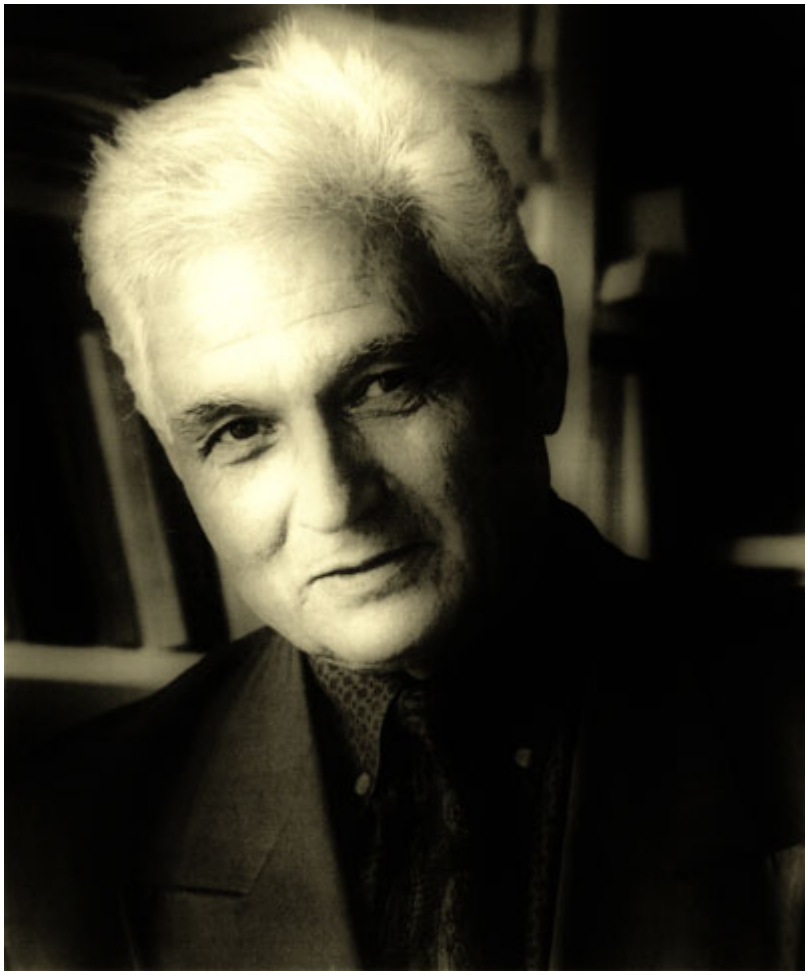
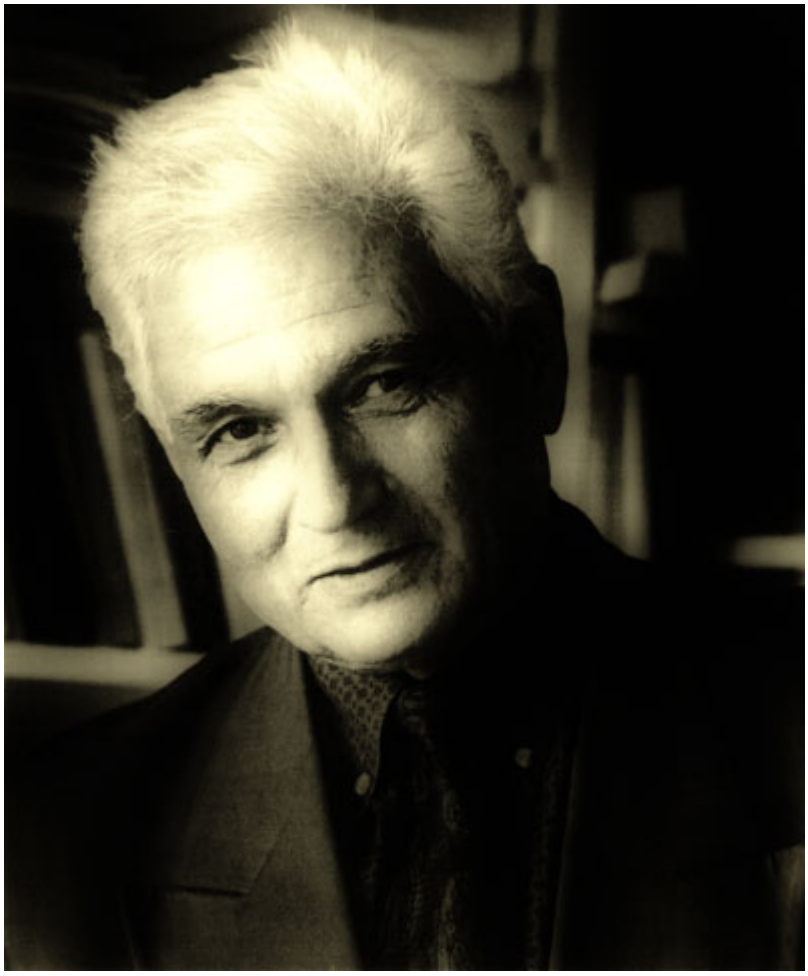
DERRIDA’S ARCHAEOLOGY



