Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) was a French philosopher and one of the most radical intellectuals of the twentieth century who transformed the understanding of literature. He was born on 15 July, 1930 in El Biar, in the suburbs of Algiers in French occupied Algeria into a Sephardic Jewish family. Initially named Jackie Derrida, his name was popularly associated with the philosophy of deconstruction. Though the influence of Derrida’s thinking is across the disciplines in humanities and social sciences, it could be largely seen in the fields of literature and philosophy. Derrida was an indigenous Jew, born into a French Jewish family and not a citizen of France. His father Haiim (Aimé) Aaron Prosper Charles Derrida was a commercial traveller for a wines-and-spirits firm and his mother Georgette Sultana Esther Safar addressed him by the first name “Jackie”. Both were Jews and their forebears had arrived from Spain and lived in Algeria since precolonial times (before 1830) but the citizenship of France was not granted to them until the enactment of the Crémieux decree in 1870 which naturalized en bloc all Jews born in Algeria. The French Jews in Algeria were assimilated into bourgeois Parisian life at this time. However, things began to change after 1940 and the problems for the Jews began from 1940 when Article 2 in the Jewish Statute published on July 30, 1940 forbade Jews from teaching and law. Among other anti-Semitic measures, it was declared that there would be a fixed number of Jewish children in primary and secondary education. During 1935–1941, Derrida attended

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2 The whole French North Africa contained a total number of 294000 Jews and according to 1931 census, 110127 Jews as French citizens were living in Algeria.
nursery and primary schools in El Biar, but in June 1942, as part of the general wave of anti-Semitism, he was expelled at age 11 (also his seven year sister Janine and many of his Jewish fellow students) from the lycée in Ben Aknoun, nearby El Biar. Derrida was openly abused in the class by his teacher by saying that “French culture is not made for little Jews.” He could not continue the school for a year in a formal way. However, he attended the unofficial secondary school set up with the help of dismissed Jewish teachers until the next spring. This chapter sensitized Derrida to anti-Semitism and led him to the project of deconstruction. Derrida had prepared for university education at this lycée, but it was also interrupted due to the restrictions imposed by the Vichy government on the Jews in Algeria. After the landing of the Allied American and British forces in Algeria in November 1942, the Jewish students were allowed to rejoin mainstream secondary education from Autumn 1943 onwards. This experience for Derrida was both puzzling and brutal throughout his life. In 1947, he entered the Lycée Émile-Félix-Gautier in the city of Algiers for his hypokhâgne and studied the philosophy of Bergson and Sartre. He passed his baccalauréat on his second try in June 1948 and started taking interest in literature and philosophy. He read deeply the philosophy of Heidegger and Kierkegaard. He carried his first trip out of Algeria to France at the age of 19 in 1949 when he entered the Lycée Louis-le-Grand at Paris and did his khâgne in preparation for entrance examination for the ENS. He read Simone Weil (1909–1943) and existentialism there. In 1950, he applied to École Normale Supérieure but the application was rejected. While remaining at Louis-le-Grand, he also met Peirre Bourdieu (1930–2002) and Michel Serres (1930–). On passing the agrégation exam for the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) in 1952, he got enrolled. At the ENS, on his first day, Derrida met the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–1990) who was also born in Birmandries in Algeria, but was raised in France.
Althusser had been at the ENS as a student since 1939 and as the caïman in philosophy since 1948. In 1954, Derrida befriended Michel Foucault (1926–1984) in Louvain and attended his lectures. He also met as teachers or fellow students the other leading figures of the ENS such as Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), Louis Marin (1931–1992), Lucien Bianco (1930–) and Gérard Genette (1930–). He wrote for his Diplôme d'études supérieures on Le Promblème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl (“The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl”) under the supervision of Maurice de Gandillac (1906–2006), professor of philosophy at Sorbonne since 1946, and submitted to the ENS in 1954, but it was not published until 1990. On Gandillac’s recommendation, Derrida had travelled to the Husserl Archive in Louvain in 1953 to research for his dissertation on the difficulties and tensions in the thought of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In Louvain, he discovered Husserl’s text of Origin of Geometry, written in German in 1936 and edited and published by Eugen Fink in 1939, under the title “Der Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem.” Derrida’s dissertation was written under the influence of Jean Hyppolite (1907–1968), Jean Cavailles (1903–1944) and Trân Duc Thao (1917–1993). Following Diplôme d'études supérieures, Derrida started working for his doctoral thesis under Hyppolite on “The Ideality of the Literary Object,” which was closely related to his work on Husserl, but due to Hyppolite’s death and other personal, political and institutional reasons, it had to be abandoned completely. On his

