

## Jacques Derrida: A Personal Testimony 1981-2004

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### Abstract

I offer here some memories of my encounters with Derrida over the years. I do so in the spirit of a testimony to his person and philosophy, recalling several exchanges ranging from our first dialogue in Paris in 1982 to later conversations in Dublin and Villanova in the 1990s to our final meeting in New York in 2001. Several of these stories are intimate and anecdotal and I share them as a token of our personal friendship as much as a tribute to Derrida's persona as a world thinker and writer.

Keywords: deconstruction, Derrida, dialogue, hermeneutics, messianicity, phenomenology, testimony.

My first encounter with Derrida was in 1982 when I invited him to a conversation for my forthcoming book, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984). We were introduced by Paul Ricoeur, my doctoral dissertation director, who had been Derrida's mentor at the Sorbonne in the 1960s. We met for a series of exchanges in his office at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales during which we discussed ideas and arguments later published in *Dialogues* as 'Deconstruction and the Other', (1984).<sup>1</sup> Derrida's deep deference to Ricoeur somewhat surprised me as, not long before, he had taken critical exception to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of reciprocity and metaphor (see, for example, *Le retrait de la métaphore*). But it became quickly clear to me that Derrida had a generosity that transcended philosophical differences and welcomed a genuine plurality of interpretations.

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1. Richard Kearney, "Deconstruction and the Other," in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); republished in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 139–156.

In that first Paris exchange Derrida spoke openly about his complex and hitherto cryptic relation to religion. He conceded that his deconstruction of logocentrism in the name of the Other resonated intimately with notions of eschatology, prophecy and messianicity. And he admitted to a troubling tension in his work between an aesthetics of linguistic play and an ethics of responsibility to the stranger. He also ventured unprecedented remarks about his vexed relationship to some of his 'Anglo-Saxon' disciples who had turned deconstruction into a scorched earth policy re notions of authorial subjectivity and hermeneutic truth. Derrida bemoaned the fact that deconstruction was misconstrued by many as a free-wheeling relativism of floating signifiers rather than being recognized as a serious critical phenomenological project – what he would later call a 'self-interruption of phenomenology' (see our Villanova dialogue, 1997).<sup>2</sup> This was already clear, of course, to careful readers of his seminal interpretation of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena* (1968). But when it came to Derrida reviewing our recording for a final edit he chose to delete these remarks, saying he did not want to offend American colleagues and friends. And while also a little chary of some of his telling discussion of religion, Derrida was willing to let it stand. "If I said it, I said it", he conceded. 'C'est la loi de la jungle'. As is well known, Derrida was always more cautious, vigilant and elusive in writing than in speech. Which is why he almost invariably preferred *l'écriture* to *la voix*.

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My 1980 exchange with Derrida was the first of several conversations between us. Subsequent dialogues were recorded at a series of conferences in the late 1990s organized by our great mutual friend, Jack Caputo. These were held at Villanova university on the theme of 'Religion and Postmodernism'. The first exchange was entitled 'Desire of God' (1997),

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2. See "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, moderated by Richard Kearney," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54–78. See also "On Forgiveness: Round Table Discussion with Jacques Derrida, moderated by Richard Kearney," in *Questioning God: Religion and Postmodernism II*, edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). I am deeply indebted to my great friend and philosophical ally, Jack Caputo, for fostering and facilitating my numerous encounters with Derrida at conferences – AAR and Villanova – in North America over two decades.

the second 'On the Gift: A discussion between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Richard Kearney' (1997) and the third 'On Forgiveness' (1999).

The dialogue on desire took the form of a response by Derrida to my talk on 'Desire of God' followed by an animated exchanges of views moderated by Caputo.<sup>3</sup> Derrida's claim that 'atheism is another name for the desire of God in the desert' was a leitmotif. At one point Caputo leaped to Derrida's defense after I had posed the question: How can deconstruction's maxim that 'every other is every other' (*tout autre est tout autre*) be reconciled with a hermeneutics of discernment: namely the need to differentiate between different kinds of others – e.g. madmen or messiahs? Jack is the best defense attorney anyone could wish to have. But Derrida was unflustered. He took my question on the chin and graciously responded: 'Richard's problems with my thoughts are my problems with my thoughts'. I was saved a lynching and all three of us continued to discuss the issue over an excellent dinner.

