

Derrida: Legatee and Legacy

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In the 2005-06 academic year, the Contemporary Studies Programme of the University of King's College dedicated its Lecture Series to *Jacques Derrida: Legatee and Legacy*. The papers assembled in this special edition of *Dalhousie French Studies* are the fruits and in some cases the proceedings of that Lecture Series. The series is a regular offering of the programme and has a unique structure, in that it is both a public lecture series, bringing prominent scholars and thinkers to Halifax and inviting the general intellectual community, and an undergraduate class for students in the programme. In this year, it was organized and taught jointly by Elizabeth Edwards and Dorota Glowacka.

The thought of Jacques Derrida is of central importance not only for contemporary philosophy but to the very structure of Contemporary Studies, and we had long thought of a lecture series on this topic, at one time hoping that we might attract Derrida himself. This was of course not to be, and in the end this series joined in a number of events which reflected on his work in the period after his death. It was therefore the moment of consideration of his legacy, bringing to bear his important thinking on, and problematization of, the idea of legacy. What is it to inherit? Derrida asks in many places. Our legacies, of a long *traditio studii*, of a metaphysical thinking, of a history of violence, is not something we can refuse to inherit, and the whole of the deconstructive approach concerns itself with taking seriously what we are condemned to receive. Nonetheless, we might take apart the houses of thought while still standing in them.

It is this approach that, curiously, coincides with the general project of the University of King's College, which is the continued study of the liberal arts, the reading of primary texts from the tradition we have inherited, and close attention to the history of thought. This is a project often held to be conservative, even nostalgic, and opposed to the supposed "relativism" of deconstruction and its critical, even repudiating, stance toward such an inheritance. And yet there is perhaps no modern thinker more enmeshed in the history of texts than Derrida, more aware of his own position as a legatee. His writing is always a rewriting of those other texts he interpolates and encloses in the weave of thought. The closeness of his readings, their precise attention, devastating accuracy *and* their provocations must be the result of a loving hostility, an approach he himself has coined the name for as "hostipitality."

The essays collected here are diverse, and make no attempt to be comprehensive. Several authors have directly addressed the central aim of the lecture series by discussing Derrida as a legatee of other key thinkers: Stephen Boos writes on Derrida's early deconstruction of phenomenology and finds alterity and otherness at the heart of Husserl's accounts of temporality, language, and subjectivity. Daniel Brandes looks closely at Derrida's well-known critique of Heidegger's existential analysis of death, and argues that it problematizes both Heidegger's privileging of human death and the lingering phenomenological scruples that inform Heidegger's early approach to the question of Being. Laura Penny writes about the debt to Nietzsche in *Spurs* and its intersection with the question of "woman." Certain themes or topics have attracted several writers; poetry, for example. Dorota Glowacka's essay considers Derrida's writing on the poetry of Paul Celan, and addresses the often inexplicit strand of thought about the Holocaust. Simon Jarvis, unwilling to join the "secondary literature" on Derrida, never names him in an essay that

nonetheless closely considers a tiny essay “Che la poesie?” and argues that the deconstructive approach to poetics is not yet radical enough. Chris Elson writes an insider’s account of the friendship and literary exchange between Derrida and poet Michel Deguy. Elson, a translator of both writers, also expressly raises issues of translation, the very possibility of which is prominent in Derrida’s thought. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger is another translator of Derrida, indeed the original translator of *Of Grammatology* into German, and his essay remembers that process of initial dissemination as well as the later influence of Derrida on his own work in historical science studies. Other essays address the political questions that emerged expressly in Derrida’s later work. Peggy Heller looks carefully and critically at the notion of Europe as Derrida deploys it, and finds a commitment to a Eurocentrism underlying his thinking. Elizabeth Edwards takes up the central idea of spectrality and considers what the unexorcisable phantoms of past atrocities mean for the possibility of a political work of mourning. Bruce Barber’s essay is the only one to engage with Derrida’s considerable body of work on the visual arts. In it, Barber offers a deconstructive reading of the opening sequence of Peter Greenaway’s film *Z&O0*.

In his late work, Derrida suggests the possibility of something like play in the inheritance, the optimistic possibility that we may be able to choose, to some extent, what our inheritance will be. In *Specters of Marx* he writes, “An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing* (18).” This is not the only place that he has written against the notion of fatality (for instance of the letter that does *not* always arrive at its destination), which is to say that though we must inherit, we are not bound to toxic repetitions. In this spirit, what follows is meant to be an intervention in our inheritance, of Derrida.

The editors of this volume would like to gratefully acknowledge the help and encouragement which this project has received. Firstly, we appreciate the opportunity offered by *Dalhousie French Studies* of this special edition of a journal that has made its mark in, among other things, the discussion of French modernity. Special thanks go to its editor, Vittorio Frigerio, for his patience and careful assistance. We thank all the contributors to the original lecture series, including those who do not appear in this volume: John Caputo, Geoffrey Bennington, Hugh Silverman, Stella Gaon and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek. Both the series and this volume have had the generous support of the University of King’s College. Dorota Glowacka had major responsibility for the initial inspiration, and for many of the details of organization. Finally, we want to profoundly thank all those students who are the invisible addressees of the original lectures. Joanna Sheridan, the student assistant, provided striking and original images for us. And those students, especially those only in second year, who were willing to struggle with difficult readings and who gamely devoted themselves to this demanding work, have our deepest admiration; they are the next legatees.

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