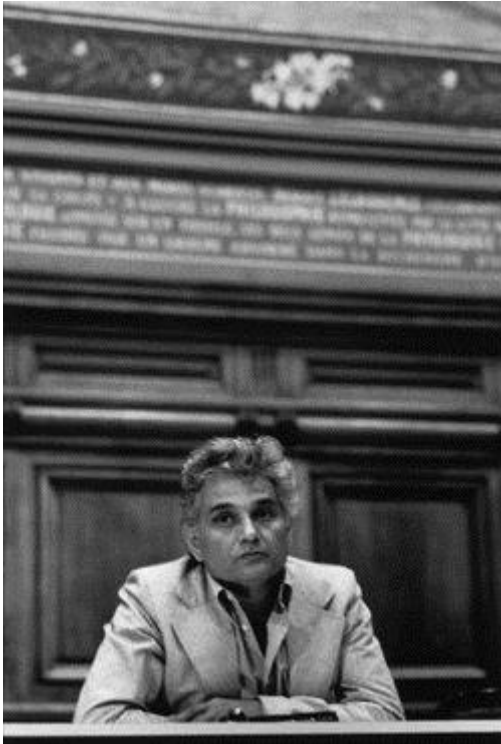


DERRIDA: THE EXCLUDED FAVORITE

IN MAY OF 1951, AT THE AGE OF TWENTY, JACQUES DERRIDA TOOK THE ENTRANCE EXAMS FOR THE PRESTIGIOUS ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE A SECOND TIME, HAVING FAILED, AS MANY STUDENTS DO, IN HIS FIRST ATTEMPT THE PREVIOUS YEAR. FUELED BY AMPHETAMINES AFTER A SLEEPLESS WEEK, HE CHOKED ON THE WRITTEN PORTION AND TURNED IN A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER. THE SAME MONTH, HE WAS AWARDED A DISMAL 5 OUT OF 20 ON HIS QUALIFYING EXAM FOR A LICENSE IN PHILOSOPHY. "THE ANSWERS ARE BRILLIANT IN THE VERY SAME WAY THAT THEY ARE OBSCURE," THE EXAMINER WROTE, ENCAPSULATING A SENTIMENT ABOUT DERRIDA'S WORK THAT HAS SINCE BECOME A COMMONPLACE:



AN EXERCISE IN VIRTUOSITY, WITH UNDENIABLE INTELLIGENCE, BUT WITH NO PARTICULAR RELATION TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY...CAN COME BACK WHEN HE IS PREPARED TO ACCEPT THE RULES AND NOT INVENT WHERE HE NEEDS TO BE BETTER INFORMED.

IN AMERICA, DERRIDA, WHO DIED IN 2004, LEFT AS BIG A MARK ON HUMANITIES DEPARTMENTS AS ANY SINGLE THINKER OF THE PAST FORTY YEARS—ACCORDING TO A RECENT SURVEY, ONLY WORKS BY MICHEL FOUCAULT AND PIERRE BOURDIEU ARE CITED MORE OFTEN. BUT IN FRANCE, THE GATEKEEPERS OF HIGHER LEARNING REGARDED HIM WITH AMBIVALENCE AND, TO HIS DEVASTATION, KEPT HIM AT ARM'S LENGTH FOR MUCH OF HIS CAREER. ACCORDING TO A NEW

BIOGRAPHY BY BENOÎT PEETERS, DERRIDA, A FRENCH JEW FROM ALGIERS ILL-PREPARED FOR THE INTELLECTUAL GRIND AND NOXIOUS FOOD OF PARISIAN STUDENT LIFE, MAY EVEN HAVE "CONTEMPLATED" SUICIDE AFTER HIS FIRST ATTEMPT TO GET INTO THE ÉCOLE NORMALE. HE FINALLY GAINED ADMISSION ON HIS THIRD TRY, DESPITE A DISASTROUS PERFORMANCE IN HIS ORALS. ASKED TO COMMENT ON A PASSAGE FROM DIDEROT'S ENCYCLOPÉDIE, HE LATER RECOUNTED:

I DECIDED THAT THIS TEXT WAS A TRAP...THAT EVERYTHING ABOUT IT, IN ITS FORM, WAS AMBIGUOUS, IMPLIED, CONVOLUTED, COMPLICATED, SUGGESTED, MURMURED....I DEPLOYED ALL MY RESOURCES TO UNCOVER A RANGE OF MEANINGS FANNING OUT FROM EACH SENTENCE, EACH WORD.