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The second Villanova encounter was a three way conversation between Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and myself on the subject of the Gift. I was serving mainly as groom trying to bring two horses to water. I recall at one point saying it was easier to get Unionist and nationalist rivals in Northern Ireland to speak about peace (it was the year leading up to the Good Friday Peace Agreement) than to get Marion and Derrida to speak about God. For while they had no difficulty conversing on their different views of gift, givenness (*Gegebenheit*) and *Es Gibt*, when it came to relating these so-called 'impossible events' to questions of religion they proved extremely cautious and circuitous. Eventually I managed to persuade Derrida to take the plunge when, for example, he described God in terms of a 'mad dream' and 'messianic desire', but Marion remained aloof; he kept his Catholic allegiance to Revelation close to his chest, in keeping with the titles of his first books on the philosophy of religion *L'Idôle et la distance* and *Dieu sans l'être*: titles which Derrida praised as ingenious. But he did break cover in the end with some fascinating exchanges on the gift

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3. Richard Kearney, "Desire of God," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 112–129. My talk is followed by a discussion with Derrida and Caputo, 130–145. This discussion and my moderated debate with Marion and Derrida both took place at the first Villanova conference on "Religion and Postmodernism," organized by Caputo in 1997.

as divine impossibility and saturation. In all, It was curious to observe how the messianic atheist (Derrida) was ultimately more disposed to debate on the ‘religious turn in continental philosophy’ than the Catholic theist (Marion). But the dialogue had its sparks and Derrida was the epitome of generosity and graciousness throughout.

One other moment of note at the second Villanova conference was Derrida’s intervention on the death penalty. I recall him responding vehemently to an American scholar comparing deconstruction to Las Vegas – as an infinite play of simulations with no signified in the real world. Derrida was visibly angry as he stood and reminded everyone that within miles of Villanova a prisoner called Abu Jamal was on death row, awaiting the death penalty. He said that deconstruction was justice, and that meant marching and petitioning for the release of this innocent man. The room was stunned into silence. He had made the point: deconstruction is not an evasion of the real, but a plea for endless vigilance, protest and struggle. Derrida, it was evident, was a thinker keenly attuned to the pain of the world. Which should not have been a surprise to those for anyone already familiar with Derrida’s ethico-political interventions on matters of education, democracy, truth tribunals, genocide, animal rights, forgiveness and digital globalization (what he called ‘mondialatinisation’).

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My next public conversation with Derrida was in New York City in October 2001, just one month after 9/11. We visited the burning ashes of the Towers together – inhaling the acrid fumes – before sitting down for our dialogue at New York University. Our original intention was to explore our respective views on the ‘God of Perhaps’ – his deconstructive take and my more hermeneutic one – but we quickly turned to a discussion of the recent catastrophe and what it meant for the question of religion and politics. Derrida smoked his pipe nervously throughout, visibly shaken by the horror of the event and proffering some daring thoughts on the recent so-called ‘turn to religion’. Our exchange was published under the title ‘Terror, Religion and the New Politics’ in my *Debates in Continental Philosophy* in 2004.<sup>4</sup> And a modified version of the conversation, edited by John Manoussakis, was republished in *Philosophy Today* with an additional

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4. “Terror, Religion and the New Politics” (dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney), in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 3–14.

exchange with Marion under the title: 'Thinking at the Limits: Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in Dialogue with Richard Kearney'.<sup>5</sup>

Manoussakis introduced these dialogues thus: 'The double encounter presented here, with arguably two of the most representative thinkers of contemporary French thought, took place in the wake of Richard Kearney's publication of *The God Who May Be* (2001). The 'turn to religion' assumed unforeseeable implications the day America, and with her the entire world, experienced the horror of what we now call "the events of 9/11." In the two dialogues there is much talk about the "unbearable" event that blinds us, "saturated" as it is with information; about the "ground zero" of revelation, the desolate place of *khora* – unnamable, impossible and singular – questions that problematize the authority and authenticity of one's claim to divine Truth and Will. All these might ring in a strange and uncanny way to the reader who will notice that the dates of the dialogues recorded here fall within a month of September 11'. Manoussakis goes on to claim that 9/11 exposed the troubling complexity of the 'return to religion'. The event itself, he argued, 'assumed religious dimensions in its sublimity as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It was immediately registered in terms of two religious idioms: Islamic fanaticism, which "provoked" and "justified" it, and Christian fundamentalism, which proclaimed that the West was under attack and vowed to protect it. As the name of God was invoked by politicians and common people alike, as "ground zero" became more and more a hallowed ground with interfaith services and memorials, gradually September 11 became less and less a political case, simply because such an impossible event could not be fully appropriated by political language. It called, in time, for a more philosophical discourse'. And Manoussakis concluded that in those Fall 2001 dialogues, such a discourse operated at the *limits of philosophy* – deconstruction, phenomenology, hermeneutics – 'attempting to rethink the boundary between the possible and the impossible'.<sup>6</sup>

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5. "Philosophy at the Limits: Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in Dialogue with Richard Kearney," edited and introduced by John Manoussakis, *Philosophy Today* 48, no. 1 (2004): 1–20.

