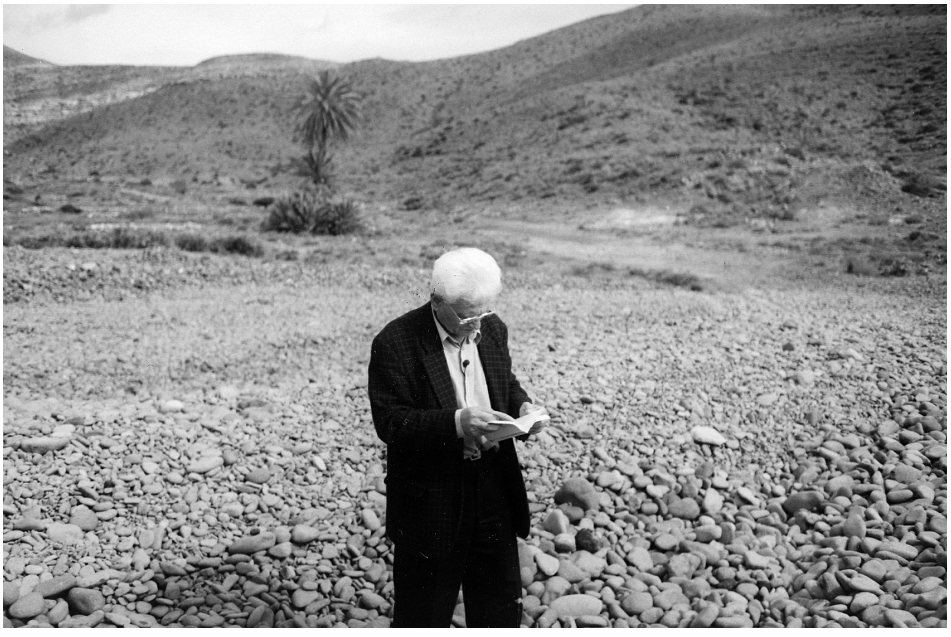

***D'ailleurs, Derrida*. Dir. Safaa Fathy, 1999. Still. Courtesy Safaa Fathy.**

Re JD: Remembering Jacques Derrida

Derrida's Futures

EDUARDO CADAVA

This *Grey Room* dossier seems necessary and important for several reasons—to express our gratitude for everything that Jacques Derrida has given us and will continue to give us; to register, each in his or her own way, what Derrida's being, his work, his lucidity, and his generosity have meant to us; but also, in some way, to register that we are together, around his death, and in its significance. As he so often told us, the work of mourning—something entirely unique and yet always shared—is not one kind of work among others. There would be no work, no friendship, no love, no time, without mourning. This is why, in a certain sense, we might say that, before us, in advance of us, he will have sought to teach us how to mourn, no matter how impossible that mourning might be: he will have sought to teach us how to speak after a death, and perhaps even after his death. If the dangers of speaking of the dead, of using them, despite our best intentions, for our own ends or desires, of speaking of our own relations with them, make speaking nearly impossible, he always insisted that "silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness" also was impossible.[1] What we know, then, is that we must say what we can, even in the face of our knowledge that he and his work always will exceed our words and our memories.

But what better way is there for us to say what we can than to remember his words, because for so many years these have been the words that made so many of ours possible. In an interview he gave to *Le Monde* in August of last year, he asserted that he had never learned to live, because this also would require that he learn to die—to take mortality into account and to experience life as survival. And even though he reminds us in the same interview that, after Plato, to philosophize has meant nothing other than to learn to die, he claims to have remained "uneducable" in regard to the wisdom of such learning.[2] Nevertheless, we know that—even though there are of course many others—it is precisely the words *death, mourning, finitude, experience, memory,* and *survival* that he sought to teach us to read. But it is because he wanted us to encounter

these words, and perhaps especially the word *death,* that these words now make it so difficult to understand the changes and transformations produced by his death. But we know—and, again, from him—that the process of mourning begins before death, with friendship, because as he told us again and again there can be no friendship without this knowledge of finitude. This is why, in a certain sense, we did not need to wait for his death to learn what it could teach us, or tell us, about his and our mortality. And yet, as he noted soon after Althusser's death, when the death itself takes place, no matter how much we may have prepared ourselves for it, we still experience it as the end of the world, because with this death the world is no longer the same as it was before it. This is why, for him, the very condition of the other's approach is an experience of solitude and forgetting, an experience, that is, of what he used to call "the desert." And, as we know, with death, with his death, "the desert grows."

