

# **AUTOBIOGRAPHY-HETEROBIOGRAPHY, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN JACQUES DERRIDA**

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*In this paper, I would like to show how the movements of never stable meanings that link biography and religion are figured and interwoven throughout a kind of ineffable literary and philosophical notion of religion. Religion is a notion that can be understood through a cluster of topics such as origin, promise, dissociation, the unconditional, forgiveness, the undeconstructable and the possibility of the impossible—terms and expressions that Derrida suggests describe God.*

## **The Last Derrida**

Despite Derrida's hesitation to speak of an evolution in his thought, it is widely believed, so much so as to become commonplace, that during the last decades of his life, Derrida, in dealing with the topic of identity, sharpened important distinctions between singularity and universality, the conditional and the unconditional, the otherness of the other and the absolute Other. The day after Derrida's death, October 14, 2004, the *New York Times*' Mark C. Taylor wrote:

During last decade of his life, Mr. Derrida became preoccupied with religion and it is in this area that his contribution might well be most significant for our time. He understood that religion is impossible without uncertainty. Whether conceived of as Yahweh, as the father of Jesus Christ, or as Allah, God can never be fully known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings. Yet, we live in an age in which people who claim to know, for certain, that God is on their side, shape major conflicts. Mr. Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning, purpose and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary, the great religious traditions are profoundly dis-

turbing because they all call certainty and security into question. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a mortal danger.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Taylor remarked:

As the process of globalization draws us ever closer in networks of communication and exchange, there is an understandable longing for simplicity, clarity and certainty. This desire is responsible, in large measure, for the rise of cultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism—in this country and around the world. True believers of every stripe—Muslim, Jewish and Christian—cling to beliefs that, Mr. Derrida warns, threaten to tear apart our world. (*Ibid.*)

Whereas belief not tempered by doubt, Derrida warns, begets mortal danger, the process of globalisation, however, draws us ever closer into networks of communication and exchange. But why does Derrida turn explicitly in his later writings to speak of himself? Is the autobiographical genre a way of seeking the truth, for doing philosophy? How and why do ethical and religious themes emerge? Why, in the so-called *last* Derrida, do the issues of the unconditional and religion become thematic? A tempting and motivated answer would be that his project was to conclude the premises of his early works, first and foremost *Of Grammatology*, defined by many as his *Discours de la méthode* or *Critique of Pure Reason*—an answer that privileges Derrida's *later* work insofar as it conceives the *earlier* work on language, psychoanalysis and phenomenology primarily in terms of concerns for responsibility and justice. Another answer, a strictly philosophical one, would be that, at the distance in time from the polemics that divided them, Derrida felt closer to Michel Foucault, to the point of allowing himself to imagine both of them walking along a common road toward a renewed Enlightenment, which Derrida coherently conceives of without the ideal of final transparency and without the idea of total illumination. It is certain, however, that Derrida continued to pursue from other angles his Nietzschean notes, questioning the present and the philosophical centrality of autobiography in well-known

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<sup>1</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "What Derrida Really Meant," in *The New York Times*, October 14, 2004.

figures such as Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau and Nietzsche. The last Derrida seems to absorb as much from human, present and personal experience as from the history of thought, those attitudes, hints and occasions for thinking that strengthen the sense of a radical and rigorous philosophy.

In this essay, my ambition is to show how the movements of never stable meanings that link biography and religion, the personal version of his life that Derrida gives us and his philosophical-theological reflection, especially on Judaic and Christian religious traditions, are interwoven in an inextricable whole to such an extent that they describe a kind of ineffable literary and philosophical notion of religion. I want to suggest that, notwithstanding Derrida's personal way of writing and thinking, this notion of religion emerges through such recurrent topics as origin, promise, forgiveness, dissociation, the unconditional, the undeconstructable and the possibility of the impossible. In support of my argument I shall try to develop my reflections, first, by means of the stimulating "Abraham, the Other" (in French, "*Abraham, l'autre*"). I see this text as exceptionally fruitful because of the inseparability of autobiography, philosophy, religion and literature. Second, I will examine the most provocative play on *Circumfession*, together with biographical testimonies, where the friendly bet between Bennington and Derrida is the setting of a sort of relation in four that includes them, Augustine and God. Finally, I will attempt to deepen the different meanings of the *probable* in Augustine, as it appears in his *Against the Academics*, and the rhetorical topic of the *im-possible*, which Derridean scholarship, in my view, must continue to think over in a post-deconstructive age.

### **Jewish Identity and/or Identity of Birth?**

We know that Spinoza's family was Portuguese Marrano, a Jewish family forced to convert to Roman Catholicism, who returned to Judaism when Calvinist Holland permitted it. Though he evaded Christianity, Spinoza absorbed much of its slander against Judaism. He flew through the nets of Judaism, Calvinism, Aristotelianism and Cartesian dualism, though Descartes was his starting point. Excommunicated by Amsterdam Jewry in 1656, the not deeply chagrined twenty-three-year-old Spinoza did not become a Calvinist; rather, he consorted with more liberal Christians, particularly Mennonites. The German and English Romantics—

Shelley aside—upon reading the *Ethics* came away with the notion that he was a pragmatist and an Epicurean materialist. As in Epicurus and Lucretius, Spinoza's God is scarcely distinguishable from *Nature* and is altogether indifferent to us, even to our *intellectual love*. He was troubled mostly by his extraordinary autonomy, unique in that Jewish history in which he did not desire to be a participant in any way whatsoever. Spinoza taught an intellectual love for his God, perhaps a God himself incapable of love, a God that is the same as *Nature*, and at the same time the text, the *Torah*. Is it possible to compare Derrida with Spinoza? Unfortunately, this question calls for much more extensive thinking and reading than is possible here, but raising it is useful in order to understand some human and ideological aspects of Derrida's biography. Along the way, I can stress only that Spinoza was a Portuguese Marrano, Derrida an Algerian imaginary Marrano, and both were heterodox Jews.

