TERRY EAGLETON

Remembering Jacques Derrida

Inside most great philosophers, there is an anti-philosopher struggling to get out. If the philosopher is a sage, the anti-philosopher is a gadfly, iconoclast, *enfant terrible.* Socrates was an ironist who flaunted his own ignorance and never published a thing. Kierkegaard claimed that the thickness of human experience could never be reduced to some abstract reason. Nietzsche, the grandfather of postmodern thought, saw ideas as ways of taming the rich complexity of things. "He is a thinker; that means he simplifies", he scoffed.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wanted to write a work of philosophy consisting of nothing but jokes, urged his disciples give up the subject altogether and do something useful instead. Philosophy was handy as a kind of mental therapy, but otherwise it left everything exactly as it was. He himself kept scampering off to the west of Ireland or far-flung Norwegian fiords, until his Cambridge minders would seek him out and drag him back to Trinity College. Having tried his hand at village schoolteaching and monastery gardening, this intellectual giant knocked on the door of the Soviet Union at the height of the Stalinist terror and asked to train as a doctor. Instead of reading Aristotle, he devoured detective stories. He knew little of Plato or Kant, but saw every second-rate Western in town.

Anti-philosophers are not just people who have no time for philosophy. It that were so, David Beckham would presumably qualify for the title. We would not call Britney Spears an anti-philosopher, any more than we would call the telephone directory an anti-novel. The term is reserved for thinkers who reject the whole project of philosophy as they find it, but who do so in philosophically fascinating ways. Only a well-trained philosopher can be a good anti-philosopher. Like Picasso, but unlike the brats of Britart, you have to be competent in the conventional forms if you want to take them apart.

To say what they mean, anti-philosophers usually find themselves having to invent a whole new mode of writing. Hence the ponderous poetics of Heidegger or the pithy aphorisms of Adorno. To the disgust of the Oxford Senior Common Rooms, they fail to acknowledge the strictly policed frontiers between poetry, philosophy and politics. They also insist that there is something more basic than thinking, something which precedes it and makes it possible: practice for Marx, the unconscious drives for Freud, "being-in-the-world" for Heidegger. "I think, therefore there is something more fundamental than thought", might serve as their motto.

For Jacques Derrida, who died in October, that primordial something was "différence". Along with his colleague Michel Foucault, Derrida was

the latest in an eminent line of European anti-philosophers, and the fact that both men were French is scarcely an accident. For France is the home of a high rationalist tradition, one embodied in a centralised, rigidly hierarchical academic system. It is not a system which is hospitable to the aberrant or avant-garde. Such high traditions, however, tend to breed their own heretics, which is one reason why France is also the home of spiritual vagabonds like Sade, Rimbaud, the Surrealists and the streetfighters of 1968.

Derrida was seeped in this dissident libertarian lineage. Like most so-called Parisian post-structuralists he was not a pukka Parisian at all, but a man of the margins. He was an Algerian Sephardic Jew, a colonial subject who encountered anti-Semitism as a schoolboy. The post-structuralist movement of the 1970s and '80s was largely a question of the ex-empire striking back: many of its exponents, such as Louis Althusser and Hélène Cixous, had close connections with Algeria. More generally, it was a question of Jews, colonials, women and gay men (Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault) invading the Sorbonne and the Collège de France like intellectual versions of marauding student radicals. There was, in fact, a close connection. Derrida published his first three pioneering works only a year before the '68 barricades went up.

Given their offbeat backgrounds, then, it is small wonder that these thinkers were fascinated by the transgressive and aberrant – by whatever escapes the net of language, fractures the human psyche, or gives the slip to state power. In fact, before long this was to harden into a whole new orthodoxy of its own. 'Otherness' was soon the most fashionable game in town. From every university in the West, the cry of *Vive la différence*! went up.

