

# *Feeding Sophie*

**Derrida: a Biography.**

**By: Benoit Peeters**, translated by Andrew Brown

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The revolt of May '68 officially started at the Sorbonne in Paris on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May with a demonstration of protest against disciplinary measures taken against a number of students. Soon the whole Latin Quarter was in uproar; weeks of chaos followed, and travelling became difficult. Many times during those heady weeks the philosopher Jacques Derrida had interminable nocturnal strolls until daybreak with the novelist-playwright Jean Genet, both lost in affable and profound conversation. Derrida later remarked:

‘Genet, in those streets without cars, in this completely immobilized, paralysed country, which had run out of petrol, kept saying: “Ah, how beautiful! Ah, how elegant”’ (p 196).

This superb, highly readable and insightful biography of one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century is full of such anecdotes. Here is another: having just published in an academic Journal at the age of thirty-four an influential essay on Levinas, *Violence and Metaphysics* – subsequently a chapter in his seminal *Writing and Difference* (1978), he got invited at a conference in Berlin. Sam Weber, the person who went to meet him at the airport, not knowing what he looked like and imagining some kind of rogue, a ‘revolutionary philosopher’, mistook a film producer (sun glasses, velvet shirt, thriller magazines under his arm, surrounded by fashionable girls) for Jacques Derrida. On the way to the hotel, the fake Derrida asked about the swimming pool. ‘What swimming pool? – Weber said. ‘And anyway you won’t have time for that; the conference will start right away’. The equivocation cleared, Derrida later asked Weber how he could have possibly mistaken him for the other guy. ‘Well ... you know’ Weber mumbled ‘the philosophy of the future... ehr ...violence and metaphysics...’ to which Derrida, clearly annoyed, replied ‘Violence, maybe but brutality?!?’ Ordinary, everyday fragments emerge in the pages of this book alongside remarkable philosophical insights, depicting a philosophical life cultivated in a climate of deep friendships, open, honourable conflicts and passionate debates. Many of the interlocutors are friends (and foes, one turning into the other and back) met along the way – many of them unknown, some of them eminent thinkers (Sollers, Kristeva, Ricoeur, Althusser, Foucault, Levinas, Blanchot, Lacan, Cixous... the list could go on), all influencing each other, all having an impact on one another, all loved with tremendous loyalty and touching tenderness, some mourned by Derrida with sincerity and kindness in his moving eulogies

(2003). As in the days of the Epicurean school in ancient Greece, the very practice of philosophy emerges from these loving and fiery encounters as an endeavour steeped in friendship. Quite a lesson for our contemporary milieu, arguably steeped in stolid alliances and fake, anodyne pluralism (especially in the field of the psychological therapies) motivated by the unspoken terror to utter anything remotely different, of being, God forbid, singled out as a non-joiner to the chorus of universal conformity. An audacious *non-joiner* is what Jacques Derrida was all his life – not out of pride but out of refinement and sheer rigour of thought, an attitude due to a joyous and restless capitulation to what his friend Genet often called ‘the fever of thought’.

The nineteen sixties and seventies in France constituted a unique *philosophical moment* in history, reverberating for decades to come – a moment legitimately comparable to the blossoming of German idealism at the beginning of the nineteenth century and to the great Greek schools of antiquity. Derrida attracted bile and vilification from Cambridge’s airless chambers, with stuffy professors jolted into consciousness from their self-referential, self-congratulatory slumber in order to line up in procession and attempt to deny the enfant terrible of ‘French theory’ the honorary degree. Frighteningly ignorant, dull-witted scribes in the British dailies felt entitled to pour scorn the day after his death. Enter one Johann Hari of *the Independent*: ‘his writing is wilfully obscure, and at times he lapses into gibberish. But in fact, once you learn how to boil down his prose, his ideas are fairly simple - and pernicious ... Derrida was the mad axeman of Western philosophy ... The deconstructionist virus has swept through the humanities departments of universities across Europe and America ...’ and so forth (Hari, 2004)

It is true of Derrida what is true of Nietzsche: both thinkers deconstructing the flimsy nature of the self and dismantling the edifice of western knowledge; we are still busy catching up, trying to absorb their profound relevance and thorny influence of their life and thought in philosophy, psychology and in the world of therapy.

