

ARTICLES : SPECIAL ISSUE
A DEDICATION TO JACQUES DERRIDA - MEMOIRS

Derrida's Last Conference

By Rachel Nigro*

Derrida's death caused a surprising reaction in the media, being responsible for a great number of articles, commentaries and announcements. It seems that now, with his death, one of his inventions – the most famous and misinterpreted one which is widely used to define his philosophical style and which is known as “deconstruction” – has finally been understood. Fortunately, in the most respected newspapers in Brasil, articles with a good survey of Derrida's work were published not only by journalists but also by literary critics, economists, lawyers and psychoanalysts. But, unfortunately, the philosophers, or the ones that call themselves philosophers, seem to have insisted on ignoring the fertility of his thoughts.

One of a major Brazilian magazines, *Veja*, published an article comparing Derrida to the doctor that created Frankenstein; in this metaphor deconstruction serving as the monster run amok, disseminating improper meanings. An out of control “signifying device.”

Philosophy, strictly speaking, has been resistant to Derrida. This is a sign or a symptom that should be analyzed. Such rejection can be seen as a symptom of a disease that has been contaminating all manner of western academic discourse. There is a resistance to what is new, to what is unknown; the bureaucracy of thought that threatens all kinds of institutions and confines the capacity of thought in our time. This is what Derrida calls closure.

Derrida disturbs the so-called philosophers by questioning the philosophical stature of Philosophy. He systematically complicates the lines with which one is used to demarcating the different domains of knowledge. That has made him the target of a set of very hostile reactions, ranging from hatred to disdain. Beyond the emotions provoked by Derrida's words, the question remains: does deconstruction

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need or want to be Philosophy? But, what is Philosophy? What or who defines its meaning?

Since Derrida's style looks rather suspicious for some Brazilian philosophers, it's no wonder they didn't show up for his last conference when he was brought to Brasil by a literature department belonging to the University of Juiz de Fora, a city located not far from Rio. Derrida's last conference, beyond european borders, took place at Maison de France, in Rio de Janeiro, in August 2004 and lasted three days. Derrida opened the conference with a three-hour speech, stopping only for a sip of water. His conference was about forgiveness and the crowded audience received with delight the gift of his words and of his presence, even more after the uncertainty of his arrival due to his poor health. Fortunately, Derrida was well enough to be present throughout the entirety of the conference, until the last word of the last speech of his last colloquium. A colloquium about his work conducted in his presence. For the last time.

But the limits of Brazilian academia are not a surprise or a problem for Derrida. He had grown used to feeling himself a foreigner, "marginal," wherever he went.

We all know that Derrida died disappointed in the fact that the recognition of his work in France was imposed by the recognition of his work in other countries. Although France wasn't his birthplace Derrida chose the French language as his haven. He was born in El Biar, Argelia, which was then a French colony known for its violent occupation. So French citizenship was imposed on him, but the French language was chosen by him. He used to say, in different ways, that we have only one language and that it is still not ours. No one has a language, and in a certain way, one is also disposed by language. The French language is his own language and the language that owns him, it shapes his thoughts, and entwines without distinction with the deconstruction style.

At the same time, French is not his language as France is not his birthplace. Derrida, in the same way as Dionisio, Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, didn't belong to only one place. He was a lost soul, *un flâneur*, wandering around and crossing over the borders of different fields of knowledge.

But what is a foreigner? What does it mean to say that Derrida is a foreign man? Let us use Derrida's own words, found in *Of Hospitality*:

In "The Apology of Socrates" (17d), Socrates addresses his fellow citizens and Athenian judges. He defends himself against the accusation of being a kind of sophist or skillful speaker. He announces that he is going to say

what is right and true, certainly, against the liars who are accusing him, but without rhetorical elegance, without flowery use of language. He declares that he is 'foreign' to the language of the courts, to the tribune of the tribunals: he doesn't know how to speak this courtroom language, this legal rhetoric of accusation, defence, and pleading; he doesn't have the skill, he is like a foreigner. (...) the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State (...) and that's the first act of violence."