In a well-known interview, an interviewer asked Derrida a set of questions: What memory do you have of Algeria? What religion were your parents? Derrida replied, "I was born in Algeria, but already my family, which had been in Algeria for a long time, before the French colonisation, was not simply Algerian. The French language was not the language of its ancestors. I lived in the pre-independent Algeria, but not all that long before Independence."<sup>2</sup> In reference to his Judaism, Derrida added, "My family was banally observant, but I must say, unfortunately, that this observance was not guided by a true family Jewish culture. There were rituals to be observed in a rather external way, but I was not really raised in what is called Jewish culture." (*Ibid.*) While training, he absorbed the Greek and German intellectual and cultural legacies, which is not surprising for a philosopher: Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger—the list of names could be extended. He added an indefinable Judaic intrusion to his formation, which would accompany the tradition of the Greek and the German, that is to say, an inscription of Judaism within the Greco-German, which he would hesitate to call Judaic. "There is certainly a feeling of exteriority with regard to European, French, German, Greek culture. But when I close myself up with it, because I teach and write all the time about things that are German, Greek, French,

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<sup>2</sup> Interview published as "Entretien avec Jacques Derrida," in "Digraph (December 1987)," in Jacques Derrida, *Points...Interviews*, (ed.) Elisabeth Weber, (tr.) Peggy Kamuf et al. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

even then it is true that I have the feeling I am doing it from another place that I do not know, an exteriority based on a place that I do not inhabit in a certain way, or that I do not identify. That is why I hesitate to call it Judaic.” (*Ibid.*)

### **Abraham**

Derrida’s “Abraham, the Other,” on which I shall focus, is the initial essay of the proceedings of the international colloquium *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida* (Paris, 3–5 December 2000). The conference focused on the question of how the term Judaism must be understood, while investigating the relationship between Derrida’s writing and the multiplicity of ways of being a Jew. Also of interest was the possible Judaism within Derrida’s oeuvre, particularly as it relates to themes such as belonging, identity, origin, promise and hospitality.

The most frequent questions were: Is there anything Jewish about Derrida? Is it possible, right now, to affirm Jewish identity, or any other spiritual affinity, and not to betray Derrida? What is it to be a Jew and a philosopher? What is the relationship between Derrida and Christianity? And, with insistence: What does the notion of “Jewish identity” mean in and across Jewish literature, Jewish thought and Jewish languages? In truth, Derrida has always denied that any sort of Judaism is at work in that peculiar way of doing philosophy that is deconstruction. He has stressed too the impossibility of a sort of deconstructionism in any singular way: deconstruction as permanent questioning of the legacy of one’s own place, propriety and property aims at preceding all filiations and derivations. Far from permitting an ideology of identity, deconstruction aims at taking down the peaceable and consolatory certainty that usually follows the reconstruction of the past. Deconstruction is practiced in the awareness of moving—between a confused and shifting mix of contingent and intelligible (*chora*) without giving occasion to any event of anthropo-theological revelation—toward something that precedes and makes ideas and worldly objects common. At the same time, Derrida never denied that a certain nexus could subsist between some aspects of his philosophical discourse, aimed entirely at working on the margins of philosophy, and some marginal figures of Judaic history, e.g., the Maranos.

The Marranos were Sephardic Jews who converted to Roman Catholicism either by choice or by force during the Spanish Inquisition. Many Marranos, while they were publicly professing the Catholic faith, privately maintained their ancestral traditions and remained faithful to Judaism. The Marranos, in short, had a kind of double identity and followed the so-called “theory and practice of double truth.” Derrida has admitted that if it is possible to speak of Judaism in his regard, it refers to the Judaism of the Marranos. The Marrano, properly understood, is one who has the might of betraying his own Judaic origin, obliged not only by self-preservation, but saves something of his Judaism. The identity that the Marrano takes into custody, being in hiding and risking annihilation, becomes a sort of alterity, the change into something that cannot be shown in pure form. Like a spectre, the Marrano is the figure of *aporia*, neither present nor absent, neither hidden nor visible, neither true nor false. He frequently appears and disappears in Derridean writings. In his previous book, *Circumfession*, a twin-text to the conference essay “Abraham, the Other,” a real autobiography to which I will turn later, Derrida deals with the genre of philosophical biography; he confronts the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. Confessing by not confessing or circum-confessing, he declares: “I am one of those *Marranes* who no longer say they are Jews even in the secret of their own hearts, not so as to be authenticated *Marranes* on both sides of the public frontier, but because they doubt everything, never go to confession or give up enlightenment, whatever the cost, ready to have themselves burned, almost, at the only moment they write under the monstrous law of an impossible face-to-face.”<sup>3</sup>

Comparing the Jewish/unJewish *aporia* to the authentic/inauthentic other, inspired by the ontological *difference*—see the Heideggerian pages of *Being and Time*—Derrida draws the figure of the *arrivant*—the arrivant, the guest, the immigrant or the stranger who causes dis/orientation within the taxonomies usually intended to identify and create hierarchies among ethnic, linguistic and national families. The arrivant is the other, the other as vulnerable other, as disarmed, as a newly

