

**OBITUARY**

Thinker of the Secret: *Prayers and Tears* For Derrida



(1930–2004)

“We *must*, but we must not like it—mourning, that is, mourning *itself*, if such a thing exists: not to like or love through one’s own tear but only through the other, and every tear is from the other, the friend, the living, as long as we ourselves are living, reminding us, in holding life, to hold on to it.”

— Derrida, *The Taste of Tears*  
(an obituary for Jean Maria Benoist)

Derrida’s obituary for a lost friend, in memorabilia only gives us the taste of tears, which comes to almost all of us. Tears make mourning *impossible*, as it makes us forget *death* as an event and makes us *wander* all alone in search of ‘body without organ’ and ‘immanence’ that are *secret*. A Deleuzean sense of difference of non-relational particulars that constitute bodies without the trope of organs, an Artaudean *dance of cruelty* that suppresses *spacing* in the name of space provides an opening to the other of this body or space. This immanence is *secret*; sometimes (!) it is the pre-originary essence that gives itself to origin. Death makes its sense in the light of this pre-originary secret of life, as an absolute other, which we forget in mourning for the other, while we die in *absolute separateness* from the other. While it stands in liberation from itself, death places us in the place of the other. The liberation from the

self determines the self as one, which is a violence to itself while giving beyond the interiority of secret of the self. A passage to the other is the gift of death. A philosophical reading of death involves this passage from indetermination of the self to the giving away to the other, which is just a borderline that lies between philosophy and the life of the philosopher that no reading can appropriate. A reading necessarily is an act of narcissistic realization of truth and meaning which enter into an aporia of crossing the line between life and death, of offering the gift of death. This is reading between the blinds, while the self does not hear because it is dumb and does not see because it is blind, it is in the very structure of onto-theology and ethics that one never knows what lies between the life and death.

Derrida's own readings of Judaeo-Christian cultures of death within its existential-ontological-theological structure of reason make death an event that does not break its own conditions of possibility. Within the culture of death, like in Artaud's *The Theater of Cruelty*, death just befalls beyond our practices of cruelty like the body of the snake being charmed by our music without the snake being a listener to the music. This is how spectacle surrounds us and we are only spectators to it. Death brings back the spectre of our absence, which further brings back the pre-originary secret that falls between origin and destination. It brings back a certain spirit, a haunt that we feign to forget, as we are not able to generate that amongst us despite an existential-ontological cruelty. This necessary supplementary nature of a representation of death, for Derrida, always falls within a 'history of death'. Derrida questions the Western history of death. The historicity of death in relation to the *other* in one's authenticity is questioned, as this *other* defies substitution and prosthesis. Rather substitution and prosthesis reduce the *other* to a singularity to which one is tied in the relation of responsibility, while death as an absolute openness to the other is *plural* that alters its conditions of possibility by breaking through the limits of the event of death. It is here that the singularity of death comes with a possibility that never comes, while such a possibility 'tears' death out of existence. In Jean Luc Nancy's obituary for Derrida, it is a salute of the kind that is a mere salute-to, a giving to the other,

*Salut à cet effacement des figures et des schémas. Salut aussi aux aveugles que nous devenons, et dont tu faisais un thème de prédilection: salut à la vision qui ne tient pas aux formes, aux idées, mais qui se laisse toucher par les forces.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Luc Nancy, Derrida, «Salut à toi, salut aux aveugles que nous devenons» in <http://www.liberation.fr/page.php?Article=245193> ( 21.11.2004). I do not risk a translation of Nancy here.

In giving to the other, Derrida never desisted himself.

In the most fruitful years of his philosophical, academic and political life in Paris and in the USA, he has always stood by causes like anti-apartheid movement of Nelson Mandella, the rights of Algerian refugees in France, the terror of hegemony of USA in anti-terror war and instances of his activist commitment to the other tell the tale of his constant search for 'authenticity' that does not lie in any thought-world or reality per se, but only as an ethical imperative. An imperative, in his language, is underivable from any metaphysics of presence. The imperative is ethical precisely because it interpellates itself within us from the trace of the other. The other calls for responsibility by annulling the call itself. This is what keeps Derrida talking of radicalization of politics, a project that knows no end. This could be seen in Derrida's responses to *The New York Times* revelation of the Nazi past of Heidegger and Paul de Man, in which Derrida differentiated the pragmatic imperative of defense of one's own position from the ethical imperative of upholding the spirit of "non-identity" as a relation to truth. In the spirit of deconstruction, Derrida approached his personal relationship with de Man and the philosophical relationship with Heidegger with a kind of 'critical intimacy' that sheers off the ethical from the political and grounds the latter in the former. His unambiguous criticism of nationalism, patriarchy, imperialism and market driven capitalism certainly provided a space for his critical intimacy with thinkers who, for him, could keep (un)successfully the ethical separate from the questions of self-identity and school of thought to which one belongs to. In fact, Derrida moved through the *exterior* of self-identity and history to reach a *radical alterity* of both truth and error. One is inspired to join Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and others in condemning the spirit behind calling such a brilliant thinker 'Abtruse', that too as Spivak says "especially when its subject is unable to respond".<sup>2</sup>

In the last few days before his passing away, he has been quoted by the French tabloid *Le Monde*, "Less and less, I have not learned to accept death (...) I remain uneducable about the wisdom of learning to die." Derrida, in our post-colonial, post-modern sense of death, remains undying in the spirit of learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Letters To *The New York Times* in response to Obituary For Jacques Derrida.