

LEARNING TO LIVE FINALLY

The Last Interview

JACQUES DERRIDA



Learning to Live Finally

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Jacques Derrida

An Interview with Jean Birnbaum

Translated by
Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas

With a bibliography by
Peter Krapp

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Contents

I

INTRODUCTION

JEAN BIRNBAUM

II

LEARNING TO LIVE FINALLY

III

NOTES

IV

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

V

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PETER KRAPP

I

INTRODUCTION

BEARING LOSS:
DERRIDA AS A CHILD

JEAN BIRNBAUM

This is about a certain end. Let us then hasten to begin by the end.¹

On August 19, 2004, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published an interview with Jacques Derrida. In that interview, which appeared under the title “I am at war with myself,” the philosopher appeared on a scene that was familiar to him, that of a mourning at once originary and incessantly to come, and whose imminence now seemed to color his every gesture. On this scene or stage Derrida had chosen to come forward, this time more than ever, as a survivor. That is, as both an “uneducable specter who will have never learned how to live” and a man who does not want to stop saying “yes” to life, a thinker whose entire work pays homage to the subversive intensity of existence.

10 A few weeks after the publication of this interview, during the night of October 9, Derrida succumbed to his illness. For those who had read and loved him, and who were ready to accompany him further, for a long time still and always *in the present*, it wasn't easy to find the strength. At the moment the curtain fell, one felt, almost instinctively, that it was best not to move: better just to stay there by his side, on that inexorable stage of mourning where we would have to bid him "farewell [*salut*]."

Not to disappear from the scene, then, not to leave the stage. If I may thus be forgiven an apparent aside, I would like to recall here the name of Imre Kertesz and thank the theater company of the Théâtre Ouvert in Paris, where his *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* was adapted for the stage and performed.² As early as the end of August, the director of this national center for drama, Lucien Attoun, after having read the interview with Derrida in *Le Monde*, invited me to come hear the spectral writing of this Hungarian writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature.³ There was no coincidence in this generous invitation: in this *Kaddish* of Kertesz, in these wandering words of

a man already half in the grave, what was inaugurated was indeed something like a *cogito of survival*: "I survived therefore I am." Everything is there if you listen carefully, everything returns in the form of some Derridean theme: "I was able to survive, or simply to be and exist, only in secret," confides the narrator of this strange *Kaddish*.

11 There would be much to say about these moments when the spectral writing of Kertesz seems inhabited, indeed literally ventriloquized, by the spirits (for there are more than one) of Derrida. Let me simply mark this double uncertainty, the double aporia with which the Hungarian author struggles: it is impossible, from childhood on, to know what it is "to be Jewish"—that's the original problem of identity; and it is also impossible to acquire, in the proper sense of the term, any kind of "*savoir-vivre*," any kind of "knowing how to live." No way to *learn to live* [*apprendre à vivre*], to take up the expression Kertesz uses repeatedly, never without italics, to describe the absolute solitude of his character, a former prisoner of the concentration camps, now a writer whose wife has left him: "She repeated more than once that it was from me that

she *learned to live*,” recalls the narrator of this *Kaddish* wherein the futility of such hope is expressed on every page.⁴

That’s it for the end; now let’s return to the beginning. A few months before this *coup de théâtre*, I went to the home of Jacques Derrida. It was the spring of 2004; the terrible illness was there but the hour of the *Kaddish* seemed far away. No one, at least, could really imagine it. After many hesitations, at the moment of beginning our conversation, of posing a first question, it was almost exactly the same words, the same italics, that imposed themselves upon us: “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*.”⁵ Everything began there, everything being contained there in reserve, in this enigmatic formula that gave the interview its initial impetus and its momentum.

That the philosopher himself wished to confer upon his responses a sort of testamentary charge was clear from the outset. To rediscover them today, in light of the *Kaddish*, is to confront the affirmation and hope that are displayed there, no matter the cost, one line after another: the lucid affirmation

of a death that is coming, always already there, impossible to anticipate; hope in an unrelenting fidelity—an entrusted trace, a renewed promise. It is here that we find again the theme of transmission, of legacy, the “politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” that is sought in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, on the horizon of an obligation to justice and an endless responsibility before “the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead.”⁶

This archive desire, this essential concern for generations, haunts the entire Derridean landscape. From out of this landscape two figures emerge, those of the ghost and of the child—the only witnesses at the end. To follow the traces they leave behind, let us return briefly to the two aporias of Imre Kertesz’s *Kaddish*.

