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DERRIDA, SAID, AND INFINITY

WITH THE DEATHS of Edward Said in 2003 and then, a year later, of Jacques Derrida, the 60s died for perhaps the last time. Both were men of the 60s in that they appealed primarily to those intellectuals who came of age in that era and who needed role models with whose oppositional spirit they could identify and whose accomplishments they could admire. For each man, the pivotal year was 1967, but the pivots were of entirely different kinds. Said had published one book, his Harvard dissertation, in 1966, but then discovered or recovered—perhaps *activated* is the right term—his political and even his racial identity first as an Arab and then as a Palestinian following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. A career took shape from this moment, beginning with *Beginnings*. Some six years older than Said, Derrida, who had studied at Harvard a few years earlier, arrived with a rush in 1967 with the publication of three extraordinarily accomplished and original works: *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Speech and Phenomena*. To a North American academy largely unfamiliar with any of his earlier work, it seemed as though this young man had sprung fully formed and with no apprentice period onto the stage of international philosophy.

Both Derrida and Said became famous for many things in many places, but over the years, North American academics were their primary and most faithful audience. This was striking, since both were, in a sense, African. But only in a sense: born in Jerusalem, Said had been raised largely in Cairo—not precisely as an Egyptian, but as a privileged young man whose father, a Palestinian businessman with an American passport, enabled his family to enjoy many of the pleasures available to the prosperous in a colonial setting. By the age of fifteen, young Edward was in prep school in New England, privileged in some ways but afflicted by a sense that never left him of being “between worlds,” or “out of place,” the title he gave his autobiography. The colonial experience affected him in many ways, beginning with language. He grew up speaking Arabic and English, and acquired French early on. He regarded Arabic as his mother tongue, but not because he learned it first. Indeed, he could not remember which one he acquired first: at the very beginning, he was speaking the languages of both the colonizer and the colonized.

Derrida's relation to language was conflicted in a markedly different way. Born and raised in Algeria, his version of the retroactive discovery of identity occurred at the age of eleven, when the Vichy government created for Algerians the category of *juif indigène*, which demarcated those who were, among other restrictions, no longer permitted in the "French" school. Derrida found himself segregated from those with whom he had formerly shared almost everything. Coming as a sudden intrusion of history and politics into the life of an inconspicuous young boy, this experience clearly had a formative, or at least a sharply clarifying, effect on him. He was never again able to take for granted the language, culture, or indeed the identity in which he had grown up. Although he insisted for the rest of his life that he was "monolingual," his "native" language, or rather the deeper sense of cultural identity that that the act of speaking that language conveyed, had on one occasion been wrenched from him by its owner, so that he wore it forever after as a well fitting but borrowed coat.

Early experience with the colonial condition, then, aggravated both men's sense of dislocation, a sense that was undoubtedly created in the first instance by their own extraordinary gifts, which helped them in later years to convert pain to power, displacement to insight. And, in both cases, a particular kind of insight. Photographs of Derrida and Said as young men have a certain similarity: they show, amid a group of pallid Westerners—colleagues or schoolmates—a strikingly handsome and *dark* young man. In a Western context that traced its lineage to the Enlightenment, both came to represent, in qualities of physical and metaphysical darkness—hidden, repressed, denied elements that were nevertheless essential to the functioning of the semiotic or imperial entirety. Communication and civilization, they argued respectively, were accomplished over and against, but also through and with their dominated, disempowered, and toiling others.

Somewhat surprisingly, with all these things in common, they had little interest in each other. Said compared Derrida to Foucault, and concluded that both were prevented by their "textual" orientation from capturing the essential thing, the embeddedness of the text in history. Said respected the worldliness of Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies, but was actively annoyed by Derrida's playfulness, by the incongruously serious delight he took in puns, homonyms, and portmanteau words. (Said, it must be conceded, had no sense of humor, at least in print.) For his part, Derrida simply never referred to Said. He was a philosopher, and the people who really mattered to him took articulation seriously. Said—whose contempt for those sentence-honing intellectuals who regarded criticism as an art was transparent—did not pass this particular test, his work characterized by force and rapidity rather than precision and nuance.