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida. Circumfession : Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 170–71. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *Circum*.

born child. On many occasions Derrida points out what human resources are demanded by the right of hospitality. In *Of Hospitality*, he maintains that hospitality is not merely an ethical duty: It is a fundamental principle of culture. Hospitality is culture itself and not simply an ethic among others; it is a principle of culture that Derrida picks up in different writings and in its complex articulations, as the Greeks understood it, as Kant confronted it in *On Perpetual Peace*. In respectful and polite disagreement with Kant, Derrida claims that the law of absolute Abrahamic hospitality—the very term *Abrahamic* invokes the mandate of hospitality—commands a break with hospitality by right, with law or justice by right. Kant, in dealing with hospitality, affirmed that in a broad sense it is part of natural right, but he added too that the right of hospitality must be limited in time, qualified and reduced to a temporary sojourn. Derrida aims at exceeding the unqualified hospitality/qualified hospitality opposition. He moves into an ethical sphere that exceeds right, as in Stoic ethics or Pauline theology.<sup>4</sup>

The essay “Abraham, the Other” is played out and supported by two signposts: on one hand, the presence of disallowed Jewish identity and, on the other hand, the necessity to confront one’s own Judaism, one’s own biography and one’s own formation. Invited to address his relationship with Judaism, Derrida began speaking through Kafka, citing Kafka’s letter of June 1921 to his friend, the physician Robert Klopstock: “I could think of another Abraham for myself.”<sup>5</sup> One could translate it slightly differently, one could substitute the verb “to think” for “to imagine” or “to conceive”: “*Ich könnte mir einen anderen Abraham denken,*” “I could, for myself, as for myself, imagine, conceive the fiction of another Abraham.”(JQ, 1)

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<sup>4</sup> St. Paul, *Letter to Ephesians*, 2, 19–20.

<sup>5</sup> Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as JQ. Originally published as *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*, (ed.) Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (Paris : Éditions Galilée, 2003). On the same theme, see also Jacques Derrida, *Act of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

What does this mean? That I can imagine another Abraham, and perhaps more than one other? That I can ask, thinking over the biblical text, what Abraham has been called? This other, the second other Abraham, was ready to respond to the call, to answer the test of election, but he was not sure of having been called, not sure that it was he who was elected, and not another.

He was afraid of being ridiculous, like someone who, hard of hearing, would come to answer “yes,” “here I am” without having been called, without having been designated... [he] would rush to answer the call addressed to another, like a bad student, for example, who from the back of the classroom, Kafka says, would think that he heard his own name, but the teacher had honoured another, having meant to reward only the very best student of the class. (JQ, 2)

The end of the parable opens another possibility: Perhaps the teacher intended to stage a confusing test between the two names, or between the two chosen ones in order to punish the bad student.

Furthermore, Kafka speaks of another Abraham (the third), the one who absolutely desires to make a just sacrifice, the one who in general has an inkling of the issue, but cannot believe that his and his son's turns have arrived. He believes and he would sacrifice in the just spirit, provided he could believe that it is specifically for him to do so. He fears that he will depart on horseback as Abraham in the company of his son, but on the way, he transforms him into Don Quixote. He does not fear the ridiculous *per se*; he fears, above all, that this ridiculousness makes him older and more disagreeable, his son dirtier. An Abraham who arrives without being called! It is as if the best student might receive the prize at the end of the year, and, in the silence of waiting, the worst student comes out of his dirty, last seat and the entire classroom bursts out laughing. Perhaps it is not a mistake: The worst student has really been called by name, the prize for the best student must be the teacher's intention and, at the same time, a punishment for the worst student. For Derrida, this deals with old stories, and referring to himself he says: “And yet tonight I will act for awhile as if these two orders were distinct, to seek to determine later on, here or elsewhere, at least as disputable hypothesis, the rule of what passes ... from one to the other, the rule of what



occurs ... between the two, and for which I would have, in sum, to respond.” (JQ, 3)

Following his persistent questioning, Derrida puts forward three choices of possible and impossible dissociations: First, there is the dissociation between persons and verb conjugations: the verb moves between the first, second and third persons, singular and plural, male and female, Jewish/not Jewish. Second, there is the dissociation of authenticity from in-authenticity, the same dissociation in which Sartre was involved after reading *Being and Time* half a century ago. Third, there is the dissociation of Judeity from Judaism that must be accepted and explored. The question concerning his being/not being a Jew leads to the double figure Marrano-Derrida:

And no doubt I will only do so to confide in you that which in me, for a long time now, feels in a place such as this, in a place defined in this way, before a topic so formulated, before a “Jewish” thing ..., at once, precisely, entrusted, and condemned, to silence.... Yes, entrusted as much as condemned. Both entrusted to silence, in the sense that one says entrusted for safekeeping, entrusted to a silence that keeps and guards so long as one keeps and guards it. (JQ, 6)

And:

As if—a paradox that I will not stop unfolding and that summarizes all the torment of my life—I had to keep myself from Judaism ... in order to retain within myself something that I provisionally call *Jewishness*. The phrase, the contradictory injunction, that would thus have ordered my life seemed to say to me, in French, “*garde-toi du Judaïsme—ou même de la judéité,*” keep yourself from it in order to keep some of it, keep yourself from it, guard yourself from being Jewish or keep and guard the Jew in you. Guard yourself from and take care of the Jew in you.... Watch and watch out ..., be vigilant, be watchful and do not be Jewish at any price. Even if you are alone and the last to be Jewish at this price, look twice before claiming a communal, even national or especially state-national, solidarity and before

speaking, before taking sides and taking a stand as a Jew. (JQ, 6–7)

