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Caputo - After Jacques Derrida Comes the Future - JCRT 4.2

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Derrida admits to being preoccupied with his own death, imagining grim scenes of his family gathered around his grave pronouncing the final words. He envisages newspaper announcements of the death a French philosopher killed in a car accident, having been involved in a fatal collision while apparently making notes on a pad of paper that he kept on the front seat of his car. But Derrida is no less preoccupied with the death of deconstruction, and, of course, neither he nor we can entirely dissociate the two deaths, since we cannot help but wonder whether there is a life for deconstruction after Derrida. So he travels around the globe at a veritable Pauline pace, visiting all the deconstructive communities, teaching on two continents and giving visiting lectures in the rest. He keeps the word alive, pronouncing the good news of the *viens, oui, oui*, about the Messiah who is to come, speaking more often in English than in French, in a world he finds—first hand—become increasingly anglophonic and globalatinized. Even today, while he is in his seventies, although he swears he is quitting, he continues to visit all the churches.

3. At the same time, Derrida is greatly amused by how often deconstruction is pronounced dead. It happens with an almost predictable regularity. The more conferences that are held about deconstruction, the more books and articles that appear about it, the louder the voices rise declaring that now, after all, it is finally dead. So then deconstruction must be a ghost, he concludes, for what else could have so much life and yet be dead? What else than a ghost could have so many manifestations, appear in so many places, be reported and sighted by so many people, all the while being stone dead? What else but a ghost could prowl about, night and day while having died some time ago? And what else is he himself, silver haired and silver tongued, but a silvery specter, whose apparition can fill a large room with a thousand people curious, shall we say, dying to catch sight of the appearance?
4. Pronouncements of the death of deconstruction are almost a weekly occurrence. Deconstruction is over, a passing fashion (now passing through its fourth decade!). It first made a name for itself in the 1960s as a roguish way of reading that appeared to menace everything established and respectable in academic life, as an attempt to license every form of literary licentiousness, to permit any interpretation, to endorse any irresponsible reading. So its first success was a *succès de scandale*, the success of a shock that was readily seized upon by a generation of Vietnam war protesting academics—"The Ends of Man" was delivered in New York City with a preface expressing his reservations about speaking in a country that waged such a war. Deconstruction apparently advocated academic anarchy in the face of totalizing and oppressive systems of reading, interpreting and thinking. Those were heady days and deconstruction was unstoppable. The only thing that could stop it was itself, when the success overtook the scandal, when it got to be an insider, when the roguish outsider became so much "in" that it was, in virtue of the venerable logic of what is in and what is out, out. When anything, no matter how much an outsider, gets to be that "in," it must be out. It becomes itself hegemonic, another version of the establishment, another force of marginalization. The wave of deconstruction swelled in the 1960s, crested in the 1970s, and finally broke in the 1980s. Then deconstruction was dead, definitely, once and for all. Its feminist credentials were not

entirely in order, its politics were not clear, and cultural studies and writing about Elvis and Disneyland was getting to be more fun. The restless and voracious monster of fashionability had moved on.

5. But the books and articles continued to appear, the conferences continued to be held, and wherever Derrida himself went and still goes today there was never a room big enough to hold the audience, as recently happened in Toronto in 2002 when some 1,500 people jammed a ballroom at the annual meeting of the A.A.R. to hear a roundtable with Derrida—on religion. So in accordance with the logic of the ghost, of “hauntology,” as he quips, the dead man was as alive as ever, everywhere to be seen and heard, although we were assured that he was quite dead.
6. In 1984, in *Erring*, Mark Taylor harnessed all the energy of a certain deconstruction, the one that had built up a head of steam in American departments of English and comparative literature, enlisting deconstruction in the service of what he called the “hermeneutics of the death of God.” The first version of the death of God remained captive to ontotheological centering and foundationalism, having merely replaced God with man, theology with anthropology, in the famous transformational criticism of the young Hegelians, but without challenging the very ideas of ground and center. But the second, more radical version, powered by deconstruction, questioned the very idea of center and subjectivity, ground and foundation, and allowed God to dissolve without remainder into the world, and sacred scripture into *'criture*. God is indeed dead and everything is permitted. Las Vegas here we come.
7. The one thing that is indeed true, in my opinion, about the repeated rumors of the death of deconstruction is this. By the 1980s deconstruction had not been rejected but assimilated; it had not been overthrown or overcome but taken up into our background beliefs so that one did not even realize that it was deconstruction. The idea that books are not neatly bound unities of meaning wholly commanded by authorial and intentional acts, that books are texts that interweave with other texts, citing and reciting them, overspilling their boundaries, and running off in so many directions that we cannot surround and saturate them, the idea nothing can stand up to a really close reading, that texts show their cracks and crevices and counter-tendencies and complexities, that they are inhabited by sub-texts and counter-texts, that “Plato,” for example, is not a stable unity of semantic and doctrinal contents but a syn-text of many colors and voices that runs off in multiple directions if you take the time to read (one could go on)—all of that, which is deconstruction, if there is such a thing, had become a commonplace that had entered into our background knowledge, a sedimentation, as Husserl might have said, in the genesis of contemporary practices of “close reading.” So at that point, in the 1980s, a certain number of people stopped reading Derrida. They thought they knew the story, that they had assimilated his line, and that whatever would come next would just be at best a new move in an old game, a tribute to his virtuosity in saying the same thing differently, but nonetheless the same thing. They were already after Derrida, who was by now standing back at the station.
8. Then a funny thing happened on the way to the funeral. Derrida started to talk about ethics, politics, and—God help us all—religion. As a case in point, look at what happened to the problematic of the gift between the 1970s and the 1990s. In *Donner le temps* the model of the gift was the *text*, which was not to be returned in gratitude to the author who brought it forth in a causal way, returned as a tribute to his authorial intentions, but rather allowed to give off sparks in infinite and unforeseeable disseminative and denotative splendor, given that

