

**Sean Gaston.**

**The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida.**

Continuum International Publishing, 2006, 152 pp.

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How does one mourn for Jacques Derrida, who wrote so much and so well on mourning? Gaston answers this question negatively: "Don't read him writing on the death of others... Don't talk too much about yourself... Don't make too much of his own 'last words' in *Le Monde* on 19 August, 2004." Gaston also found a positive way to proceed – to read *Glas*, the only book he says he could read – a book that tells "you how not to monu-memorialize, to idealize and interiorize the 'father' as an act of mourning" (2). Gaston successfully follows Derrida's warning against the dangers of mourning. This is especially difficult as he is writing at a time when the sense of loss is profound, the fifty-two days following Derrida's funeral, when the dangers of reappropriation, narcissistic pathos, and cannibalistic consumption of the other are so present (Derrida, 2001: 159, 168, 225.)

Gaston's focus is the gap because with representation a gap immediately appears between a thing and its double. We find Gaston unwilling and unable to mourn the death of Derrida. Rather than visiting Derrida's grave when in Paris, he goes to the book shops *PuF* and *Vrin* at Place de la Sorbonne and *La Hune* on Saint Germain where he buys more of Derrida's books – to keep reading – to keep writing – in the gap between death and a time of mourning which can never arrive, but arrived the first time we read Derrida, and knew one day the great vessel would lay emptied of its prose. We know this with all writers who move us, who touch us in some deeper way, and reading becomes an act of mourning from that moment on. Some day we will have to go on without them, reading, writing, unable to mourn as the leaves of the Sycamores fall in the Place de la Sorbonne and November 2004 brings four more years of the Bush dynasty.

Gaston's re-reading of *Glas* leads him to recall Hegel's Heidelberg lectures, which were under way at the same time of year 190 years earlier. Twenty-five years later Hegel would die during his 1831 lectures on the history of philosophy – unfinished lectures, fragmented further by different translations and the readers in whom he lived on, one of whom was no supporter of Hegel's wish to erect monuments in the history of philosophy – Jacques Derrida. We prefer now to virtualize the university rather than build new ones and as such we will not have a Université Jacques Derrida – ours is no longer a memorializing culture: contemporary times have sided with Derrida in his dispute with Hegel.

Kant called philosophy the work of "putting off". Death exhibited an unusual timeliness in Derrida's case, contradicting his assertion that it always arrives too soon or too late. "Wise men at their end know dark is right" (Dylan Thomas in Davies and Maud, 2003:44).

Mind the gap. Derrida's work, like philosophy itself, originates in a gap – the gap between France and Algeria. The history of philosophy that Gaston presents to us is one in which we are always trying to close the gap – a gap that death keeps opening. The book is a sincere enactment of what Derrida practiced: turning what we read into writing. It is a collection of swerves and traces, of Gaston turning himself into a specter – a few pieces of paper – an attempt to survive death. It is a book of gaps about gaps while facing the terrible gap opened by the loss of Derrida. But Jacques Derrida is not dead nor will he be dead as long as people speak his name. As the centuries pass, perhaps millennia in Derrida's case, slowly he will die as his name is spoken less often, but not until he finds a place with the pre Socratics who came before the still living names of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, will he be truly dead. Like Heraclitus, Derrida's oeuvre will survive

the fragmentation that the passing of time will bring. In “the ruins of monu-memorialization, there are only gaps”. (123)

An endorsement on the back jacket written by a friend of Gaston’s (Nicholas Royle) advises us that this book is: “a brilliant, deeply read and consistently surprising account of Derrida’s work”. What is nice (and highly unusual for a book jacket quotation) is that it also happens to be true. When you finish this book you are left wanting more. Wasn’t that also precisely Derrida’s gift to us – a gift we can never return – despite the wealth of writing he left to us, he left us wanting more? I think that is the highest compliment an author can force from us and it is one that Gaston also earns in this erudite work of love. The book is a loving, respectful and deeply scholarly goodbye through practicing what the teacher taught.

And so Gaston manages the impossible mourning of Jacques Derrida without monu-memorializing. Death is only the very beginning of separation. Mourning, whatever else we force it to be, is merely the period in which we acknowledge that beginning. If all we can do at the end of our attempt at mourning is to say goodbye, we will have begun the separation in earnest and the mourning, the unavoidable and impossible mourning, may continue past the end of the book.

This book only let me down when it failed to challenge Derrida. Challenge keeps things from stopping. They continue to live on, we continue to speak their name, we mourn them – an impossible mourning because they never really stop – not in our time. We keep great teachers and influences alive in two ways: 1) Gaston’s way, by practicing what the teacher taught, and 2) through challenge. The risk Derrida’s legacy now faces is that more and more Derrida will be heaped upon Derrida as deconstruction is an enormously productive machine continuously “passing the world through the sieve of the text” (Baudrillard, 1996:25). The challenge Derridians face now is to challenge Derrida while reading him on his own terms.

Gaston’s book does not really seek to challenge Derrida but by refusing to monu-memorialize, and in pointing to some important implications of Derrida’s death, Gaston traverses many gaps without falling into the biggest one. But to follow Derrida is not merely to internalize his approach, but to challenge it, in challenge we find ourselves fully attempting to “respect his infinite exteriority” (2).

#### References

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