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1 The position of the person who prepared the students for the aggregation at the École Normale Supérieure was known in its slang as caïman.
4 The dissertation was published in French as Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) and translated and published by Marian Hobson as The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). Jean Hyppolite, director of the ENS at that time had invited Derrida to prepare the text for publication and had even encouraged to translate Husserl’s Origin of Geometry.
second attempt in 1956, he passed his agrégation oral examination which guaranteed him in 1959 a teaching position in the hypokhâgne in a lycée at Le Mans, Sorbonne., Derrida met in 1953 at Haute-Savoie his future partner Marguerite Aucouturier, a Catholic with maternal family in Czechoslovakia, who was the elder sister of one of his best friends Michel Aucouturier (1932–) during years at the Lycée and the École. In 1956, Derrida was awarded a one-year bursary to pursue research on Husserl at Harvard so he went with his wife to the United States. While pursuing his research at Harvard, Derrida married Marguerite in Cambridge in 1957. Marguerite gave birth to two sons – Pierre (b.1963) and Jean (b.1967). At the time of Algerian war of Independence (1954–1962), Derrida joined compulsory military by serving as a school teacher for the children of soldiers in Koléa, near Algiers for two years during 1957–59. In 1959, Derrida abandoned his forename “Jackie” for “Jacques”. He started his first job as a lecturer at the Sorbonne (Paris) in 1960 and, from 1960–64, as an assistant to Suzanne Bachelard (1919–2007), Georges Canguilhem (1904–95), Paul Ricouer (1913–2005) and Jean Wahl (1888–1974), he taught general philosophy and logic. After the Algerian Independence in 1962 and the final withdrawal of France from Algeria, Derrida and his family moved to Nice because the settlers of the French descent had their primary allegiance to the French language and culture, and because the universalism of the French Republic had distinguished itself long back by emancipating the Jews. Derrida wrote an introduction to Edmund Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry* which was published in 1962 and received a venerable attention in the philosophical circles of France. During 1963-64, he had published articles like “Cogito and History of Madness”, “Force and Signification”, “Violence and Metaphysics”

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*Maurice de Gandillac at Sorbonne had recommended to Derrida to visit Husserl archives in Louvain and on his visit, Derrida had discovered the text of the *Origin of Geometry*, published in German by Eugen Fink. Jean Hyppolite at the ENS had also encouraged Derrida to translate in French Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry.*
which were collected in a volume *Writing and Difference*, in 1978. On the invitation of Althusser and Hippolyte in 1964, he left Sorbonne and joined the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) as a *maître de conference* where he taught almost for 20 years. From mid-1960s to 1972, Derrida was associated with Philip Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group. In 1966, he was invited by René Girard (1923–2015) to participate in a colloquium hosted at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore where he met Paul de Man (1919–1983) and Jacques Lacan (1901–81). In 1967, three of his major philosophical works – *L’écriture et la difference*, translated as *Writing and Difference*, *De la Grammatologie*, translated as *Of Grammatology*, and *La Voix et le Phénomène*, translated as *Speech and Phenomena* – were published. Unlike Althusser, Derrida participated (though he had limited enthusiasm) in the various marches carried by the students at the ENS, and in their strikes and demonstrations protesting the Vietnam war, which is known as May 1968. In the subsequent campaign, he took a leading role to defend philosophy as a discipline against the political attacks made upon it by successive conservative administrations. He was invited by Paul de Man’s former student Samuel Weber to deliver a lecture in a seminar on structuralist literary theory at Freie Universität in Berlin in 1968. In this seminar, he met Peter Szondi (1929–1971), the founder of the Institute of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature and director at the Institute for General and Comparative Literature at the Free University of West Berlin and a close friend of the German Jewish poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). Later Szondi introduced Celan to Derrida in Paris. On his second visit to Berlin in 1969, Derrida met Rodolphe Gasché (1938–) and Werner Hamacher (1948–). At the beginning of 1970, he was also invited by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940–2007) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–) to present a paper on “White Mythology” in a seminar on rhetoric in Strasbourg and since then, continued collaborations with both. In 1972,