Is all of this authentic? The injunction is “watch over the secret with which you seem to have been entrusted.” Derrida asks himself if the prescription of the law that separates the Jew from the non-Jew, the circumcised from the un-circumcised, so intensely experienced by St. Paul before his conversion to Christianity, can be perennial.<sup>6</sup> The injunction would be to maintain silence, a chosen silence—chosen because of the existential condition of *a priori* guilt on account of an original debt and congenital mistake. Hence the question: “Why the big enigma, the *quasi* universal and ontological theme of an *a priori* guilt or responsibility, of an original debt, a congenital wrong (which one finds everywhere, notably among so-called Christian, anti-Christian or atheist thinkers, like Kierkegaard or Heidegger)? Why has the universal argument of this singular indictment come from me always, *almost* usually, obscurely, as if stuck to the question of my belonging without belonging to Jewishness or to Judaism?” (JQ, 8)

To speak or not to speak? And inversely, being mute or to speak? How to avoid speaking? To speak even in keeping silent? The Derridean opposition is neither a game nor a double game nor an *ingénue* opposition, as some readers and critics have thought. Nor does the Derridean deconstructive practice aim at forming a binary philosophical opposition characterised by hierarchy and involving a pair of terms in which one member is supposed as primary, the other as secondary and derivative, so that the first attains prominence and the second is rejected. Nor again does it amount to a free game of two opposites without hierarchic relations, awaiting a dialectic that seeks an eventual reunification; it is not an Hegelian synthesis. The Derridean dualism is not and cannot subsist as a mechanical external or posterior juxtaposition; it is as an original *trace*-insight and -out-sight, endowed with an active and passive value. Provided we remember that the trace for Derrida is before being, it is like significance in the signifier position and the reverse. It is something that pertains to the foundation, to the relation between the foundation and

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<sup>6</sup> On the topic of circumcision, see Saint Paul’s *Epistle to Galatians*, in which Saint Paul intertwines the theme of conversion with the theme of circumcision; see also Derrida’s pages in *Circumfession*.

what is founded. It is a question about the closure of the structure, about the whole architecture of philosophy. It concerns not only this or that construction; it concerns the architectonic motif of the system. I think of the Kantian definition of the architectonic, which does not exhaust all the senses of “architectonic.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Derrida, Kant’s definition is of particular interest because his architectonic is the art of the system, and deconstruction is first concerned with the system; but it does not bring down the system, it opens onto possibilities of arrangement or assembling or being together that is not necessarily systematic, it prevents the play of differences from reassembling in a systematic whole (this is what philosophy *stricto sensu* gives to the world). Of course, it is a kind of active translation that does not destroy structures from the outside, that displaces somewhat the progress or the regress in a linear way like the *Destruktion à la* Heidegger. It is the deconstruction of *Destruktion*. It does not mean, finally, the annulment, the annihilation of ontology but the analysis of the disputable structure of traditional ontology.

But, now let us come back to Derrida’s autobiography, which often is a modality of philosophy, remembering how and when the word “Jew” was ascribed to him, for the first time, in French Algeria. He remembers that he had never heard the word “Jew” in his family or, at least, he never heard the word as a neutral designation to classify, even less to identify, belonging to a social, ethnic or religious community. “I believe I heard it at school in El Biar, already charged with what, in Latin, one could call an insult ...*injuria*, in English, *injury*, both an insult, a wound, and an injustice, a denial of right rather than the right to belong to a legitimate group.” (JQ, 10) The word “Jew,” rather “*dirty Jew*,” was ascribed to him with the clear attribution of guilt, before he committed any mistake. He remembers that sometimes he played, without really playing, at naming himself the last of the Jews, he who should not merit

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<sup>7</sup> “By an architectonic I understand the art of systems. Since systematic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science, i.e. makes a system out of a mere aggregate of it, architectonic is the doctrine of that which is scientific in our cognition in general, and therefore necessarily belongs to the doctrine of method.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (tr. and ed.) Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), A833.

the title of authentic Jew, or the Marrano who, however, is a Jew, because he believes that the less you are a Jew, the better you will be one. He remembers, too, as a youth the direct vision of what occurred to Jewish boys like him. “But the same suffering and the same compulsion to decipher the symptom have also, paradoxically and simultaneously, cautioned me against community and communitarianism in general...” (JQ, 15) That is why he remained cautious about communitarianism and borders; that is why he had always seen with respect, using the procedures of deconstruction and praising the margins, the places of borders, the free zones, and the interspaces between opposites. So, he became the bearer of wariness, of an aporeticity:

...this experience sharpened my reasoned mistrust of borders and oppositional distinctions (whether conceptual or not), and thus has pushed me to elaborate a deconstruction as well as ethics of responsibility, exposed to the endurance of the undecidable, to the law of my decision as decision, of the other into me, dedicated and devoted...to aporia, to a not-being-able-to or not-being-obligated-to...trust in an oppositional border between any two, for example, between two concepts that are apparently dissociable. (JQ, 17)

Lastly, perceiving that an answer was required regarding the ambiguity of the dualism authentic/ inauthentic, he affirms:

At this point what I want to confide to you, simply and in my name, if I can still say that, is that I insist on saying “I am Jew” or “I am a Jew” without ever feeling authorized to clarify whether an “inauthentic” Jew or, above all, an “authentic” Jew—in Sartre’s limited and very French sense—nor in the sense that some Jews who are more assured of their belonging, of their memory, their essence or their election might understand, expect, or demand of me. (JQ, 30)