This is why he also sought to teach us—as if in anticipation of the fact that one day we would need to confront his death—that, even though it is with ends and loss that we have to live, life and survival are inscribed within them. As he said, again in the same interview,

> life is survival. To survive means to continue to live, but also to live after death. In regard to translation, Walter Benjamin underlines the distinction between afterlife, on the one hand, to survive death, as a book can survive the death of an author, or a child the death of parents, and, on the other hand, living on, to continue to live. . . . All of the concepts that have helped my work, especially those of the trace or the spectral, were linked to "survival" as a structural dimension. [Survival] constitutes the very structure of what we call existence. We are structurally survivors, marked by the structure of the trace, of the testament. Everything I have said about survival as the complication of the life-death opposition proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival, this is life after life, life more than life, the most intense life possible.[3]

As we seek to think about the many ways in which his work lives on beyond his death, about the legacies of his work, here and in the future, we should remember these words and these lessons because one of his most cherished words, one of the words he gave to us, thought for us, one of the words he associated with survival, was *memory* itself. In an interview from 1983 now over twenty years ago, he brought together the threads of memory and loss, of memory and survival, and claimed them to be at the heart of his work and thought. There, he says:

> If there were an experience of loss at the heart of all this, the only loss for which I could never be consoled and that brings together all the others, I would call it loss of memory. The suffering at the origin of writing for me is the suffering from the loss of memory, not only forgetting or amnesia, but the effacement of traces. I would not need to write otherwise; my writing is not in the first place a philosophical writing or that of an artist, even if, in certain cases, it might look like that or take over from these other kinds of writing. My first desire is not to produce a philosophical work or a work of art: it is to preserve memory.[4]

Let us preserve the memory of Jacques Derrida, the memory of which he so often wrote but also the memory we all have of him and his work. And it is here, in our memory of the multiple legacies he has left for us, in our recognition of the inescapability of his thought, not only for us but also for "our time," that we can perhaps remember several of his other lessons. These lessons—about philosophy, literature, history, politics, religion, economics, ideology, law, rights, nationalism, racism, colonialism, genocide and torture, the media, university institutions, capitalist imperialisms of all kinds, rogue states, the war on terror, justice, responsibility, language, life, death, and, again, mourning—are more urgent and necessary than ever before. Together they remain the most significant, probing, and thinking resources we have to address what is rapidly becoming the signature of "our time": the acceleration of violence, economic oppression, inequality, hunger, war, and ethnic, religious, and cultural conflict that today defines so many instances of suffering and death throughout the world. It should never be said—as so many have, and will no doubt continue to say—that his work did not engage history and politics, that his work retreated from what remains most important to us. From the beginning he proceeded in the conviction that his philosophical activity did not require a political or ethical practice because it already was, from the start, an ethicopolitical practice.

If he always sought to do several things at once and in several ways at once, it is because he believed that nothing ever happens in isolation, that nothing is ever done alone. This is why so much of his work seeks to understand the nature of relation—for example, that between texts; between literature and philosophy, history, politics, economics, or technology; between the self and others; between different communities or nations; between language and the domains of history and politics; and among the past, the present, and the future. In each instance his work seeks to trace the relations that prevent the assertion of an identity—of a subject, a community, a nation, a state, a discipline, a race or ethnicity, a moment in time, and so forth—that would be self-identical to itself,

that would refuse its relation to others. This insistence on relation belongs, therefore, to an ethicopolitical project that begins in the presupposition that we are always, in advance, related to others and that seeks to rethink the axiomatics that support claims for the agency and responsibilities of subjects without reference to the relations in terms of which these subjects are constituted in the first place—whether they are conceived as individual, collective, or national—not in order to make ethical and political statements or actions impossible (as many accused him of doing, because these statements or actions would no longer be said to originate solely within individuals or single communities) but, on the contrary, to facilitate a path for their very future.

