

A black and white close-up portrait of Jacques Derrida. He has white hair and is looking slightly to the left. He is holding a dark cigarette in his mouth, which has a bright red glowing tip. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a light-colored shirt.

SEAN GASTON

*the impossible
mourning of*
jacques
derrida

THE IMPOSSIBLE MOURNING
OF JACQUES DERRIDA

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Écart: Derrida and the Gap

The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida was written in the first two months after the death of Jacques Derrida. How does one respond to the death of Jacques Derrida? How does one mourn for Derrida, who warned of the dangers of mourning (as idealization and interiorization), while insisting that mourning is both unavoidable *and* impossible? The *gap* that the death of Jacques Derrida has left behind is open, gaping: it cannot be closed. One can perhaps only respond by tracing the gaps (*écarts*, *béances*, *décalages*), the histories of the gap, in Derrida's work.

Plato and Hegel always recognized the importance of *the gap*: they invoke the gap (the opening, the separation, the division) and they put it to work. The inescapable gaps that *cannot* be bridged, that *cannot* be filled, play a central role in Derrida's thought and in our response to his death. The gaps in Derrida's work resist *the gap*; they swerve, deviate and wander (*écarter*) – gaps *move*. When someone or something takes *pre-cedence* (goes first, goes before, goes on ahead *and gives up its place*) a gap is opened. There (are) only gaps, the gaps that Jacques Derrida has left behind him *and* in front of him: the pre-cedence of gaps.

This tracing of gaps (*écarts*) is a preface to an *impossible* mourning, a mourning that one must *at once* avoid and affirm. It keeps returning to Derrida's *Dissemination* (1972) as a preface to *Glas* (1974), Derrida's first extended work on mourning. Gaps move, swerve and deviate and in tracing the *écarts* in Derrida's work there are unavoidable digressions on Plato (the *Cratylus*, the *Sophist*) and Hegel (the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*) as well as on Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Lévinas and Lyotard. The question of how one avoids a memorial becoming a

monument concerns the importance not only of “literature”, but also of “history” in Derrida’s thought. In the strange suspensions of literature, where the part is always greater than the whole, the gap moves, even dances. For Derrida, history (is) *the history of the departures from totality* – a history of gaps that move.

In tracing the *écarts* in Derrida’s work, there is also an improbable ‘history’ of gaps, of *digressions* on the gap, that include: Abraham and the speeds of hospitality; the Athenians and other barbarians in classical Greece; philosophy and translation in the seventeenth century; yearning (*Sehnsucht*) in the eighteenth century; imaginative sympathy in the nineteenth century; writing and raving, and the hiding of the face of God in the twentieth century. These digressions, these histories of the gap, reiterate that *we are always trying to close the gap*. Gaps move *and* we are always trying to close the gap.

The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida was written from 12 October 2004, the day of Jacques Derrida’s funeral, to 17 December 2004. As with many of Derrida’s works, most notably ‘Envois’ in *The Post Card* (1980), it is written *with* the date. It is a work of fifty-two days, with all the gaps, all the unforeseeable demands and daily events, all the finitude of *today*. Today, we are trying to close the gap that cannot be closed: the gaps of today, of *12 October 2004*.

Today (this very day, the day I am writing this) is also always *another* today (any day, the day that you are reading this) and these fifty-two days were revised in May–July 2005, with some additional deviations, swerves, *écarts*.

15 July 2005

The Precedant (12–29 October 2004)

12 October 2004. I shall now try and write in the past tense. Late last year a friend sent me a copy of Derrida's *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, the expanded French edition of *The Work of Mourning*. Knowing since last September that Derrida was gravely ill, I could not open it. Yesterday, I sat in a café in Oxford and I began to read the first few pages. But I found that I could not read Derrida writing of those who have died, *always too soon*. As I closed the book I came across Derrida's last letter to me, dated 21 November 2003, which I had forgotten was at the back of *Chaque fois unique*. As I stared at the envelope with Derrida's signature on the upper left-hand corner and at my own name and address in his handwriting, and read the short gracious letter again, I thought what I am feeling now – reading the *traces* of one who has just died – this was what Derrida meant by *writing*. I never understood this, this terrible *Unheimlichkeit*, until now. There and not there. Still here and, already, not here: now here and nowhere. Writing is always like this. I have only just begun to understand, and it is already too late.