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8 The honorary doctorate degree was titled L’Inscription de la philosophie: Recherches sur l’interprétation de l’écriture and was given to Derrida for following ten published works: Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction, Writing and Difference, Speech and Phenomenon, Of Grammatology, Dissemination, Margins of Philosophy, The Archeology of the Frivolous, For, Scribble and The Truth in Painting.
Foundation in France. When, as a member of the Foundation, Derrida was on a visit to Prague to speak at a seminar on Descartes in 1981, at the end of his journey, he was arrested at the airport and imprisoned by Czecho-slovakian police for allegedly possessing heroin. He was released and deported the next day only upon the intervention of the French media and the French government, then the newly elected French President François Mitterand (1916–1996). In 1983, he established government-sponsored Collège International de Philosophie and became its first director, which aimed to be the centre of excellence by promoting innovative thinking and research in philosophy and the humanities not only in France but also internationally. In the same year, Derrida joined the council of the Foundation against Apartheid and his friend Paul de Man also died to whom the homage was paid by him in 1984 in a series of three lectures at Yale and Irvine: “Mnemosyne,” “The Art of Memories,” and “Acts: The Meaning of a Word Given”. After de Man’s death, Derrida taught at the University of California at Irvine and was later joined by J. Hillis Miller. The discovery of de Man’s anti-Semitic wartime journalism by Ortwin de Graef in 1987, known as de Man affair, brought the virtual end of the Yale School of deconstruction founded by Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman (1929–2016) and Harold Bloom (1930–). The appearance in France of Victor Farías’s (1940–) book Heidegger et le nazisme (1987) renewed a long-running debate within the French tradition of Heidegger which reached to a pinnacle when Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe were invited to discuss this subject with Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in Heidelberg in 1987. Derrida replied to the attacks directed at deconstruction by the Jürgen Habermas (1929–) in Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf

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Vorlesungen\textsuperscript{10} (1985), translated as The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity\textsuperscript{11} (1985) in a long footnote added to his book on Paul de Man Memoires: pour Paul de Man (1988). In his afterword to Limited Ink\textsuperscript{12} (1988), Derrida again responded to Habermas. There were stark differences between the two philosophers: For Habermas, the War and the Holocaust raised the question of how to defend modernity and Enlightenment, while for Derrida, the experiences during the War left him suspicious of any claim to communal self-identity. Derrida’s long address “Force of Law” in the conference on “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice” at the Cardozo Law School, New York in 1989 also takes forward the intellectual preoccupation with de Man, Heidegger and Nazism. In 1998, he was also invited to Frankfurt by Hamacher to deliver the lecture on “University without Conditions”.

During 1980-1998, Derrida was awarded the Honorary Doctorate by twelve prestigious universities and colleges around the world. He was awarded the prestigious Adorno Prize for interdisciplinary work a few days after 9/11, on which occasion he delivered the lecture “Fichus”. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, he went to see his friends at New York and gave an interview to Giovanna Borradori on terror and terrorism. This important interview on a contemporary event has been included in a book Philosophy in a Time of Terror\textsuperscript{13} (2003) edited by Giovanna Borradori wherein Derrida and Habermas, despite their differences, come together to think about and respond to the present. In 2003, after mourning the death of his close friend Maurice Blanchot, Derrida was diagnosed of the cancer of the pancreas and died on the ninth of October, 2004.

\textsuperscript{10} Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985.
The philosophers like Heidegger, Husserl, Hegel, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Kant, Freud, Lacan, Levinas, Althusser, de Man, Blanchot, etc. exerted a great influence on Derrida’s philosophical mind and his work as an intellectual. His legacy as an intellectual can be seen in the thoughts and works of thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Sarah Kofman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hélène Cixous and Jean-François Lyotard. His impact was pervasive but it was significantly felt in the discipline of literary studies. His late work was greatly influential in the important domains of politics, ethics and religion.

