

If We Could Speak Again With Derrida

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ABSTRACT

Dedicated to Our Sons

If we could speak again with Derrida what language would we speak? What do we speak when we speak of death? That is the question of this discussion, which engages with the cartography of absence, with our being-present in life in the face of the aporia of death. This conversation with Derrida brings death to life. My Adieu to Derrida finds its way through Derrida's Adieu to Levinas, which enlivens my Adieu to my sons; and Cixous enters the text at the time when language fails. The narrative of death asks what death is, considers the public address of death, and the way we speak of death in the mapping of life.¹

"Each one of the two words, Reparation and Separation, remains all alone. Each one stands in its solitude - and, between the two, there is the between" (Derrida, 2000: vii).

There is no time like death

Derrida (1993: 25) had asked, "What is the experience of death?" and the question of knowing *if* death "is" – and *what* death "is"; and as he directs us to the radical absence of direction in the question his answer ripples across the surfaces of our being-in-time. There is no time like death. That is what I am thinking about as I write this Adieu to Jacques Derrida, but in this writing *he*, to whom I address this text, is no longer alone; he is no more 'not here' than he was when he was 'here'. The *he* of which I speak denies the simplicity of the singular to whom and of whom I speak as there can be no (pro)position in this mode of address. They are already implicated by the singular; they are here and not here, somewhere between Reparation and Separation.

When we spoke, it was an impossible speaking with one who is already spoken in the texts of many others. I wanted to say that there was much I wanted to say, but instead I said I had a bumper sticker with "I love Jacques Derrida". An impossible crossing.

Death is like this. All the texts have already been written, all the words spoken. There can be no sense when the condition of sense has already met its nemesis. So in desiring to speak again, I am facing the inevitability of being not-here, the impossible dread of that final Adieu when one stands at the grave and weeps.

As Derrida says, "I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it" (1999: 1), and at that turn of phrase I turn to face the separation of the phrase, "Adieu. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust". These are the words they say at the grave to remind us that the dust of earth means no more being *on* the earth. You have to *become* earth for this passport to the final crossing. How can we 'be' in this

moment when being is denied, where anxiety at the loss of being dissolves those very borders which lets being be? “Death always comes too early or too late” is the echo of Heidegger in the sentence we have inherited, the life sentence.

There are no words that can piece together the fragments; no words to deny the aporia, that passage without passage when you face the borderless crossing. We can learn only in close proximity with Derrida who says, in close proximity with Emmanuel Levinas:

I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right here, before him, so close to him, pronouncing this word of *adieu*, this word *à-Dieu*, which in a certain sense, I get from him, a word that he will have taught me to think or to pronounce otherwise (1999: 1).

In the footnote we read: “Every relation to the other would be, before and after anything else, an *adieu*” (127), and we see that there is always the supplement to the text.

The public address

So in a sense this discussion is a mediation of sorts between the text and its supplement as I seek a way to speak of and to those who have become earth. Derrida asks: “Whom is one addressing at such a moment? And in whose name would one allow oneself to do so?” (1). We can answer, of course, that we are addressing the one who died, in this case Derrida, but in the knowing there is the not-yet-known as the others invade the text. He was my child and in the absence there is no self; yet is this a self whose voice speaks publicly?

In addressing Levinas, Derrida says:

Often those who come forward to speak, to speak publicly, thereby interrupting the animated whispering, the secret or intimate exchange that always links one, deep inside, to a dead friend or master, those who make themselves heard in a cemetery, end up addressing *directly, straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond (1999: 1-2).

We have seen these public faces, we who are left – left with what – with the absence in the presence of the other? “With tears in their voices, they sometimes speak familiarly to the other who keeps silent, calling upon him without detour or mediation, apostrophizing him, even greeting him or confiding in him” (2). So there is an enigma of being in the time of non-being. They speak in dutiful calling. Cast adrift we navigate an impossible crossing, an in-between, without passage, “the double concept of the border, from which this aporia comes to be determined” (Derrida, 1993: 18).

Constructing narratives

Realising that I was constructing a narrative of our encounters with the singular and plurality of death and our attempts to grasp its edges I turned to Cixous.

The aim of this narrative – in so far as Narrative of the narrative – is precisely to reconnect the greatest number of possible parts to hazard, or to retrieve them, to make them parts of its own body, to give them sometimes human form, rarely tropic form, to draw new and still uncalculated riches from this virtuous marriage (Cixous, 2000a: 10).

The convention of the narrative of friendship appears at the gravest moment, then dissipates. Here is a narrative to follow. The language is never the right one at the time, any time. There is a grave difficulty here in the way of speaking. Friends ought to know how to speak. Stranding the otherness of Other they speak of the one who is there but not there, absent yet present before them.

This is not necessarily out of respect for convention, not always simply part of the rhetoric of oration. It is rather so as to traverse speech at the very point where words fail us, since all language that would return to the self, to us, would seem indecent, a reflexive discourse that would end up

coming back to the stricken community, to its consolation or its mourning, to what is called, in a confused and terrible expression, 'the work of mourning' (Derrida, 1999: 2).

We have found ourselves in a narrative *at work*. A responsibility to this work appears to appear. This work is for everyone, yet we are taught none of it, as we learn nothing from it. The narrative of the work of death is not at issue in lives that are elsewhere from here. Baudrillard (1998: 182) claims that the narrative of death has become discredited, undesirable and eliminated in the social etiquette of our global landscape. "There is no time between there and here, no space between then and now, no legitimate reservoir of 'dwelling'" we hear Heidegger say. And once we said: "There is no time or space for death" (Grierson, 2001: 12).