THE JURORS WERE UNIMPRESSED. "LOOK, THIS TEXT IS QUITE SIMPLE," ONE COMPLAINED. "YOU'VE SIMPLY MADE IT MORE COMPLICATED AND LADEN WITH MEANING BY ADDING IDEAS OF YOUR OWN."



IT'S HARD TO SAY WHAT'S MORE REMARKABLE: THAT THE SO-CALLED FATHER OF DECONSTRUCTION WAS ALREADY HATCHING HIS APOSTASY WHILE JUST BARELY OUT OF HIS TEENS, OR THAT THE UNDERTAKING INVOLVED SO MUCH SUFFERING. PEETERS' DERRIDA IS A NERVOUS WRECK: "A FRAGILE AND TORMENTED MAN," PRONE TO NAUSEA, INSOMNIA, EXHAUSTION, AND DESPAIR. BY THE SUMMER OF 1960, AFTER FAILING TO GET A PROMISED POST AS A MAÎTRE ASSISTANT AT THE SORBONNE AND HAVING SPENT THE YEAR TEACHING IN A PROVINCIAL CAPITAL INSTEAD, HE WAS ON ANAFRANIL, ONE OF THE ORIGINAL ANTI-DEPRESSANTS, WHICH HAD JUST APPEARED ON THE MARKET. DURING ANOTHER BOUT OF THE BLUES, HE WROTE TO A FRIEND FROM HIS INFIRMARY BED, "I'M NO GOOD FOR ANYTHING EXCEPT TAKING THE WORLD APART AND PUTTING IT TOGETHER AGAIN (AND I MANAGE THE LATTER LESS AND LESS FREQUENTLY)."

THAT'S NOT A BAD DESCRIPTION OF DECONSTRUCTION, AN EXERCISE IN WHICH UNRAVELING—OF MEANING AND COHERENCE, OF THE KIND OF BINARY LOGIC THAT TENDS TO POPULATE PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS—IS THE PATH TO ILLUMINATION. IN DERRIDA'S READING, WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS' PREOCCUPATION WITH FIRST PRINCIPLES, A DETERMINATION TO CAPTURE REALITY, TRUTH, "PRESENCE,"—WHAT HE CALLED IN REFERENCE TO THE PHENOMENOLOGIST EDMUND HUSSERL "THE THING ITSELF"—WAS DOOMED. HE TRACED THIS IMPULSE IN THINKERS FROM ARISTOTLE TO HEIDEGGER, FAMOUSLY ARGUING, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT A TENDENCY TO FAVOR THE IMMEDIACY OF SPEECH OVER THE REMOTENESS OF WRITING WAS UNTENABLE. (ARISTOTLE'S FORMULATION: "SPOKEN WORDS ARE THE SYMBOLS OF MENTAL EXPERIENCE AND WRITTEN WORDS ARE THE SYMBOLS OF SPOKEN WORDS.") THROUGH A SERIES OF DEFT AND DELICATE MANEUVERS, DERRIDA SOUGHT TO SHOW THAT SPEECH IS INEXTRICABLE FROM WRITING, NO MORE OR LESS AUTHENTIC. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO DEPENDS, AS ALL DIFFERENCES DO, ON A PROCESS OF ENFORCED ABSENCE OR REPRESSION: A IS A ONLY BECAUSE IT IS NOT B, AND THUS B IS NEVER ENTIRELY OUT OF THE PICTURE.

WITH THE TENACITY OF A GUMSHOE, HE HAUNTED TEXTS BY PLATO, ROUSSEAU, SAUSSURE, LEVI-STRAUSS, MARX, AND HEGEL, AMONG DOZENS OF OTHERS, EXPOSING THE WAYS IN WHICH THE SUBJUGATED OR BANISHED HALF OF A CRUCIAL PAIR—INSIDE/OUTSIDE, MAN/WOMAN, REASON/MADNESS, SIGNIFIER/SIGNIFIED—CONTINUED TO PLAGUE ITS PARTNER. HIS CLOSE READINGS WERE AT ONCE HIGHLY SPECIFIC AND ABSTRACT, BUT LENT THEMSELVES TO EXTRAPOLATION. AS THE SCHOLAR MARK C. TAYLOR NEATLY PUT IT: "THE GUIDING INSIGHT OF DECONSTRUCTION IS THAT EVERY STRUCTURE—BE IT LITERARY, PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS—THAT ORGANIZES OUR EXPERIENCE IS CONSTITUTED AND MAINTAINED THROUGH ACTS OF EXCLUSION." AND WHAT IS EXCLUDED "DOES NOT DISAPPEAR BUT ALWAYS RETURNS TO UNSETTLE EVERY CONSTRUCTION, NO MATTER HOW SECURE IT SEEMS."