**DERRIDA, POLITICS AND THE HOLOCAUST**

Derrida’s writing raised philosophical questions like authority, hierarchy, law, language, communication and identity which had political implications. His writing was also concerned with the politics of institutions. He himself played an important role in setting up philosophical organizations, institutions and foundations like GREPH, Collège International de Philosophie and Jan Hus Educational Foundation. GREPH challenged the traditional practices of French philosophy and campaigned against government plans to curtail the teaching of philosophy. It was a paradoxical project: to change philosophy, while calling for its maintenance, especially in schools. Platformed by GREPH, the Collège promoted new forms of philosophical activity, supported interdisciplinary studies, research without pre-established goals or projects, involved school teachers and pursued creative, performative interaction with architects, musicians and artists. Derrida insisted on this other dimension related not only to philosophy, but also to activities which resist philosophy and provoke philosophy into new moves, a new space in which philosophy does not recognize itself. But importantly, Derrida engaged with political writing and activities in a wider sense.
As a thinker and a public intellectual, Derrida has addressed political issues such as apartheid, racism, anti-Semitism, illegal immigrants, refugees, death penalty, state terrorism, censorship, etc. in several ways. He deconstructed political texts and ideas like the American Declaration of Independence, the writings of Rousseau and others on democracy, the notion of Enlightenment reason as a political force and the question of political identity, with its problems of imperialism, racism and Eurocentricism. In addition, Derrida wrote and lectured in support of political movements such as nuclear disarmament and the discourse of nuclear deterrence, and the racial emancipation in South Africa. But the politics of deconstruction is a vexed question. Deconstruction is not revolutionary and Derrida questions the idea of revolution as teleological. Deconstruction resists political alignment, with either Left or Right. On the political responsibility of deconstruction, Derrida writes: “Deconstruction should seek a new investigation of responsibility, questioning the codes inherited from ethics and politics.” Therefore, deconstruction is viewed as politically protean, available to conservative, liberal, left and emancipatory tendencies. In the late 1980s, two controversies surrounding Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man focussed attention on these issues.

Heidegger supported German fascism and its social trajectories by calling the “inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely, the encounter between global technology and modern man)”\(^{14}\). The facts were re-publicized along with new research in 1987. Victor Farias and others argue that Heidegger’s involvement was a deep-rooted and long-standing commitment, not a temporary career compromise. Heidegger was appointed Rector of Freiburg University in 1933, in the early years of Hitler’s National Socialist government. He also joined the party. His first administrative moves

dismantled the democratic structures of the University, and his inaugural address encouraged the students to “sacrifice themselves for the salvation of our nation’s essential being and the increase of its innermost strength in its polity.”

He went to the extent of declaring a damning statement of his affiliation with National Socialism in the form of an appeal to the German students in the Freiburger Studentenzeitung on 3 November, 1933: “Der Führer selbst und allein ist die heutige und künftige deutsche Wirklichkeit und ihr Gesetz” (“The Führer himself and alone is the present and future German reality and its law”). As a result, many critics have viewed that Heidegger’s philosophy matched the political trajectory of fascism. But Derrida defends Heidegger’s philosophy over politics and suggests that there is more to Heidegger’s philosophy than the German ideology of the period between the two wars: Insinuated “anti-Semitism” should not be thought to pass over, by “atmospheric contagion”, to anyone who dallies with an attentive reading of Heidegger. Thus, Derrida infringes upon the limits and divisions of Holocaust discourse and makes manifest the rules of this discourse.

Paul de Man, the deconstructionist friend and colleague of Derrida, as a journalist in 1940s (1939–1943), had written wartime articles for the Nazi controlled Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir and Flemish newspaper Het Vlaamsche Land printed on presses (on August 20, 1942) which supported the fascist government of German occupied Belgium. The articles mainly argued that the Jews had “polluted”

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16 Heidegger, “Aufruf an die Deutschen Studenten”, Freiburger Studentenzeitung, VIII, No.1, 3 November, 1933.
19 Paul de Man had taken a fulltime post in the publishing house called Agence Dechenne, dedicated to art and literature.
20 Ortwin de Graef rediscovered de Man’s wartime journalism and sent to Derrida twenty-five articles from Le Soir and four from Het Vlaamsche Land as a general impression of de Man’s first writings during wartime. Derrida wondered about this selection about: “I have still not understood why and how this selection was made from a set
contemporary literature and that “the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, deplorable consequences.”