Indeed, as he so often reminded us, there can be no ethics or politics that does not begin with this sense and question of relation, and this is why what compelled him to read and to write was the possibility and chance of altering and transforming the relations in which we live. As we consider what has remained for us of his work, of our memories, of our relations to both him and his work, we should remember that these relations and filiations are always multiple. As he knew, it is because we are inscribed within a great number of filiations that we are obliged to reflect on the nature of inheritance and on what we inherit from his work: a unique filiation can never be a filiation. At the same time, as inheritors of his work—and this is what destines us to a future—we also must tear ourselves from it in order to sign or countersign this inheritance; that is, in order to inherit it. In his words, "it is from possible infidelity that one breaks from one's inheritance, that one assumes it, that one takes it up and countersigns it in order to move it somewhere else."[5] An inheritance that would transmit only dead things and archives, that simply would seek to reproduce the past for future generations, cannot be an inheritance. We can only inherit an inheritance that, within the multiple filiations that make it what it is, even as they fragment and multiply it, simultaneously invents inheritance in order to mobilize it in another direction.

This is why, after Derrida's death, it is our task—our ethical, political, historical, and philosophical task—to carry what he has left for us, to bear it and move it toward the invention of a future. As he so often told us, we must always, at every moment, invent the world anew—we must, in the words of his dear friend, Jean-Luc Nancy, "invent a world, instead of being subjected to one, or dreaming of another."[6] If these responsibilities are without model or guarantee, we should remember that it is "where certainties come apart," where they begin to disappear, that we can gather the strength "that no certainty can match."[7] This is what Derrida's writings mean for us today: the possibility of a future, but a future that promises us a world different from the one in which

we presently find ourselves—a world that, because it would always remain open, because it would presume the unconditional right to ask critical questions even about the form and authority of the question, is still to come. This means that his death does not at all signal the twilight or end of theory—as so many would wish to have us believe (a desire that reveals much more about their anxieties over his survival, even after his death, than about anything else)—but rather the ongoing effort to inaugurate a world. Let us now invent this world, without, but always with him.

Let us remember him, armed with the knowledge that he gave us: that mourning itself "provides the first chance and the terrible condition of all reading." Mourning authorizes reading. It gives us the right to read. It is what makes reading possible and, now, within the sadness in which we all find ourselves, without him, but forever with him, it is what asks us to continue reading, to continue our mourning through the reading that this impossible experience makes possible. I believe that he would want these acts of reading to open up a space in which we might work to come to terms with his absence, to engage, as he always did, the space of our most pressing historical and political issues—a space in which we might mourn him, and remember him, thanks to his gracious generosity. Let us read, then, without, but always with him, without, but always after him, because, as we know, to speak and read in memory of him is to speak of the future, ours, but also his.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, "In Memoriam: Of the Soul," in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, rev. ed., trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), xvi.

2. Jacques Derrida, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même," with Jean Birnhaum, in *Le Monde*, 19 August 2004, http://www.lemonde.fr.

3. Derrida, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même."

4. Jacques Derrida, "Dialanguages," with Anne Berger, in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994,* ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 143.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Á voix nue," in *Sur parole: instantanés philosophiques* (Saint-Étienne: Éditions de l'Aube, 1999), 60.

6. Jean-Luc Nancy, "What Is to Be Done?," trans. Leslie Hill, in *Retreating the Political: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy,* ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 158.

7. Nancy, "What Is to Be Done?," 158.