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Jean-Luc Nancy & Sergio Benvenuto

Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004)

A Conversation between Sergio Benvenuto and Jean-Luc Nancy

Sergio Benvenuto: Could you describe briefly your personal relationship with Jacques Derrida? What aspect of his personality struck you most?

Jean-Luc Nancy: Jacques Derrida always struck me as an indivisible block of thought and personality. With Derrida I never made a distinction between the man and his work, nor was I ever tempted to do so. He fully lived his thoughts, and he fully thought out his life: that doesn't mean that he conformed to his ideas (in terms of a rule-governed "application" of theory to practice), but rather that his life, his personality as you call it, his relations with others and with himself were guided, maintained and extended by the same care, the same *souci* (to use a term from Heidegger, *Sorge*, that he himself used quite rarely). Which care? That which comes to mind, or to the soul as one may say, when all assurances, all certainties have been turned upside down. This was the kind of upheaval he experienced, the kind belonging to a certain period—specifically, the period of the "end of philosophy" as Heidegger intended it; the end of "world view" and the beginning of a "task of thought" so new that its mere idea causes anxiety. My relationship with him was a friendship within—and by way of, so to speak—this care or unrest. I can easily say that he wasn't afraid of anything and was worried about everything. I would even say that he got stirred up (*il s'affolait*) about everything; he continually brushed up against madness (*folie*) in always testing the infinite fragility of traditional assurances (culture, knowledge, thought).

SB: What aspect of Derrida's work most influenced your thinking and why?

JLN: It was through him that I came to understand the irreversible turn in thinking taken by Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Bataille and Freud. This was because he opened up the space inscribed at the heart of *présence à soi*, being-present-to-oneself. He called it *différance*, creating a barbarism of the French word *différence* (difference) in writing it with an 'a'. *Différance*, deferring: the irreducible separation from the present, from presence, the self—the "subject". Writing is at the heart of voice. A "heart" that, as a result, is not an intimacy closely gathered around oneself, a "dwelling" that is not the home of familiar or family intimacy. While Sartre—to take a hallmark of my student years—only offered the dialectic of the in-itself and the for-itself, and while just behind him was the ever functioning Hegelian machine that remained unaffected by the Nietzschean imprecations (for me, as far as I saw, like for many others at that time), there suddenly opened up, not a reductive or conciliatory force, but an instability that brought forward a new opportunity—and a risk!—for the adventure of thinking, that is, of not getting locked the meaning; for not satisfying even supreme and final ends. Suddenly, there was for me a way of thinking at work in the century, in the concrete and living of the world of 1960 (or 1962, to be precise: the end of the war in Algeria, the beginning of a new history, and even of an afterward history...). Philosophy suddenly found, for me, the

actuality of its movement, of its act and gesture.

SB: You use the term “actuality”: a word that can be taken in different ways. One may think of it in the Aristotelian sense of *energeia*, as in passing to action—and also in the sense of being current, being in resonance with one’s time. In which of these two senses is Derrida’s work *actual*? Or is it actual in both senses of the term?

JLN: These two meanings of *actual* were implicitly linked in my answer. First, the latter sense: being in resonance with one’s time. In reading Derrida in 1964, I saw that resonance in a completely unexpected way. To better answer your question, I opened my copy of *The Origin of Geometry* and among the paragraphs I had underlined, I choose these words: “making the polemical unity of appearing and disappearing irreducible”. In that “irreducibility” I recognized something that for me, at that time, “resonated”. I had never before experienced that, at least in such a clear and “striking” manner. And it was an actuality of thought: it was a matter of entering that “polemical unity”, which was also a way of sliding outside the bounds of a certain phenomenology. It was also a way of displacing oneself with respect to a certain positive side of history, of consciousness, life, etc. And this “polemic” (a choice of words that today seems strange to me), displaced or undid the “dialectic”. As for the second meaning of “actual”: it was an act of thought, the mark and the tone, the blow of the effective act, of thought at work, right there in front of me, because I knew it was perfectly contemporary to and at the same time behind with respect to the commentary it claimed to be (and which was the style of others I knew).

SB: Do you think there was an evolution in Derrida’s thinking over the course of his lifetime, and, in the affirmative case, how to describe it?