Let us turn back to the initial point, that of calling, that of Kafka. Derrida seems to ask, What do I do when called? I reply to the appeal, I hold on to introducing myself as a Jew. But what nexus is there between doing

and knowing, between faith and knowing? And, echoing the story of Kafka,

Whoever is certain—as the other, the second Abraham of Kafka, were precisely not—whoever believes he detains the certainty of having been, he and he alone, he, first, called as the best of the class, transforms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature with the most fearsome consequences that can be imagined in this century, political consequences in particular. (JQ, 31)

It would seem that now the distinction between inauthentic/authentic or between Jewishness and Judaism is no longer certain. Yet, some vestige remains. In a famous and analogous passage, Freud, discussing Moses, concluded more or less in the same way. If one asked this Jew (that is himself) “since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your compatriots, what is left of you that is Jewish? He would answer—A very great deal, and probably its very essence. He could not now express that essence in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind.” (JQ, 32) Yet, some vestige remains. So, in between the tangle of directions (religious, historical, philosophical, linguistic, juridical, political), in between the prehistoric and protean melting pot, two contradictory postulates arise: On the one hand, the condition of freeing oneself and, on the other, this freeing can be interpreted as revelation or election. Derrida concludes, “That there should be yet another Abraham: here, then, is the most threatened Jewish thought ..., but also the most vertiginously, the most intimately Jewish one that I know to this day.” (JQ, 34–35) Is this a third Abraham, as in the famous trap of the *Third Man Argument* in the Parmenides? Derrida is neither worried about this, nor about the other’s own infinite otherness. In the light of his logic, *tertium datur*, there is the possibility of the impossible.

More needs to be said about “Abraham, the Other.” One could slightly summarise the very core of the essay as follows: In the way we customarily and unquestioningly see things, *Abraham* precedes *the Other*; but Derrida, in order to contest Jewish identity, the meaning of being a Jew, invites us to imagine that all this needs to be challenged and reversed. In using the strange and paradoxical figure of Abraham, Derrida emphasises his personal tension (“*how much I feel, and will always*

*feel, out of place in speaking of it, out of place, misplaced, decentred*") (JQ, 4, my emphasis) between an absolute and irrecoverable notion of imaginary alterity, always deferred and always "to come," and the condition of being somehow always within the self. The inner meaning of the binary opposition *Abraham/the Other Abraham, Derrida/the Other*, and, inversely, *the Other/Derrida*, shows exemplarily the non-identity with himself, the Jewish/non-Jewish aporia. The Marrano, the hero of Derrida, must be regarded with the same lens. He is the one who possesses a double identity, the one who must keep a dreadful secret. In his turn, Derrida's Abraham is tightly bound to the Marrano in a fundamental and irreducible way, in the logic of the secret, the secret that commands Abraham to overburden himself with the heavy and problematic responsibility to the "otherness of the other." (See Derrida's, *The Gift of Death*, where his emphasis on secrecy and mystery appears, in my view, more Gnostic than Christian or Jewish.)

### **Augustine**

In the conference "Abraham, the Other," the references to *Circumfession* are numerous. The analogies between the personal lives and some seasons in the life of St. Augustine and of Derrida are more than a curiosity. At a round-table discussion in Villanova in 1994, Derrida said about his "marginal notes," *Circumfession*, that they are a kind of Jewish *Confessions*, a sort of diary-cum-dialogue with St. Augustine—his equally weepy compatriot—a sort of haunting and enigmatic journal he kept while his beloved mother lay dying in Nice, an example of literary auto-heterobiography. In *Circumfession*, the son of tears (Augustine/Jacques) cir-cum-fesses (to God/"you") about his mother (Monica/Georgette) who went out on the northern shores of the Mediterranean (Ostia/Nice), from which both families had emigrated. In the same discussion, he took the opportunity to pay attention to those analogies, saying,

I play with some analogies: that he came from Algeria, that his mother died in Europe, the way my mother was dying in Nice when I was writing this, and so on. I am constantly playing, seriously playing, with this, and quoting sentences from *Confessions* in Latin, all the while trying, through my love and admiration for St. Augustine—I have enormous and immense admiration for

him—to ask questions about a number of axioms, not only in his *Confessions* but in his politics, too. So there is a love story and a deconstruction between us.<sup>8</sup>

Citing sentences from the *Confessions* in Latin, Derrida declares his love and immense admiration for St. Augustine; he discovers the prayers and tears of Augustine, and exercises a sort of deconstruction, side by side with him. In some aspects, it is a scene of forgiveness and conversion somewhat similar to Petrarch's *Secretum*, in which the Italian poet asks the saint some questions on several topics. With courageous effort, Petrarch looks for an unprejudiced analysis of his inner soul, an *ante litteram* psychoanalysis; he confesses. St. Augustine charges him with *inertia* and *aegritudo* and accuses him of not making the decisive choice. Along with Augustine, the poet will manifest the same mental and spiritual attitudes described by Augustine in *De vita solitaria* and *De otio religioso*.

But, what is Augustine's mood, what is his intellectual condition during his Milanese sojourn? It seems helpful to remember that at times Augustine had already abandoned polytheism. He is still a Manichean; he is a materialist and perhaps an atheist. According to some scholars, in 386 the intellectual revolution of Augustine took him to Platonism rather than religion. A reading of the three dialogues of the Cassiciacum period (*Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine*) gives us sufficient material with which to analyse his philosophical and humanistic learning from Plato to Xenon, from Varro to Cicero, from Seneca to Plotinus. Here, we discover the scholar, the historian, the professor of philosophy and the rhetorician who is well aware of his mission, who is taking inspiration from the classics, the ancients' *sapientia* and divine wisdom. In the dialogue *Contra Academicos*, we better discover the closeness between Augustine and Derrida, and their distance.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, (ed.) John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 20–21.