Said's worldly orientation did not necessarily produce superior judgment. His involvement with the Palestinian cause was intense but not always consistent or productive; at the end of his life he had rejected the two-state model and was

both advocating a binational state and promoting a group dedicated to forming an “emergency Palestinian government,” whose official description makes no reference to a commitment to co-government with the Israelis. In the first Gulf War, Said was vehemently opposed to everything—American military action, Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, the Baathist government in Iraq, Kuwait’s government, other backward or regressive Arab regimes—but did not subject himself to the discipline of articulating an actual course of action in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. In the case of Kosovo, he condemned what he called the “cowardly” NATO bombing campaign, implying that he would have preferred ground combat as a more virile course of action, and declared that any intervention would surely fail of its purpose. On this and other occasions, he seemed to follow the principle that the United States and its allies, as imperial powers, could do no right. He seemed to many to be on the political left but never had a kind word for Marx and precious few for Marxism; he lived a life of international celebrity, and his many years of engagement with the PLO were not a leftist credential.

Derrida’s politics were unsatisfying not in specifics, but on principle. He was a deconstructive philosopher, and did not set up as a sage or political commentator. He believed, first, that analysis was restricted to the text, to which its protocols were adapted. He insisted that deconstruction as a method or quasi-method yielded no predictable or fixed political commitments whatsoever, and was implicitly neither right nor left. Still, he was far kinder to Marx than Said, and even called for a “New International” in *Spectres of Marx*. But there were, for Derrida, no good or valid reasons for taking analytical shortcuts or bringing the process of reading to a premature end: he deconstructed as though he had all the time in the world. Where Said seemed obsessed with finitude—just one form of which was the finitude of the space of Israel-Palestine—and the subjugation of knowledge to power, the idea of infinity was built into deconstruction. Fresh meaning poured forth from Derrida in response to complex texts whose meanings had been thought to be settled. If his critique of the metaphysics of presence invariably suggested that things that were thought to be living, such as voices and minds, were actually mediated by death in the form of graphemes or letters, the reverse was also true. Under his attention, the dead—the settled, the established, the determined, the deceased—awoke, and entered onto an eternal life of infinite semiosis. For Said, the context of knowledge generally represented a corruption or degradation of the pretensions of knowledge to atemporal adequacy; for Derrida, context was simply accepted in a non-tragic sense as the only force capable of stabilizing meaning, since, within the text itself, there was just no stopping the caroming significations. Said held that the mission of criticism was expressed in “an unstoppable predilection for alternatives” in response to the suffocation of meaning by power; for Derrida, the text itself was constituted by alternatives without limit, which criticism merely revealed.

Their different attitudes towards finitude were directly reflected in their attitudes towards religion. They had both been raised in a religious environment—but

once again, only in a sense. As a Jew by hostile decree, Derrida was from the first respectful towards religion and especially towards Judaism, but religious belief or conviction was entirely alien to him. He read Levinas as a philosopher, which outraged Levinas. Indifferent to the career-making compliment paid him by Derrida's elaborately patient and respectful reading in "The Violence of the Letter," Levinas replied angrily, insisting that no, he had not unwittingly regressed back into philosophy when he advocated ethics as a "first philosophy" that properly came before any other. "Not to philosophize," he said, "is *not*," as Derrida had insinuated, "to philosophize still." But it was not the relation of ethics to philosophy that Derrida found most compelling in Levinas. It was the idea that ethical obligation was infinite, and could not legitimately be limited, for it overrode all other obligations or considerations, beginning with convenience, reasonableness, and common sense. When Derrida read Nietzsche, he considered whether Nietzsche was in any sense responsible for the egregious misreadings of his work perpetrated by Nazi ideologues, and decided that, since responsibility knows no limitations, he was.

Derrida considered his own responsibilities as a reader in the same light. Reading Paul de Man's wartime journalism, he registered the full horror of the situation, and then, since the task of critical reading dictated that one register everything, every last possibility, he also introduced the notion, which he found flickering in the margins, that a canny young *littérateur* such as de Man in 1941 might have intended some subtle critique of the racist arguments he seemed to be espousing. In doing so, Derrida knew that he was inviting the storm of derision that followed, from both longtime enemies and allies. Trashed from all sides as a weak-kneed attempt to preserve the memory of his old friend and colleague when the hard evidence indicated that the friend was a villain of world-historical proportions, this was in fact his bravest and most brilliant performance, in which the imperative of right reading overrode all other considerations.