JLN: There was, of course, an evolution, just as there is, luckily, for everyone. He was increasingly interested in topics concerning institutions, ethics or politics. This was due, in part, to the fact that he was frequently questioned regarding these areas: many did not realize that what was at stake—metaphysically speaking—in the theory of *différance* and grammatology was upstream from the moral and political definitions, and that it didn’t really make sense to try to “draw” from it a moral or political philosophy, since such a “deduction” or “application” results from a way of thinking that rests on the assurance of given principles that can be “applied”. He wanted to show that he had not shirked his responsibility or what was once called “commitment”. But what he did in favor of this movement remains profoundly true to him since he never ceased examining the error of the assurances resulting from all the humanist certainties at the very moment in which he may have seemed to support them. For example, if he became the most insistent philosophical defender of the abolition of the death penalty, he at the same time maintained—indeed hammered—his point that there was no conclusive and irrefutable philosophical argument in favor of such an abolition, and that consequently such an argument requires a completely different theoretic position for its principle (if in fact it is a matter of principle).

SB: Derrida’s political commitments—towards South Africa, illegal immigrants, against the death penalty, etc.—never had a radical or extremist aspect: they were, after all, politically correct causes, as someone malicious might say. Which serious person today is really in favor of the death penalty or against emigration towards our countries? If one compares his activities to the much more scandalous and “erroneous” ones of someone like J.P. Sartre, for example, one sees it quite clearly. Is it just coincidence? Or in the end was Derrida, politically and ethically, a moderate?

JLN: One could say that your question already contains the answer, starting with Sartre. My generation deplored Sartre’s “errors” (even though, personally speaking, I was always more inclined towards

indulgence on his behalf than were others). Sartre had crystallized two related phenomena: the “intellectual’s commitment” and the fierce insistence upon a “revolutionary” line. The two together seemed threatened by the dismantling of the *corpus* of Marxist or Marxist-like, or Marxist-anarchist if you prefer, beliefs and convictions. This phenomenon was not a turn towards moderation, but a paradigm shift (to use Kuhn’s expression) or a change in episteme (as Foucault would say). And these two vocabularies themselves corresponded to a shift in the relation to history, progress, “grand narratives” (Lyotard). In this process, Derrida had two related behaviors: on the one hand, that of one of the Left who in fact did not see himself in a revolutionary statement (unless projected into a dimension not visibly accessible); and on the other hand, that of a thinker who knew, or at least felt, that the very essence of the “political” was, necessarily, to be reworked given that at stake were an epochal change and a deconstruction of metaphysics (and so also of the politics!). What’s more, he had later to face up to certain attacks (especially in America) from those disappointed by his political restraint, and who were far from suspecting their grounds. He showed that he was ready to commit himself—and in fact, his commitments were not radical, but what more radical commitments would you cite these days? I don’t see any in particular that deserve serious attention. In the last two years he even declared himself in favor of alter-globalization (so called no-global) in such a less “politically correct” and unexpected way. On the other hand, and this is the most important thing in my view, his commitments gave another dimension to the “causes” in question: in the case of Mandela, he initiated a reflection about “forgiveness”, being the first to open that; and in the case of the death penalty, he undertook a reflection regarding the philosophical arguments—still to be given—condemning it. By way of summarizing: one can, of course, always choose to be more to the Left than someone like him—but where, exactly?... I really don’t see how. One can just as well question the very idea of the “political” as the idea of “commitment”. And if he didn’t have the time to do it thematically, he nevertheless opened up a number of paths not easily ignored. Questioning the very idea of the political is today something that is not “correct” at all.

What is supremely correct is asking intellectuals to sign petitions. Today in France, however, protesting against a kind of widespread consensus that prohibits any criticism of Sharon (except, of course, from the far Left) is absolutely incorrect: and this is what Derrida was doing in recent years.

SB: It’s been said that Derrida’s deconstruction is a self-deconstruction: in the end, he analyzes—and takes apart—primarily his masters, from Condillac to Marx, from Freud to Lacan, from Heidegger to Lévi-Strauss to Paul de Man. Is it possible to read part of Derrida’s work as a self-critique, that is, as a critique of his own original culture, one belonging to his own history? In short, did he not deconstruct the cultural and moral world where he was *dwelling*?

