
Chapter 1

Life

Few philosophers, in the latter half of the twentieth century, so profoundly and radically transformed our understanding of writing, reading, texts, and textuality as Jacques Derrida. The scope of Derrida's thinking is prodigious. It explores with extraordinary inventiveness and originality some of the most pressing practical and theoretical challenges of recent times, in philosophy, politics, ethics, literary theory, criticism, psychoanalysis, legal theory, and much else besides; it articulates a fresh and rigorous account of the complex cultural, philosophical, and religious legacy of the West, its achievements and its silences, its exclusions and unfulfilled promises; and it develops a new style of reading scrupulously adjusted to the general implications and intricate singularity of philosophical and literary texts, to their relevance within the history of thought and the question of their enduring but always fragile future. The scale of Derrida's published output is similarly imposing. In the course of an intellectual career spanning five decades, he published well in excess of 100 volumes, including sustained monographs on key themes or topics, a wealth of lecture, seminar, and conference presentations brought together in a series of wide-ranging collections of essays, many other more localised interventions, including a stream of interviews, prefaces, prepared and unprepared responses to different audiences and to other thinkers, not to mention numerous other autobiographical or other writings impossible to categorise in conventional terms. And though Derrida wrote almost exclusively in his native French, he soon acquired a worldwide reputation and saw his work translated into English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Greek, Russian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Arabic, Japanese, and many other languages too.¹

Derrida's beginnings were, in fact, relatively modest. He was born Jackie Derrida on 15 July 1930 in El-Biar, a district on the south side of Algiers, during the period of French colonial rule. His father, Aimé Derrida, a commercial traveller for a wines-and-spirits firm, and his mother, Georgette Safar, were both Jews, whose forebears, arriving from Spain, had lived in Algeria since pre-colonial times, i.e. before the annexation of the country by the French in 1830. This meant that they became eligible for French citizenship only as a result of

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the Crémieux decree enacted in 1870, which naturalised *en bloc* all Jews born in Algeria.² As far as the Jewish population in Algeria was concerned, which numbered some 110,127 people according to the 1931 census, not to mention Derrida's own immediate family, this award of French citizenship was however short-lived, for one of the first measures introduced by the collaborationist Vichy government in October 1940 was the abrogation of the *décret Crémieux*.³ Already Vichy itself was keen to outdo even Hitler in the extent of its anti-semitic legislation, and the authorities in Algeria proved more eager still, extending to primary and secondary schools the severe anti-Jewish quotas imposed by Vichy, which meant that from June 1942 onwards, Derrida, aged 11 at the time, like many of his Jewish fellow students, found himself forcibly excluded from state education (*PC*, 97; 87–8; *MO*, 34–7; 16–18). Until the following spring, he attended instead – at least in name, since in reality he seems to have been persistently absent – the unofficial secondary school set up with the help of Jewish teachers who had similarly been dismissed by the authorities. In November 1942, when the Allied American and British forces landed in Algeria, it seemed as though things would quickly improve, but the new French regime, comprising many anti-semitic elements who had previously supported Vichy, was markedly slow in reversing the situation, with the governor-general, Marcel Peyrouton, a former Vichy interior minister, arguing that to reinstate the Crémieux decree would encourage similar demands on the part of the disenfranchised majority Muslim population.⁴ It was not until the Autumn of 1943 that Jewish students were allowed to rejoin mainstream secondary education.

The experience at the time for Derrida, he later remarked, was both puzzling and brutal. It left him with a deep suspicion of any kind of communitarian politics based on racial, ethnic, or religious identification, and translated too into an abiding reticence to speak in the first person plural, as *we* or part of an *us*, in the name of this or that larger community, even including that Jewish community of which he was nominally a member (*AV*, 40–7). It also served to alienate Derrida from the educational institution in general, and it is not surprising that during his adolescent years Derrida's academic record was that of a disaffected, often unhappy student, one of whose ambitions, even as he had begun to take an interest in Rousseau, Gide, and Nietzsche (*SP*, 16–17), was to be a professional footballer, or even perhaps an actor: an early photograph, shown in Safaa Fathy's documentary *D'ailleurs, Derrida (Derrida's Elsewhere)* depicts him at the age of fifteen, with bow-and-arrow, dressed as Tarzan (*TM*, 96–7)!