behind or beneath its surface lay the secret that it has no secret depth, only more surfaces. But in *Donner la mort*, published in the 1990s, the point of departure is not Baudelaire but the Kierkegaard of *Fear and Trembling* and the model of the gift is the Levinasian tout autre as an affirmation without reserve of the coming of the other, *l'invention de l'autre*. In the 1990s, the subjects chosen for Derrida's lectures and seminars—hospitality, friendship, the gift, forgiveness, justice, democracy—took on a surprising ethico-religious tone.

9. Those of us who pride ourselves on being close readers of Derrida—nobody can be a close reader of everybody, so this should not be so much a matter of pride as a description of our preferences—were not surprised. We had all along been saying that there is an ethical, a political and, yes, even a religious dimension to deconstruction. If there is an analogy to the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, the exceptionality and resistance to system and universalism that deconstruction exhibited would not be a form of aestheticism, a kind of Jacques the Seducer, but rather to the religious exception. The anarchy, if anarchy it be, of deconstruction, is a very responsible one, with ties to Levinas and the Jewish scriptures, particularly the prophetic literature. Furthermore—this will shock everyone—there is a certain deconstructive element in the New Testament, in virtue of which sabbath laws were breached in the name of the ones for whom the sabbath was made, the last were made first, the outsiders in, the lame and the leper preferred, and so forth. The whole thing—deconstruction, that is—started to look like a Jewish version of *Fear and Trembling*, a cross between Levinas, Kierkegaard and post-structural theory. Mark Taylor told me that he was trying to get Derrida—given his interest in the secret—to write a book about *Fear and Trembling*. I got tired of waiting and wrote my own version - *Against Ethics* - which appeared at the same time as *Donner la mort* was appearing in French. It is testimony to the infinite mercy of God that the book in which I was sketching out what a possible deconstructive reading of *Fear and Trembling* would look like did not at all collide with what Derrida was at the same time saying in *Donner la mort*, without my knowing it was appearing! Just as *Fear and Trembling* appeared on the same day as *Repetition*, my *Against Ethics* appeared on practically the same day as *Donner la mort*.
10. Then it happened. In 1989, the D-day of latter-day Derrida studies, the day he landed on the beaches of religion, Derrida wrote "*Circonfession*," a very Jewish quasi-Augustinian journal upon which long extracts from the Latin text of the *Confessiones* were grafted. In this text—God help us, this is what he actually said—Derrida confessed that he was a man of prayer, that he prayed all the time, and that if we understood this about him we would understand everything, and that failure to understand this had caused him to be misread again and again. I was 37,000 feet above the earth when I first read this but I signaled the stewardess to let me off the plane immediately, a parachute would do, so that I could get to my computer.
11. So JD had found a new way to scandalize everyone, this time scandalizing the good and true and the pious by injecting deconstruction into the religion departments and seminary curricula, provoking deconstructive readings of the scriptures, infiltrating scriptural hermeneutics with deconstruction, etc., much of which came a glorious head at the A.A.R. in Toronto this past fall with the cluster of seminars organized by Yvonne Sherwood, capped off by an "appearance" of the man himself. But that was only the half of it. Derrida was not only scandalizing the fundamentalists and defenders of orthodoxy, radical or otherwise, but he had also found a way to scandalize the bad and the errant and the impious, that is, his fellow deconstructors, by allowing the smell of burning incense and candles to waft over the halls of the English department. And if there were any point on which deconstructors and post-modernists were intractably modernist and reductionistic, if there were any point on which

they remained unreformed and reconstructed reactionary, exclusionary purists, it was religion. Religion is dead, it's out, and God help Derrida if he is going to start talking about religion. Secularizing deconstructors were scandalized—secretly, I think, they were praying that this was not true—that Derrida had gone religious, even as the folks in the religion department sensed that there was something dark and khoral about this ankhoral religion.

