

'Do We Have the Right to Mourn Derrida?'

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What does it mean to mourn the death of someone you have never met? When Princess Diana died in 1997, the public's devotion to her became, for some, a kind of group hysteria. In part this was fuelled by the media industry's reluctance to relinquish a valuable source of revenue: in fact, Diana had never been more present to her public than in the six months following her burial. As such, for those of us who do not worship at the temple of celebrity it was difficult to comprehend the sense in which she was 'missed' by her people. We were all choking on her image, as it coquettishly smiled up at us from the cover of every glossy magazine.

Of course, I would like to say that mourning Derrida is quite a different story. But how might this be so? We could say that Derrida is admired not for his ethereal beauty, or his ability to play the part of 'snow white' in a fairytale fantasy. Rather, Derrida's effect upon his readership has exerted a constitutive influence upon their very subjectivities, as readers, philosophers, and thinkers. Derrida won his public by writing in such a way as to change how we approach philosophy, culture, society, and politics. Far from fulfilling a part in the philosopher's fantasy life, Derrida put into question the structures that form that fantasy. Those who admire his work are thus affected by the journey upon which he has taken them through the philosophical imagination. To engage with Derrida's writings is to engage differently with the history of philosophy, and with the very foundations of thought. It should come as no surprise, then, that those affected by his writings would mourn his loss: especially once we consider the effort required to follow his path of thinking—a divergent path in relation to the philosophy that came before him—it is understandable that the reader would feel herself to share a certain intimacy with him.

Yet the question still remains, do we have a right to call what we feel in relation to Derrida's passing 'mourning'? In what sense do we really feel Derrida's absence, and to what extent does such absence serve to restructure our own identities? Especially when, by virtue of his texts, he is no less present to us than ever he was before? I wish, in this brief paper, to suggest that it is not so much the event of Derrida's passing that affects us, as his writings, through which we already participate in a figurative act of mourning for Derrida, independently of whether he lives or dies. That is to say, insofar as we—who did not know him—could mourn his death, we had already done so by reading his works. This is not to say that we cannot feel a personal connection to Derrida, and perhaps sadness that his unique point of view is lost to the world. For instance, I think it is fitting that we meet here tonight, in this intimate setting, to reflect upon Derrida's influence upon us, and how we may work towards acknowledging our (ultimately unpayable) debt to him. It's just that I think this sense of personal connection must bear our scrutiny, if we are properly to recognise this debt.

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It has of late been frequently remarked, how preoccupied Derrida was, especially towards the end of his life, with mourning—what has been called a 'politics of mourning'—as a guiding principle with respect to the other. How one deals with the loss of another without compromising that other's uniqueness is for Derrida an ethical question of the highest order. Moreover, mourning is for Derrida a constitutive element of friendship. As Brault and Naas point out, in the introduction to *The Work of Mourning*, every friendship is founded in the knowledge that one friend will outlive the other, and so will be left with the task of mourning.

Yet, mourning has been a background question within Derrida's texts from his first interrogations of the metaphysics of presence, and the devaluation of writing in relation to speech. Writing is traditionally disparaged as a medium for thought because it speaks in the absence of its author, and so it is open to the 'unsolicited' appropriation of others, and thus to a corruption of its original meaning. Writing is accordingly *marked* by absence, and a sense of loss. This is also brought to bear in the

logic of the signature, whereby a subject confirms his will and agency specifically in the event of his absence. In a sense, the signatory is already dead upon signing and ‘authenticating’ the document, because his presence is henceforth no longer required: his signature effectively takes its place.

To be sure, Derrida turns on our assumptions about the priority of speech, demonstrating that speech is already a kind of writing, representing an empty and unattainable presence. Rather than ushering forth presence, speech is structured by absence. In this respect, our engagement with language necessitates an attitude of ‘mourning’ a lost presence, whether this presence might be the author whose words we attempt to interpret; or the reader to whom we entrust our expectant words.

It is in this sense that Derrida has always been lost to us, and the object of our mourning. To be sure, such loss has been constitutive of our relation to him, and plays a central role in fabricating Derrida’s presence to us: or his imagined presence, as philosophical provocateur *cum* pop star. In this way, taking the trouble to read through his texts, and to reconstruct their meaning, is a project of mourning in which the reader who lets herself be affected by his writing incorporates an element of Derrida: as words, phrases, a perspective on philosophy. This incorporation was possible only because of his absence: if he had been present to us, we needn’t have made the effort to read and to understand his texts.

There has lately been a lot of talk of the personal effect that Derrida’s passing has had upon his readers, and I must confess that I am as bewildered in the face of the avowed need tearfully to mourn his death, as I am at the displays of grief addressed to ‘the people’s Princess.’ Perhaps it is testimony to the power of absence; the pervasiveness of death, and of the fear of death, in our everyday lives and practices. But also to the danger of subordinating the other’s death to our own fears and fantasies... There is always a figure at the periphery of the deceased’s circle, who gets caught up in the histrionics of mourning: who anticipates his own death in the death of the other. This always appears inappropriate—even insulting—to those closest to the dead. This is because mourning is not only a private concern, but also a public,

social, rite of passage. For this reason, one must be *entitled* to mourn publicly, and to bear one's psychic wounds openly, for the recognition of others.

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The funeral rite is always for others... never for the family who buries their dead. There is no such thing as 'closure'—as promised by the funeral—for the mother, sister, children of the deceased. The gaping wound opened by the death of a loved one does heal over time, but continues to pulsate and ache to the rhythms that marked time for the dead one's life. The birthday, the Anniversary, Father's Day, and—of course—the day on which he drew his last breath, all bring renewed pain to those left to mourn his passing.

At my father's funeral I had the sense that I was playing a part in a show put on for the benefit of the cast of a thousand extras in his epic life. Those who had not been there to watch him die all professed the shock his death had caused them, and trotted out the usual platitudes concerning the 'big shoes' such a small man had left them to fill. It was a fitting send off for a professor. But I could not but feel resentment for the people who had won the struggle for my father's attention... did they have to steal the funeral as well?

Not that it isn't nice to hear how much he was respected, how important his work had been... it's just that the space left in his field of research is incomparable with the absence his death brought to his family, to whom he is truly irreplaceable. This absence continues to consume those caught in its vortex. After the funeral others are at liberty to forget... and to forgive the deceased for dying. They get on with their lives, and why shouldn't they? But after the business of seeing to friends and colleagues is done, only then can the hard work of grieving begin.

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Most respectful to Jacques Derrida would be to leave those who survive him to their grief. What we experience in relation to Derrida's death can be named 'grief' only

figuratively... Which is not to say that we do not owe him a debt of gratitude, and that his work has not affected us deeply. We need to mark a place for him in our lives... and to form a response to him in writing. As Judith Butler writes, in her obituary for Derrida, “[...] now that Derrida, the person, has died, his writing makes a demand upon us” (Butler 2004, 3), and we must respond to this demand in kind. Yet, we who knew Derrida only through his writings—if we have taken the time to read and think about his work—have already incorporated him, and thus have also undergone a process *like* that of mourning. The event of his passing signifies an opportunity to think through his philosophy, from beginning to end, and to determine our own task in relation to it. To mistake this for an actual process of mourning would only obscure our responsibility to Derrida.

Works Cited

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