JLN: Of course, a “deconstruction” is always self-deconstructing. But not in the way your question seems to take it. You speak of “his masters”, of “his culture” as if it were personal, particular and regional. But it’s nothing other than what the themes of “deconstruction” have introduced since Nietzsche’s “hammer”, Husserl’s “*Abbau*” and Heidegger’s “*Destruktion*” (and, less directly, since Feuerbach’s and Marx’s “critique”, as well as Bergson’s challenge to the Cartesian and Kantian tradition). That is, it has to do with an entire tradition—which calls itself “Western”—that sees the need of placing itself in relation to its own origins, foundations or principles in order to experience not its “insufficient” or “erroneous” nature, but rather its “overly sufficient”, overly self-sufficient and self-normative nature. A “deconstruction” is a construction that questions itself, that places itself in question, that opens itself up. It’s not Derrida who practices a “self-critique” (a term, in fact, linked either to an odious totalitarian practice, or a curious illusion of self-sufficiency...), it is the West that de-Westernizes itself, that displaces and globalizes itself—that disseminates itself...

SB: Although Derrida was of the Left, one can't say that his philosophy was "Leftist". But he was in fact especially admired by the intelligentsia of the Left. Is it possible to formulate more precisely this affinity between Derrida's theory and the Left? Or is it the result of a misunderstanding?

JLN: What does "the Left" mean today? If all the defining models of a history, of a social, governmental, or extra-Statist organization are left aside along with the "ideologies" (as they say today, but in fact they are philosophies) underlying them, there only remain two things of "the Left": 1) an unconditional demand for justice; 2) an inclination to welcoming the uprising, the revolt of those who suffer as a result of injustice. These terms and this inclination are easily found in Derrida. Anyway, his philosophy—but does he have one? and in what sense?...—isn't "Leftist" in the sense that it would have eventually led to one or another of the assumptions of a "Leftist" worldview (History, Progress, Man as creator of his own value, etc.). These assumptions are all brought into question by the self-deconstruction of the West. On the other hand, raising the question of these assumptions as such, bringing forward the issue of what "political" and "moral", or "equality" and "justice", mean and as he sought to do in *Specters of Marx*, trying to open in Marx himself a difference (and *différance*) between the humanist certainties and another dimension altogether (which he called "messianic" in a highly sophisticated sense—but for me the use of the term was always unsatisfying, and for him as well, he once told me), this is, if I may say so, more than and better than "being on the Left" in a conformist and politically correct way. There are people of the Left, there are no "philosophies of the Left", especially when the question of stepping outside of the philosophy-*Weltanschauung* is raised! It is not because, for example, Deleuze was very openly pro-Palestinian that his thinking was more "Leftist" as compared to Derrida: they each had a different position, of course, but ultimately not at all incompatible in this respect—far from it! A careful analysis would show this.

SB: Derrida and Jewishness. Can one say that Derrida's way of thinking also belongs to the Diaspora?

JLN: Yes, certainly. But once again, what are we talking about? Of a particular case, typical of Derrida-Jew-Algerian, or something else? Are we talking about Jewishness as an index of the irruption of a rejected, *forclos*, un-thought thought from within Western thinking (and within "Jewish thinking" as well)? Then it's something else. One speaks of "Jewishness" as a sign of discord and dehiscence—of division and ties, of *différance*—of the West with itself. Maimonides, Spinoza, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger secretly, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Levinas would all at least have followed this path, accompanied and led Derrida. With him, the difference is that he belongs to a time—that of the on-going mourning of the Shoah, of the on-going explanation of the Shoah, and the time of the conflict between Israel and the Arab world—in which the "Jew" (with Lyotard's quotation marks) becomes a manifest, conflictual, problematic and enigmatic sign—and all the more so since he doesn't think in relation to "Jewish thought" (unlike Levinas, Derrida did not read the Talmud, and very little of the Torah). Between Levinas and Derrida there was a dehiscence, or a strain, within being Jewish—and, I repeat, insofar as this "being Jewish", which does not and cannot constitute "substantial" being, identified identity, itself opens up within Western identity the beating of a difference—with and without an "a".

