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DIVISIBLE DERRIDAS

I cannot emphasize enough that his whole philosophy is a consequence of the displacement of everyday language, a modern mocking of French as cliché. The writing survives and puts time out of joint, derails it, it makes its entry as the past-already while holding out the promise of the already-future that it is, that it will be.

—Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as A Young Jewish Saint*¹

THE CHALLENGE TO SCHOLARS interested in the “already” future of “Jacques Derrida” will be found, ironically, in simultaneously constructing and deconstructing a context for his life and works. In a previous *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* piece I referred to this process as “resisting archivalization.” So, the question is, Can one understand Derrida without claiming to know what he “really” means or what he really meant? Mark C. Taylor’s *New York Times* post-obituary Op-Ed piece², contrary to the sentiment conveyed by the title provided by editors, approaches this, but with some qualifications. One can, as many have, exhaustively trace the trajectory of Derrida’s thought and account for his vocabulary at different moments in his philosophy over the past forty or more years. However, situating Derrida in this manner does not necessarily lead to an answer to the pressing question, What did he really mean? Mark C. Taylor is acutely aware of this problem when he provides a summary of Derrida’s philosophy. The valuable detour from this approach, I’ll argue, occurs when Taylor addresses the possibilities that Derrida

NOTE: The next several issues of the JCRT will provide a series of commentaries and reflections on the works of Jacques Derrida. This essay introduces and addresses the complexity of the task.
—Eds.

¹ Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as A Young Jewish Saint*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

² Mark C. Taylor, “What Derrida Really Meant,” *The New York Times*, October 14th, 2004.

has created for thinking, which is a related but separate issue from what Derrida “really” means/meant. Taylor offers from his perspective an extension of Derridean philosophy in his analysis of the global economy, but one could select virtually anything to “theorize” or “displace.”

The point being made, then, is one relevant to the history of theory—a history that is closely associated with Derridean philosophy. Knowing who said something, when he/she said it, and what he/she intended by it does not lead to what “it” means. What something means or what it “really” means is a deferred moment within Derridean theoretical inquiry. In fact, knowing all of these conditions of a text actually makes the finality of meaning more unattainable insofar as the conditions of production open additional sequences of impasses and points of indeterminacy that add to the deconstructive process rather than subtract from it. In this instance, what something really means suffers not from a lack of possibilities but from an abundance of them. Therefore, within Derridean discourse, history, context, biography are not the degree zero of meaning. If anything, history, context, biography demonstrate the vanishing point or displacement of all explanatory discourse.

With all the commentary on Derrida we have to date, there is one text (and not the only one) that demonstrates the complexity of the interpretive condition that I’ve just described—Hélène Cixous’ *Portrait of Jacques Derrida As A Young Jewish Saint*. While she may have it wrong, initially—Jacques Derrida is not a saint in the conventional sense, not even a young Jewish one, living or dead—there is a confrontation with “what Derrida really means” that cannot go unnoticed. Just as Derrida displaces conventional understandings in everyday language, so, too, does Cixous with her reference to Derrida’s “sainthood.” “Saints,” as we know, bear witness to that which exceeds understanding, calling us to attention in the presence of the indivisible. “Catholic” saints must pass difficult tests—perform miracles, attend to or heal the sick, attest to the divinity of Jesus, suffer for the faith. While “Catholic” saints bear witness to this totality of the sacred and manifest that totality for us, other saints, “Jewish saints” perhaps, bear witness to something else—the folly of sainthood, possibly. In either case, the “saint” is obligated to testify to something—something that is complete and in excess of human comprehension—something he or she mediates. If this were not the case, then saints could not pray for us or intercede on our behalf. Jacques Derrida’s “sainthood” lies in the fact that he can do neither, then or now.