They also called for collaboration with the fascist government in a common task of the peoples of Belgium and Germany. Much after de Man’s migration to the USA in 1947 with his concealed past and after his death in 1983, these articles were discovered in 1987. When de Man died of cancer in 1984, Derrida delivered a funeral address “In Memoriam, of the Soul: for Paul de Man” at a ceremony at Yale on 18 January and published memorial lectures in the book Memoires for Paul de Man in 1986. A vitriolic debate among the critics followed the revelations and the authority and creditability of de Man, his work and that of deconstruction were questioned. Questions raised centred upon the historical, ideological and biographical contexts of these writings, and upon de Man’s later career as a writer and literary theorist. Two main questions of this controversy were about the connection between de Man’s wartime journalism and his deconstruction, and about how de Man’s journalism could be read. Derrida explored the possibilities in his essay “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War” (1988). Derrida himself acknowledged that de Man’s texts had an overall, dominant effect and often work in conformity with the official Nazi rhetoric. But the inconsistencies in the effect were found by de Man’s intellectual support to modernist writers like Franz Kafka, André Gide, D. H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway whose projects were antipathetic to Nazism. In the

\[\text{of about 125 [in Le Soir].}\] However, Graef was ready to send him the rest of the articles but no further reference can be found whether Derrida tried to obtain them. The writings have been brought out in a book entitled Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.


anti-semitic article *Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle*, translated as “The Jews in Contemporary Literature”, de Man even criticized “vulgar” anti-semitism which may imply that there is another variety called distinguished anti-semitism. But he observes silence on it, whereby he condemns anti-semitism *tout court* as well as regarding anti-semitism as “always and essentially vulgar”. Moreover, the article had been published alongside other anti-semitic articles. Despite these evidences, Derrida was not in favour of closing de Man’s books – either censuring or burning them – since that would reproduce the very exterminating gesture of which de Man is accused. He finds fault in de Man of accepting the actual course of events and playing the rule of the nonconforming smuggler in writing about anti-semitism. He concludes by saying: “He [de Man] was aware of having never collaborated or called for collaboration with a Nazism that he never even named in his texts, of having never engaged in any criminal activity or even any organized political activity, in the strict sense of the term”. The vilification of de Man by the critics reminds Derrida of the excluding and eradicating mentalities of fascism. Derrida also offered a defence of de Man in 1988.

Thus, Derrida’s philosophical concern with the politics of anti-Semitism is thought worthy of exploration. The present chapter argues that the philosophy of Derrida has been saturated with the event of the Holocaust. Derrida’s work itself is an engagement with the Holocaust and grows from its cinders. The traumatic effects of the Holocaust pervade Derrida’s tense and intensive preoccupation with memory, death and mourning. For example, Derrida writes: “The thought of the incineration of the holocaust, of cinders, runs through all my texts [...] What is the thought of the trace, in fact without which there would be no deconstruction? [...] The thought of the

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23 Appearing *Le Soir* on 4 March, 1941 as a special edition to promote anti-semitism, the article was signed by de Man himself.

trace [...] is a thought about cinders and the advent of an event, a date, a memory. But I have no wish to demonstrate this here, the more so, since, in effect, ‘Auschwitz’ has obsessed everything that I have ever been able to think, a fact that is not especially original.”

Robert Eaglestone (2004), Gil Anidjar, Lesley Chaberlain, etc. view the event of the Holocaust as an example of the enormity of human suffering and define the Holocaust as the most substantial feature of postmodern philosophy. They have identified and commented on the theme of the Holocaust in Derrida’s works. Derrida’s achievement as the most serious thinker of his generation is, according to Anidjar, due to the presence (even silent and oblique) of the Holocaust in his philosophy. He writes: “Derrida, a great artistic-philosophical mind at his innovative best in the 1970s and early 1980s, devoted a lifetime’s work to showing how the Holocaust imposed a constraint on any future humanist culture.” Deconstruction, the name given to his philosophical method by Derrida, was a lament for truth-seeking classical methods in the face of the modern evil. Robert Eaglestone also observes in his seminal study of this relationship *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (2004): “[...] the Holocaust is all-pervasive in Derrida’s work. That is, deconstruction is not indebted to the Holocaust, nor does it explain it, but it stems from it: ‘“Auschwitz’ has obsessed everything that I have ever been able to think.”