First, Jewishness: a “lost child” of Judaism, Derrida often recalled the double movement of acquiescence and anxiety, of love and revolt, that characterized his relationship to the tradition of Israel. Evoking in this regard “the obscure and uncertain experience of inheritance,” he underscored the violence of an assignation of identity inscribed from the outset

14 in the immemorial time of an interminable repetition, and first of all in “the memory without memory of circumcision.” A so very dangerous assignation that seizes, “harpoons,” and threatens (with death) the Jewish child “before any fault and before any act,” that is, we might say, before even any *act of birth*.⁷ Called thus into a covenant, as if prior to any coming into the world, all those who bear a Jewish name find themselves in what Derrida calls “the situation of an at once spectral and patriarchic nursling.”⁸

And then: *learning to live*. As with Jewishness, we would have to cite text after text on this point, so much is Derrida’s reflection obsessed by this second aporia, this other way of naming the impossible: “To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death.”⁹ Living, like dying, is not something one learns. All one can really do is see it coming. Together. To try to *learn from one another* to live, in a shared anxiety and a difficult freedom, where each *expects him or herself* to die: a passing out of life, farewell [*salut*] in the night. Whence the renewed necessity not to distinguish between these

two silhouettes: the specter and the child. Not only, of course, because whoever goes through the trial of death prepares to take the *step beyond*—“as disarmed as a newly born child”—but also and especially because the task of every survivor, that is, of the one who temporarily survives the other, the friend, consists in enduring his or her disappearance.¹⁰ This survivor prepares to bear (*tragen*) the absence—or, better, *to bear the loss as one bears a child*.¹¹

Such is the burning vocation of the survivor, this apprentice ghost who never looks backward without falling back into childhood: “survival structures every instant in a kind of irreducible torsion, that of a retrospective anticipation that introduces the untimely moment and the posthumous into what is most living in the living present, the rearview mirror of an expecting-death at every moment,” writes Derrida.¹²

A few days before the publication of our interview (which here appears in its entirety and as Derrida himself had approved it), the philosopher was seated at a table at his home in Ris-Orangis. Pen in hand, he reread the contents of the interview with

16 great care, with the studious concentration of someone who always wanted to present himself as a schoolboy. Wherever a particular formulation had been edited out, we would be certain to be reproached: "Do you realize the vertiginous questions contained in these words?" His eyes were full of a gentle anger, simple, almost innocent. And he would try to catch the eye, to gain the support, of his wife, Marguerite, without whom nothing would have been possible.

In this text, Derrida had wanted to speak of his illness. Did he sense that it would be for both the first and last time? One might think so, given how painful each deletion was to him. Time was running out on all sides: he was expected that afternoon in Brazil, where an international conference was being held in his honor. His suitcases still open, he took a moment to sit down and heave a sigh: "One thing is certain, people are going to read this and think I'm just barely surviving, that I am already dead." We took these words at the time as a sort of provocation from an *enfant terrible*. No one close to him could really believe it.

17 A week later, upon his return from Rio de Janeiro, he was given the interview as it had just appeared in *Le Monde*. Several times he confided to those close to him that he was at once pleased and disheartened: "It's an obituary," he sighed, using this blunt assessment to counter the objections of his friends: "No, Jacques," they argued, "it's only a trace, and it's a trace of life." And in fact, if you listen again today to the tapes on which our interview was recorded, it is indeed the voice of Derrida you hear, perfectly intact, the same as it always was. The voice of a *ghost* that is already contemplating the irreparable. Cheerful and gentle, it is the voice of a *spectral child* who does not yet know anything about life, and who is just beginning to learn—finally: "I see myself dead cut off from you in your memories that I love and I weep like my own children at the edge of my grave..."¹³

JEAN BIRNBAUM

II

LEARNING TO LIVE FINALLY

JEAN BIRNBAUM: Since summer 2003 you've never been more visible on the public scene. You have not only published many new works but have traveled around the world to participate in several international conferences organized around your work—in London, in Coimbra, here in Paris, and, in the coming days, in Rio de Janeiro. A second film has been made about you (*Derrida* by Amy Kofman and Kirby Dirk, after Safaa Fathy's very beautiful 2000 film, *Derrida's Elsewhere*), and several publications have devoted special issues to your work, including *Le magazine littéraire*, the journal *Europe*, and a volume of the *Cahiers de l'Herne*, which contains a number of unpublished works. That's quite a lot for a single year, and yet you haven't hidden the fact that you are...

JACQUES DERRIDA: ...you can just say it, very seriously ill, and undergoing a very aggressive treatment. But let's leave that aside, if you don't mind, we are not here to issue a medical report—whether public or secret...

JB: Fine. Here at the outset of our interview, then, let's return instead to *Specters of Marx*. A crucial book, a defining work devoted entirely to the question of a justice to come, and which begins with this enigmatic exordium: "Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally.*" More than ten years later, where are you today with regard to this desire to "know how to live"?

JD: At the time—this was in 1993—what was at issue was a "new international," the subtitle and a central theme of the book. Beyond "cosmopolitanism," beyond the notion of a "world citizen," beyond a new world nation-state, even beyond the logic, in the final analysis, of political "parties," this book anticipates all the "alter-globalist" imperatives in which I believe and which appear more clearly today (though still

insufficiently, in a chaotic and unthought way).¹⁴ What I called at that time a "new international" would require, I argued back in 1993, a large number of mutations in international law and in all the organizations that establish world order (IMF, WTO, the G8, and especially the United Nations and its Security Council, whose charter would have to be changed for starters, along with its autonomous forces of intervention, its composition, and first of all its location—as far away as possible from New York City...)

