

○ **REVIEW OF SEAN GASTON, *THE IMPOSSIBLE MOURNING OF JACQUES DERRIDA***  
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This is Gaston's personal and philosophical diary of his mourning in the two months following the death and burial of Jacques Derrida. He begins on 12 October 2004, the day of Derrida's funeral, and concludes on 17 December 2004. He revised the account in May–July 2005. The specific dating accords with Derrida's frequent ruminations on what is entailed in writing by the date. Gaston's mourning takes the form of extended readings and rereadings of much of Derrida's writings from 1959 to his final works. His introductory paragraph, written in July 2005, succinctly expresses his struggle in mourning the death of Derrida:

How does one respond to the death of Jacques Derrida? How does one mourn for Derrida, who warned of the dangers of mourning (as idealization and interiorization), while insisting that mourning is both unavoidable *and* impossible? The gap that the death of Jacques Derrida has left behind is open, gaping; it cannot be closed. One can perhaps only respond by tracing the gaps (*écarts*, *béances*, *décalages*), the histories of the gap, in Derrida's work (vii; in all quotations from Gaston the italicisation is his).

With this Gaston launches into his meditations on gaps in Derrida's writings and on the gap left by Derrida's death, meditations ordered loosely by date and by topic. This is both a mourning and a philosophical treatise or treatises. A gap is already present in the question of what to call Gaston's work. My review is my response to Gaston's book and not an attempt to summarise it. He doesn't attempt to summarise Derrida's work because of the vast range of the latter's production and because a summary always contains a claim to totalise, to capture the essence of the thought of another whether Derrida, Gaston or Plato. Tracing gaps is one of Derrida's major strategies in deconstructing the varied moves in the history of Western thought to seize a totality or an essence. A leitmotif for Gaston is the insistence that 'for Derrida, history (is) *the history of the departures from totality* – a history of gaps that move' (p. viii, *passim*).

Gaston lodges gaps in language, offering at key points lexical and etymological comments on the diverse terms in French, German and English. (The opening quotation lists three French nouns.) Gap itself moves: gap, gaping, deviation, distance, digression, separation, expulsion, exclusion... (32, 53–54, 61, 101 *passim*).

A first gap is that between Jacques Derrida, the man who is now past and spoken of with the past tense – Derrida lived in Paris and he taught philosophy – and Jacques Derrida, the writer who is spoken of with the present tense – Derrida says, writes, maintains. Gaston chooses the latter and focuses on Derrida's works and his own reading of them. Gaston is not saying that Derrida's works are present while the man himself is now gone. The issue of *presence* is central to Derrida's lifelong grappling with the metaphysical privileging of presence as a way to totality, the Truth. Every topic, every thinker, that Gaston deals with relates to the question of how to

mourn Jacques Derrida without turning him or his work into a monument, a grand testament to presence.

A second gap is the ‘of’ in the book’s title. ‘The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida’ speaks both of mourning for the man and of what this man writes – in the present tense – of mourning as both impossible and inevitable, of how to mourn and to shake the inevitable move to objectify and monu-memorialise the person or oeuvre. ‘Start with the gaps’ is Gaston’s strategy in this diary of mourning and is mine in this response to the diary.

Gaston divides his book into three large parts by date (one part for each month) and by topic. First is ‘The Precedant (12–19 October 2004)’ [1–18]. The pre- of to precede, to preface and on into the chain of signifiers of pre- already questions, solicits, any notion that the title of this first part tells us ‘what it’s all about’. Derrida’s preoccupation with this ‘pre-’, *le pre-* in French, occurs and reoccurs – *le re-* is another part of the chain – throughout his career. To precede contains a gap, a gap that moves, within itself:

To precede suggests *both* to go before, to take precedence, to be first *and* to give way, to cede or to yield one’s place. To *pre-cede*: going ahead, going before, *taking one’s place* at the front and, at the same time, *giving up one’s place* as one goes ahead (3).

This is one of many words that Derrida employs to make the foundational and essentialist dreams of metaphysics tremble; *writing*, *supplement* and *pharmakon* are other well-known examples. Derrida mines language in the full range of its manifestation, from individual nouns and verbs to lengthy discourse for resources for this solicitation of the metaphysical project, for this search for gaps.

‘Preface’ takes us to Hegel, perhaps the philosopher of the preface, who sought to put the gaps, especially those between the thesis, the antithesis and the synthesis to work in the *Aufhebung*. The latter is Hegel’s way to try to close the gap. *We are always trying to close the gap* is another of Gaston’s leitmotifs, the topic of one of his several digressions (89). Derrida questions, solicits, deconstructs – three verbs in a lengthy chain of substitutions – philosophical and other writers but never claims to finally move beyond them, to free himself of the philosophical tradition and to go on to something completely different.