SB: What meaning can one give to his insistence, during the latter period of his life, upon the theme of the sacrificial animal? Can one read in this a simultaneously ethical and political slide with respect to his "post-structuralist" beginnings? That is, that Western metaphysics had repressed and sacrificed not only and not above all writing, but the animal in us? Can one say that, for the latter Derrida, the sacrificed animal assumes the same value as writing, whose scotomization he denounced in his early works?

JLN: I'm not in a position to answer that question, since I don't know all the texts relating to it, in particular the unpublished seminars in which he developed to a considerable extent his thinking on the animal. I think

you're right: there is a correspondence between the animal and writing, which is seen when Derrida (towards the end of the text in "The autobiographical animal", the anthology from the conference by the same name, published by Galilée) talks of the animal's "trace of itself". Trace, writing, movement of a going-towards which ends up not ending, which does not have a final "post" and yet "goes", not exactly "nowhere" (which is only a rough translation of Heidegger's *Holzweg*, the wood-path), but somewhere that is not situated, established, configured. Such is the "self" of which the animal would be a particular evidence, lacking the possibility of deluding itself over the identity given by an "I", just as language leads us to do in the case of human beings. Animal and writing, then, are two versions of a being-in-the-world or of making a world that avoids the appropriation of a final meaning. I say it in terms of "world" since Derrida's thinking here is based on a suspicious examination of Heidegger's categories which make that animal "poor of the world" while man is "maker of the world". "World" is thus implied as a shaping, configuration, posture and status; it is not an open, undetermined world in expansion... It amounts to saying that this interest in the animal is not something particular to Derrida: he shares it with Deleuze, and for both of them it belongs to a necessity of displacing humanism, of questioning it or leaving it aside. This is the great and profound need of our times—provided one knows how to see it as something other than a "super-humanism" or a re-theologization...

SB: Is it possible to say that Derrida is anti-spiritualist? What is the meaning of his deconstruction of what, in Heidegger, remains "spiritual" and hence humanist?

JLN: *Of Spirit* [his book on Heidegger] gives the answers needed, much better than I could do! It leads us back to the animal and the letter, both of them traditionally contrasted with the "spirit" or "mind". Briefly, the spirit holds for the immaterial presence-to-self, for self-penetration and self-expression (exhalation, emanation, combustion, breath and flames) with no remainder, no exteriority, no interval. But at the same time, I wouldn't call it "anti-spiritualist" since the spirit, as breath, *pneuma*, is also what causes movement and separation, that which lifts up and carries away... and which is at the same time the non-phenomenal of the phenomenon itself. In other words, *the voice*, if you will, to use his founding title. As for voice, he never put it aside under the writing: he only wanted to show that the voice is written, that writing is thus also the trace of breath, and breath, in the end, the erasure of the trace, but in such a way that in that erasure, the trace infinitely continues to play its role, namely, that of not ending. It is very complicated, and I think that the word "spirit" or "mind" also marks an empty place, one of those empty places like the words "subject", or "matter" or "meaning" (Derrida was surprised that I use it). These words are outdated, they are full of misunderstandings. But their empty places give rise to questions, or rather expectations. He clearly continued to model himself on such expectations.

SB: Those who detest so-called post-modern thinking in general, and Derrida's in particular, accuse it of being spiritualist: that it has forgotten scientific rationality and has lost touch with "the earth". How can one understand Derrida's position vis-à-vis "the earth"?

JLN: The earth, but it's everywhere in his thinking! It's the native soil and the lost land, the land where one returns and where return is impossible. The earth one never escapes for any kind heaven whatsoever, but which at the same time has nothing to do with the good old solid earth, thick and fertile. Non-maternal, but at the same time well-grounded. Certainly not a certain land of a certain Heidegger, but a land or earth that one could clearly discern in *Khôra*, for example... I'm surprised that such a question could be raised...

SB: In fact, it's not a question, it's a judgment: it's the way Derrida is judged by a large part of the Western intelligentsia who don't share his views. For example, Richard Rorty who, although having

read and appreciated Derrida, saw his way of thinking as a linguistic romanticism.

JLN: I don't know what Rorty means exactly by "linguistic romanticism", although I could guess and I would also be somewhat critical of the reliance on language over concepts. But there is no lack of conceptualization in Derrida's case, one need only read him carefully. Here, just as in politics, the debate is mined with prior meanings of words and pre-judgments... But on the other hand, I do not want to erase views and I don't deny certainly that there is room for debate! I would only say that one only seriously begins when there are no kind of normative, philosophical judgments, when there is no "philosophical correctness"...