By the end of the 1940s, however, things began to change. After successfully passing his *baccalauréat* at the second attempt in June 1948, Derrida began to

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take a more active academic interest in literature and philosophy. At the age of nineteen, this took him for the very first time out of his native Algiers to Paris. Before then, his travelling had been limited to accompanying his father by car on his rounds, which rarely extended beyond 200 kilometres from the family home (C, 31, 37; 27, 32). If the 1942 Allied invasion had been the first landing to alter the course of his life, Derrida later remarked, so his landing in Marseille en route to Paris was the second (TM, 95–6). He did not settle easily at first in the capital. But in 1952 he eventually gained admission to the prestigious elite institution of the Ecole normale supérieure, through which had passed, in earlier decades, some of the most prominent philosophical and literary figures of the age, from Henri Bergson to Jean-Paul Sartre.

At the Ecole normale Derrida encountered as teachers or fellow students many who would soon become leading figures in their own right: the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who was already an important member of the Ecole normale teaching staff, the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, who also taught Derrida for a time, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the philosopher of aesthetics Louis Marin, the Sinologist Lucien Bianco, and the literary critic and theorist Gérard Genette. This was a remarkably creative generation who collectively, within twenty years or so, radically changed the whole philosophical and theoretical landscape both in France and elsewhere; in the 1980s and 1990s it would increasingly fall to Derrida to act as a standard-bearer for what had been achieved. So it was that he came to be responsible for numerous obituaries and eulogies: for such friends and colleagues as Foucault, Marin, and Althusser, and other influential thinkers of the period as Roland Barthes, Paul De Man, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard. Increasingly, towards the end of his own life, it was not surprising that Derrida often thought of himself, he said, as something of a survivor.⁵

In 1954 while at the Ecole normale, Derrida completed a first lengthy dissertation, which was not published till 1990, entitled *Le Problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl* (*The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*), in which Derrida dealt with some of the difficulties and tensions existing in the thought of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder and architect of modern phenomenology. Two years later, having successfully obtained the highly competitive advanced teaching qualification, the *agrégation*, and on the pretext of pursuing his research on Husserl, Derrida travelled to the United States where he spent a year as a visiting student at Harvard in what was to be, Derrida remarked, the third significant landfall in his career. On his return to France in 1957, Derrida submitted the title for a doctoral thesis closely related to his work on Husserl. But for a variety of personal, political, and institutional reasons the project was never completed, and Derrida was finally awarded a doctorate

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only in 1980 on the basis of his published work. In his thesis defence, while retracing his intellectual itinerary, he took the opportunity to explain, as we shall see, why it was that his thinking, for essential reasons, had never proven reducible to a *thesis* (DP, 439–59; TT, 34–50).

In 1957, before proceeding further in his academic career, along with all other French males of arms-bearing age, Derrida was obliged to carry out compulsory military service, which he did in a non-military setting, teaching in a primary school in Algeria for the next two years. These were turbulent times in the country. The war for Algerian independence begun in 1954 was slowly reaching a decisive climax, and soon after, under the April 1962 Evian accords, culminated in France's final withdrawal from the country, which it had admittedly never viewed as a colony but as a natural extension of its own territory. Many settlers of French descent left for the mainland, as did others, like Derrida's own family, whose primary allegiance was to French language and culture and to the universalism of the French Republic, which had distinguished itself long ago, unlike the Vichy State, by its emancipation of the Jews. In 1959 Derrida similarly returned to Paris, where his academic and intellectual career now began in earnest. After five years spent teaching at the Sorbonne, he took a position at the Ecole normale supérieure where he remained for the next twenty years, notwithstanding his international celebrity, in the surprisingly modest role of *maître-assistant* or lecturer.

By the end of the decade, Derrida had established himself as a powerful new voice and publishing presence, bringing out in 1967 no fewer than three separate volumes: *La Voix et le phénomène* (*Speech and Phenomena*, translated 1973), *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*, translated 1976); *L'Écriture et la différence* (*Writing and Difference*, translated 1978), followed, five years later, in 1972, by three more, equally substantial books: *La Dissémination* (*Dissemination*, translated 1981), *Marges de la philosophie* (*Margins of Philosophy*, translated 1982), and *Positions* (*Positions*, translated 1981). These respective dates for original French and subsequent English publication are not insignificant; they are a useful measure of Derrida's increasing prominence in the English-speaking world throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For while *De la grammatologie*, like *La Dissémination*, had to wait almost a decade before being translated, a much later book, *Specters of Marx*, first published in French in 1993, admittedly drawing on material presented in English at a conference in California some months before, was already available in translation the following year. *Monolingualism of the Other* and *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, both published in French in 1996, were likewise quickly translated, appearing in English only two years later.