His writings and Gaston’s response are filled with the names of thinkers, renowned and little known, from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle), through Latin writers (Augustine and Aquinas) and on into ‘modern’ philosophers including Descartes, Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard and Husserl. Derrida is first and foremost a reader and a writer, not a thinker of clear and distinct ideas. His writings are inextricably bound to those of others and all the names and writings of others are one significant move against monu-memorialising Derrida through his writings.

Literature appears in the names of Shakespeare, James and Kafka, amongst others. Gaston gives little attention to this gap between literature and philosophy. Unlike the other gaps that ‘we are always trying to close’, this is one that many want to maintain with rigor; there should be no illegal crossing of this border. However Derrida also shakes this gap and makes this border permeable, but he does not close the gap and remove the border. He reads philosophy with an obsessive attention to the writing itself, the very words on the page, an attention more characteristic of literary reading; he doesn’t read philosophy as though it were ideas and concepts somehow

separable from the writing. This is part of Hegel's dream, to write a *pre-face* that speaks the ideas of the work that is being *pre-faced*. Hegel's constant need to rework his prefaces and to produce new ones testifies to this as a dream, not a reality.

The other two parts of Gaston's diary are 'Histories–Décálages (1–30 November 2004)' [19–73] and 'The Gap Moves (1–17 December 2004)' [74–124]. Gaston underlines the instability of writing by the date in the opening of the second part. Boldface and italics mark the dates.

**1 November 2004.** On *28 October 1816* in Heidelberg Hegel gave his inaugural address for his forthcoming lectures on the history of philosophy. This inaugural address would become the *pre- before* the preface to the unstable and much-disputed text of the collected fragments and student transcriptions that make up Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. There has been a kind of bad *Aufhebung* Hegel suggests [note shift to present tense in Gaston's text: Hegel spoke and suggests] and philosophy is not doing so well (p. 19).

In a paper first delivered on *15 July 1992* (his birthday), 'Derrida writes of "the essential incompleteness of translating"' (p. 55). I cite a passage from Gaston that is a citation from Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (1979), a dual language book with French and English on opposite pages. The English translation is by Barbara Harlow. For me the passage and its context in Gaston and beyond is a provocative example (I don't address the problematic of the example) of Derrida's writing style, of the gaps involved in it and in any translation. All are part of a mourning that struggles to avoid idealisation and interiorisation.

If it is necessary to keep one's distance from the feminine operation... it is perhaps because 'the woman' [*la femme*] is not some thing, the determinable identity which announces itself from a distance, at a distance from some other thing, from which it would withdrawal [*sic*] or approach. Perhaps she is, as a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum, the *abîme* of distance, the out-distancing of distance, the interval's cadence [*la coupe de l'espacement*, the cut, the gap of spacing], distance itself, if one can still say this, which is impossible, distance *itself*. Distance out-distances itself, the far is furthered. One is forced to appeal here to the Heideggerian use of the word *Entfernung*: at once the divergence [*l'écartement*] the distance [*l'éloignement*] and the distantiation of distance [*l'éloignement de l'éloignement*], the deferment of the distant [*lointain*], the de-ferment [*l'é-loignement*], it is in fact the destruction (*Ent-*) which constitutes the distant as such [*comme tel*], the veiled enigma of proximation. (48–51, trans. modified)

Translation is always incomplete and citation, iteration, always introduces difference, gaps. Gaston has an ellipsis at the start and notes at the close that he has modified Harlow's 'original translation'. This is incomplete for Gaston and needs both modification and supplementation in the form of the inclusion of French terms and phrases in brackets. In *Spurs* the French is on the page to the left. The language itself, or better the languages themselves: English, French and German, signal difference and a gap is visibly marked in the hyphen separating a prefix (another pre-) from the modified term: de-ferment.

Then there is the typographical error, if it be such, signaled by [*sic*]. Derrida's French is 'à distance d'autre chose, et dont il y aurait à s'éloigner ou à s'approcher'. Harlow's translation reads 'at a distance from some other thing. In that case it would not be a matter of retreat and approach'. Harlow renders the French reflexive verbs with English nouns while Gaston's troubled reading crosses a noun and a verb, perhaps reflecting some confusion of two possible translations. Errors, mis-quotations, mis-prints, mis-translations are all a necessary part of the very possibility of citation and iteration.

A detailed discussion of a brief text in its 'original' form and in both translation and modified translation is a fitting close to my response. The discussion starts and finishes with the gaps. It is a celebration of Jacques Derrida's writings and thoughts and a mourning of his passing.