

DERRIDA/AMERICA 2/20/05 Jacob Burns Moot Court Room at Cardozo, 10.00 a.m.

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**RADICAL PATIENCE**  
**THE FALL INTO HISTORY**

After the death of Jacques Derrida, several questions that had been in the air since quite a while – a decade, or so, at least – took on a more definite form, questions of growing urgency as well as curiosity (not to speak of amazement) towards a work's impact, importance and effect, whose force – performative as well as constative – seemed to be both, at the same time, definitive in crucial respects (and in these respects already a historical, even classical, part of the canon), as well as limitless, undefinable, beyond limitation (and in this respect unforeseen, of a sublime nature). The lifework of every great philosopher, one might say, confronts us with this double legacy, but there are, coming to think of it, not so many great philosophers in one's time; and for that reason one is rarely confronted in a lifetime with the double edge of this type of a legacy – and certainly not often enough in order to be prepared for such a moment of evaluation: a moment like a shock in which time makes itself felt in the routine of history.

It may be the mark of Derrida's most singular importance, the singularity of this importance, that it is hard, if not impossible, in this moment for us to decide what is important in his work in the first sense, and what is memorable in the second sense: in what will be included in the canon of philosophy as a historical discipline of learning, and in what is to be taken, in the second sense, as a desire to learn, as a coming to know, and is to be further developed – contested and worked through – of unfinished labors, the never ending attempt at a new politics of learning. For this second, meta-academic aspect of a legacy beyond the mere stuff left behind, Derrida has left us with some appliances, terminological instruments, notorious supplements, dead metaphors and, more precisely, paleonyms: the old names, namely, of friendship and the love of learning, names that can serve as the mnemonical means of a tradition of philosophy in permanent deconstruction.

It is not to be expected, and never was expected in Derrida's own pronouncements, that his work would escape the logocentric tradition's mode of "being in deconstruction." So what about this particular Derridean mode's of writing a deconstructive legacy? A legacy "of" deconstruction with respect to its auto-involvement "in," and subjection to, deconstruction? A historical question, no doubt, albeit in a sense of history that forgoes the histories commonly told. "Always historicize," that categorical imperative of Arts and Science Faculties at large, turns more radical in Derrida's case: in deconstruction's open auto-reflection of its own coming to happen. Derrida's death is both, the foreseeable and the unforeseen moment of this happening, of deconstruction's fall into history – a moment that was bound to occur, but was in no way to be anticipated. What about the immanent fortune of deconstruction? A fortune that is no future in the common sense of expectations, although it may materialize in future deconstructions, or manifest itself in future reflections on the nature of deconstruction.

The two aspects mentioned (the classical and the sublime) of a heritage to be cultivated on the one hand, and the provocation to be encountered on the other may be taken as a first, however dubious, indication. There may be something like a legacy in deconstruction (including deconstruction's "being in deconstruction"), but there is most certainly, I have to underline, no mission in deconstruction. There is no mission with respect to a future that would be consistent with the name of deconstruction, by now itself a paleonym, and there is no politics

of deconstruction to be drawn from that name, except in some “new sense of the political,” maybe, a sense of friendship we have been missing more than ever, since Derrida gave us a first sense of it, in the sphere of politics.

There is a reason and a coincidence, at this moment, for some assessment of the recognition scene after Derrida, the geopolitical drama of Higher Education in the age of a brutally emerging New World Order. What, if not a mission, can a legacy of philosophizing amount to in a moment like this one? We may have – most of us have, indeed – come to our own consequences, lines of argumentation, deconstructions of sorts, variants more or less radical. We may have argued, discussed, revised, rethought, but now we have more to do: to conceive of a history, a conception of history, after deconstruction. The conference is dedicated to this necessarily new sense of the historical, from which the task of a new conception of the political has to take its departure.

Obviously, the urgency is different in different fields of application, and the paleonym of history may be the trickiest of them all. In order to begin, at this moment, the politics of deconstruction remain the first priority: a priority of academic politics, research politics, to begin with. From the start, Derrida’s work had begun to revise the agenda and the curriculum. Talking about the political heritage of Derrida at a time of immense geopolitical significance and strain does not mean talking among Derrideans on Derridean perspectives. Derrida was only the best example, he was exemplary in the true sense. It is the project of the conference to identify and to open up the zones of deconstructive concern where this agenda is at stake.