As for the phrase you just cited ("learning to live finally [*apprendre à vivre enfin*]"), it came to me once the book was finished. It plays first of all, though in a serious way, on its everyday meaning. *Apprendre à vivre* means to mature, but also to educate: to teach someone else and especially oneself. When you address someone and say "*je vais t'apprendre à vivre,*" it sometimes has a threatening tone, meaning not only "I am going to teach you how to live" but "I'm going to teach you a lesson," "I'm going to get you to shape up or whip you into shape." From there—and the ambiguity of this play is even more important

24 to me—this sigh leads to a more difficult question: is living something that can be *learned*? or *taught*? Can one learn, through discipline or apprenticeship, through experience or experimentation, to *accept* or, better, to *affirm* life? This concern for legacy and death resonates throughout the entire book. It is also something that torments parents and their children: “When will you become responsible? How will you *answer* or finally *take responsibility* for your life and for your name?”

So, to finally answer your question, no, I never *learned-to-live*. In fact not at all! Learning to live should mean learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality (that is, without salvation, resurrection, or redemption—neither for oneself nor for the other). That’s been the old philosophical injunction since Plato: to philosophize is to learn to die. I believe in this truth without being able to resign myself to it. And less and less so. I have never learned to accept it, to accept death, that is. We are all survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve [*en sursis*] (and, from the geopolitical perspective of *Specters of Marx*, this

25 is especially true, in a world that is more inegalitarian than ever, for the millions and millions of living beings—human or not—who are denied not only their basic “human rights,” which date back two centuries and are constantly being refined, but first of all the right to a life worthy of being lived). But I remain uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live. I still have not learned or picked up anything on this subject. The time of the reprieve is rapidly running out. Not just because I am, along with others, the heir of so many things, some good, some quite terrible: but since most of the thinkers with whom I have been associated are now dead, I am referred to more and more often as a *survivor*—the last, the final representative of a “generation,” that is, roughly speaking, the sixties generation. Without being strictly speaking true, this provokes in me not only objections but feelings of a somewhat melancholic revolt. In addition, since certain health problems have become, as we were saying, so urgent, the question of survival [*la survie*] or of reprieve [*le sursis*], a question that has always haunted me, literally *every instant* of

26 my life, in a concrete and unrelenting fashion, has come to have a different resonance today. I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living and dying. It is originary: life *is* living on, life *is* survival [la vie *est* survie]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death. When it comes to translating such a notion, Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between *überleben*, on the one hand, surviving death, like a book that survives the death of its author, or a child the death of his or her parents, and, on the other hand, *fortleben*, *living on*, continuing to live. All the concepts that have helped me in my work, and notably that of the trace or of the spectral, were related to this “surviving” as a structural and rigorously originary dimension. It is not derived from either living or dying. No more than what I call “originary mourning,” that is, a mourning that does not wait for the so-called “actual” death.

JB: You used the word “generation.” It’s a rather tricky notion that comes up quite often in your writing: how is one to refer to what is, in your name, passed on from a generation?

JD: It’s a word I use here rather loosely. One can be the “anachronistic” contemporary of a past or future “generation.” To be faithful to those associated with my “generation,” to be the guardian of a differentiated and yet common heritage, can mean two things: first, to adhere, sometimes in opposition to everyone and everything, to certain shared exigencies, from Lacan to Althusser, and including Levinas, Foucault, Barthes, Deleuze, Blanchot, Lyotard, Sarah Kofman, and so on, not to mention all those writer-thinkers, poets, philosophers, or psychoanalysts, fortunately still living, from whom I also inherit, both in France—all those, for example, who contributed to the works you had the kindness to mention in the beginning (we must ask them to forgive us for not being able to say more about them here)—and then abroad, more numerous and sometimes closer (I could cite dozens of names here, often more important for me than many French). I am referring here, by metonymy, to an *ethos* of writing and of thinking, an intransigent or indeed incorruptible *ethos* (Hélène Cixous calls us the “incorruptibles”), without any concession even to philosophy, an *ethos* that does not let itself be scared off by what public opinion, the media, or the phantasm

28 of an intimidating readership might pressure one to simplify or repress. Whence the strict taste for refinement, paradox, and aporia. This predilection also remains an obligation. It unites not only those I just mentioned a bit arbitrarily, which is to say, unjustly, but the entire milieu that supported them. We are talking about a sort of *provisionally bygone era*, and not about such and such a person. It is thus necessary to save that or bring it back to life, at any cost. And the responsibility for this is today so urgent: it calls for an unrelenting war against *doxa*, against those who are today called “media intellectuals,” against a general discourse that has been preformatted by media powers that are themselves in the hands of certain politico-economic, editorial, and academic lobbies. At once European and global. Resistance does not mean that one ought to avoid the media. One must, whenever possible, develop them and help them to diversify, to recall them to this same responsibility.

At the same time, we must not forget that that “happy” era of yesteryear was hardly a time of peace and tranquility. Indeed far from it. Differences and differends ran rampant in that milieu, which was

29 anything but a homogeneous whole that might be summed up by some idiotic term like “1968 thought,” a term that today dominates both the press and the university as either a rallying cry or an indictment. So, even if this fidelity still sometimes takes the form of infidelity and a parting of ways, one must be faithful to these differences, that is, one must keep the discussion going. As for me, I continue to discuss, for example, Bourdieu, Lacan, Deleuze, and Foucault, whom I continue to find much more interesting than those with whom the press is so impressed today (there are, of course, exceptions). I am keeping this debate alive, trying to prevent it from becoming stale or degenerating into simple deprecation.