Much of Derrida’s deconstructive concern with the Holocaust and Nazism comes from his experience as a Jew. Derrida inscribed his Jewishness on the surface of numerous texts and engaged with authors such as

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Levinas, Jabès, Freud, Celan, Benjamin and Scholem whose Jewish concerns were explicitly thematized in his readings. The Jewish Derrida is understood as reviving rabbinical casuistry or cabalistic hermeneutics. Stating that Derrida was obsessed with Auschwitz in his thought, Eaglestone examines the legacies of the Holocaust and the legacies of Derrida’s thought. The first legacy of Derrida can be seen in the applied impact across a wide range of discourses. In relation to the Holocaust, his work has had an impact on how the events have been approached and memorialized. The intellectual trajectory of Saul Friedlander as a historian of the Holocaust is guided by deconstruction. But in the wake of the de Man affair, some critics like David H. Hirsch see Derrida’s work as fascistic. The second legacy of Derrida’s thought on the Holocaust lies in thinking about our intellectual approach to the Holocaust. In “Force of Law: The “Mystical” Foundation of Authority”, Derrida presented his reading of Benjamin’s Zur Kritik der Gewalt (1921) with respect to the issues raised by the Nazi genocide. In the ‘Post-scriptum’ to ‘Force of Law’, Derrida ventures to describe how Walter Benjamin might have responded to the Final Solution. Among the two different versions suggested by Derrida, the first one corresponds to what might be a

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30 Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin is influenced by deconstructive thought.
31 Reflets du Nazism (1982) and Probing the limits of representation (1992) are his two important works on Holocaust historiography.
35 Derrida presented the first version of this essay on Benjamin entitled “Force of Law: The “Mystical” Foundation of Authority” in a colloquium on “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice” organized by Drucilla Cornell at the Cordozo Law School in 1989. The first half was entitled Du droit à la justice (“Of the Right to Justice/From Law to Justice”). The second half of his essay Prénom de Benjamin was not read aloud but only distributed among the participants. The second version entitled Prénom de Benjamin (“First Name of Benjamin”) with an addition of a foreword and a postscript was presented on 26 April, 1990 in the conference on “Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’: Probing the Limits of Representation” organised under the auspices of the Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles during 26-29 April 1990. The conference was sponsored by Saul Friedlander who later edited and published some of its papers in Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. However, Derrida’s paper was not included in the volume.
commentary on Nazism: its use of language, totalitarian logic of the state and corruption of democratic institutions, and its total, mythical violence. But Derrida suggests that this would be thinking about the Final Solution from the perspective of Nazism and therefore following through Nazism’s thought. In the second version, Derrida suggests a counter-commentary aiming to analyze the Final Solution from the perspective of Nazism’s other. The Final Solution is to be thought from the possibility of singularity, from the point of view of its victims and a universal demand for justice. It must be thought as a project of the destruction of each singular individual as a singularity and the destruction of the more general naming that which binds and creates communities. From this perspective, Derrida suggests: “Benjamin would have judged vain and without pertinence ... any juridical trial of Nazism ... any judgemental apparatus, any historiography still homogenous with the space in which Nazism developed ... any interpretation drawing on philosophical, moral, sociological, psychological or psychoanalytic concept.” That Nazism can be judged and measured from outside and not by its own concepts is also problematic for Derrida as it would mean that only God can explain the Holocaust, as “an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence.” Derrida writes that one is “terrified at the idea of an interpretation that would make of the Holocaust an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God.” He sees it in response to Christians and Jews both suggesting this. Therefore, for Derrida, Benjamin and his alternatives are “too Heideggerian, too messianic-marxist or too archeo-eschatological.” The first
version is too complicit in describing the Holocaust through the logic of Nazism, and the second has no concern with anthropology, humanism or human rights. In the first there is only writing about the Holocaust and hence nothing about the post-Holocaust, while in the second, the Holocaust destroys everything and is pushed to the transcendental realm, and so no post-Holocaust. Both versions correspond to Nazism, its false logic and science and its appeal to myth beyond reason. In this way, Derrida makes us think about the complicity of our discourses of ethics, identity, race or rights with the Holocaust. He remarked: “I do not find in any discourse whatsoever anything illuminating enough for this period [the twentieth century].” Derrida’s emphasis on singularity points to a complaint about the ways in which our very way of thinking makes it impossible to discuss particulars as particulars. The third part of Derrida’s legacy is an abiding concern for justice. Whenever Derrida discusses the Holocaust directly, he shows his keenness in stressing its singularity and a wider sense of human suffering: “everything for which Auschwitz remains both the proper name and the metonymy.” In the interview “Canons and Metonymies”, Derrida asks: “why this name rather than those of all the other camps and mass exterminations?” The debate over the uniqueness of the Holocaust and Derrida’s own use of “Auschwitz and ...” raise serious questions which are central to both Derrida’s work and legacy. Derrida hardly employed the term “Auschwitz” or the Hebrew word “Shoah” saying: “I find a bit indecent, indeed, obscene, the mechanical nature of improvised trials instigated against all those whom one thinks one can accuse of not having named or thought