In his early books of 1967 and 1972, Derrida ranged widely over the work of several canonic and non-canonic philosophical and literary figures, from Plato,

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Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and Levinas on the one hand, to Rousseau, Mallarmé, Artaud, Bataille, Jabès, and Sollers on the other, bringing these seemingly disparate philosophical and literary writings into close critical proximity, not in order to dismiss or underplay the complex differences between the literary and the philosophical, but rather to examine their shared implication in questions of writing, language, and style. And if in his early work he addressed the question of writing now in philosophical works, now in literary texts, in 1974 Derrida went a step further in his most provocative and challenging book yet, *Glas* (*Glas*, translated 1986), which was in the form of a double reading spread across parallel columns of selected works by G. W. F. Hegel, the imperious nineteenth-century philosopher of Absolute Knowledge, and the fiction and plays of one of the twentieth century's most avowedly marginal authors, the self-confessed 'coward, traitor, thief, and queer',⁶ Jean Genet. What was at stake here was not the subordination of literature to philosophy or philosophy to literature, as some have hastily concluded, but an exploration of what it was that took place *between* the so-called philosophical and the so-called literary, which was to be the central focus of much of Derrida's thinking in the years to come.

Following in the wake of the strikes and demonstrations of May 1968, the 1970s in France, as far as the education system was concerned, were a period of fierce polarisation on the part of both left and right, and though Derrida had limited enthusiasm for the events of May themselves, he took a leading role in the subsequent campaign to defend philosophy as a discipline against the political attacks mounted against it by successive conservative administrations. There was an important need, in Derrida's eyes, both to rethink the relationship between philosophy and the institution of the university and to reinvent the institutional basis for the teaching of philosophy at both secondary and university level. These concerns on Derrida's part were immediate but also long-lasting, and gave rise, from 1974 onwards, to his involvement in the Greph (Groupe de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique or Philosophy Teaching Research Group), and in 1983 to the founding of the Collège international de philosophie, that mobile interdisciplinary coalition that in recent decades has played a key role in France as a platform for innovative thinking in philosophy and in the humanities.

In the mid-1970s, too, together with his colleagues Sarah Kofman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida was instrumental in launching, first with Aubier-Flammarion, then with the newly revived Editions Galilée, a book series called 'La Philosophie en effet' (roughly translatable as 'Philosophy in deed'), which served as an important outlet for new approaches in the discipline. These initiatives were not restricted to mainland France. In 1981, with

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colleagues from other countries, Derrida helped set up the Jan Hus Association to support dissident or persecuted intellectuals in Communist Czechoslovakia. It was during a visit to Prague to speak at a clandestine seminar that Derrida was arrested and imprisoned on suspicion of drug trafficking, only to be released (and deported) shortly after as a result of the direct intervention of François Mitterrand, the newly elected French president.

During the 1970s Derrida's reputation took on a decisively international character. By 1976, for instance, *De la grammatologie* was now available in Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, as well as English translation, and this led to an increasing number of invitations abroad, with Derrida becoming a frequent visitor to the United States, giving lectures and seminars at Johns Hopkins, then at Yale, and then at the University of California, Irvine, and other institutions too. In 1979 his growing prominence on the English-speaking stage found expression in the book *Deconstruction and Criticism*, co-authored with Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, the title of which had the unfortunate effect of identifying Derrida's work with a label he had never claimed as such, and would always find reductive, and creating for some readers at least the misleading impression that his work was simply a kind of literary criticism applied to philosophical texts.

Much debate, controversy, and polemic ensued, particularly in the English-speaking world, much of it ill-informed, and sad confirmation of the fact that it is sometimes easier for professional commentators not to understand what they are (or, more likely, are not) reading. Derrida's enthusiasm remained however undimmed. He carried on tirelessly explaining, developing, and reinventing his thinking in a wide range of different settings, languages, and forums, displaying an unflinching commitment to his responsibilities as thinker, teacher, and engaged intellectual. He campaigned against apartheid, against racism in all its forms, against the assault of the French state on those it deemed to be illegal immigrants, against the death penalty, against state terrorism, whatever its provenance. He remained throughout deeply critical, too, of the grossly simplifying tendencies characteristic of highly mediatised, globalised contemporary Western societies, and deploying his formidable intellectual resources in the effort to understand the threat to democracy of what, since the end of the twentieth century, has come to be known as the new world order.