What I say about my generation holds just as well, of course, for the past, from the Bible to Plato, Kant, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and so on. I don't want to renounce anything, indeed I cannot. Because, you know, learning to live is always *narcissistic* (a concept, let me just note in passing, that I've tried to complicate elsewhere): one wants to live as much as possible, to save oneself, to persevere, and to cultivate all these things which, though infinitely greater and

30 more powerful than oneself, nonetheless form a part of this little “me” that they exceed on all sides. To ask me to renounce what formed me, what I’ve loved so much, what has been my law, is to ask me to die. In this fidelity there is a sort of instinct for self-preservation. To renounce, for example, some difficult formulation, some complication, paradox, or supplementary contradiction, because it is not going to be understood, or rather because some journalist who does not know how to read it, or read even the title of a book, thinks he or she understands that the reader or audience will not understand any better, and that his or her ratings and job will suffer as a result, is for me an unacceptable obscenity. It is as if I were being asked to capitulate or to subjugate myself—or else to die of stupidity.

JB: You have invented a form of writing, a writing of survival [*survivance*], which is suited to this impatience of fidelity. A writing of the inherited promise, of the safeguarded trace, and of entrusted responsibility.

JD: If I had invented my writing, I would have done so as a perpetual revolution. For it is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event, to take into account the presumed or desired addressee; and, at the same time, to make as if this writing will determine the reader, who will learn to read (to “live”) something he or she was not accustomed to receiving from anywhere else. One hopes that he or she will be reborn differently, determined otherwise, as a result: for example, these grafts of poetry onto philosophy, which are anything but confused, or certain ways of using homonyms, the undecidable, or the ruses of language, which many read in confusion because they fail to recognize their properly *logical necessity*. Each book is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader. The mass productions that today inundate the press and publishing houses do not form their readers; they presuppose in a phantasmatic and rudimentary fashion a reader who has already been programmed. They thus end up preformatting this very mediocre addressee whom they had postulated in advance.

32

And yet, out of a concern for fidelity, as you say, at the moment of leaving a trace I cannot but make it available to whomever: I cannot even address it *in a singular fashion* to someone. Each time, however faithful one might want to be, one ends up betraying the singularity of the other whom one is addressing. The same goes *a fortiori* when one writes books for a more general audience: you do not know to whom you are speaking, you invent and create silhouettes, but in the end it no longer belongs to you. Spoken or written, all these gestures leave us and begin to act independently of us. Like machines or, better, like marionettes (I try to explain this in *Paper Machine*). At the moment I leave “my” book (to be published)—after all, no one forces me to do it—I become, appearing-disappearing, like that uneducable specter who will have never learned how to live. The trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me. This is not a striving for immortality; it’s something structural. I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each

time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, “proceeds” from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing. It’s the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs?

33

This question is more relevant today than ever before. It preoccupies me constantly. But the time of our techno-culture has radically changed in this regard. The people of my “generation,” and *a fortiori* those of previous ones, had been accustomed to a certain historical rhythm: one thought one knew that a particular work might or might not survive, based upon its own qualities, for one, two, or, perhaps, like Plato, twenty-five centuries. Disappear, then be reborn. But today, the acceleration in the forms of archivization, though also use and destruction, are transforming the structure, temporality, and duration of the legacy. When it comes to thought, the question of survival has taken on absolutely unforeseeable forms. At my age, I am ready to entertain the most contradictory hypotheses in this regard: I have simultaneously—I ask you to believe me on this—the

34 *double feeling* that, on the one hand, to put it playfully and with a certain immodesty, one has not yet begun to read me, that even though there are, to be sure, many very good readers (a few dozen in the world perhaps, people who are also writer-thinkers, poets), in the end it is later on that all this has a chance of appearing; but also, on the other hand, and thus simultaneously, I have the feeling that two weeks or a month after my death *there will be nothing left*. Nothing except what has been copyrighted and deposited in libraries. I swear to you, I believe sincerely and simultaneously in these two hypotheses.

JB: At the heart of this hope there is language, and first of all the French language. When reading you, one can feel in every line the intensity of your passion for this language. In *Monolingualism of the Other* you go so far as to call yourself, with a certain irony, the “last defender and illustrator of the French language.”¹⁵

JD: Which does not belong to me, even though it’s the only one I “have” at my disposal (and even then!). The experience of language is, of course, vital. And

thus mortal. Nothing original in that. A series of contingencies have made of me a French Jew from Algeria born in the generation before the “war of independence”: so many singularities, even among Jews, and even among the Jews of Algeria. I was part of an extraordinary transformation of French Judaism in Algeria: my great grandparents were still very close to the Arabs in language and customs. At the end of the nineteenth century, in the years following the Crémieux decree of 1870, the next generation became more bourgeois: though my grandmother had to be married more or less clandestinely in the back courtyard of a town hall in Algiers because of the pogroms (this was right in the middle of the Dreyfus affair), she was already raising her daughters like bourgeois Parisian girls (16th Arrondissement good manners, piano lessons, and so on). Then came my parents’ generation: few intellectuals, mostly shopkeepers, some of modest means and some not, and some who were already exploiting a colonial situation by becoming the exclusive representatives of major metropolitan brands: with a tiny little office and no secretary, one could, for example, become the

36 sole distributor of all the “Marseille soap” in Northern Africa (I’m of course simplifying a bit). Then came my generation (a majority of intellectuals: liberal professions, teaching, medicine, law, etc.). And in 1962 just about everyone in France.¹⁶ I myself had come earlier, in 1949. It was with me—I’m hardly exaggerating—that “mixed” marriages began. In a quasi-tragic, revolutionary, rare, and risky fashion. And just as I love life, and my life, I love what made me what I am, the very element of which is language, this French language that is the only language I was ever taught to cultivate, the only one also for which I can say I am more or less responsible. That is why there is in my writing a certain, I wouldn’t say perverse but somewhat violent, way of treating this language. Out of love. Love in general passes by way of the love of language, which is neither nationalistic nor conservative, but which demands testimonials—and trials. You don’t just go and do anything with language; it preexists us and it survives us. When you introduce something into language, you have to do it in a refined manner, by respecting through disrespect its secret law. That’s what might be called unfaithful

37 fidelity: when I do violence to the French language, I do so with the refined respect of what I believe to be an injunction of this language, in its life and in its evolution. I always have to laugh, though sometimes with contempt, when I read those who think they are violating, precisely without love, the “classic” spelling or syntax of a certain French language; they always look a little like virgin boys given to premature ejaculation, while the great French language, more untouchable than ever, watches on and awaits the next in line. I describe this ridiculous scene in a rather cruel way in *The Post Card*.¹⁷

To leave traces in the history of the French language—that’s what interests me. I live off this passion, that is, if not for France at least for something that the French language has incorporated for centuries. I think that if I love this language like I love my life, and sometimes more than certain native French do, it is because I love it as a foreigner who has been welcomed, and who has appropriated this language for himself as the only possible language for him. Passion and hyperbolization. All the French of Algeria share this with me, whether Jewish or not:

38 those who came from metropolitan France were nonetheless foreigners—oppressors and standardizers, normalizers and moralizers. They provided a model, a uniform and a uniformity, a *habitus*, and one had to conform to it. But at the same time we made fun of the French from France. When a teacher arrived from the *Métropole* with his French accent we found him ridiculous!¹⁸ That's where the hyperbolization comes in: I have only one language, and, at the same time, in an at once singular and exemplary fashion, this language does not belong to me. I explain this better in *Monolinguisism of the Other*. A singular history has exacerbated in me this universal law: a language is not something that belongs. Not naturally and in its essence. Whence the phantasms of property, appropriation, and colonialist imposition.

JB: In general, you seem to have a hard time saying “we”—for example, “we philosophers” or “we Jews.” But as the new world disorder unfolds, you seem less and less reticent to say “we Europeans.” Already in *The Other Heading*, a book written during the first Gulf War, you spoke of yourself as an “old European,” as “a sort of European hybrid.”¹⁹

JD: Two reminders: I do indeed have a hard time saying “we,” but there are occasions when I do say it. In spite of all the problems that torment me on this subject, beginning with the disastrous and suicidal politics of Israel and of a certain Zionism (for there have been more than one, since the very beginning, and Israel does not represent to my eyes Judaism as a whole any more than it represents the world diaspora, or even world Zionism or an originary Zionism, which was multiple and contradictory; there are in fact fundamentalist Christians in the United States who claim to be authentic Zionists, and the power of their lobby matters more to the Bush administration than the American Jewish community, not to mention the Saudis, when it comes to determining the joint direction of American-Israeli politics), well, in spite of all that and so many other problems I have with my “Jewishness,” I will *never* deny it. I will always say, in certain situations, “we Jews.” This so very tormented “we” is at the heart of what is most worried in my thought, the thought of someone I once called, with just a bit of a smile, “the last of the Jews.” It would be, in my thought, like what Aristotle says so profoundly of prayer [*eukhē*]: it is neither true nor false. It is, in

fact, literally a prayer. In certain situations, then, I do not hesitate to say “we Jews,” as well as “we French.”

Then also, since the very beginning of my work—and this would be “deconstruction” itself—I have remained extremely critical with regard to European-ism or Eurocentrism, especially in certain modern formulations of it, for example, in Valéry, Husserl, or Heidegger. I have written a great deal on this subject and in this direction (especially in *The Other Heading*). Deconstruction in general is an undertaking that many have considered, and rightly so, to be a gesture of suspicion with regard to all Eurocentrism. When more recently I have had occasion to say “we Europeans” it is something quite different and is always related to a particular set of circumstances: everything that can be deconstructed in the European tradition does not negate the possibility—and precisely because of what has happened in Europe, because of the Enlightenment, because of the shrinking of this little continent and the enormous guilt that pervades its culture (totalitarianism, Nazism, fascism, genocides, Shoah, colonization and decolonization, etc.)—that today, in

the geopolitical situation in which we find ourselves, Europe, an other Europe but with the same memory, might (this is in any case my wish) band together against both the politics of American hegemony (in the configuration Wolfowitz, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and so on) and an Arab-Islamic theocratism without Enlightenment and without political future (though let’s not minimize the contradictions, the processes underway, and the heterogeneities within these two groups, and let us join forces with those who resist from within these two blocs).