6. "Philosophy at the Limits," 1. Manoussakis concludes: "As the exchanges with Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Richard Kearney unfold, the reader will notice the development of a tension between hermeneutics and phenomenology (in the dialogue with Marion) on the one hand, and between hermeneutics and deconstruction (in the discussion with Derrida) on the other. Situated in the middle, we see Richard Kearney (who throughout the pages of *The God Who May Be* never tires in advocating a third way) using art and skill as he ranges from a hermeneutics of suspicion (when it comes to a

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Then there was Dublin. Here another kind of trouble awaited us. When I invited Derrida to visit Ireland in 1998, his notoriety preceded him in the form of a British media campaign deploring Cambridge University's decision to award him a doctorate. Thousands of people – from academia and the general public – turned out to hear him. He arrived at University College Dublin carrying a massive wad of pages that he had every intention of delivering. But as we walked down the aisle to the amphitheater, I swept it from his arms. 'You are not reading that!' I said. But he clung to his portly MS like a mother to a baby being taken into custody – before eventually letting go. He finally faced the bemused public, paperless and disarmed. Derrida spoke straight from the heart about the 'lie' (the topic of his talk) for a brisk 50 min. rather than the 3 hours his paper would otherwise have taken. (A month previously he had spoken for 6 hours at the Freud Museum in London, the only people left in the room at the end being his two English translators). The Dublin audience was utterly entranced. Derrida could charm birds off trees when he was not hiding behind a 200-page paper. And he did just that. The question-answer session afterwards was a lesson in deep listening and responding. No question was too naïve for him. From the first – 'Mr Derrida, what does it mean to be human?' – to the last question from an autodidact local window cleaner – about the difference between deconstruction and destruction. Derrida was polite, modest and attentive in his response – belying his British media caricature as a cranky, egotistical intellectual rock star. For many who had not read Derrida closely – or at all – deconstruction spelled nihilism and relativism. But the inquisitive window cleaner was delighted with Derrida's careful and caring reply. He concluded the wonderful exchange with this remark, delivered in a broad Dublin accent: "Mister Derrida, I am delighted you came all the way from Paris to be with us today. Reading the British gutter press this week I was expecting to meet a French vampire. But you are a good man, a very good man. I had always believed the Marquis de Sade was the most maligned man in intellectual history, but I now realize it is you, Jacques Derrida! If I was the Lord Mayor of Dublin I would offer you the keys to the city." The audience broke into applause and Derrida was deeply moved, bowing to the Dublin window cleaner, his hands clasped in thanks. What more could I say.

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phenomenology of saturation and transcendence) to a hermeneutics of suspension (when it comes to the aporetics of the impossible). Both dialogues operate at the limit of philosophy, attempting to rethink the boundary between the possible and the impossible."

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One last story I am inclined to mention here, but which, for reasons of discretion, I have not committed to print before, concerns Derrida's final reconciliation with Ricoeur. After Derrida's University College Dublin lecture on the lie we retired to my house for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the question of Derrida's depression came up – we had both experienced 'dark nights' in our lives – and he happened to mention how one of his worst bouts followed his doctoral defense when Ricoeur (his director) never showed up for the post-dissertation toast. Derrida confided that this withholding of the ceremonial blessing (as he read it) had devastated him, because Ricoeur had been an intellectual father for him since leaving his own family in Algeria to come to Paris as an émigré student. When I informed him that Ricoeur had not come to my doctoral toast either, Derrida was speechless. You too? He exclaimed. 'Were you not shocked?' I said not at all. I had simply picked up the phone and asked Ricoeur why he had not shown up – and had received this frank and moving response: 'I am sorry Richard, but I never attend any of my student's dissertation toasts. I have so many and must also look after my own family. I am a bad father to both my intellectual and actual children. I never give either enough time. Such is my life. I do two jobs badly, but it is all I can do'. Derrida was deeply affected and as soon as he returned to Paris the next day phoned Ricoeur. They agreed to meet that same afternoon in the Jardin du Luxembourg (it was early May) and stayed talking non-stop until *les gardiens* sent them home when the gates closed at 21:00.

What they realised during their exchange was that for 30 years their respective philosophical positions (deconstructive and hermeneutic) had been speaking past each other – mishearing, misreading, miswriting – in part because of a dialogue manqué at a pivotal moment in their lives: Derrida looking for a surrogate father, Ricoeur unable to respond to a surrogate son. Ricoeur confessed to me subsequently that after this reunion, they continued to talk on a weekly basis right up to Derrida's untimely death from pancreatic cancer in 2004. Ricoeur joined his adopted spiritual son two years later in 2006.