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43 The idea of singularity is also important in Derrida’s thoughts on literature which is studied by Tim Clark and Derek Attridge.
46 Derrida gravely granted uniqueness to the Holocaust by saying: “I know that it is unique, of course. But as to knowing whether one can make this uniqueness into an example and an exemplary point of reference, for me this remains very problematic with regard to other genocides.”
‘Auschwitz’” and persisted in writing the word “holocaust” without capitalizing it. Derrida deploys it in a variety of contexts, stretching to its original Greek sources and decontextualizing it by writing: “I am still dreaming of a second holocaust that would not come too late”, or “Of the holocaust there would remain only the most anonymous support without support, that which in any event never will have belonged to us, does not regard us. This would be like a purification of purification by fire. Not a single trace, an absolute camouflaging by means of too much evidence: [...]”

Derrida’s writing from “Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book (77–96)” and “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas (97–192)” (both in Writing and Difference) to “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German” (1989) has engaged with the Holocaust and Nazism. However, the present chapter analyzes his clearest engagement with Nazism and the Holocaust in books such as La Vérité en Peinture (1978), translated as The Truth in Painting (1987); Feu la cendre (1987), translated as Cinders (1991); De l’esprit (1987), translated as Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question (1989); and Mémoires pour Paul de Man (1986, revised 1989), translated as Memoirs for Paul de Man (1986).

In La Vérité en Peinture (1978), translated from the French into English as The Truth in Painting (1987), Derrida proclaims “I am interested in the idiom of painting” and proceeds to confront aesthetics and deconstruct painting. The Truth in Painting is divided into five parts. Passe-Partout contains introductory remarks about truth in painting. Chapter I Parergon has an essay “The Parergon,” on Emmanuel

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49 Gil Anidjar, “Everything Burns: Derrida’s Holocaust”
Kant’s third critique *Critique of Judgement* (1790); Chapter 2 + R (*Into the Bargain*) and Chapter 3 *Cartouches* are about the catalogues of two eminently forgettable artists, Valerio Adami and Gerard Titus-Carmel. Chapter 4 *Restitutions* is a discussion of Meyer Shapiro’s critical note in his book *The Still Life as a Personal Object* (1968) on Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s painting “Old Shoes with Laces” (1886) in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935). The fifth essay and sixth section of *The Truth in Painting* entitled “Economimesis” [in the collective volume *Mimesis desarticualtions* (1975)] is excluded from both French edition and English translation. The title of this collection of essays is taken from a letter written by Cezanne in 1905 to the painter Emile Bernard, saying “I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you.” This utterance reveals Derrida’s main concern with thematizing the philosopher’s desire to find truth at work in painting. The fourth essay and final fifth section of *The Truth in Painting* called “Restitution” which addresses the controversy between Martin Heidegger and Mayer Shapiro about the shoes painted by Van Gogh is relevant for this research. Derrida encounters here the problem of representational thinking in Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s painting “Old Shoes with Laces” (1886) in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935) and Meyer Shapiro’s critique of this interpretation in *The Still Life as a Personal Object* (1968). Derrida introduces a contrast between Heidegger, the champion of peasant ideology, and Shapiro, the city-dweller, and is more critical of Shapiro than Heidegger for snatching few lines of Heidegger from his essay on Gogh for his own purpose and for ignoring the problem of representation raised by the shoes. Heidegger tries to reveal contrast between the shoes as useful products and the notion of thing as existing prior to any representation. Heidegger derives the problem of representation from Plato in his