Derrida's intellectual itinerary displays many unreconciled and paradoxical pulls of allegiance. On the one hand, as far as dominant Catholic metropolitan French culture was concerned, Derrida was an outsider several times over, which explains perhaps why he was often to find celebrity abroad before encountering it, so to speak, at home. On the other hand, far from turning aside from the enlightenment imperatives of reason, clarity, and critical debate,

Derrida's response to marginalisation and to his own eccentric place in mainstream French culture was to embrace the European philosophical tradition with renewed passion and commitment, even if – as it invariably did – it meant reminding that tradition of its own past and reading it against the grain of its own received orthodoxy. In order to keep faith with his position as an outsider, Derrida quickly realised, it was necessary precisely to become an insider – not in order to renounce exteriority, but to replace the outside at the centre where it properly-improperly belonged. The challenge was to find a place or, better, a place without a place, simultaneously inside and outside the philosophical tradition, *both* as a grateful and respectful guest *and* as a recalcitrant foreign body, not in order to promote consensus, therefore, but to reveal dissensus, and conscious of the need to exploit all the critical resources bequeathed to him by the philosophical tradition in order that nothing might ever be taken for granted by the philosophical tradition itself. For that tradition was anything but homogeneous or identical with itself; it was traversed by many unspoken assumptions, discontinuities, internal inconsistencies, tensions, irresolvable paradoxes, slips, silences, absences, and exclusions, all of which it was imperative to address, but the only evidence for which, like some hidden family secret, lay in the family's own historical archive.

The result was an unyielding double stance of fidelity and infidelity. It is in any case impossible to be truly faithful to the legacy of the past, and Derrida was well aware of the paradox. If I scrupulously copy out, in my own hand, adding nothing, subtracting nothing, the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, this may seem to represent a gesture of purest fidelity. But not so, it is infidelity itself, for I do something that neither the author nor the text of *Hamlet* ever did or was or is capable of doing, in which case I find myself betraying both the letter and the spirit of Shakespeare's play.⁷ It is however too late for me to do otherwise, and I cannot but accept the inevitability of my betrayal, in which case the only question that remains is how I bear the burden of my betrayal, how I therefore choose or am constrained to invent my relationship with the play, which is what occurs whenever I read it or see it performed.

The paradox is anything but rarefied; it is entirely banal, and has to be confronted anew by every performer who steps on stage, and every reader who picks up the play, and, like the Danish Prince, is enjoined to respond to the words of a father's ghost. To be or not to be, suggests Derrida, citing a fragment from the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), is first of all to inherit (*SM*, 93–4; 67–8). But all inheritance is necessarily split, and time always out of joint. There is the past, to which it is necessary to pay tribute, if only because without it we cannot say who we are, and because whoever ignores it merely ends up repeating it; and there is the future, unforeseeable,

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unpredictable, incalculable. And there is no alternative, Derrida argues, but to respond equally to both, even if this means having to confront perpetual, irreconcilable contradiction.

Derrida's own response to the dilemma was a remarkable combination of generosity and vigilance, openness and suspicion. For Derrida, it was absolutely crucial that the two sides of the equation – the past, the future – were not flattened out, synthesised away, and reduced to one. His lifelong commitment, whatever the intellectual consequences, was to this need to respect and affirm difference, division, singularity. It informed all his political, philosophical, and literary thinking. In one of his last interviews, published shortly before his death, Derrida considered for a moment the ambiguous political legacy of the concept of democracy in Europe, whose fate was so often to have been found wanting, but whose promise it was nevertheless essential, Derrida insisted, to continue to affirm. There was no escaping that difficult legacy, its implications for thought, for thinking, and the thinker himself. 'It's true', Derrida agreed, 'you will always find me making this gesture, I have no final justification for it, save that it's who I am, or where I am. I am at war with myself, it's true, you have no idea how much, beyond anything you may guess, and I say contradictory things, which are, shall we say, in real tension with one another, and which make me what I am, are my life's blood, and will be the death of me.' The struggle, he realised, could and would never end. 'Sometimes', he added, 'I see it as a terrifying and painful war, but at the same time I know that's what life is. I will find peace only in eternal rest. So I cannot say I have come to terms with the contradiction, though I also know it is what keeps me alive, and indeed makes me ask the very question you were recalling: "How to learn, how to teach [*Comment apprendre*] how to live?" [cf. *SM*, 13; xvi]' (*AV*, 49).

Life, however, is not something that can either be learned or taught, which is not to say it is not the object of much earnest, anxious, joyful questioning. This was Derrida's point: life is what happens, occurs, takes place, often, as it were, without anyone necessarily being there to take that decision. How, then, here and now, should the relationship between Derrida's life and his work be addressed?

The question admits of no ready answer. The fact is, when books like this choose or are required to deal first with a thinker's life, and then with his or her work, the relationship between the two is not something that may be taken for granted. Is life separate from work? Or is it part of work, and work part of life? For certain critics, life is something that is expressed by the work, while for others it is the work that expresses the life. For others, the work is only valid or valuable because it leads back to life, while for others life itself is

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strictly irrelevant to the work. These are, in some branches of literary criticism, important debates. But from Derrida's perspective, while life and work are thought as existing in opposition to one another, it matters little how the relationship is construed.