He was born, like Camus, in Algeria, prone to ‘nostalgeria’ and complex feelings of home, exile and belonging; expelled at the age of 12 with all other Jewish students and teachers from the Lycée Ben Aknoun and enrolled at an improvised school for the Jewish community, recognizing already then the ‘malaise’ that was to accompany him all his life, the unwillingness to be part of the ‘communitarian experience’:

On the one hand, I was deeply wounded by anti-Semitism. And this wound has never completely healed. At the same time ... I could not tolerate being ‘integrated’ into this Jewish school, this homogeneous milieu that reproduced and in a certain way countersigned – in a reactive and vaguely specular fashion ... – the terrible violence that had been done to it. This reactive self-defence was certainly natural and legitimate, even irreproachable. But I must have sensed that it was a drive [*pulsion*], a gregarious *compulsion* that responded in truth to an *expulsion* (p.21).

Immersing himself in literature – Gide, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Valéry, Camus – the most formative readings for the young Jacques (or Jackie as he was then) turned out to be the letters of Antonin Artaud, a anti-Gnostic per excellence, an innovator whose presence changed poetry and theatre. I had nothing to say, Artaud had declared, and yet I am inhabited by a passion to write, to create. Derrida too felt, at the age of fifteen, that he *had to* write, ‘writing passionately without writing, with [a] sense of emptiness’ (p. 28); he felt *protean*: he could take any form, write in any tone: ‘I said to myself: I can write everything and so I can’t write anything’ (p. 29).

In one of his first published works he combined a sophisticated reading of Husserl (whose *Origin of Geometry* he translated into French prefaced by a lengthy and original piece on phenomenology), with an appreciation of James Joyce, creating exciting and surprising parallels between the two. If Husserl seeks to ‘reduce or impoverish empirical language methodically to the point where ... [it is] transparent’, Joyce brings out ‘the greatest potential for buried, accumulated, and interwoven intentions’ (Derrida, 1989, pp. 102-103). These two seemingly opposite tendencies were to accompany his work throughout his life – an ambivalent and spirited liaison between phenomenology and its lyrical *double*, resulting in a subversive, moving and ironic *exploding* of philosophy into literature: *The Postcard* (1987) and *Glas* (1990) are two celebrated examples of this, the first with its opening two hundred pages consisting of love letters addressed to no one in particular; the second written in two columns, with the left devoted to a reading of Hegel and the right devoted to a reading of Jean Genet.

In 1962, during his early days in France, his sister and her family fled Algeria during the conflict which left 400,000 dead, and went to stay with him. Derrida often took the children with him to Paris. Martine, who was eight at the time, later recounted:

Sometimes, he’d have to leave us for quite a while inside his 2CV, in the courtyard of the Ecole Normale Supérieure – or maybe it was the one in the Sorbonne? He told us that he was going off to feed ‘Sophie the Whale’ with tins of sardines. He asked us to be patient, as ‘Sophie’ was quite prickly and he was the only one she would allow near her ... It took me several years to understand that Sophie was philosophy (p. 121)

Reluctant to join Marxism at the time when it was *de rigueur* among intellectuals, Derrida shocked everyone by publishing *Spectres of Marx* (1993) in the nineties, when even mentioning Marx was frowned upon. His later years were marked by a re-discovery of the sacred as emergent from phenomena rather than obedience to institutionalized sacredness, by a courageous commitment to emancipatory politics and to deeply unfashionable themes: forgiveness, hospitality, otherness – all taking on board yet radicalizing the teachings of Levinas, Jankélévitch and others. To this later period belongs his luminous reading of Kierkegaard, *The Gift of Death*, a ground-breaking interpretation of religion and ethics at a time (which is still very much our own time) of the selling out of genuine ethics and spirituality to the pressures of conscience, reputation and box-ticking.

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