For now, there is nothing in Derrida resembling an ethereal or "angelic" romanticism, even if there is the "breath" I talked about. I don't know if one can find in his work some kind of reflection regarding the earth, but I don't see how one can say he has supposedly "forgotten about scientific rationality and the earth", for two reasons: 1) Derrida in no way forgets or makes short shrift of scientific rationality—no more than any serious philosopher—but scientific rationality is of a different nature than philosophical reasoning, which has been known since Kant!; 2) and why should scientific rationality and the earth be linked? The former concerns the universe, the cosmos, planets, ecosystems, mechanisms, chemistry, biology, but the earth is something else!

SB: Another common accusation made against Derrida—and against the so-called post-modern thinkers—is that of being nihilistic, that is, without historical hope, a radical, relativist historicism etc. Can one take Derrida as a nihilist? For example, what is the relationship between his way of thinking and that of Gianni Vattimo, who proudly waves his nihilist flag?

JLN: There it is! "Nihilism", but who understands this word if they haven't read Nietzsche? And what does Nietzsche say? He says that nihilism is the result of the "death of God", that is to say, the disappearance of "over worlds" and beliefs in a principle located in the beyond. In this way, he clearly points out what Kant, and in fact the entire history of philosophy, claimed, namely, that there is in fact no beyond, there is no principle that is *given* or *set down* somewhere as a cause, origin, substance (except in Spinoza's sense...). Nihilism reveals to itself the truth of metaphysics. It follows that, once again according to Nietzsche, the escape from nihilism takes place from within nihilism. In other words, one doesn't fill the *nihil*, one experiences it, one practices it and thinks about it. If "nihilist" means disenchantment, cynicism or melancholy, that is not Derrida! (Although he was, as a man, rather melancholic, but of that great melancholy that knows how to laugh and smile.) If "nihilism" means acknowledging the crumbling of the representations of Principles, Origins, Values and Meanings, and a firm intention to take note of this acknowledgement, then it's something else. Using this word "nihilism" without other precautions isn't very serious... It is from the very outset a refusal to philosophize.

SB: Etienne Balibar said, to the contrary, that Derrida was part of the great transcendentalist tradition of philosophy: that of Kant, Husserl and Heidegger. Do you share that opinion? And, if yes, in what sense does Derrida belong to that philosophical "family"?

JLN: If by "transcendentalism" one means the attitude that 1) takes note of the fact that the "supreme being" or *ens qua ens* is not a being and in this sense is not or is nothing (which is raised by Kant and fully developed by Heidegger), and 2) questions the conditions of possibility of a thought regarding truth, meaning, manifestation, existence, morality and beauty in these conditions, then Derrida is certainly part of that line. Which amounts to saying quite simply that he is neither a skeptic, nor an empiricist nor a dogmatic. (One needs to set aside the question of a "transcendental empiria" whose roots are as much in Kierkegaard as they are in Husserl.) It simply means that philosophy, as a way of thinking, is as alien to

scientific knowledge as it is to religious belief. If the debate is over where to classify Derrida, the problem is that he doesn't identify himself as being either on the side of scientific or pragmatic (utilitarian) knowledge or on the side of mysticism. But it is precisely in an "elsewhere" with respect to these two that philosophy always, absolutely always, takes place!!!

SB: Regarding Derrida, you told the Italian newspaper *Liberazione* that, as in the case of Spinoza, "the truth reveals itself." You said, "The truth imposes itself—and one can neither avoid it nor prefer something else to it. But still, one must not confuse verifiable truth with unverifiable truth, the truth that imposes itself prior to, or over and above, any verification." I think that this is the essential point that separates Derrida's thinking (and yours) from the Analytic or Anglo-American style of thinking, for which the belief in a truth that's imposed by force is naïve and dogmatic since, as is the case, human beings never agree about the truth (for example, a majority of Americans are convinced that man is not the product of evolution in the Darwinian sense, but was created by God as described in the Bible). Every day and almost everywhere one comes across people who prefer, not the truth, but something else. If it's not true that truth is imposed or revealed by itself, isn't the belief then that a truth was self-imposed just an "ethnic" peculiarity? That is, a belief of the tribe of French philosophers and their followers? How do you respond to this basic criticism?