Europe finds itself under the injunction to assume a new responsibility. I am not speaking of the European Community as it now exists or is taking shape in its current (neoliberal) majority, virtually threatened by so many internal wars (I remain very pessimistic in this regard), but of a Europe to come, a Europe trying to find itself. In (“geographical”) Europe and elsewhere. What we call in a certain algebraic shorthand “Europe” has certain responsibilities to assume, for the future of humanity and the future of international law—that’s my faith, my belief. In this case, I do not hesitate to say “we Europeans.” It’s not

a question of hoping for the creation of a Europe that would be another military superpower, protecting its market and acting as a counterweight to other blocs, but of a Europe that would be able to sow the seeds of a new alter-globalist politics. Which is for me the only possible way out.

This force is underway. Even if its motivations are still confused, I don't think anything can now stop it. That's what I mean when I say Europe: an alter-globalist Europe, transforming the concept and practices of sovereignty and international law. And having at its disposal a genuine armed force, independent of NATO and of the United States, a military power that is neither offensive nor defensive nor even preventive and that would be able to intervene without delay in support of a new United Nations whose resolutions are finally respected (for example, for this is most urgent, in Israel, though elsewhere as well). This is also the place from which we might best think certain forms of secularism [*laïcité*], for example, or social justice, so many European legacies.

(I just mentioned "secularism." Please allow me a long parenthesis here. It is not about the veil at school

but about the veil of "marriage." I unhesitatingly supported and endorsed with my signature the welcome and courageous initiative taken by Noël Mamère, even though same-sex marriage is an example of that great tradition inaugurated by Americans in the nineteenth century under the name of *civil disobedience*: not defiance of the Law but disobedience with regard to some legislative provision in the name of a better or higher law—whether to come or already written into the spirit or letter of the Constitution.²⁰ And so I "signed" in this current legislative context because it seems to me unjust for the rights of homosexuals, as well as hypocritical and ambiguous in both letter and spirit. If I were a legislator, I would propose simply getting rid of the word and concept of "marriage" in our civil and secular code. "Marriage" as a religious, sacred, heterosexual value—with a vow to procreate, to be eternally faithful, and so on—is a concession made by the secular state to the Christian church, and particularly with regard to monogamy, which is neither Jewish (it was imposed upon Jews by Europeans only in the nineteenth century and was not an obligation just a few generations ago in Jewish

Maghreb), nor, as is well known, Muslim. By getting rid of the word and concept of “marriage,” and thus this ambiguity or this hypocrisy with regard to the religious and the sacred—things that have no place in a secular constitution—one could put in their place a contractual “civil union,” a sort of generalized *pacs*, one that has been improved, refined, and would remain flexible and adaptable to partners whose sex and number would not be prescribed.²¹ As for those who want to be joined in “marriage” in the strict sense of the term—something, by the way, for which my respect remains totally intact—they would be able to do so before the religious authority of their choosing. This is already the case in certain countries where religiously consecrated same-sex marriages are allowed. Some people might thus unite according to one mode or the other, some according to both, others according to neither secular law nor religious law. So much for my little conjugal paragraph. It’s utopic, but I’m already setting a date!

What I call “deconstruction,” even when it is directed toward something from Europe, is European; it is a product of Europe, a relation of Europe to

itself as an experience of radical alterity. Since the time of the Enlightenment, Europe has undertaken a perpetual self-critique, and in this perfectible heritage there is a chance for a future. At least I would like to hope so, and that is what feeds my indignation when I hear people definitively condemning Europe as if it were but the scene of its crimes.

JB: With regard to Europe, are you not at war with yourself? On the one hand, you note that the attacks of September 11th are destroying the old geopolitical grammar of sovereign powers, thereby signaling the crisis of a certain concept of the political, which you define as properly European. On the other hand, you remain attached to this European spirit, and first of all to the cosmopolitical ideal of an international law whose decline you describe, or whose survival...

JD: The cosmopolitical has to be “raised to a new level” (*aufheben*) (see, for example, “On Cosmopolitanism”).²² When we speak of the political we are using a Greek word, a European concept that has always presupposed the state, the form of a *polis* linked to a national

territory and to autochthony. Whatever ruptures there may be within this history, this concept of the political remains dominant even at the very moment so many forces are in the process of dismantling it: the sovereignty of the state is no longer linked to a territory, nor are today's communication technologies or military strategy, and this dislocation does in fact bring about a crisis in the old European concept of the political. And the same can be said for the concept of war, or the distinction between civilian and military, or national or international terrorism. I try to explain this at some length elsewhere (for example, in *Rogues* and in the interview I gave after 9-11).²³ But I don't think we should just take it out on the political. And I would say the same for sovereignty, which I believe in some situations can be a good thing, for example, in fighting against certain global market forces. Here again we are talking about a European legacy that must be at once retained and transformed. I argue something similar in *Rogues* with regard to democracy as a European idea, something that at once has never existed in a satisfactory way and remains to come. And, in fact, you will always find this gesture in my

work, and I have no ultimate justification for it, except to say that it's me, that that's where I am. I am at war with myself, it's true, you couldn't possibly know to what extent, beyond what you can guess, and I say contradictory things that are, we might say, in real tension; they are what construct me, make me live, and will make me die. I sometimes see this war as terrifying and difficult to bear, but at the same time I know that that is life. I will find peace only in eternal rest. I thus cannot really say that I assume this contradiction, but I know that it is what keeps me alive, and makes me ask precisely the question you recalled earlier, "how does one learn to live?"