### **The Probable, the Impossible**

In order to deal with the previous question, I suggest reading some passages from the dialogue *Against the Academics*—a text functional for my argument and whose meaning justifies a lengthy insert. In the second book of dialogue, Augustine, not far from his complete conversion, reports a meaningful observation (as conveyed in his *Confessions*) concerning his conception of philosophy. I alert the reader that the dialogue *Against the Academics* is not a dialogue against Academics; on the contrary, it is about Academics. Vaguely modelled on the Platonic dialogues, it joins together, in civil and philosophical conversation, characters of the familiar circle of Augustine: relatives, friends, the students Alypius, Trygetius, Licentius, Augustine's son Adeodatus, his mother Monica and other minor figures. The group, united in a country house near Cassiciacum, a little away from Milan, in November 386, intends to debate the idea of philosophy as a search for and science of human and divine things, referring in particular to the Academics.

Alypius, Augustine's best friend, is a useful figure who mediates between the higher, more elementary and easier levels of the dialogue. Licentius is the young student in love with philosophy, who, after some time, falls hopelessly in love with poetry, and again in love with philosophy and, at last, with poetry. Like some Platonic characters, he can be defined as the aesthete. Trygetius is the young man, still looking for fame and glory, who comes to philosophy from a military career and clashes with Licentius in the initial phase of the dialogue. As the dialogue advances, the progress from doubt about knowledge to the problem of truth and the aporetic nature of philosophy becomes clearer.

The dispute concerning the *probable*, which I will turn to later, between Augustine and Licentius, a supporter of the Academics, is very lively and fascinating. Augustine's answer to his friends is:

Somehow or other they persuaded me of the probability (the Academics)—to keep to their term for the moment—that man cannot find truth.... Wherefore, please withdraw your question. Let us rather discuss among ourselves as closely as possible the question of whether or not truth can be found. For my part, I think I can even now advance many arguments against the Academic position. Between them and me there is this one differ-



ence: they think it probable that truth cannot be found, and I, that it can be found. If they are but pretending, then ignorance of truth is peculiar to me only, but it is more likely to be common to us both.<sup>9</sup>

Although the two positions have equal lawfulness in reference to the concept of probability, Augustine wants to shift our attention. Comparing the probability of the Academics to the balanced, neutral idea of the probable, and seeing its reverse, accepted also by Licentius, Augustine observes that saying something is probable means saying something that is similar to truth. Alypius, however, faithful to the Academics, restrains himself because he does not share what is *de facto* an opening toward the truth. For Alypius, to accept the probable does not shift the human impossibility of knowing the truth. In sum, the probable remains balanced between the true and the false. Eventually, it may be the object of statistical-mathematical calculation! Augustine resumes the initiative and presents his decisive argument in accordance with his thesis: to think of knowing means to be conscious of thinking (read, in the modern period, Descartes). This is incontestable, though it remains that to think of knowing is not to know and that philosophy is aporetic.

After dinner, Augustine exhorts the young Licentius not to abandon philosophy for poetry, though he must admit that, because of various intellectual paths and propositions, philosophy can look like a labyrinthine game, a futile game, apparently serious, fit only as a puzzle. Later on, Alypius says:

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<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *Against the Academics* (tr. and ed.) John J. O'Meara (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1951). For the Latin text, *Contra Academicos*, see Sant'Agostino: *La controversia Accademica (Contra Academicos)* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1970), (2. 9. 22-2. 9. 23): "Nescio enim quomodo fecerunt in animo quamdam probabilitatem (ut ab eorum verbo nondum recedam), quod homo verum invenire non (possit ...). Itaque istam interrogationem remove, si placet, ut potius discutiamus inter nos, quam sagaciter possumus utrumnam possit verum inveniri. Et pro parte mea videor mihi habere iam multa, quibus contra rationem Academicorum niti molior: inter quos et me modo interim nihil distat, nisi quod illis probabile visum est, non posse inveniri veritatem; mihi autem inveniri posse probabile est. Nam ignoratio veri, aut mihi, si illi fingeabant, peculiaris est, aut certe utrisque communis."

Even though I should concede what you are so anxiously striving for, namely, that the wise man knows wisdom, and that between us we have discovered something which the wise man can know, nevertheless, I do not at all think that the whole case of the Academics has been undermined.... For they will say that it is so true that nothing can be known and that assent must be withheld from everything, that even this, their principle of not being able to know anything, which practically from the very beginning until you came along, they had maintained as probable, is now wrested from them by your argument.<sup>10</sup>

Far from being upset—on the contrary, he is pleased with the last statement by Alypius, who reduces the defence of Academics to a *reductio ad absurdum*—Augustine is ready to clarify the problem of *apodeixis*: “Consequently, we are now in agreement. For both they and I believe that the wise man knows wisdom. But, they advise, all the same, that assent should not be given to this. They say that they *believe* only, but do not at all *know*. As if I should profess that I *know*! I say that I also *believe* this. If they do not know wisdom, then they, and I with them, are stupid. But I think that we should approve of something, namely, truth.”<sup>11</sup>

To deny science, to say that there is no possibility of *apodeixis* for humans, leads to scepticism, at least to a naïve and dogmatic scepticism nobody can accept. At this point, the dialogue could be closed, given that Alypius has admitted that Augustine has gained much ground. Instead, the debate is taken up once again by punctuated references to