How does one mourn for Jacques Derrida?

Don't read him writing on the death of others. One cannot avoid thinking: is this how Derrida would like, would expect, would *anticipate*, his own funeral oration, his own memorial, to be written? Who will read at his grave, who will add the last address to *Chaque fois unique*? Will it be Jean-Luc Nancy or Hélène Cixous? Philosophy or literature? More than one, no more one, above all (*plus d'un, avant tout*).

Don't talk too much about yourself. About how you first saw Derrida at La Coupole in Paris on 15 March 1991 at the launch of the book *Jacques*

Derrida and how he appeared, suddenly, looking anxiously at his watch and then, like the White Rabbit, disappeared down a staircase.

Don't look for 8–9 October in that book of writing *with* dates, *The Post Card*.

Don't make too much of his own "last words" in the interview in *Le Monde* on 19 August 2004. Try to avoid anything to do with *survivre* (surviving, living on, living over), of 'surviving in dying, of *sur-vivre* before and beyond the opposition between living and dying' ('Poétique et politique de témoignage' 522). In this last interview, Derrida says *la survie* 'constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Da-sein*, if you like'. It is 'the most intense possible life' ('Je suis en guerre contre moi-même' 13). Yes, yes . . . but this is too hard, too much like a new understanding of writing that leaves you in tears, always.

I put the letter away, back into *Chaque fois unique*, and I closed the book. All I could think of was that I must read and that the only book that I could read was *Glas*. Because it will tell you how not to *monu-memorialize*, to idealize and interiorize the 'father' as an act of mourning, to make a monument out of a memorial, to make an *Aufhebung* of the death of Jacques Derrida (*Glas* 1b).

How does one mourn for Jacques Derrida? How does one mourn otherwise for Jacques Derrida, who has spent thirty years (from the publication of *Glas*, from 1974–2004) warning against the dangers of mourning? For Derrida, mourning (*le deuil*) is inescapable, dangerous – and impossible. Mourning always *risks* a 'narcissistic pathos', a 'reappropriation' and cannibalistic 'consumption of the other' (*The Work of Mourning* 168, 159, 225). But it also announces an 'interminable', 'inconsolable', and 'irreconcilable' *finitude* (142–3). As Derrida says in an interview from 1990:

Even before the death of the other, the inscription in me of her or his mortality constitutes me. I mourn therefore I am [*Je suis endeuillé donc je suis*], I am – dead from the death of the other [*Je suis – mort de la mort de l'autre*], my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning that is moreover impossible [*d'abord endeuillé, d'un deuil d'ailleurs impossible*]. This is what I also call the ex-appropriation, the appropriation caught in a *double bind*: I must and I must not take the other into myself [*prendre l'autre en moi*]; mourning is an unfaithful fidelity if it succeeds in interiorizing the other ideally in me, that is, in not respecting his or her infinite exteriority. ('Istrice 2. Ick bün'n all hier' 321; 331)

How does one mourn *after* Derrida? I have just had an email from

Nicholas Royle, who has written eloquently of what it means to be *after* Derrida, saying that Jacques Derrida's funeral is *today*, and *today* I am going to try and write in the past tense, to keep writing.

Start with the gaps.

At the end of the beginning, in the last sentences of his first paper on Husserl, '“Genesis and structure” and phenomenology' (1959), Derrida raises the 'historico-semantic question' of what 'precedes [*précède*] the transcendental reduction'. The transcendental reduction is 'the free act of the question, which frees itself [*s'arrache*] from the totality of what precedes [*précède*] it in order to be able to gain access to this totality' (167; 251). How does one ask about what *precedes* that which *frees itself* from everything that *precedes* it?

'The science of pure possibilities', Husserl had insisted, 'must everywhere precede the science of real facts' (*Ideas I* [1931 Preface] 7). Before Husserl, Kant had argued 'there must be a condition that precedes [*vorhergeht*] all experience and makes the latter itself possible' (*Critique of Pure Reason* [1781] 232; 168). For Kant, without such an *absolute precedence*, there can be no pure understanding, no categories, no transcendental imagination – and no transcendental philosophy. After Kant, Hegel would accept that religion 'precedes [*vorangeht*]' philosophy, but *only* so philosophy can exclude it and can *begin without it* (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*: 61; 82).