JB: There is in your work a very old reflection on the relationship between knowledge and power, between research institutions and the state. Here again it seems to be from a certain European promise that your faith in "the Humanities of tomorrow" ("The University Without Condition") is renewed.²⁴

JD: What I call the university of tomorrow, which must not be a conservatory, presupposes that teaching

48 take on the mission inscribed in its very concept. A European and relatively modern concept that ordered the university to organize its search for truth without any conditions attached. That is, to be free to know, criticize, ask questions, and doubt without being limited by any political or religious power. The defining moment can be found in Kant, who puts philosophy in the lowest class, below medicine, law, and, of course, theology, because it is the furthest removed from power, but who grants it a certain superiority insofar as it must be free to say everything it considers to be true, on the condition that it says it within the university and not outside it—and that was my objection to Kant. In the originary concept of the university there is this absolute claim to an unconditional freedom to think, speak, and critique.

JB: But then what are we to do in the case of Holocaust revisionists who deny the existence of gas chambers and the reality of the Shoah?

JD: One has the right to ask all questions. But when one responds to questions with falsifications

49 or counter-truths, gestures that have nothing to do with honest research or critical thought, then that's something else. It's either incompetence or unjustified instrumentalism, and it has to be reprimanded, just as a bad student has to be reprimanded. It's not because one has the status of professor that one can say whatever one wants in the university, even though we must reserve for the university the possibility of posing questions and reexamining things. If Faurisson had simply said: "Let me have the right to do historical research, let me have the right not to take certain witnesses at their word," then I would have been all for letting him work.²⁵ But when he then wants, against a mountain of evidence, to go from these critical questions to affirmations that are unacceptable from the point of view of attested and proven truth, then he is simply incompetent, harmful as well, but first of all incompetent. And thus unworthy of presenting himself as a university professor. In this case, debate is impossible. But, in principle, the university remains the only place where critical debate must remain unconditionally open. This is a legacy I hold dear, even if my own relation

to the university is rather complicated. It is a legacy from Europe and from Greek philosophy; it was not born elsewhere. And despite all the deconstructive questions I pose with regard to this philosophy, I continue to say a certain yes to it, and I will never propose simply jettisoning it. I have never turned my back on either philosophy or Europe. My gestures are of another sort. I will never say—and you know what I'm referring to here—"Forget Europe! Goodbye [*salut*], philosophy!"... No more than I will ever say "marriage is a fundamental value for society."

JB: In two recent works (*Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* and "Rams"), you return to this important question of *salut* [farewell, greeting, salvation], of impossible mourning, in short, of survival.²⁶ If philosophy can be defined as the "attentive anticipation of death" (see *The Gift of Death*), might not deconstruction be considered an interminable ethics of the survivor?²⁷

JD: *The Gift of Death* was meant to be, among many other things (for example, a new critical

reinterpretation of responsibility as, according to Patōcka, something essentially Europeo-Christian), an attempt to give another reading of Kierkegaard's Abraham. Despite my enormous admiration for this thinker, I tried to show that he perhaps Christianized the story of the binding of Isaac. I regret not having treated there and then the question of Christian marriage, as I have recently done in *Le Parjure* (just published in the *Cahier de l'Herne*).

As I recalled earlier, already from the beginning, and well before the experiences of surviving [*survivance*] that are at the moment mine, I maintained that survival is an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament. But, having said that, I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say—at least from "*Pas*" (in *Parages*) on—about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in

me from an unconditional affirmation of life.²⁸ This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible. I am never more haunted by the necessity of dying than in moments of happiness and joy. To feel joy and to weep over the death that awaits are for me the same thing. When I recall my life, I tend to think that I have had the good fortune to love even the unhappy moments of my life, and to bless them. Almost all of them, with just one exception. When I recall the happy moments, I bless them too, of course, at the same time as they propel me toward the thought of death, toward death, because all that has passed, come to an end...

III

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

“I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, ‘proceeds’ from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing.” So said Jacques Derrida in the course of an interview with Jean Birnbaum of *Le Monde* during the summer of 2004. Expressed here in a particularly pointed and personal form is a claim about the nature of writing—indeed about the trace more generally—that can be found already in some of Derrida’s earliest works. In his 1971 essay “Signature Event Context,” for example, Derrida argued that writing “must continue to ‘act’ and to be readable even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers

56 for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead.”²⁹ Though Derrida always insisted that this readability of the trace in the absence of the author is “structural” and not contingent upon the actual death of the author, that the author’s disappearance or death is implied in the trace whether he or she is already dead *or* still living, this final iteration of the claim during the summer of 2004 holds for us today an exemplary, even a testamentary value. Published here in English for the first time under the title *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida’s interview with *Le Monde* both bears witness to his claim about the repeatability and survival of the trace and puts it to the test of a unique and unrepeatable event. For if Derrida’s death in October of 2004 changed nothing about the status of the trace or of his own writing, it will have changed much about how we are to receive, read, and translate him today.