JLN: It is a radical and essential objection since, as you say, it is a basic point. If someone believes that a god created the world, it's in the realm of the verifiable, and he expends considerable effort in trying to pass his unverifiable belief for something belonging to a higher order of the verifiable (revelation, sacred books...): he doesn't say that this truth is shown by itself! And those who think that man is the product of evolution also know that this "production" remains unverifiable: what does it mean for man to be the "result of"? What does it mean or how is one to understand the fact that, suddenly, a great ape began burying its dead, built a burial mound, etc.? Is it a cerebral structure? Undoubtedly, but what does that mean? In short, the verifiable and unverifiable are always inter-connected, like a duet or a pair of sidekicks. Their link and their debate are very important and must always be pursued. It is the order of truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus*, a virtually infinite order since the *res* is continually reshaped and remodeled by the *intellectus* who summons it to answer to him. But where is the truth *regarding this knowledge itself* or, if you prefer, *the truth of man's verifying inclination* (of his curiosity, his ingenuity, his appropriation of the world)? How could it be verifiable? It is what imposes itself, reveals itself, as desire, love, or a feeling of beauty or the sublime. It was Kant who said that there needed to be desire, although now forgotten, in order for knowledge to emerge...(it's in the Introduction to the Third Critique).

SB: Or already in Aristotle? *pantes ànthropoi tou eidénai orégontai phùsei* [all men by nature desire to know] (*Metaphysics A 980 a*).

JLN: Yes, thank you! And in fact, Aristotle gives as the first proof the pleasure produced by sensation. The remarkable point here is that for Kant, the desire-pleasure of knowing is for us "forgotten": for him, knowledge is cold, and pleasure requires a different discipline, that of "reflective judgment", itself going as far as displeasure in the sublime. This provides an interesting insight into what could be called the affective and sensual history of truth...

Let's get back to the topic at hand. The same type of knowledge is not used to arrive at truth that precedes, and does not follow from, verification. Spinoza calls this a "third" kind, and sets conditions for it which are not initially cognitive, but emotive and ethical in his sense of the term. That is, in Plato's cave, what is it that pushes a prisoner to leave? What is it that pulls him away? What or who is it? Plato doesn't say. This is what is at issue. It is not a matter of an unverifiable that imposes itself by force (whether by terror or stupidity), it's a matter of an "imposition" that frees the person upon whom it's imposed. One can therefore

say that the essence of this truth is freedom (here, Heidegger comes to mind), later we can think about this freedom... but I'll stop here. I'd only like to make you see how very serious these issues are, much more than all the game about the verifiable and unverifiable, which is certainly important, but covered with guarantees. The "real truth" is without guarantees, without assurances. Again, it's like love—it may be love itself. Love of the world, of mankind, of oneself, love for no reason.

SB: In fact, in the history of philosophy, two senses of "truth" have been compared—and the two conceptions refer to the common language use of the term "truth". One is that of *adequatio res et intellectus* you just mentioned: that a proposition is true when it appropriately describes a thing. The other sense is instead what you assume: truth as the falling of a mask, an unveiling—it's the appeal to truth as authenticity, I'd say. It seems that you give a subjective, even affective, connotation to this notion of truth: you speak of desire, love, curiosity, of the feeling of beauty and the sublime, of subjective freedom. From this point of view, the basic truth would no longer be, "I think, therefore I am," but "I desire (or I love), therefore I am": the subject who desires to seek truth would be the true transcendental subject. Fine, but I can imagine the objection to all this from a philosopher from another tribe: "Why call 'truth' that transcendental inclination in all subjects? And why ought one think that it imposes itself by itself?" Psychoanalysis shows, in fact, that the true desire isn't obvious, that it's by no means a truth that applies to everyone: to the contrary, it needs to be reconstructed, it needs to be brought out little by little, and one can *always* question authenticity (truth). One can certainly say, "I (transcendentally) desire, therefore I am," but this doesn't tell us *what* I am or *what* I desire... Subjective truth, if one believes Freud (and Nietzsche), would be no more self-imposing and constraining than objective truth.

