Comment

In memoriam Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida died on 8 October 2004, at the age of 74, after months of struggle with pancreatic cancer.

Whether he was a great philosopher or an ephemeral prankster will divide students for years to come, perhaps even forever.

What is not in doubt is that, over the years, he delivered a series of eulogies at the funerals or memorial services for friends, which deserve to be remembered. Published in translation in 2001 as *The Work of Mourning*, the French title, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* – 'Each time unique, the end of the world' – was no doubt felt too obscure for the English-speaking market; yet it surely says more effectively what the eulogist wanted to tell the mourners: in every death a whole world ends.

Born near Algiers, into a long-established Jewish family, the eleven-year-old was expelled from school under the Vichy laws ('French culture is not for little Jews', the headmaster said). Back in regular schooling he did not flourish, dreaming of a career as a professional footballer, failing the *baccalauréat* the first time, yet reading voraciously on his own: Rousseau, Nietzsche, Bergson, Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Hearing of its existence by chance on the radio he decided he wanted to study at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, got in at his third attempt, faltered again but finally passed in 1956. Marriage followed (Marguérite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst, survives him, with their two sons), a year at Harvard (pretending to consult Husserl archives), a spell of military service (teaching soldiers' children near Algiers), hack teaching in Le Mans and then at the Sorbonne, then back at the ENS until elected in 1984 to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

Derrida never held a philosophy chair in France: resolutely blocked. Famously, in 1992, three philosophers at the University of Cambridge tried but failed to stop him receiving an honorary degree. By then, with about 70 books to his name and a network of visiting professorships in the United States, Derrida was a major interlocutor in several different domains, in so called Continental philosophy but also in literary criticism and theory – and, to an extent, in Christian theology.

The Work of Mourning, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), collects, with his permission, fourteen funeral orations or

© The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2005, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00061.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

memorial addresses delivered by Derrida over nearly twenty years, from Roland Barthes in 1980 (hit by a truck while crossing the street after lunch with François Mitterand) to Jean-François Lyotard in 1998 (after a long struggle with leukaemia). The others include Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Sarah Kofman, Gilles Deleuze and Emmanuel Levinas.

It's a beautiful book, beautifully translated; though of course very 'French'. As he would have been first to say, these were obviously all commemorations at the deaths of colleagues and friends. What there would be to say, and who there would be to say it, at the deaths of the thousands of people who die alone and in atrocious circumstances, in the gutter or as 'collateral damage', is another matter. Here the memorialist is remembering friends.

'To have a friend', Derrida says, 'still to see him when he is no longer there and to try to know, listen to, or read him when you know that you will see him no longer . . . To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die' (page 107). The day will come, when death will take from us, not only some friend, 'but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite – mortally infinite – way'.

In recent years Derrida kept returning to Augustine, his North African compatriot, the *Confessions* in particular, intrigued by Augustine's question, 'What do I love when I love my God?' – *Quid ergo amo, cum deum meum amo*?

It's as much a sigh and a hope and a prayer as a question, as his finest interpreter remarks (Jack Caputo). And as such, not a bad way to begin to think again about God, in the writings of this Jew who was not brought up in his people's faith, this self-described atheist with such passion for God. Levinas, a Talmudic scholar as well as an exponent of Husserl and Heidegger, taught him to say *adieu*, so Derrida says: *à-Dieu*.

F.K.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00061.x Published online by Cambridge University Press