

*The following text was published in Revolver around September 1999.*

## **"A Modesty Haunted by the Devil"**

### **Lunch with Jacques Derrida**

Twelve noon at the cocktail bar of the Landsdowne Hotel, I am the first one to arrive. The barman asks me what I would like, I ask for a whiskey that it turns out I am too afraid to drink. I fear that he will smell it on my breath. Then I hear a bunch of people arriving, uncertainly climbing the stairs, unsure if they have come to the right place. Both young and old people, they are mainly staff and students from the Power Institute of Fine Arts, which hosts his trip here in Sydney. I notice that the women have in general gone for a decidedly French look, elegant suits, with skirts and stockings. One women is all in leather.

Then he arrives. Recognizing him instantly, I turn in the other direction, after having taken a side-long glance. And before I know it, I find that I am in the next room at the table with him, seated directly opposite. What do I say to Jacques Derrida? This man is nearly forty years my senior. He has published - I don't know - maybe forty books, and is the most famous - probably the most significant - living philosopher. It's not that I haven't read his work, nor that I simply have nothing to say about it, it's just that before his colossal reputation, and the significance of his contribution, a normal conversation becomes almost impossible. Most certainly, it would more fun to be with him if one didn't know who he was. His almost mythic status greatly reduces the chances for something memorable to happen.

He lifts his head and looks me straight in the eye as I am introduced to him. And I remember something he said to me a number of years ago in Paris during a seminar. He said that whenever two people look at one another, there is a secret - an absolute secret - that is heterogeneous to all disclosure. This secret cannot be betrayed, and yet we are betraying it all the time.

Of course, I don't recall this thought to him - or to the others around me. I am almost certain that he doesn't remember me. Everybody is very anxious to please him, to make him feel well. He remains very polite, while being led from one person to another, a little like a high level diplomat or a statesman. Tonight, he will dine with French Ambassador and Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University.

I spent maybe three quarters of an hour at the table with him, and maybe twenty-five minutes in the car as he was driven to his hotel. He asked me what I was working on, if I live in Sydney, etc. I asked him about Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, two writers whose work is very important to me and who he knows personally, and about the topic of his seminar is this year in Paris. It's on the question of forgiveness - with four principal characters as in a play: Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, Hegel, Desmond Tutu. He's looking at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, where he was recently, as well as at the Lewinsky scandal in the United States, which led to the President publicly apologising to the American people and asking them for forgiveness. On the way to this hotel, he noted the unusual mixture of old and new architecture in Sydney - a city he finds very charming.

All of this was somewhat interesting and informative. But I couldn't but be struck by the inadequation of what the meeting meant for me as opposed to what it most certainly meant for him: this was a significant event in my life, something I could boast about to my friends and further write about, whereas for him it was in all probability very little, almost nothing: an inadequation between two singular beings with two singular existences and some esoteric nothing between them. How to get used to nothing? (This was one of the strange questions he raised in the course of the seminar I attended in Paris in 1994-95.)

Finding myself seated directly in front of him, I discover that despite this proximity, and the intensity of my feelings, I will have to live out my relationship with Derrida alone. Nothing I could say at that moment could suppress the distance between the Derrida inside me and the one in front of me. If anything, it only increased it. There is something sad, tragic, when one realizes that it couldn't be any other way. My expectations of such an encounter could not be realized. And furthermore, I knew enough to expect this disappointment. Thus I could have written this article, even before I actually had lunch with him. And yet, I came away nonetheless with the sense of something having changed in the world - in my look at the world. Something from outside, from very far-away had touched me - and the cafés, the streets, the caretaker throwing his fishing rod in the parking lot, took on briefly a different meaning. It's as if some of his greatness had rubbed off on me. And I was reminded another existence, another relationship, another me, that it is submerged in my everyday life: this relationship with him which separates me from others, this sort of intimacy which makes the world disappear.

People will be talking and writing about Derrida and his work long after they have forgotten about John Howard, Nicole Kidman and Bill Gates. Such media deities are transitory, yet Derrida is also a media deity of sorts. He says in an interview with Anne Berger: "the philosopher is someone whose desire and ambition are absolutely crazy; the desire for power of the greatest political men is an absolutely minuscule desire next to the desire of the philosopher, who, in a philosophical work, manifests at once a design for mastery and at the same time a renunciation of mastery at a size and amplitude that I find infinitely more powerful than among others...To put oneself in this place, it's simultaneously to project the greatest possible mastery over all the discourses of possible mastery, and at the same time to renounce it. The two things go together: at the same time, it's the place of the greatest possible discretion, effacement, withdrawal, modesty; a modesty haunted by the devil; that's what interests me."