Interestingly enough, Derrida’s death has provoked not only moving tributes, but also most scandalous responses. Far from proving Derrida’s growing irrelevance, those responses prove deconstruction’s undiminished potential to challenge. Whereas the French State was ready to embrace the enfant terrible, after all, as the a last representative of the old French genius and, moreover, of a Europe to come, the American media and academy’s attempt to use his death as an opportunity to dismiss him seems a sign of alarming weakness rather than of strength. They seemed incapable of putting up with the provocation of an Old Europe all too easily discredited at large. Derrida had become famous via America and deconstruction had come to represent something like the American dream in theory; he had made the American academy the very site of theoretical passage, the very idea of the academic passage that is the officium of university education. The fact that, in the end, Derrida was perceived more as a threat than a promise, is the clearest indication of another loss or threat of loss, the loss of the idea of the old university, the vanishing of the shared transatlantic ground of what Derrida in one of his last lectures, shortly after receiving the Adorno prize in Frankfurt, has cited as “The Idea of the University.”

The current geopolitical state of American politics necessitates a new look at what has been the largest reception of a new European key and movement in cultural politics since World War 2. For a moment, it looked as if, indeed, *Deconstruction Was America*, since it had become what it was “in America” – in a process of importation, translation, and return that was fit to redefine the age-old transatlantic project of Higher Education, fit even to newly define a more than American, transatlantic “way of life.” Deconstruction became French and even more so European “theory” by going to, and passing through America. That path suggests new questions about the geography of theory, the politics of Europe and America, East and West, the world at large. Specifically, now looking back in mourning rather than in celebration, is it possible to trace out the zone, whose name or, rather, paleonym is Europe? Not only America’s Europe, but the crypt of good old America’s shared hopes, and the project of Europe’s bygone dream America: that friendly and fruitful heterotopia rather than the out-

dated, left behind utopia of modern progress? The medium of such negotiations has been for several decades the philosophy of Derrida, the field of negotiations opened by his initiatives and inventiveness, a potency of thought whose urgency and liveliness finds symptomatic expression in the scandal it keeps provoking as powerfully after the death of the author as in the hey days of his deceiving momentary stardom.

We do know now much better, in this moment of the emerging historicity of deconstruction, “the terms of discourse” connected with Derrida’s arrival, success, and survival in the academy. They gave, as Peter Goodrich elegantly put it (elegantly, as always), to Derrida’s “writings their *nomos*” – a Greek term most pertinent not only to the sphere of law, but even more so to that of education and politics – a *nomos* marked by the caesura: of the “suspension of judgement” (for example), of an ethics of indirection (in the exemplary sense mentioned), and of the unprecedented *aporia*, finally, of a waiting that is no awaiting, no merely utopian or messianic expectation, but radical patience. Derrida’s new sense of politics that comes under the old name of friendship, displaces the contractual terms of *amicitia*: unconditional – even if there were no friend – unconditional friendship. It is one of waiting, of radical patience in the face of what is happening. Derrida is cool, the coolest ever. He endures in the face of what remains, and remains to come. Most ardent in his desire to know, the icy fire of his politics of love educates.

Less cool, heated in the everyday debates of professing, the professors (us, to be sure) have to make up their minds. There is no chance for the academy on both sides of the Atlantic as well as for the academies built upon their paleonym, the university at large, in the globality of its dissemination and displacement, to do politics without revising its space of instruction, its ways of coming to know, its ethics of sharing its knowledge, its conditions of free debate, in short: in cultivating its institutional zone of learning and desire to know. The new sense of the political includes a new politics and economics of knowledge, in the collegiality of students and professors rather than of academic salesmen and their paying customers.

The reason, finally, I dwell on this aspect, is the following. There is more to be mentioned of the 3 sponsoring institutions of this conference than meets the eye, Cardozo Law, NYU, and the European University Viadrina (upon the river Oder, that is), on the European East coast, East of Berlin. Plan and program of this conference is part of these institutions shared Doctoral Programs – the Poetics and Theory Program in case of NYU, whose permanent visiting professor Jacques Derrida was for a decade, and the Program in Representation—Rhetoric—Knowledge of the Viadrina, which was opened by the same Derrida about 10 years ago. Teachers, students and visitors of this transatlantic doctoral enterprise form the majority of those who are scheduled to speak and discuss during the next two days. A zone of coordinated trans-disciplinary study, this doctoral cooperative enjoyed the support of the three universities mentioned, and experienced the lasting effect of Derrida’s teaching. What we have learned with him rather than from him is the modesty of learning that is the mark of the true philosopher.