I never got to finish my comment on Derrida who died in October. [BBC Link]

The obituaries were largely stifled by misunderstanding, outrage, horror and incredulity – have a look at the Guradian’s lamentable list – [Link]

Mark Taylor was better in the NYT – [Link]



Flying back to the US today I see that *Time Magazine* (issue Dec 27 – Jan 3) includes Derrida in its review of the year.

But he does not appear in the on-line issue. Embarrassment?

I want to point out how profoundly archaeological is Derrida's thinking.

Begin with a key point about our (archaeological) understanding of the past – that it has been crippled by a series of radical oppositions in our thinking, our research, values and understanding, and where one pole is privileged over the other

- what happened in the past taking precedence over the subsequent traces
- the traces taking precedence over our record of them
- the life of the past (as we suppose it occured) over its decay and our rediscovery of it
- the real past over its retelling.

Presence/absence, materiality/inscription, past/present, those we are interested in/our attempts to understand, what happened/what is left over, life/death, fullness of cultural experience/loss and repetition.

We are meant to think of how absurd it would be to challenge these distinctions – that somehow the traces of the past could hold something the past itself did not possess – that we might suspect the past did not actually happen the way it did, that the past is not internal to itself, but somehow extends beyond its present, genealogically, into its past and into its subsequent history,

But this is just what Derrida does – puts to one side these privileged terms and treats the pairs symmetrically.

With good reason.

For archaeology, and archaeology is the material cornerstone of history and our sense of history, the past is, of course, here with us, living again as we make it our own. And who, arrogantly, will dare to claim they know what really is happening, now or back then? Who will lay claim to the time machine that will reveal the secrets of the past?

We know that all we actually do have are traces, that we only work on flimsy remains, betwen past and present.

Derrida worked on ways of dealing in this undecidability.

The archaeology of zombies.

And this is the first key term – *undecidability.* Uncertain spaces between. Short circuits. Zombies, vampires – alive AND dead; neither dead nor alive. Secrets we must refuse to believe, even if they are true. Undecidables threaten because they poison the comforting sense that we inhabit a world governed by decidable categories. Undecidability – the horror of indeterminacy. The failure of the life/death presemce/absence opposition. And what threatens and transgresses its category fascinates us.

Tactic – don’t decide. Play both sides. Dis-place past and present, original and trace.

The trace – an undecidable, the past displaced into what remains, both present and absent. The undecidable trace is the origin of the meaning of the past – both present to us, but lost too.

Think too of authentic and original against counterfeit, fake. The signature or seal, representing one's authentic presence and identity, has to be repeatable, iterable. Like the past. It has to be repeated. Otherwise it wouldn't be recognisable. Faking it is a necessary part of authenticity. And we are fascinated by forgery.

The past keeps returning, but different, in the new associations of the traces and remains, our hindsight. This is the necessary *iteration* of the past – it will never be pinned down, there is no bottom line on what happened in the past, because the remains are a return of the past, the same but different (this is the distinction between repetition and iteration).

Ironically perhaps the past is constantly deferred into the future – we will never know, though we may work upon the remains. *Deferment.*

Strategy. Don't explain the past – unfix it.

I see an essential honesty and humility in all this, and one that is in sharp contrast to those grand designs of so many of my colleagues to organize and control the evidence, to supposedly get to the truth, to find out what supposedly really happened – which is actually only what they want you to think because it suits them to have it so.

This is all at the heart of what we are calling a symmetrical archaeology.