Already, in 1959, Derrida was preoccupied with the prefix *pre-*, with what comes before, in front, in advance. Much of his work could be described as a remarkable preoccupation with *le pre-* and *le re-*. Precede, *praecedre*, *précéder*: to come before, to go before, to travel ahead of. To precede suggests *both* to go before, to take precedence, to be first *and* to give way, to cede or to yield one's place. To *pre-cede*: going ahead, going before, *taking one's place* at the front and, at the same time, *giving up one's place* as one goes ahead.

For Derrida, it is impossible to ask Husserlian phenomenology about what *precedes* that which *frees itself* from everything that *precedes* it, about that which takes precedence without *yielding* its place:

The question of the possibility of the transcendental reduction cannot expect an answer. It is the question of the possibility of the question, opening itself, the gap [*l'ouverture elle-même, la béance*] on whose basis the *transcendental I*, which Husserl was tempted to call "eternal" (which in his thought, in any

event, means neither infinite nor ahistorical, quite the contrary) is called upon to ask itself about everything, and particularly about the possibility of the unformed and naked factuality of the nonmeaning, in the case at hand, for example, of its own death. (167–8; 251)

The impossible question for phenomenology of that which is *not* free to precede what it precedes is also a question of death. Derrida describes this ‘question of the possibility of the question’, this question for the ‘*transcendental I . . . of its own death [de sa propre mort]*’, as ‘opening itself, the gap [*l’ouverture elle-même, la béance*]’. Alan Bass has translated *la béance* as ‘the gap’, and one could also translate it as ‘gaping’, as the *gaping*, open wound. It is this gaping opening, ‘opening itself’, that raises the impossible question, the question of the impossible, of the *precedant* that comes *and* goes first, that *gives up its place* as it takes precedence. The *precedant* always predeceases, goes on ahead.

13 October 2004. Start with the gaps. Five years later in his first essay on Edmond Jabès (1964), Derrida turns to another kind of gap, a Latin gap; to an interval, a break, that slips and falls:

The other originally collaborates with meaning. There is an essential *lapse* [un lapsus] between significations which is not the simple and the positive fraudulence of a word, nor even the nocturnal memory of all language. . . . The caesura [*la césure*] does not simply finish and fix meaning. . . . primarily, the caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption – between letters, words, sentences, books – no signification could be awakened. (‘Edmond Jabès and the question of the book’ 71; 107–8)

These Latin gaps are the very possibility of meaning, of signification. If the gap is filled or *bridged* there is no meaning, no signification. The gap is indispensable, unavoidable: it must not be bridged. But when it comes to the gap, there is always the question of a bridge.

As Derrida notes in *The Problem of Genesis* (1953–1954), ‘Hume remains the most revolutionary European philosopher for Husserl’ (175). For Hume, the limitations of an understanding founded on external sense-impressions lead to an inevitable reliance on fictions of the imagination to ensure the coherence and *continuity* of perception (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 193). At the outset, from the start, at the origin, there are gaps in experience. Imagination fills the gaps. Hume works to bridge the gap. This empirical faculty of filling in the gaps of perception is not that different

from Kant's *a priori* synthetic unity of the transcendental imagination as the possibility, the precondition, of any experience: both bridge the gap. For Kant, 'the principle of continuity' forbids 'any leap [*Absprung*] in the series of appearances . . . but also any gap or cleft [*Lücke oder Kluft*] between two appearances in the sum of all empirical intuitions in space'. The *Critique of Pure Reason* abhors any Latin gaps that jump: '*in mundo non datur hiatus, non datur saltus* [in the world there is no hiatus, there is no leap]' (A 228–29/B 281–82). At the same time, as he bridges the gaps of experience, Kant insists on the *gap* between appearances and things in themselves. Without this gap, nothing can be universal, necessary and objectively valid. It is a gap that must not be bridged, a gap that *works* for reason. Hegel will inherit this gap of reason and *put it to work* for speculative dialectics: the gap as *Aufhebung*.

