of an experience of the writing, just like the one conceived by Derrida, based upon the relation with those other others. A thought without calculation, and beyond it, is close to an extremely tragic conception, in which even so there is something to be done, not closing itself in nihilism at all. This new experience of thinking that Derrida seems to open up and which seems to have bequeathed to us as heritage, this intimacy with the ghosts, this responsibility for every and any other (people, discourses, animals and whatever can be conceived, and maybe even beyond the thinkable) is what seems to open one of his favourite works, his *Spectres*.

One would like to “learn how to live,”<sup>9</sup> he says, but learning how to live is learning how to die, because, if there is some lesson to be learnt, this is only taught *by* and *with* the ghosts. Thus, one learns that there is no life, the life itself, the full presence of the living-being living in him/herself and to him/herself, but also that our life is a trace of traces among many traces of traces. And that is why, in one of his last interviews, Derrida said: “no, I have never learnt how to live. Not at all! To learn how to live, this should mean learning how to die, to take into consideration the absolute mortality to accept it.” We are always or almost always associated with dead thinkers and, because of this, more living than never, and now, like before, or now more or less than before, with Jacques Derrida among them, among the living-dead of tradition, and this is what makes us or should make us involved with the

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<sup>8</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, ON GRAMMATOLOGY (from GRAMATOLOGIA 75 (Miriam Chnaiderman e Renato Janine Ribeiro trans., 1999).

<sup>9</sup> References to SPECTRES OF MARX, pages 9-13; and to the interview by Jean Birnbaum, LE MONDE (8 Aug. 2004).

theme of *survival* – to survive: to continue living, but also living after death. A task for which the thinking is responsible.

But who are “we”? Derrida does not answer, and says, “Maybe we are between this vigil and this waiting which are also the ends of man. But who, us?”<sup>10</sup> The impossible that happens, the non-response which turns into responsibility and the unthematizable turned into “object” of the thinking – which is left to us, to the survivors.

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<sup>10</sup> DERRIDA, *supra* note 8 at 177.