ACTS OF EXCLUSION, IT TURNS OUT, WERE CENTRAL TO DERRIDA'S PERCEPTION OF HIMSELF—THE TRIGGERS, AS HE SAW IT, FOR HIS DEPRESSION. FOREMOST AMONG THESE WAS HIS EXPULSION FROM HIS ALGERIAN LYCÉE IN 1942, WHEN VICHY FRENCH OFFICIALS LOWERED THE JEWISH STUDENT QUOTA FROM 14 TO 7 PERCENT.

“NO TRAUMA, FOR ME, PERHAPS, WHICH IS NOT LINKED ON SOME LEVEL WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF RACISM AND/OR ANTI-SEMITISM,” HE WROTE IN A NOTEBOOK IN 1976—A STATEMENT COMPLICATED BY HIS CONTROVERSIAL DEFENSE, TWELVE YEARS LATER, OF HIS FRIEND AND ALLY, THE YALE SCHOLAR PAUL DE MAN, WHO WAS POSTHUMOUSLY REVEALED TO HAVE PUBLISHED ANTI-SEMITIC NEWSPAPER ARTICLES IN NAZI-OCCUPIED BELGIUM. (REFERRING TO THE MOST EGREGIOUS OF THE PIECES, DERRIDA ADMITTED, “NOTHING IN WHAT I AM ABOUT TO SAY...WILL HEAL OVER THE WOUND I RIGHT AWAY FELT, WHEN, MY BREATH TAKEN AWAY, I PERCEIVED IN IT...AN ANTI-SEMITISM THAT WOULD HAVE COME CLOSE TO URGING EXCLUSIONS, EVEN THE MOST SINISTER DEPORTATIONS.”)

SUBSEQUENT EXCLUSIONS WERE LESS TRAUMATIC BUT STILL MORTIFYING. IN 1964, DERRIDA BECAME A MAÎTRE ASSISTANT AT THE ÉCOLE NORMALE, AND, TWENTY YEARS LATER, A DIRECTOR OF STUDIES AT THE ÉCOLE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES, WHERE, FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE SUPERVISED DISSERTATIONS. BUT DESPITE HIS GROWING INTERNATIONAL RENOWN—BUTTRESSED BY THE US SUCCESS OF OF GRAMMATOLOGY (1976), WHICH SOLD NEARLY 100,000 COPIES, AND WRITING AND DIFFERENCE (1978)—HE WAS REJECTED FOR PROFESSORSHIPS AT BOTH THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS AT NANTERRE AND—THE ULTIMATE PRIZE—THE COLLÈGE DE FRANCE. (PIERRE BOURDIEU PUT HIM UP FOR ELECTION THERE BUT WAS UNABLE TO RALLY SUPPORT.) ONE SOURCE TOLD PEETERS THAT BECAUSE DERRIDA WAS NEVER MADE A FULL PROFESSOR IN FRANCE, “HE HAD NO ASSISTANT OR SECRETARY TO HELP HIM, WITH THE RESULT THAT HE HAD TO ‘LOCATE, PHOTOCOPY, COLLATE, AND CARRY EVERYTHING BY HIMSELF.’” ACCORDING TO ANOTHER, A FORMER STUDENT, “WRITING YOUR THESIS WITH HIM MEANT THAT YOU WERE MORE OR LESS FINISHED IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM. IN FRANCE, EVERYONE WHO WORKED WITH HIM SUFFERED FOR IT.” DERRIDA, PEETERS WRITES, BORE “A GRUDGE TOWARDS THE FRENCH UNIVERSITY SYSTEM, IN WHICH, THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, HE WOULD FEEL ‘AN OUTCAST.’ ”

OF COURSE, FOR HARD-LINE DECONSTRUCTIONISTS, TO READ A MAN’S WORK THROUGH HIS BIOGRAPHY IS AN INTELLECTUAL ERROR ON A PAR WITH THE “METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE.” DERRIDA WAS PREDICTABLY DISMISSIVE OF WHAT HE CALLED “BIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS (COMPLETE WITH STYLE FLOURISHES AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT) TO WHICH GREAT HISTORIANS OF PHILOSOPHY OCCASIONALLY RESIGN THEMSELVES,” AND PEETERS, WHO TIPTOES AROUND DERRIDA’S THOUGHT DOING HIS BEST NOT TO STEP IN IT, TAKES THAT OBJECTION TO HEART. (HIS BOOK, WHICH HE DECLARES AT THE OUTSET “HAS REFUSED TO EXCLUDE ANYTHING,” SUFFERS FROM THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT AFFLICTS DERRIDA’S VEXED BINARIES: A SURFEIT OF EQUIVALENCY—AN ACCUMULATION OF DETAIL UNTRoubLED BY AN APPRAISING EYE.) YET THE IMPRESSION IS UNAVOIDABLE: DERRIDA’S VANTAGE POINT AS A PERENNIAL OUTSIDER, “A LITTLE BLACK AND VERY ARAB JEW” (HIS WORDS) FED NOT ONLY HIS DESPAIR BUT IN FUNDAMENTAL WAYS HIS WORK.

IS IT TOO MUCH OF A STRETCH TO SAY THAT DECONSTRUCTION WAS AT SOME LEVEL AN ALLEGORY OF PERSONAL EXCLUSION? AND DID THIS ADD TO HIS APPEAL IN THE UNITED STATES? IN AMERICA, DERRIDA’S WORK WAS OFTEN DEPLOYED IN BATTLES OVER IDENTITY. UNLIKE IN FRANCE, HIS FIRST US READERS ENCOUNTERED HIS THEORY IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF SOCIAL UPHEAVAL. THE CULTURE WARS OF THE 1980S WERE IN PART ABOUT THE EFFORTS BY LIBERALS TO MAKE UNIVERSITIES—EVERYTHING FROM THEIR LITERARY CANONS TO THEIR ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS—MORE INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE, TO BETTER REFLECT SOCIETY AT LARGE. AND BY THE END OF THAT DECADE, DERRIDA HAD BEEN TAKEN UP BY DISCIPLINES ACROSS THE HUMANITIES—PHILOSOPHY WAS THE RARE EXCEPTION—WHERE HE WAS PERCEIVED AS A NATURAL ALLY, SOMEONE WHO IMPLICITLY UNDERSTOOD HOW CULTURAL PHENOMENA AND INSTITUTIONS CONTRIVED TO SUPPRESS THE VOICES OF MINORITIES, WOMEN, AND GAYS. (EVEN HIS DETRACTORS PAID HOMAGE TO HIS INFLUENCE, SINGLING HIM OUT AS A HARBINGER OF AMERICA’S INTELLECTUAL DECLINE.

IN THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND, ALLAN BLOOM INVEIGHED AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION FOR ENABLING AMERICA'S "RELATIVIST" TURN—FOR CONFERRING PHILOSOPHICAL LEGITIMACY ON AN INSIDIOUS QUEST TO UNDERMINE REASON, TRUTH, AND REALITY ITSELF.) WAS IT JUST A COINCIDENCE THAT HIS FIRST MAJOR AMERICAN TRANSLATOR, GAYATRI SPIVAK, THE SCHOLAR WHO PLUCKED THE TERM "DECONSTRUCTION" OUT OF OF GRAMMATOLOGY AND PUT IT UNDER A SPOTLIGHT IN HER INFLUENTIAL PREFACE TO THE BOOK, WAS AN INDIAN-BORN US TRANSPLANT AND A WOMAN?

BUT AMERICANS, IT'S BEEN SAID, OFTEN GOT DERRIDA WRONG: DECONSTRUCTION WAS NEVER INTENDED AS A REPRODUCIBLE METHODOLOGY, LET ALONE A POLITICAL WEAPON. (TO HER CREDIT, SPIVAK, WHO WENT ON TO HELP FOUND THE FIELD OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES, APPLYING DERRIDEAN THEORY TO REPRESENTATIONS OF THIRD WORLD "SUBALTERN," DID NOT PRESENT IT THIS WAY.) THE CRITIC FRANÇOIS CUSSET, WHO DEVOTED A WHOLE BOOK TO EXPLAINING FRENCH THEORY'S UNLIKELY US SUCCESS, NOTES THE "IRONIC PARADOX THAT THE LEAST DIRECTLY POLITICAL AUTHOR IN THE CORPUS OF FRENCH THEORY (COMPARED TO DELEUZE, LYOTARD, FOUCAULT) WAS THE MOST POLITICIZED IN THE UNITED STATES." EVEN DERRIDA CLAIMED ASTONISHMENT AT THE WAY HIS ELUSIVE AND POETIC GLOSSES ON HEIDEGGER AND HUSSERL WERE REFASHIONED INTO A BLUNT, ALL-PURPOSE TOOL—A KIND OF LETHAL DEEP-READING APP—WIELDED BY AMERICANS DETERMINED TO WAGE WAR ON A CANON THEY HADN'T ALWAYS BOTHERED TO READ.