Husserl believed that Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740) 'gives the first systematic sketch of a pure phenomenology, which, though under the name of psychology, attempts to supply a philosophical transcendental philosophy' (*Ideas I* [1931 Preface] 16). Like Hume, Husserl argues that because 'the spatial shape of the physical thing can be given only in some single perspective aspect', there is always an 'inadequacy which clings to the unfolding of any series of continuously connected intuitions'. Unlike Hume, Husserl insists that this inadequate, individual intuition is only an *aspect* of a general, essential intuition – a pure essence. The gaps of experience *and* the fictions of imagination are always *invitations* to pure essence, to ideality (*Ideas I* §3–4: 48–51). As Derrida observes in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), 'it is no accident that Hume's thought fascinated Husserl more and more. The power of pure repetition that opens up ideality and the power which liberates the imaginative reproduction of empirical perception cannot be foreign to each other; nor can their products' (55).

In *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida notes that Husserl accepts that in communication 'meaning [*le vouloir-dire*] is *always* entangled, caught [*toujours enchevêtré*, prise] in an indicative system' (20; 20, trans. modified). However, despite this '*de facto* necessity of entanglement', Husserl insists on 'the possibility of a rigorous distinction of essence' *between* expression and indication (20). For Derrida, this possibility – this refusal of the contamination of expression by indication – 'is purely *de jure* and phenomenological'. Husserl's 'whole analysis', he argues, 'will thus advance in this separation [*dans cet écart*] between *de facto* and *de jure* [*le fait et le droit*], existence and essence, reality and intentional function'. This

gap (*écart*) is the possibility of intentionality for Husserl. It 'defines the very space of phenomenology' and 'is opened only in and through the possibility of language' (21; 21, trans. modified). There can be no meaning, no signification *without a gap*, without a gap that *cannot* be bridged. But there can also be no meaning, no signification, Derrida adds, without a gap that *cannot be put to work*. It is this gap, this '*divergence* [*écart*] between two kinds of signs', that haunts phenomenology (30; 32). It is 'the *divergence* [*l'écart*] of indicative communication and even of signification in general', Derrida writes, that 'opens the living to *différance*' (69; 77, trans. modified).

In French, the gap diverges, deviates; it is at once a noun (*écart*) and a verb (*écarter*). *Un écart*: a distance, a space, a gap, an interval, a difference, a deviation, a departure. *Faire un écart*: to swerve, to jump, to leap aside. *À l'écart*: to be out of the way, to be remote, to be on the side. *Mettre, tenir, rester à l'écart*: to keep back, to hold back, to stay in the background, to remain on the margins. *Écarter*: to move apart, to separate, to spread, to open, to dismiss, to remove, to exclude, to push aside, to set aside, to step back, to withdraw. To draw back behind the curtain: *derrière le rideau*.

14 October 2004. Today, a friend has sent me copies of *Libération* ('Derrida: l'homme déconstruit', 11 October), with a long and generous article on Derrida by Robert Maggiori, and *Le Monde* with a special supplement on Derrida organized by Jean Birnbaum (12 October). I also read today that Derrida asked that no words be read at his funeral. So, in the end, when it comes to a testament for Derrida, one does not have to choose between Nancy and Cixous, *between* philosophy and literature. An *impossible* decision. There is no final address to add to *Chaque fois unique*, and we are *left* with the impossible decision, with a decision *from* the impossible. As Cixous has written of Derrida, 'the scenarios of his travels, displacements and returns are always marked by the seal of the impossible' ('Ce corps étranjuif' 72). And it is in taking an unavoidable and agonizing *interest* in the impossible – an interest *from* the impossible – that I am *dis*-interested and taken away from my self *to* the other, *for* the other.

In *Of Grammatology* (1965–1967), Derrida writes of 'a primary gap and a primary *expatriation*' in the Platonic text. Spivak translates '*une coupure . . . premières*' as 'a primary gap', and it can also be translated as 'a first cut' (39; 59). In the *Cratylus*, Socrates had insisted on the *proper* cut, on the propriety of cutting: 'In cutting [*temnein*], for example, we do not cut as we please, and with any chance instrument; but we cut with the proper

instrument only, and according to the natural [*phúsin*] process of cutting; and the natural process is right and will succeed, but any other will fail and be of no use at all' (387a). For Socrates, the proper cut is only an example to illustrate the proper *name* and the propriety of naming, when art, craft (*tekhnē*) naturally works for nature (*phusis*) (389).