Portrait of Jacques Derrida As A Young Jewish Saint is a non-hagiography, but nonetheless celebratory of a life: “Let’s laugh with him now, as sometimes happens when he’s fed up with forever feeling sad in the same way” (88). Let us bind ourselves, Cixous declares, to the laughter of Derrida—a laughter of excess

that echoes in the empty vault of sadness . . . “in the same way.”³ How is it that Jacques Derrida’s “sad laughter” is saintly? Does he pray for us by being “fed up”? Does he love us in his sadness, laughter? Perform miracles for us by displacing everyday language? Tend to our sickness with his writing? Suffer for us? If he does these things for us, then, Jacques Derrida is a saint insofar as he does not really pray for us, or really perform miracles for us, or really love us or really tend to us or really suffer. Sainthood, this sainthood, becomes a form of “Jacques-ularity,” a laughter that manifests pointlessness and sadness—not any sadness, however, but the “same” sadness as an infinite detachment espoused by the ultimate “chirographer.” This “Jacques-ularity,” one could say, is the opposite of Sarah’s laughter insofar as Sarah laughed at “infinite” impossibility and Derrida seems to laugh at “infinite possibility.” St. Derrida, then, the jocular saint, keeps us apart, does not sound, as others would, the call for us to be bound to something. Instead, St. Derrida draws us toward laughter and binds us to nothing but the infinitely divisible point, bearing witness, finally, to his inability to bear witness, to stop his sad laughter without end:

The point to which the *point* is a thorn in his [Derrida’s] side, the whole corpus of his work bears the stigmata. The point is the absolute unity, without dimension, says mathematical discourse. The point is the true atom. The indivisible unity.

Now, the fundamental axiom of everything he says everywhere is the *divisibility of the point*.

Everything he writes, everything he thinks is a protest against the point as indivisible. He writes, divided, in order to divide it, the point. He thinks, he lives, divisibility, he divines [*divit*]. His sense of urgency on this point exceeds even his own calculations, sometimes he makes a point of attacking the point, sometimes it is his unconscious or the possibilities of the French language that work against the point.⁴

This point(lessness) (not meaninglessness) of laughter that marks the divisibility of the “indivisible” does not represent, as a fragment, the totality of the sacred; it is a “circumcised” remnant of the totality; the discarded cutting that is merely remembered as a scar. Cixous’ St. Derrida is forever saddened by the cut, laughing and lamenting as a response to the impossibility of ever stopping the division or finding what something “really” means. Here, the *point* is no-point, the impossibility of locating an indivisible “atom” that would signify the end of divisibility—a cut with no scar. It is also here that St. Derrida laughs himself out

³ See Stephen G. Nichols, “Laughter as Gesture: Hilarity and the Anti-Sublime,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 4.2 (April 2003).

⁴ Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida*, 62.

of his conventional sainthood. Derrida can do no more than bind himself to the divisible point, which is not something he can call us to do. He cannot, as other saints can, pray for us there; he cannot perform miracles for us there; and, he cannot love us there. He can, perhaps, suffer there, but not necessarily for us. He is not a saint insofar as he cannot bear witness to a totality that is indivisible. He, according to Cixous, cannot even bear witness or testify to his own suffering and detachment. For Cixous, this makes Derrida a “young Jewish saint.”

At best, Derrida’s sainthood is pointless—bound to divisibility rather than divinity. Was he one who perhaps wished to convert detachment into attachment, but could never escape the sadness of divisibility? If only part of this question can be affirmed, then the “real” meaning of Derrida is a futile objective. Hélène Cixous, on the other hand, does fulfill one quasi-saintly role. She tends to the opening/wound between laughter and sadness found in Jacques Derrida. Cixous, more or less, bears witness to Jacques Derrida’s inability to bear witness, his suffering and detachment. In a sense, she calls upon us to see his suffering, detachment, not to see suffering, detachment. Cixous calls upon us to see his indivisibility, not to see indivisibility. Jacques Derrida’s sad-laughter or laughing-sadness, therefore, is that to which “St.” Cixous tends.

Finally, this suffering, detachment that Cixous sees in Derrida’s life does not belong to Derrida alone. It is a shared philosophical suffering, detachment deeply felt as a mourning for an indivisible intimacy—an intimacy deferred. Jacques Derrida felt it publicly and acutely through his writings. With this in mind, one could view, as Cixous does, Derrida within the discourse of sainthood, deconstructed. The emphases rest here on the reversal of saintliness, a sainthood predicated on the rule of divisibility, and the infinite possibilities for more rather than less as a condition of existence. The question for the future of Jacques Derrida can be phrased as the following, Can divisibility displace divinity? One “meaning” of Derrida may be in “really” considering the implications of this question.

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