This is the place where, in several previous works over the past two decades, we took the opportunity to thank Jacques Derrida *personally* for the encouragement and help he gave us in the translation

of his work, help understanding his original French and, oftentimes, help finding an appropriate English translation. This time—this time for the first time—we could benefit from no such help, not from the author of the work and not from the one we always considered to be our first reader. While we will thus continue to feel and to express our gratitude for the life and work of Jacques Derrida, and while we will continue to look to his other works for clues about how to read and translate him, we must now rely more than ever on the help and readings of others.

We would thus like to thank our students at DePaul University for the many fine suggestions they made on the translation, both in a graduate seminar in philosophy at DePaul and during a Study Abroad program in Paris. Martin Hägglund of Cornell University also gave us many helpful comments on an earlier draft of the translation, as did Jean Birnbaum, who was able to supplement the written word with recollections of his spoken interview with Derrida.

Finally, we would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to Marguerite Derrida, who knows better than anyone what Jacques Derrida meant in his final

interview when he spoke not only of a certain *hope* for the survival of his work but of an essential and irreducible *uncertainty* regarding its ultimate destiny and destination: for whenever one writes, said Derrida in August of 2004, “one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs?”

58

PASCALE-ANNE BRAULT AND MICHAEL NAAS

IV

NOTES

¹ [Birnbaum's French title is "*Porter le deuil*," an idiom meaning *to be in mourning* or *to go into mourning*. Birnbaum, following Derrida, is playing on the fact that "*porter*" by itself means to carry or bear and can be used to describe the carrying or bearing of a child.—TR.]

² Let me recall that, in the Jewish tradition, the Kaddish is a prayer of sanctification recited in particular during the period of mourning. *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston, IL : Hydra Books, 1997).

The play performed at the Théâtre Ouvert was directed by Joël Jounneau, who, with Jean Launay, was also responsible for the script. The actor was Jean-Quentin Châtelain.

³ [Kertesz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002.—TR.]

⁴ [Or "That it was I who *taught* her how to live." As Derrida points out at the beginning of the interview, "*apprendre*" can mean either to *learn* or to *teach*, so that "*apprendre à vivre*" can mean either *learning to live*, that is, *learning oneself to live*, or *teaching another (or oneself) to live*.—TR.]

⁵ You will have recognized the exordium of *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvii; the emphasis here is Derrida's.

⁶ *Specters of Marx*, xix.

⁷ “Abraham, l’autre,” in Joseph Cohen, Raphael Zagury-Orly, *Judéités, Questions pour Jacques Derrida* (Paris : Galilée, 2003), 16, 20, 25, 40. [The French here is *acte de naissance*, literally, a “birth certificate.”—TR]

⁸ *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 42.

⁹ *Specters of Marx*, xviii.

¹⁰ *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 34.

¹¹ “[I]f *tragen* speaks the language of birth, if it must be addressed to a living being present or to come, it can also be addressed to the dead, to the survivor or to their specter, in an experience that consists in bearing the other in the self, just as one bears one’s loss or one’s mourning—and melancholy,” from “Rams : Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, edited by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 159.

¹² *Aporias*, 55.

¹³ “Circumfession” in *Jacques Derrida*, by Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 41.

¹⁴ [The word “*alter-mondialist*,” which Derrida returns to later in the interview, is most commonly translated “anti-globalist.” But since Derrida is proposing not to abandon all global or world initiatives but to transform them, to help fashion “another,” better world, we have opted for “alter-globalist,” a term that has gained some currency in certain international movements.—TR.]

¹⁵ *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 47.

¹⁶ [1962 is the end of the Algerian “war of independence.”—TR.]

¹⁷ *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 184.

¹⁸ [In *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida parses the French word *Métropole* as “the Capital-City-Mother-Fatherland, the city of the mother tongue” (42).—TR.]

¹⁹ *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 6-7.

²⁰ [On June 5, 2004, Noël Mamère, mayor of the town of Bègles in the Gironde region of France, presided over the first

same-sex marriage in France. He was temporarily relieved of his duties as mayor for performing this illegal ceremony and the marriage was subsequently annulled by the courts.—TR.]

²¹ [The word *pacs* is an acronym (“Pacte Civil de Solidarité”) for the provision adopted by French law in 1999 allowing both heterosexual and same-sex couples to enter into a civil contract or, translated literally, a “Civil Pact of Solidarity.”—TR.]

²² In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 1-24.

²³ “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” an interview with Giovanna Borradori, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-136, 186-193. The original French version of this interview appears in *Le “concept” du 11 septembre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2004).

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The University Without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 50-54.

²⁵ [Robert Faurisson, a well-known Holocaust revisionist in France, was a professor for many years at the Université Lyon 2.—TR.]

²⁶ *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2003) [This

is the augmented French version of *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)]; “Rams” in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, 135-163.

²⁷ *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.

²⁸ [“Pas” was first published in 1976 in *Gramma* 3/4, Lire Blanchot 1, and then republished in *Parages* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986), 19-116.—TR.]

²⁹ “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 316.

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