12. If the life of deconstruction turns on scandal, Derrida breathed new life into deconstruction so that deconstruction and Derrida have continued to enjoy a life after death. From the point of view of academic politics, deconstruction has not disappeared; it has just moved down the hall, from the literature departments to the religion and continental philosophy departments. So those who decided that they have Derrida's number, or that the train has left the station on deconstruction, those who had stopped reading Derrida, had in fact missed the new train Derrida was riding. Deconstruction was turning out to be not the hermeneutics of the death of God, or not only that, since, as Tom Carlson pointed out to me, there are numerous ways in which that is true, but also the hermeneutics of the desire for God, which is also true, both Nietzsche and Levinas, both Zarathustra and Johannes de Silentio. So deconstruction has found a new life in the religion department, and a whole new wave of deconstructive theory is washing over us in something that is starting to be called in the course catalogues and on the conference posters "continental philosophy of religion," of which there are many components, deconstruction being one of its most productive and provocative. That, for the present, which means the foreseeable future, is the future of deconstruction, the place where it presently promises to make the most productive trouble. (When it stops making trouble then it really is dead.)
13. But eventually, Derrida will stop traveling, deconstruction as an actuality will subside into the history books, and the word will become, if it is not already, the name of something that is over. And this, please note, in virtue of what deconstruction is or is supposed to be, namely, the coming of the other, and preferably the coming of the impossible and unforeseeable. The more deconstruction is outstripped by something unforeseeable, the more it will be proven right! That is what it is trying to provide for! Thus, as a possibility, as a *provocation*, deconstruction has a future. Indeed deconstruction *is* the future, a theory *of* the future, and hence very much something that belongs to the future of theory. So after Jacques Derrida comes the future.
14. What shall we say theory is or, in keeping with the sense of time in deconstruction, what shall it have been? Theory is a way of problematizing, of wondering about what we are saying and doing, about what we think we are saying or doing, and whether that is what is really being said or done, or whether something else has silently crept over us and turned it into something else altogether. In theory of the deconstructive sort, one could put "quotation marks" or "scare quotes" around each and every word or fragment or sentence, practice or institution, and problematize it, ruminate over it, worry over it. The trick lies not in knowing when to do that—you always can—but to know when *not* to do that. It depends upon a Socratic demon that warns us to leave this or that alone for the time being because it would represent a more strategic intervention to worry about something else instead.
15. Theory is endless suspicion and mistrust. But it is not the jaundiced eyed mistrust that believes nothing and does nothing and that slanders everyone who tries, but the kind of felicitous mistrust that somehow finds a way to cohabit with faith, which mistrusts the present in the name of the future. Theory, and the theory astir in deconstruction in particular, doubts the present because of its faith in the future, its love of the '*venir*', of what is always and structurally

to come, so that the Messiah never actually shows up, since if he does, then he is no longer what is to come. What deconstruction will have done, and the way that it will live on, after Derrida, after deconstruction itself, lies in its insistence on the future, on what is coming, and on the courage it takes to keep the future open. Theory is the endless problematizing of our beliefs and practices, the bottomless suspicion that our current beliefs and practices are unworthy servants of the future, unfaithful to the open-endedness of the future, the anxiety that the present tends to ensconce itself in its presence and to close off what is coming. If there were no theory, there would be no future, just the endless repetition of the same. Resistance to theory is reactionary. To resist theory is to resist the future in order to cling to the present. Theory pries the present open to the future, making possible the coming of the impossible, in the name not of doubt but of faith, not of contempt but of love. To understand the future of theory would require understanding the future of love.

16. The future of theory, after Jacques Derrida: *viens, oui, oui*.

John D. Caputo is the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University, where he has taught since 1968. He serves as the Chair of the Editorial Board of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*. His most recent publications include *The Religious* (Blackwell, 2002), *On Religion* (Routledge, 2001) and *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Indiana, 2000). He is presently at work on a book on deconstruction and the "Kingdom of God."

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