JLN: It's not at all a matter of subjectivity: in order for a subject to recognize the "true" for him, and for a body of knowledge to be able to provide the verification procedures of an *adequatio*, the idea of "truth" must first be given, by a transcendental but not individually subjective gift—it's instead the transcendental of a subject-in-general. "True" means: that to which you cannot deny consent. In the etymology of "true" one finds "to believe": but it is a non-subjective "to believe", not a "take-to-be-true" of illusion or credulity, but the "to-be-taken-as-true" of evidence, proof or revelation. These three forms here are equivalent: they are three variants of the same idea of "truth". We aren't speaking about subjectivity or objectivity here, we're speaking of what organizes *a priori* the very possibility of knowledge and thought. It's a matter of knowing how to conceive of this *a priori* or this "archi-inclination" of all thought and meaning. (It's what leads Lacan to declare "*Moi, la vérité, je parle...*" "I, the Truth, speak...") It is clearly neither subjective nor objective, since this pair of concepts assumes a determined truth as the relation between a subject and an object... But this is nothing, or rather, it's a "nothing" in a sense to be thought. When Nietzsche, since you mention him, says, "We have art so as not to be swallowed up by truth," he is absolutely affirming the truth! If I spoke of affect and intensity, it is not as regards the subjective: it is rather as regards the archi-transcendental in which truth precedes all meaning, all signification, by opening up the signifying realm of the signifier ("*Je parle*, I speak")—but what is this opening like and how does it act? Like a hole that terrifies and swallows up? Like a blow in the face? Like an explosion? Like love at first sight? In any case, truth *acts*, it doesn't (or not only) "inform". Truth is more praxis (*praxique*) than poiesis (*poietique*). It transforms its subject (its agent or its patient...). Verifiable truth doesn't do anything: it is itself made, constructed.

What strikes me is that this question, like many others, seems directed more towards philosophy as such than towards Derrida in particular...

SB: Of course. But Derrida's importance consists precisely in the fact that he lets himself raise questions one wants to raise regarding philosophy as such.

JLN: Yes, and that in no way means that he takes himself, nor that one should take him, for “philosophy” in person! He himself gives great importance to the diversity of philosophies as diversity of tones, styles, ways of “opening” the path of meaning (to go back to what I mentioned earlier). He knew quite well that it was “his voice”, his “idiom” (a theme he cultivated)—but even this, the truth of the idioms or voices, belongs to... truth!

This is also why the best, and also most faithful (if one wants to express it this way) way of taking Derrida’s contribution into consideration, is for each one to do their utmost to find their own voice, their own tone...

SB: How can one sum up what it is that brings Derrida and Lacan together, and what it is that separates them?

JLN: I don’t know. I am not that familiar with Lacan, I really don’t study him. Lacan is very close to Derrida by virtue of a shared origin (Hegel, Heidegger, Bataille, Kojève, etc.). But Lacan set out to construct a device (a “tool box” as Lacanians like to say) that, despite everything else, ultimately declares the necessity of cure and institution. One can speak in terms other than those of “healing” or “normalization of the ego”, and this is very desirable, but the fact remains that it’s a technical device. As a result, the Lacanian concepts are often used inflexibly, they are not themselves open to other possible developments. Perhaps this isn’t the case everywhere, as I’d like to believe, but it’s not what one sees. One also finds in Lacan a classification of philosophy that leaves no place for “thinking” as an opening and risk or chance of otherness or of any alteration apart from the relation to the “Other”. But I’ll stop there, since I have no idea how Derrida would have answered—although I don’t think I’m far off.

SB: You wrote a book on “there are no sexual relations”: can you briefly describe what you wanted to do in terms of this provocation with respect to Lacan?

JLN: To simply clarify the use of a word (relation, *rapport*) for which only one of its possible meanings seemed to be implied. The same holds for the word “to write” or “written” (what is written of the relation). All this remains locked in a codification, and doesn’t allow one to open the thought game... There are relations, sexual and otherwise, and from this fact there follow certain important consequences regarding what one can name as “subject”, “desire”, etc. ...

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Translated from the French by Marcel S. Lieberman

Notes:

[*] In French, *Personne* means both “person and “no one” [*Translator’s note*].

[+] The Proto-Indo-European *ghut*, from which the English word God derives, means “that which is invoked” [*Translator’s note*].