Said was raised an Anglican, but his critical position was from the beginning emphatically, even polemically secular. He regarded religion as a threat when others did not see it as an issue at all; "Secular Criticism," which appeared in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* in 1983, struck many readers as oddly unmotivated, since they did not immediately grasp the significance of religion for Said. They did not see, that is, its connection to the larger field, the question of beginnings—which, in turn, was linked for Said to the even more fundamental issue of how to make one's way in the world. "Beginnings," he said in the book by that name, "inaugurate a deliberate *other* production of meaning—a gentile (as opposed to a sacred) one." One begins to become oneself when one leaves the orbit of religion, with its restrictions and assurances, and sets out to create meaning where there had been none before. The writing of a text was an exemplary beginning, since texts were produced by individuals situated in historical circumstances. From the—outset, shall we say—Said was an individualist and a humanist. For Derrida, whose message was often condensed into the phrase "always already,"

a phrase that indicated a rejection of finitude and fresh starts, the very idea of a beginning in Said's sense represented a prime candidate for deconstruction.

The sense of the infinite was given form by Derrida's marathon speaking performances, in which such considerations as audience attention span were simply set aside. He delivered *Specters of Marx* as a single, all-day lecture. I once introduced Derrida at a conference at Louisiana State University, and sat beside him at the table as he read "Le Monolinguisme de l'autre" in French. The subject had particular resonance for me as I tried to follow his discourse in that state of partial comprehension I always have when hearing French, or reading Derrida. It was not a long paper, but he read very deliberately, and it took an hour and a half. Then the questions—like the paper, in French—began, and he responded to each in full. Gayatri Spivak, who was scheduled to give the next talk in another room, left to prepare about ten minutes before her talk was to begin. Derrida continued. At about the three-hour point, a half hour after Spivak had been scheduled to begin, I interrupted to thank Derrida for his stimulating paper and generous responses, and invited the audience to continue the conversation informally later on, so we could move on to the next item on the conference schedule. I looked over at Derrida, expecting to see him nod and gather up his papers. He looked at me a long moment—and resumed speaking. When we finally arrived in Spivak's room, we found her asleep in a chair. She did not awake in an especially good mood, but with Derrida gallantly seating himself in the front row, she quickly became her entertaining self. Soon, however, her composure was sorely tested when Derrida fell conspicuously asleep. The stuff of legends.

Other routine performances also became legendary. One time, Stephen Greenblatt and I were talking, and he said, apropos of nothing at all, "One time I saw Derrida talk for two hours on a single line." "I was there!" I said. It was at Harvard in 1986, some fourteen or fifteen years before our conversation; Barbara Johnson introduced him to hundreds of more or less resistant and curious people, and he explicated—fully explicated—a brief poem by Ponge, dwelling on the first line: "Par le mot par." It was absolutely fascinating as both criticism and performance, and by the end, curiosity had been satisfied, and if all resistance had not been overcome, at least people left knowing that they had seen something remarkable. When he gave a lecture series at Chicago centered on a single Baudelaire prose-poem, the audience grew with each successive lecture, and when he concluded the final lecture by reciting the entirety of the brief text on which he had spent so many hours in the preceding weeks, the audience had the sense of meaning issuing in rays and waves and small explosions from each word, and a roar more typical of opera performances than long lectures greeted the conclusion.

On every occasion that I know of, Derrida not only spoke for as long as his subject demanded, whether or not he had flown in that day, but he made himself

available without limit to all who approached him afterwards. The mere fact of fatigue did not seem to count as an excuse for not attending to everyone fully, the acolytes, the would-be amigos, the genuine friends, the hostile, or those whose motives in seeking face time were impure; nor did he ever, to my knowledge, fail to accept with grace and patience the proffered manuscript, book, or dissertation chapter, to which he often replied by handwritten note. In this respect, too, he submitted himself to an imperative of infinite responsibility, and for this and other reasons his memory rightly evokes in many a sense of infinite gratitude and respect.

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