To have some purchase on what is really at stake here, it is necessary, perhaps, to adopt the reverse strategy and begin to consider what it is that joins life and work together. It is soon apparent that what they share is a relationship with death and dying. Dying is the extreme limit of life, its margin, frontier, or border, without which life would not be what it is, but which I cannot know as such since to do so I must pass beyond it and then return. There are manuals on how best to put an end to a life; but there are no instructions on what the experience of dying is like, for it exceeds the possibility of experience, which is why in turn death and killing are events that loom so large in works of fiction. My life is only what it is because I know (or ignore) that, at some point, unknown to me, perhaps tomorrow, the next day or the next, I shall die. Since it always belongs to the future, that dying is something unavailable to me. There is nothing more properly mine, but it is not something I can ever properly claim as such.

At first sight, there could be nothing more different than writing. But what happens when there is writing? What happens is that a trace is left, on paper, on disk, in wax, or on the wet sand, a trace that is no sooner inscribed than it exists without me, and must exist without me, since otherwise it would not be a trace. So this book that you are reading may have been written by a living human (at least I think so); but as soon as these words left my fingers and appeared on my computer screen, they were no longer mine alone. As you read these words, their author may be long dead (how will you tell?), which is also to say, Derrida argues, that the possibility and the inevitability of my dying are already inscribed within these words. Whether I am actually dead or not, as you read these words, then, is less important than the possibility I may be dead, and to that extent am in a sense as good as dead, and dead to these words which (I hope) are still the words I originally intended, but which you are free to interpret as you will.

To understand what is at stake in life, in work, then, it is necessary to consider death: not as grim inevitability, but rather as an unfathomable secret always dividing me from myself. The question is sometimes asked: why live, why write? But there are no answers to such questions. The purpose of life, if one exists, is living; and the purpose of writing, if there is any, is likewise: writing. This of course simplifies nothing. What it does however is to reaffirm the unbounded possibilities of the one and the other, possibilities that, by virtue of the logic of inheritance, are inseparable from a debt owed to the past and to the future. But

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while there may be ethico-moral or religious precepts which an individual or group may elect to obey, or not, in order to lead a good, decent, or honourable life, there are no rules that teach how to live, or from which it is possible to learn how to live. Life's limits, like those of writing, cannot be decided in advance.

How, then, to carry on? 'I can't go on', answers the narrator in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*, and continues, without pause: 'you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any . . .'⁸ When asked by a journalist for the French newspaper *Libération* why he wrote, Beckett replied tersely and to the point, dispensing with both verb and personal pronoun: 'Bon qu'à ça', which meant: 'No good at anything else', 'Only any good at this', 'No good at anything except being or not being B-K-S', in which readers will recognise the outline of a cryptic signature.⁹ As the verdict suggests, like Derrida, Beckett was conscious of being a survivor, what French calls a *survivant*, so long as the word is read, as it is by Derrida in the essay 'Living On', in the sense of *both* a living after, in the future, *and* a living boundlessly, in excess of life's limits.

'O day and night, but this is wondrous strange', interjects Horatio. At which Hamlet reminds him: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, /Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Derrida seems to have agreed. For notwithstanding the formidable critical arsenal deployed by Derrida in his prolonged engagement with Western metaphysics, there was always more to it than that. Most importantly of all, perhaps, though his vigilance was unerring, there was nothing negative about Derrida's thinking, which was carried instead by an irrepressibly affirmative thought of the future: not the future that is a deferred present, calculated, programmed, and determined in advance, and to that extent barely a future at all, but the future which cannot be foreseen, mastered, or regulated, and is still to come (*à-venir*, as the French word *avenir*, future, allows Derrida to say), as threat or promise, without it being possible to say which it is, but without which no literature, no politics, no writing, no otherness, no innovation of any kind would be possible. This other future, for Derrida, one might say, was simply this: another word for life itself.

And so it was, shortly before it was time (time without time) for Derrida's life to end, as it did on 9 October 2004, and just as he had done for many of the friends who had predeceased him, Derrida penned a funeral address, to be read out at his own funeral, written in quotation marks, and in the third person, safe in the knowledge that he would not be there to say it or hear it, but that his words, having already escaped his grasp, had the strength still, or the weakness, to bear witness to the singular mystery of a life. Read aloud by his son Pierre as ritual demanded three days after his death, these, then, were Jacques Derrida's parting words: