

TRIBUTE TO JACQUES DERRIDA

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It is difficult not to repeat what has been said; though it is necessary to repeat a lot of what has been said. I want to concentrate on one aspect that seems particularly important for Jacques Derrida's teaching in New York, the university political aspect of a transatlantic relationship that is today more than ever in trouble. For European universities, Derrida was the American challenge: the utmost of what could be made of the Humanities and, more precisely, in the teaching of philosophy as a kind of theoretical practice, a renewed practice of reflection within the manifold subjects and topics of Arts and Science Faculties. In the American academy, on the other hand, Derrida appeared as the representative of a kind of thinking, a practice of thought, that revived the dead matter of a bygone history, the dead end of European philosophy. He was philosophy live.

To have found a stage and, as he doubtlessly would have put it, a hospitality where that was possible – in Europe it became possible only because of that American precedence – was an achievement that cannot be overestimated. The spirit of European philosophy, since Hegel's days the pale ghost of a past in an infamous present; the genius of philosophical teaching, in other words, materialized on the other side of the Atlantic, and it was from here that it created a new sense, both literary and democratic in the American sense, of philosophy.

People were not particularly grateful for this performance, it was too much for most of them, on both sides of the ocean, which was about to become, as he sadly witnessed, a greater and deeper divide. He was too much for the specialists, the analytical folks in particular, because philosophy loves to hide, and hates to be dragged into performance, onto the scene that is the rest of the university. Being hated for that, scandalized and defamed, was a painful experience against which he found no remedy, but he became patient, however sensitive he remained, in that storm of aggression, in which he had to endure in his own body the crisis of legitimacy of the educational body that is still called – and who knows for how long – the University.

He has been loved, however, for the very same reason, that very passion for the university, by the students of the world, has been read and is being read non stop around the world. The first philosopher to become a media star like a movie or pop or soccer star, restored to philosophy a public role, opened to philosophy an audience, beyond the ideological crisis management and political partisanship of ordinary practical philosophy. And he has managed to deal with this love of his students in an economy of love, so to speak, to oppose the world of the straight philosophical male bonding with an inventiveness and wit and freedom of thought, which seemed to bring back, all of a sudden, what had been attractive in the philosophical faculty in the distant days when students of all subjects came to listen to the philosophers.

The figure of the teacher, a Gestalt rather than a persona (neither guide nor leader, both of which are pre-democratic figures of the political), the teacher as a philosopher, is not just one European phantom among others. In Derrida's project of a "Politics of Friendship" it may be one of the motives shared between western and eastern thought. The secret, though, of Derrida's transatlantic interventions is not the global phantasm of neo-imperialisms of sorts. This is a different type of friendship than that of contractual politics: another, new sense of the political. It proves Derrida as a post-Christian philosopher in the most profound sense, who, from the roots of his Jewish wisdom, subverts and turns around the catastrophic turnout of a

corrupted Christian world order. As a philosopher, in fact, of Christian caritas as well as a dedicated lover of language (in all respects of the genitive “of”), he held on to love, kept loving, while the breakdown of Christian politics had become paramount. He had to leave this world in pain, but with the incomparable courage of someone who lives on.

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