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* (3, 4, 10-5. 11): “*Etsi concedam, inquit, quod te magnopere niti video, sciri a sapiente sapientiam, et aliquid inter nos deprehensum quod sapiens possit percipere, tamen nequaquam mihi occurrit Academicorum labefactata omnis intentio. (...) Dicent enim usque adeo has been nihil, nullique rei assensionem praebendam, ut etiam hoc de nihil percipiendo, quod tota sibi pene vita usque ad te probabiliter persuaserant, nunc ista conclusione sibi extortum sit.*”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* (3, 5, 11-6. 12): “*Nunc itaque concordem sumus. Nam ut mihi ita etiam illi videtur, sapientem scire sapientiam. Sed tamen ab assensione illi temperandum monent. Videri enim sibi tantum dicunt, scire autem nullo modo: quasi ego me scire profiterar. Mihi quoque videri istuc dico: sum enim stultus, ut etiam ipsi, si nesciunt sapientiam. Approbare autem nos debere aliquid puto, id est veritatem.*”

Cicero and Zeno. The Academics, following in Zeno's footsteps, maintain that it is not possible to have knowledge of sense-data; they say that the object that has no common character with that which is false can be imagined and kept certain. In sum, it is difficult to make a distinction between true and false, waking and sleeping, the pure and incomplete understanding of knowledgeable contexts. Augustine is certain, nevertheless, "that three times three makes nine.... All the same, I notice that much can be said even in defence of the senses themselves—things which we do not find to be not questioned by the Academics."<sup>12</sup>

Then what will unveil the truth? *Nothing else than faith* is Augustine's reply. We have now come to the destitution of philosophy as compared to *faith*. Augustine has chosen interiority as a privileged place of searching; he has moved along the same line as Plato concerning no possible access to ideas that come from sense data. And in this way Augustine comes to *know* God. Derrida, instead, will pursue the Socratic path of non-knowing, of invoking without knowing, as John Caputo observes.<sup>13</sup>

Now, let us return to *Circumfession*. The book presupposes a contract. As a whole, it is written as a *friendly bet* between friends, in which Professor Geoffrey Bennington, in the upper part of every page, undertakes to give a systematic account of Derrida's thought such that it would even anticipate whatever Derrida might think and write in the future. After having read Bennington's text, Derrida writes, in the lower part of the page, something escaping the proposed systematisation. Who could have imagined such a thing? In exhibiting his circumcision, by means of a crude language, shamelessly, in public, like an ancient cynic, Derrida largely exceeds Bennington's text, overtaking his friend. Evidently, the relation with Bennington is the relation between the one who is up there on the upper half of the page and the one who is down on the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* (3, 11, 25): "Nam ter terna novem esse, et quadratum intelligibilium numerorum, necesse est vel genere humano stertente sit verum. Quanquam etiam pro ipsis sensibus multa posse dici video, quae ab Academicis reprehensa non invenimus."

<sup>13</sup> John D. Caputo, "Shedding Tears Beyond Being," in *Augustine and Postmodernism*, (ed.) J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 97–98. For Derrida as *Augustinian Jew*, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

bottom half on the page, but this reflects too the known relation between the other and the self.

We are prepared for multiple readings—reading between the lines of this auto-hetero-biographical book, we see the similarity between the personal lives of Augustine and Derrida. For instance, it is interesting to draw a comparison between the earlier Manichean faith of Augustine and the Derridean play that links his own and Augustine's faith to different sides, frequently exchanging their respective places, imitating the forms and borrowing the paths of the opponent, which reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other: good/evil, soul/body, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness. To understand adequately the problem of evil, Augustine moved from the Manicheans to the Platonists, finally discovering that the problem with both Platonists and Manicheans was the lack of "tears of confession." Derrida, on the contrary, in the face of Christian mystery, stays behind Gnosticism, as a close reading of his text demonstrates. It becomes interesting, at the same time, to reflect on Augustine's difficulties in escaping from the negative view of sensibility, or more, to consider the different senses/meanings of the Augustine of *probability*, as clearly appearing in *Against Academics*, and the *impossible* of Derrida, a rhetorical topic in Derridean thought—the former as a *logical* term, a term of binary logic, the latter as an *illogical/logical* modality, a term of an "other" logic. The *probability* of any event is the *ratio* between the value at which any expectation, depending on the happening of the event, ought to be computed, and the value of the thing expected upon its happening. The *impossibility*, apparently the contradiction of possibility, is not the opposite of the possible; rather, the *impossibility* co-belonges to the condition of possibility, and Derrida confesses to be impassioned by the passion for the impossible.

Following the lines of Plato's philosophy, the theological tradition of Augustine remains the quintessence of Western logocentrism, whereas Derrida's deconstruction wishes to deconstruct the entire Western religious and secular tradition. Dealing with the texts of the Christian tradition less as deposits of truth to be plumbed and more as scripts to be performed in ways touched by contemporary concerns, Derrida writes pages of theology that are both profoundly traditional and innovative as well as being aesthetic. Here, I feel near to Hent de Vries when he effectively argues that in Derrida, "the trace of the Other can only be addressed in an aporetic thought, one that is neither strictly hermeneutical,

nor purely narrative, nor poetical, let alone aesthetic, it is to doubt the very pertinence of the common lines of demarcation that are drawn between philosophy, literature, and theology, without effacing them completely” (JQ, 195), and later on, “It is still unclear to what extent philosophical and theological thought can distance themselves—in form, style and content—from their supposed referents, contexts of origination, and horizons of expectation.” (JQ, 196) (In our case: philosophy, literature and theology.) Derrida and Augustine can take a voyage together, but, at a certain point, they separate. Derridean deconstruction is too radical, very different from a supposed Platonic monism, harmony and peace; it is very different from an Augustinian theology. Derrida is not properly an Augustinian Jew, as John Caputo believes, highlighting the “religious” significance of Derrida’s thought.<sup>14</sup> Derrida is, at most, half Augustinian. By attending to his reading and interpretation of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Derrida, following the economy of *differance*, pursues a distinctive and clear program. While he is deconstructing Plato, he deconstructs what is at the heart of Augustine’s thought, the fateful identification of God and his interpretation of *Exodus* 3.14, the kernel of Western Christian religious and secular onto-theology.