For Derrida, the 'first cut' in the propriety of naming begins with Socrates and Phaedrus sitting 'under a plane tree, by the banks of the Illyssus' (*Phaedrus* 227a). As they are sitting there, Socrates will ask, 'am I a monster [*thērion*]?' (230a). And Phaedrus will ask Socrates, 'do you ever cross the border?' (230a). And Socrates will say, 'now I am certain that this is not an invention of my own . . . and therefore that I have been filled through the ears, like a pitcher, from the waters of another' (235d). Monsters, crossing borders and the ear of the other: the 'first cut' of *writing*.

Speech, Derrida writes, is 'a *logos* which believes itself to be its own father': the Christ of language. Writing, 'since [as Socrates says] its "parent's help is always needed" [*Phaedrus* 275d] . . . must therefore be born out of a primary gap [*une coupure*] and a primary *expatriation*, condemning it to wandering and blindness, to mourning' (*Of Grammatology* 39; 59). How is mourning possible? Start with the gaps. Living speech would never be able to mourn the *loss* of the father, as it could not mourn the loss of *itself*, as living speech. With speech, there can be no mourning. The first cut of Western philosophy would be writing as the loss of the father. The gap as the first cut: no father. *Writing*, one has *always* lost the father.

15 October 2004. 'Turn to the *Cratylus*', Derrida advises ('Plato's pharmacy' 140).

Socrates: Then the irreligious son of a religious father should be called irreligious?

Hermogenes: Certainly.

Socrates: He should not be called Theophilus (beloved of God) or Mnesitheus (mindful of God), or any of these names: if names [*onómata*] are correctly given, his should have an opposite meaning.

Hermogenes: Certainly, Socrates. (394e)

Contrary to the thought of Protagoras, who believes that 'man is the measure of all things' and that things 'are to me as they appear to me, and that they are to you as they appear to you', Socrates begins the *Cratylus* by arguing that 'things must have their own proper and permanent essence'. Things are 'independent, and maintain to their own essence the relation

prescribed by nature'. There is an original *gap* between us and 'things themselves' (386d). It is a natural gap, a gap that resists convention. It is on the *basis* of this unbridgeable gap that Socrates turns to the proper cut, to the propriety of cutting and the *proper name* (the name that is natural and true) as an instance of a 'proper instrument' (*tekhnē*) always working 'according to the natural process' (*phusis*) (387a). The proper name: *tekhnē* working for *phusis*.

As a 'proper instrument' working 'according to a natural process', naming relies on a transparent or virtual *tekhnē*, a *tekhnē* that disappears, that leaves no remainder. When *tekhnē* appears to work for *phusis*, *form* triumphs over *matter*: 'when a man has discovered the instrument which is naturally [*phúsei*] adapted to each work, he must express this natural [*phúsei*] form, and not others which he fancies, in the material, whatever it may be, which he employs . . . the form [*idéan*] must stay the same, but the material may vary' (389c, 389e–390a). Names are 'the true forms [*eidōs*] of things in letters' (390a). 'The irreducible privilege of the name [*du nom*]', Derrida will write in 'The pit and the pyramid' (1968), 'is the keystone [*la clé de voûte*] of the Hegelian philosophy of language' (96; 112). It is the gap that binds Hegel to Plato.

For Derrida, *naming* is always the announcement of 'a death to come [*d'une mort à venir*]', of 'a name that survives whoever carries that name' ('The animal that therefore I am' 389; 270; Royle, *Jacques Derrida*). Naming is the inescapable beginning of mourning. 'First of all, mourning [*D'abord le deuil*]. We will be speaking of nothing else' (*Specters of Marx* 9; 30).

17 October 2004. 'The form must be the same, but the material may vary.' Socrates uses this order between form and matter to argue that when it comes to naming, 'whether in Hellas or in a foreign country; – there is no difference' (390a). There is, apparently, no gap between the Greeks and the barbarians, as long as the *philosopher* keeps the legislator, the maker of names, 'whether he be Hellene or barbarian', in order (391a). As Hegel at Jena on 13 October 1806 would see the philosopher at the end of history, Socrates sees the philosopher at the end of the name (Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* 35).

It is only *after* this end of the proper name that Socrates takes on (mimes) the role of the *etymologos*, a masterful student of etymology, of the *etymon*, the *true* form of words (391–421). The *etymon* begins with proper names. At the same time, as Socrates displays or performs the truth