Derrida's own trademark contribution to the post-structuralist project – deconstruction – has been lazily caricatured as a form of nihilism. According to the Cambridge dons who voted against awarding him an honorary degree some years ago, this sinisterly glamorous foreign subversive held that language can mean anything you like, truth is non-existent, and – infamous declaration – 'there is nothing outside the text'. Far from being some kind of Dadaist slapstick, however, Derrida's works are remarkable for their rigour of thought and tenaciously close readings. He never taught that words can mean anything you like, just that meaning is never as stable as it seems. Truth is by no means an illusion; but it always depends on interpretation, and interpretation is a volatile affair. To deconstruct a piece of writing is to investigate the ways in which it can violate its own logic, say several incompatible things at once, brush against the grain of its own meaning. Derrida himself, a maverick leftist from beginning to end, never ceased to insist that deconstruction was primarily a political matter. It meant probing the hidden logic of institutions as much as of literary works.

He was thinking of patriarchy as much as *Paradise Lost.*

To claim that there is nothing outside the text is not to say that there are no elephants or dental cavities. It means that there is nothing which escapes 'textuality'. For Derrida, the world itself is 'textual' – a weave of differences and affinities so complex that a thing can never be lifted clear of its context. Everything, from words to concepts to individuals, is shot through with bits and pieces of everything else, to a point where the whole notion of a pure identity is undermined. It is not hard to hear the victim of vulgar anti-Semitism in such sophisticated claims.

Nothing, in this view, can stand alone, despite the liberal tradition's insistence on the autonomy of the individual. 'Textuality' is thus a covert form of radical politics. In trying to dismantle Western metaphysics, Derrida had a whole theory of possessive individualism in his sights – the delusion that human beings are proprietors of themselves. But he was not out to liquidate the human subject, simply to 'decentre' it – to dislodge it from its privileged position as the origin of all meaning. He wanted to expose the unconscious forces and structures which put human beings in place, and which then managed with low cunning to convince them that they were gloriously self-dependent.

In Derrida's view, there is no piece of reality which is not caught up with another, no sign which is not dependent on other signs. Since this interdependence can be traced *ad infinitum,* there is no place where the whole process comes to rest. There is no absolute origin, no rock-hard foundation, no meta-language, no meaning of meanings. All of this is just metaphysical illusion. Like Nietzsche, we must abandon the doomed search for metaphysical foundations – for essences, fixed natures, first principles – and rejoice instead in the sheer contingency of things, the fact that we are standing on nothing more or less solid than ourselves.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the bishops and bankers were less than enthralled. A group of US business executives even put out a semi-literate manifesto denouncing this subversive mandarin. For the truth is that liberal capitalist societies cannot – as yet, at least – dispense with their metaphysical foundation, and across the Atlantic they are currently in the process of digging them ever deeper. Deconstruction is the enemy of all that cocksure absolutism.

Yet Derrida was fearful of absolutes that he had a horror of reasonable certainty. He could be a dogmatist of the indeterminate – a prejudice reflected in his literary style, with its tiresome penchant for the safely unanswerable rhetorical question: 'What is this bunch of bananas? How many? Interminable, or not? And for whom? Do these questions even have meaning?' (Derrida did not of course write this sentence, though it might sound as if he did). Politically, he was a leftist with an ingrained distaste for agendas, structures, organisation and programmes – in short, for politics. He was like the kind of liberal Anglican who believes devoutly in

Christianity except for the existence of God, the after-life and the divinity of Christ.

He was probably the most astonishingly original philosopher since the second world war, a man of formidable cultivation who was as much at home among poets and painters as among theorists. Like Tolkien or Kabbalah, he became something an exotic cult, which he did little to encourage but also little to quash. Along with most French post-structuralist thinkers, he had a far more devoted following in Britain and the USA than in an icily disapproving France. He fought to retain the teaching of philosophy in French schools, fellow-travelled with a French Communist Party far too determinate in its views for his taste, and spoke out angrily against apartheid and French immigration policies. Surreally, he also managed to get himself arrested on a trumped-out dope charge in Soviet-style Czechoslovakia. Above all, in the manner of a great anti-philosopher, he made philosophy relevant and exciting – and it is this above all, perhaps, which his duller colleagues were unable to forgive.