

JOHN D. CAPUTO
Syracuse University

JACQUES DERRIDA
(1930-2004)

WITH THE DEATH OF JACQUES DERRIDA on October 8, 2004, some thirty-seven years after he first burst upon the scene in 1967 with three explosive books of philosophy, the world lost one of its deepest, most original and most provocative figures. Born of an assimilated French speaking Jewish family in Algeria on July 15, 1930, he emigrated to France to study philosophy in 1950 and in 1957 made his first visit to the United States, to which he would be linked by the stars. Named after the American child movie star Jackie Coogan—his birth name was “Jackie”—he was to achieve there an astonishing and long standing celebrity perhaps even greater than in France.

His death was greeted with both an outpouring of moving eulogies from his admirers and several sharp attacks on his legacy from both liberal and conservative media. On what passes for an American left these days, the *New York Times* obituary was so mean-spirited and unfair that it elicited a letter of protest that ended up going on-line and collected the signatures of thousands of academics, architects, writers, artists and other intellectuals, while the *Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, simply put a right wing hit man on the job. Scott McLemee’s pieces in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* stood out as a glaring and thoughtful exception to this media attack.

Why the controversy? Because the genius of Derrida lay in brushing against the grain. He showed the left that Enlightenment “reason” was to a great extent an historical construction, a more scrupulous account of which would have to include a lot more about faith, contingency and context. He showed the right that “tradition” was also a construction that was a far more complex and polyvalent mix, a more scrupulous study of which would turn up a lot more than family values and proof that God was on your side. He did this, to boot, in a sometimes playful punning style of writing and of thinking—he was a great and early admirer of James Joyce—that violated the protocols of received academic discourse, a transgression that even the Marxists had avoided. Those

who knew Derrida know that he always had the devil in his eyes. Pursuing a program calculated to madden everyone, his care for more scrupulous renderings of reason and of tradition was greeted with unscrupulous attack. This is not without precedent. The same of course could have been said for Socrates, who had the same fatal genius for stirring up the great sleeping Athenian steed, for St. Paul, who was run out of more towns than he could count, and for Kierkegaard, at whose burial there was actually a riot.

The fuss was about something Derrida called “deconstruction,” a word that has actually made it into high-popular culture and shows signs of making it into the common vocabulary. What everyone has more or less picked up about deconstruction, even if they have never read a word of it, is its destabilizing effect on our favorite texts and institutions. Derrida exposes a certain coefficient of uncertainty in all of them, which causes all of us, right and left, religious and non-religious, male and female, considerable discomfort. That was the side of deconstruction that grabbed all the headlines and made it in the 1970s a kind of academic *succès de scandale*. Without reading very closely, it all looked like a joyous nihilism. But what his critics missed (and here not reading him makes a difference!), and what never made it into the headlines, is that the destabilizing agency in his work is not a reckless relativism or an acidic scepticism but rather an affirmation, a love of what in later years he would call the “undeconstructible.” The undeconstructible is the subject matter of pure and unconditional affirmation—“viens, oui, oui” (come, yes, yes)—something unimaginable and inconceivable by the current standards of imagining and conceiving. The undeconstructible is the stuff of a desire beyond desire, of a desire to affirm that goes beyond a desire to possess, the desire of something for which we can live without reserve. His critics had never heard of this because it was not reported in *Time Magazine*, but they did not hesitate to denounce what they had not read. This was the case with the famous signatories of the letter to Cambridge University who disgracefully declared Derrida unworthy of an honorary degree because he undermined the standards of responsible scholarship—the most elemental tenet of which would surely have been first to read what you criticize in public (a close second being, if you do read it, try to understand it).

It was not surprising that in the last fifteen years Derrida would start talking about religion, telling us about his “religion (without religion),” about his “prayers and tears,” and about the Messiah. He would even write a kind of Jewish *Confessions* called “Circumfession,” a haunting and enigmatic journal he kept while his beloved mother lay dying in Nice, a diary *cum* dialogue with St. Augustine, his equally weepy “compatriot.” Modern day Algeria is the ancient

homeland (Numidia) of Augustine, and Derrida even lived on a street called the *Rue Saint Augustin*. In this text, the son of these tears (Augustine/Jacques) circum-fessed (to God/“you”) about his mother (Monica/Georgette), who lay dying on the northern shores of the Mediterranean (Ostia/Nice), to which both families had emigrated. This side of Derrida even makes some admirers nervous, for they would prefer their Derrida straight up, not on what seems to them religious rocks.

His critics failed to see that deconstructing this, that and everything in the name of the undeconstructible is a lot like what religious people, especially Jews, would call the “critique of idols.” Deconstruction, it turns out, is not nihilism; it just has high standards! Deconstruction is satisfied with nothing because it is waiting for the Messiah, which Derrida translated into the philosophical figure of the “to come” (*à venir*), the very figure of the future (*l'avenir*), of hope and expectation. Deconstruction’s meditation on the contingency of our beliefs and practices—on democracy, for example—is made in the name of a promise that is astir in them, for example, of a democracy “to come” for which every existing democracy is a but a faint predecessor state.

But if this religious turn made his secularizing admirers nervous, it made religious people still more nervous. For after all, by the standards of the local rabbi or pastor, Derrida “rightly passes for an atheist,” which gives secular deconstructors much comfort (but giving comfort is not what deconstruction was sent into the world to do). When asked why he does not say “I am” an atheist (*je suis, c'est moi*), he said it was because he did not *know* if he were, that there are many voices within him that give one another no rest, and he lacks the absolute authority of an authorial “I” to still this inner conflict. So the best he can do is to rightly pass for this or that, and he is very sorry that he cannot do better. That, it seems to me, is an exquisite formula not only for what might be called Derrida’s atheism, but also for faith. Rightly passing for this or that, a Christian, say, really is the best we can do. It reminds me of the formula put forward by Kierkegaard’s “Johannes Climacus” (more Socratic figures!) who deferred saying that he “is” a Christian but is doing the best he can to “become” one.

Derrida visits upon all of us, Christian and Jew, religious and secular, left and right, the unsettling news of the radical instability of the categories to which we have such ready recourse, and he raises the idea of a still deeper idea of ourselves which (religiously?) confesses its lack of categories. He exposes us to the “secret” that there is no “Secret,” no Big Capitalized Secret to which we have been wired up—by scientific reason, by poetic or religious revelation, or by political persuasion. We make use of such materials as have been available to us,

forged in the fires of time and circumstance. We do not in some deep way know who we are or what the world is. That is not nihilism but a quasi-religious confession, the beginning of wisdom, the onset of faith and compassion. Derrida exposes the doubt that does not merely insinuate itself into faith but that in fact constitutes faith, for faith is faith precisely in the face of doubt and uncertainty, the passion of non-knowing. Violence on the other hand arises from having a low tolerance for uncertainty so that Derrida shows us why religious violence is bad faith. On Derrida's terms, we do not know the name of what we desire with a desire beyond desire. That means that leading a just life comes down to coping with such non-knowing, negotiating among the several competing names that fluctuate undecidably before us, each pretending to name what we are praying for. For we pray and weep for something that is coming, something I know not what, something nameless that in always slipping away also draws us in its train.

May he rest in peace, he who was sent to us to give us no peace.

Adieu, Jacques.

JOHN D. CAPUTO is the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Humanities at Syracuse University. His latest book *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, will appear from Indiana University Press by the end of 2005. He recently co-edited *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Indiana UP, 2004), based on the 2001 "Religion and Postmodernism" conference at Villanova. He also serves as editor of the Fordham University Press book series *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* and Chairman of the Board of Editors of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*.

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