LOOKING BACK ON THE TUMULT IN 1997, HE VENTURED A GENTLE REBUKE:

"DECONSTRUCTION WAS BECOMING NOT ONLY AN ACT, AN ACTIVITY, A PRAXIS, BUT IT WAS BECOMING PRACTICABLE, AND, AS THEY SAY IN FRENCH, PRACTICAL, IN THE SENSE OF EASY, CONVENIENT, AND EVEN SALABLE AS A COMMODITY.... THE PARADOX OF THIS SITUATION...IS THAT WHAT WE WERE THEN TRYING TO APPROPRIATE BY MAKING IT POSSIBLE, THAT IS, FUNCTIONAL AND PRODUCTIVE, WAS IN ANY CASE THAT WHICH HAD ALREADY SHOWN ITSELF EXPLICITLY AS IMPOSSIBLE."

NO DOUBT, SOME AMERICAN USES OF DECONSTRUCTION WERE CRUDELY LITERAL. (ONE TYPICAL LATE-1980S FEMINIST AVOWAL: "THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORK OF GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF UNJUST POWER RELATIONS INVOLVES THE DESIRE TO THINK OUTSIDE THE STRUCTURES OF THOUGHT AND CONSCIOUSNESS WE HAVE INHERITED. BUT BECAUSE OUTSIDE THESE STRUCTURES THERE IS NO THOUGHT AND SIGNIFYING LANGUAGE, THE VERY THINKING THAT DECONSTRUCTS THEM MUST ALSO INEVITABLY RECONSTRUCT THEM.") BUT BY THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM, AS THE CULTURE WARRIORS DISARMED AND DECONSTRUCTION RETREATED TO A MORE MODEST POSITION IN LITERARY STUDIES, BECOMING JUST ONE OF MANY READING STRATEGIES AT THE DISPOSAL OF SCHOLARS, THE EXCESSES IN ITS NAME HAD BY AND LARGE DISAPPEARED.

STILL, THE UNDERLYING INTUITION—THAT IN DERRIDA'S ABSTRACTIONS WAS A POWERFUL STORY ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING SHUT OUT AND UNHEARD—MAY HAVE BEEN SOUND. HE LACED HIS WORK WITH ELLIPTICAL ALLUSIONS TO HIS LIFE, AND COMPOSED AT LEAST ONE EXPLICITLY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK, "CIRCUMFESSION," (1993). (IN IT, HE MENTIONS HIS BROTHER PAUL, WHO DIED BEFORE HE WAS BORN AND WHOM DERRIDA REPLACED AS YOUNGEST SON: "FROM THIS I ALWAYS GOT THE FEELING OF BEING AN EXCLUDED FAVORITE, OF BOTH FATHER AND MOTHER...EXCLUDED AND FAVORITE AT TWO JUXTAPOSED MOMENTS...AND IT IS STILL GOING ON.") HE ALSO REFERRED TO PHILOSOPHERS' LIVES IN HIS OWN WORK, CITING AT LENGTH IN GLAS (1974), FOR EXAMPLE, IN A DISCUSSION OF HEGEL'S VIEW OF THE FAMILY, LETTERS HEGEL WROTE TO HIS SISTER AND FIANCÉE.

SHORTLY BEFORE HIS DEATH, DERRIDA TOLD AN INTERVIEWER,

I AM AMONG THOSE FEW PEOPLE WHO HAVE CONSTANTLY DRAWN ATTENTION TO THIS: YOU MUST (AND YOU MUST DO IT WELL) PUT PHILOSOPHERS' BIOGRAPHIES BACK IN THE PICTURE, AND THE COMMITMENTS, PARTICULARLY POLITICAL COMMITMENTS, THAT THEY SIGN IN THEIR OWN NAMES, WHETHER IN RELATION TO HEIDEGGER OR EQUALLY TO HEGEL, FREUD, NIETZSCHE, SARTRE, OR BLANCHOT, AND SO ON.

HOW HE IMAGINED HIS OWN BIOGRAPHY WOULD BE USED TO ILLUMINATE HIS THEORY IS HARD TO SAY. THE EPIGRAPH OF PEETERS' BOOK, A LINE FROM "CIRCUMFESSION," IS, IN TYPICAL DERRIDEAN FASHION, INSTRUCTIVE CAUTION: "NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW FROM WHAT SECRET I AM WRITING AND THE FACT THAT I SAY SO CHANGES NOTHING."

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Emily Eakin

Martine Franck/Magnum Photos - Jacques Derrida at the Sorbonne, June, 1979

Jacques Derrida drawing by David Levine

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