The Derridean narrative of death "the work of mourning" takes us elsewhere from here. He turns to Levinas and says he could not, "nor would I even try to, measure in a few words the oeuvre of Emmanuel Levinas. It is so large that one can no longer glimpse its edges" (1999: 3) and he speaks of beginning to learn "once again from him and from *Totality and Infinity* ... how to think what an 'oeuvre' or 'work' – as well as fecundity – might be" (3).

Derrida speaks of learning to hear otherwise, of "*droiture* – 'straightforwardness' or 'uprightness'" where he speaks of Levinas "where uprightness names what is, as he says, 'stronger than death'" (Derrida, 1999: 2). And then: "But let us also keep from trying to find in everything that is said to be 'stronger than death' a refuge or an alibi, yet another consolation" (2). The consolation of history – we sort the photographs, build the archives, but the difficulty of grasping the archive that death discloses is the difficulty of naming Reparation when Separation is its name.

In the face of Other

We seek many consolations in the social archives of our time in the way of making reparation for the separation that is not yet and may never have been. We name things. Derrida turns us back to 'Death and Time' (Levinas, 1975-76), "where he defines death as the patience of time"; and, "The death that 'we meet' 'in the face of the Other' – as non-response". Then he reminds us that Levinas speaks thus: "It is the without-response ... There is here an end that always has the ambiguity of a departure without return, of a passing away but also of a scandal ('is it really possible that he's dead?') of non-response and of my responsibility" (Derrida, 1999: 5).

There is something scandalous here. So often I have heard it said. They say it of our sons and now of Derrida. Where lies our responsibility? Reynolds explores this question through Derrida's *Gift of Death* where responsibility to other others is raised.

For Derrida, the paradox of responsible behaviour means that there is always a question of being responsible before a singular other (eg. a loved one, God, etc.), and yet we are also always referred to our responsibility towards others generally and to what we share with them (Reynolds, 2005).

Reynolds explains: "Derrida insists that this type of aporia, or problem, is too often ignored by the 'knights of responsibility' who presume that accountability and responsibility in all aspects of life - whether that be guilt before the human law, or even before the divine will of God - is quite easily established (GD 85)" (Reynolds, 2005). This puts the Derridean procedure of otherness into a social-political context where the moral right, or right-on-our-side, too often speaks the first and last word on Right and Responsibility.

And Derrida reminds us that Emmanuel Levinas speaks of responsibility in the face of the other: "Someone who expresses himself in his nakedness – the face – is in fact one to the extent that he calls upon me, to the extent that he places himself under my responsibility" (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999: 7). And Levinas quickly returns this to death where he says:

The death of the Other affects me in my very identity as a responsible I ... made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other, this is my relation to his death.

It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor (7).

Yet in this response Levinas speaks of an emotion, “a movement, an uneasiness with regard to the *unknown*” to which Derrida responds: “The ‘unknown’ is not the negative limit of a knowledge. This non-knowledge is the element of friendship or hospitality for the transcendence of the stranger, the infinite distance of the other” (Derrida, 1999: 8). And we are turned away from the demands of behaving dutifully to another sort of demand, that of hospitality in the gift of the Other.

The remembering of the forgetting of being

This narrative is “very near and very hard to approach in reality” (Cixous, 2000c: 110). Perhaps that is why the Other language is slipping through my text. We speak what is already spoken. Yet we speak in silence somewhere between *Reparation* and *Separation*.

“The silence comes to us from the abyss”, says Derrida (1999: 114). Is this the infinite distance? The darkness of Other is a deep divide; for therein is the abyss of philosophy itself. If, as Bennington claims, “Death is the only subject of philosophy” (2001: 3), then it languages the headstones of history; and Derrida prises open the gravity of philosophy by putting it to question in the questioning of death.

What happens when a great thinker becomes silent, one whom we knew living, whom we read and reread, and also heard, one from whom we were still awaiting a response, as if such a response would help us not only to think otherwise but also to read what we thought we had already read under his signature, a response that held everything in reserve, and so much more than what we thought we had already recognized there? (Derrida, 1999: 9).

And now Derrida is no more; and my sons; and the other Others’ sons. “This is an experience that, as I have learned, would remain for me interminable”, is the way Derrida speaks of it (9). And we speak it thus.

The question of death persists in the corporeality of one’s being in the world, in the time of being. Lowering them into the ground it was the ‘no more’ that was the abyss and the abyss was mine, and is. It is and will be about the shock of being-in-time, and the remembering of our forgetting, which is the fundamental revealing of Heidegger.

If death is our remembering, we face the terror of forgetting.

“I am cold. I am singing voicelessly: *il duol mio dir non posso, in quest’ora funeste*. This hour of felicity is deadly to me. I am writing to go beyond myself; but what anguish if I succeed” (Cixous, 2000b: 104). And in that terrible knowledge of going beyond, of facing the death of Other, we face the aporia in us, which “presupposes an infinite separation, an infinite interruption where the face appears” (2000a: 9).

Notes

1. The author acknowledges Derek McCormack, FRSA, Vice-Chancellor of Auckland University of Technology for the gift of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, which text will soon be returned with thanks.

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