### Further Considerations

*Circumfession*, like the *Confessions*, is an autobiography involving a declaration of religious faith, a kind of religious faith, and an attempt at reconciliation with the past in which that faith, as far as it is Jewish in the case of Derrida, was received. Like *Confessions*, it is part of a quest for a great pardon in which Derrida mimics the movement between Augustine’s own words and those of scripture in the *Confessions*. But he always stays on the historical side, in a sort of movement back and forth between himself and the *Derridabase*. Derrida confesses that his reading of Augustine is a kind of intentional misreading or misleading, carrying Augustine down paths that Augustine himself did not travel. In escaping Bennington, Derrida writes that he is trying to circumvent without success the circumference, “the one that has always been running after me, turning in circles around me, a circumference touching me with a flame that I try in turn to circumvent, having never loved anything but the im-

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<sup>14</sup> In particular, see Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, ch. VI, §18.

possible.” (Circum, 3) Here we cannot help but stress, once more, that rupture is essential to Derrida’s thinking; it is the scheme, the methodological instrument of his thought and of his *Circumfession*. In relation to Bennington, *Circumfession* is but the metaphor of Derrida’s whole life, the confession of the impossibility of confessing: “I posthume as I breathe, which is not very probable, the improbable in my life, that is the rule I’d like to follow and which in the end arbitrates the duel between what I am writing and what G. will have written up there, beside or above me, on me, but also for me, in my favour, toward me and in my place.” (Circum, 26) I am thinking of the imaginary dualism Derrida/Cixous, the speculation on the different sides of two friends in the book *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say*<sup>15</sup>: Hélène Cixous, who stands for life, life promised to life, and Jacques Derrida, who admits always feeling drawn to the side of death or, better, who is not able, simply or simply not, to wilfully step outside the double bind of identity. According to some scholars, Derrida assumes the Hellenic Augustine of the *gnothi se auton*, whose confession and gathering of his dispersed self depend upon a movement inward and upward both in and toward God (the Word as mediator is both in and above the human). Derrida assumes an Augustine who is in a transmuting relation to Plotinus. Certainly, the Augustine of the *Confessions* does come to know God, and by means of this knowledge is converted. The Augustine of the mentioned dialogues *Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita*, and *De ordine* is not converted yet.

### **Derrida’s Religion**

Derrida’s readers did not know about his religious struggle, about his coming to terms with his broken covenant, about his religion without religion and without religion’s God. By confessing his “faith,” Derrida surprises us by writing a text that, while it remains consistent with his published thought, demonstrates the inadequacy of attempts to circumscribe that thought and to imprison it within the confines of a predictable system.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say*, (tr.) Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

Derrida's surprising religion (at least, for the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is not a surprise, since this is the least surprising religion for sophisticated intellectuals who partly prefer negative theology. His religion is ultimately a non-knowledge in which he is having a great time,

...that is what my readers won't have known about me, the comma of my breathing henceforward, without continuity but without a break, the changed time of my writing, graphic writing, through having lost its interrupted verticality, almost with every letter, to be bound better and better but be read less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion about which nobody understands anything more than does my mother who asked other people a while ago, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God ... but she must have known that the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything, nor a transcendent law or an immanent *schechina*, that feminine figure of a Yahweh who remains so strange and so familiar to me ... (Circum, 154–55)

Toward the end of his book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, John Caputo writes,

From the point of view of the present study, *Circumfession* is the most interesting and provocative of all of Derrida's texts, the pivot around which this book is all along turning. This is not because we have succumbed to some voyeuristic impulse to catch sight of Derrida's secret life and not exactly because *Circumfession* reveals to us Derrida's secret passion, his private religion, but rather because it forces us to think out what this "religion" can be, what the passion of deconstruction can be."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 285.

This surely is acceptable, provided that we do not forget what Derrida replies in a conversation when pressed to speak about his religion:

If I had to summarize what I did with St. Augustine in the text *Circumfession*, I would say this: I played with some analogies: that he came from Algeria, that his mother died in Europe, the way my mother was dying in Nice when I was writing this.... So there is a love story and a deconstruction between us. But, I won't insist on St. Augustine here, it's too difficult, and the way that this text is written cannot begin to account for such and such. See ... so, to address more hurriedly the question of religion—again, in a very oversimplifying way—I would say this: first, I have no stable position as to the texts you mentioned—the prophets, the Bible and so on. For me, it's from Plato and others.<sup>17</sup>

Coming full circle, let us remember what was written at the beginning: for Derrida, religion is impossible without uncertainty, tension and heterogeneity. In the *jeu* that is *Circumfession*, which is not so much a spiritual exercise as a technical exercise, Derrida is neither winning nor losing the “theological,” and this gives form to culture and the deconstruction of theology.

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<sup>17</sup> See Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*.