When I visited Ricoeur shortly after Derrida's death in 2004 – to present him with my new book, *The Owl of Minerva: The Hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur* – he was in deep grief. He said it was not fair that Derrida had died before him. '*Il est mort trop jeune*', he told me, '*Il était comme un fils. Ça aurait du être moi*'. And he then movingly recalled his original encounter with Derrida as a young student arriving in Paris from Algeria



a half century before. From the moment he gave his first presentation at Ricoeur's seminar at the Sorbonne, he realized straight away that the young Jewish Algerian would be a great philosopher. The presentation was entitled '*Introduction a l'Origine de la Géométrie de Husserl*', which when published in 1962, established the young Derrida as one of the most brilliant young philosophers of his generation. At that same meeting with Ricoeur, at his home in Châtenay-Malabry, he told me that when he and Derrida had discussed my book, *The God Who May Be* (2001), Derrida deemed it too hermeneutic while Ricoeur thought it too deconstructionist! I shared with Ricoeur a line from the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney: 'Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between'. Ricoeur smiled. It was the last time we spoke.

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There was a memorial for Derrida in Boston when he died. I was honored to be invited and spoke about several of our above encounters as well as some uncanny personal synchronicities which we shared together over the years.<sup>7</sup> In addition to our common experiences as graduate students of Ricoeur, I also recalled two other psychic coincidences surrounding Derrida's visit to Dublin. The first was a dream I had shortly before he arrived which I wrote down and sent to him: 'He was swimming at the bottom of the sea looking at fish; his hair was multicolored like the fish and he was crying'. He replied saying he had been snorkeling in the bay of Nice the same day I had that dream and was mourning the death of a loved one. 'His hair had been died by the strong sun that day'. A second uncanny event concerned a class I was giving in University College Dublin shortly after Derrida's Dublin visit. I was tutoring a group of students on the role of the unconscious in Derrida's book *La Carte Postale: Spéculer sur Freud* when there was a knock on the door of my office. It was the university postman with a post card for me. It was a thank you note from Derrida. We exchanged a number of letters after that concerning different 'coincidences' in our respective thoughts of that time – including our shared notions of

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7. The memorial event was held on February 7, 2005, at the Newton Theological Seminary and was organized by radical theologian Eleanor Dixon. See also my memorial accounts in "Derrida Memorial: Prayers and Tears," *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006); and the section "Paris Apprenticeships: Levinas, Ricoeur, Derrida," in *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney*, edited by Daniel Veldsman and Yolande Steenkamp (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018), 36–45.



the ‘possible’ as le ‘*Peut-être*’ (which I interpreted as a poetics of eschatology in *Poétique du Possible* and *The God who May be* and Derrida interpreted as ‘messianicity’ in his later writings on hauntology and politics). I called him a ‘mystical atheist’ and he liked that. He responded to my reading of ‘*le dieu du peut-être*’ in his essay ‘As if it were Possible’.<sup>8</sup> And we continued up to his death to explore together – in epistolary exchanges and personal meetings at the Hotel Lutétia and la Tortu restaurant (his favourite Parisian haunts) – many of our developing thoughts about God and being and justice and literature; acknowledging in our last encounter a common debt not only to the mystics Eckhart and Silesius but to Nicolas of Cusa’s mystical insights into the divine *possest* and the secret letters EL. Not forgetting the ‘epiphanies’ of my compatriot, James Joyce, who Derrida loved to read and reread throughout his life. (See *Ulysse Gramophone*). In fact, once after I had spoken about Joyce and epiphany on a French TV program with Laure Adler, Derrida wrote and told me he had been reading Joyce when he turned on the television and found me speaking about the same subject. He noted that we were wearing the same kind of white cotton shirt. We laughed. What else could we do.

May he rest in peace as we await democracy to come.

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8. Derrida, “As if it were Possible ‘within such limits’” (1998), in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 347–370. His writings on messianicity, mysticism, and hauntology were explored in a number of late texts and essays including *Specters of Marx* and *Save the Name*. See Richard Kearney, “Derrida and Messianic Atheism,” in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, edited by Edward Baring and Peter Gordon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); and my reading of Derrida as a mystical atheist in Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 62–65. For the most illuminating and original interpretation of Derrida’s turn towards a messianic ‘religion with/out religion,’ see the pioneering works of John D. Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), *On Religion* (2001), *The Weakness of God* (2006), *The Insistence of God* (2016), and *What to Believe* (2023).

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