



IN MEMORIAM

Jacques Derrida

Professor of English and Comparative Literature, French and Italian, and Philosophy
Irvine
1930 — 2004

Jacques Derrida, distinguished professor of French, philosophy, and comparative literature at the University of California, Irvine and one of the most innovative, prolific, and influential philosophers and writers of our time, died in Paris on October 9, 2004 at the age of 74, after a year and a half- long struggle with pancreatic cancer. He left behind his wife, Marguerite, two sons, and two grandchildren. His death is an incommensurable loss for his family and friends, as well as for his colleagues and students in the School of Humanities at UCI. He is also mourned by people from around the world who have been influenced by his teaching and writings, and those who admire his involvement in the struggle against racial discrimination and on behalf of social justice for excluded and oppressed minorities.

Jacques Derrida was born in El- Biar, Algeria on July 15, 1930 into a family that had lived in Algeria for centuries before its conquest and colonization by the French. His grandparents had become French citizens in 1870, when the Crémieux Decree granted citizenship to the Jewish population of Algeria, who, like its Arab and Berber inhabitants, had until then been considered French subjects with limited civil and legal rights. Jacques described more than once the effect on him of arriving at school one day at the age of 12 to be told that he could no longer attend classes. He had been excluded from the French public school system because of the severe Numerus Clausus imposed on Jewish students after the Vichy collaborationist government rescinded citizenship for all Algerian Jews. He was able to return to school a year after the arrival of Allied troops in North Africa, but never forgot how it felt to be a victim of discrimination, deprived of basic civil rights, and treated as an unwanted foreigner in his own land; to realize, as he put it, that he was a citizen of no country at all.

Jacques left Algeria for the first time at the age of 19 to study in Paris at one of France's best lycées, Louis-le- Grand, and was admitted to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in 1952. He passed the French national agrégation exam in 1956 and spent the next year studying at Harvard. From 1957 to 1959, during the Algerian War, he taught in a high school in Algeria for the children of French soldiers in order to fulfill his military obligations. He taught philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1960 to 1964 and then at the École Normale Supérieure from 1964 until 1983. In 1983 he was appointed "Director of Studies" at the École des Hautes Études in Paris. Co- founder of the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, he was also chosen as its first director. Beginning in 1968 he gave seminars at American universities such as Johns Hopkins, NYU, and UC Berkeley, and was a visiting professor at Yale University from 1975 until 1987, when he joined the faculty at UCI. He was also Andrew D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University from 1982 to 1988. The recipient of a dozen honorary doctorates from institutions such as Columbia University, the New School of Social Research, and Williams College in the United States; Cambridge and Essex Universities in England; and universities in Belgium, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Italy, and Canada; Jacques was awarded the prestigious Theodor Adorno Prize in 2001.

Jacques Derrida was the author of more than 50 books and hundreds of essays during his long and distinguished career. Soon after he published *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology* in 1967, he became internationally recognized as one of the most influential, challenging, and original thinkers of our time. He first became known in the United States in 1966, when at a conference on structuralism at the Johns Hopkins University he delivered a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the

Discourse of the Human Sciences” that challenged the philosophical assumptions on which structuralism was based. Jacques’s name will always be closely associated with “deconstruction,” the complex and much misunderstood term he used to designate his critical approach to the history of philosophy and the strategies he and others developed to analyze both the conditions of possibility and the limitations of various forms of philosophical discourse and literary practice. His books and essays constitute critical dialogues with philosophers from Plato to Heidegger, as well as with a wide range of writers and artists from different national traditions and periods. His most recent essays deal with issues such as hospitality, capital punishment, the history and future of democracy, and what he called “a new internationalism,” the formation of an international community that would be more open, egalitarian, and democratic than existing national and international communities, organizations, or institutions.

In the almost 20 years he taught at UCI, Jacques gave courses on subjects as diverse as the sovereignty of the nation- state, friendship, hospitality, the death penalty, and the concept and practice of pardon, sharing with students his analyses of a wide range of philosophical, historical, literary, and political texts from Plato to the present. His bi- weekly lectures were attended by approximately 100 students and faculty, with participants arriving not just from the West Coast but from across the entire country. He also gave a weekly closed seminar for the students enrolled in his class. His generosity with his time was legend and greatly appreciated by the many students and faculty who lined up during his long office hours to talk with him.

Less well- known in the United States were his numerous political activities and commitments. Jacques Derrida was Vice- President and co- founder (with Salman Rushdie, Edouard Glissant, and Pierre Bourdieu) of the International Parliament of Writers; a founding member of the Cultural Foundation Against Apartheid; and the Vice- President and co- founder (with Jean- Pierre Vernant) of the Jan Hus Association, whose purpose was to defend the rights of dissident Czech writers. Members of the association traveled to Prague to give clandestine seminars to dissident philosophers, and in 1982, after one of his seminars, Jacques was arrested and spent two days in prison in Prague. He was also actively involved in various organizations supporting the rights of immigrant workers in France.

I last saw Jacques at his home outside of Paris just months before his death. He was beginning to suffer a relapse from the cancer that would bring about his death in October. When I arrived at the Derridas’ house that evening, Jacques was working at his computer. Notwithstanding his obvious physical discomfort from his disease and its treatment, he was writing evaluations for the papers he had received from his last graduate class at UCI. As usual, for each paper he had written an extremely detailed 2-3 page, single- space report. In spite of other pressing demands on his time, he nonetheless made the effort to respond to his students’ work with great care at a time when he was weak and in pain. For the more than 35 years that I have known him, Jacques Derrida has had that kind of commitment to his students and colleagues and has always taken the time to respond meticulously and generously to their work. The UCI students who received the last evaluations he ever wrote should feel privileged indeed.

A student once said the following to me after speaking with Jacques for the first time, and this, I think, was the impression of almost everyone who met him: “He is so important, and his work is so difficult, and yet in person he is not difficult at all but open, generous, and incredibly nice.” The importance of Jacques’s work is indisputable and will continue to influence work in the Humanities and Social Sciences long after his death. But the UC community should also know the kind of man Jacques Derrida was and realize how lucky we were to have had him as a teacher, colleague, and friend for almost 20 years.

David Carroll