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making sense of painting: art as naked thing, without any use value and as a symptom for a wider sense of reality. “Restitution” also has a playful excursion on shoes and laces and asides about toe and foot fetishes to focus on the priority given by Heidegger to the naked thing. The section focuses too on three of Magritte’s paintings on the subject of feet and shoes to challenge and supplement Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh painting. Derrida questions the distinction between what is marginal and what is central in a painting by mentioning another pair of shoes, not mentioned by Heidegger, in Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Marriage*.

In *Feu la cendre* (1987), translated as *Cinders*53 (1991), Derrida is haunted by an untranslatable phrase in French “Il y a là cendre” (there are there cinders/cinders are there). The book is about the relationship between singular moments, philosophy, writing and the Holocaust. It is a turning point in Derrida’s project of deconstruction. Derrida is concerned about the thought of the trace – the trace is best considered as the cinder– “what remains without remaining from the Holocaust.” Cinders are what is left of the events of the past and what is left is past, with which we make history. The cinder underlies deconstruction and the cinder is the cinder of the Holocaust. Deconstruction does not seem to address the Holocaust, but it has addressed it indirectly. Deconstruction in its origins is about the Holocaust. The singularity of the Holocaust is represented by the figure of the cinder which makes a demand for justice. A philosophy of cinders situates Derrida in a post-Holocaust world without any escape from it. The 1987 French edition of *Cinders* contained a cassette tape on which Derrida and Carole Boquet had read its written text but in English translation there is no cassette, only its cinders/ashes.

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Mémoires pour Paul de Man (1988), translated as Memoires for Paul de Man* was written shortly after Paul De Man’s death and is a final salute by a group of friends to the departed friend, an intimate gathering for recollection. The book is divided into four sections: “Mnemosyne,” “The Art of Mémoires,” “Acts and Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War”. Derrida speaks few words (“la mort dans l’âme”) and promises “I will try to find better words, and more serene ones.” Derrida mourns privately and solitarily for his dear friend Paul De Man, and asks philosophical questions about death such as: Can there be a fully experienced experience of death? Is writing an avoidance of death? According to Derrida, death is never simply the death of the other, but it is about justifying our survival. We cannot tolerate death as primitive triumph of life, instead death triumphs over life and there is a mingling of life and death in forms of nightmares, hallucinations or ghosts. Derrida does not want De Man to die like a dog but find a right way for him to die. Derrida and de man intellectually shared notions of life, death and triumph and Memoires for Paul de Man is a good example of it. What Derrida speaks about the politics and ethics of deconstruction in this book is relevant to the reactions to the revelations about De Man’s pro-Nazi articles in Le Soir, and to any appraisal of Derrida’s response to criticism of his project of deconstruction as politically evasive. Derrida quotes a passage from the second Foreword to Blinding and Insight in which Paul De Man writes of his forgotten past: “I am not given to retrospective self-examination and mercifully forget what I have written with the same alacrity I forget bad movies—although, as with bad movies, certain scenes or phrases return at times to embarrass

and haunt me like a guilty conscience.”55 Thus in Memoires for Paul de Man, Derrida devotes deconstruction to an endless critique of every teleology, ideology, dogma, doctrine and creed.

De l’esprit (1987), translated as Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question56 (1989), is based on a lecture entitled “Heidegger: Open Questions” given by Derrida on 14 March, 1987 at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris. Derrida begins the book with the words: “I shall speak of ghost [revenant], of flame, and of ashes./And of what, for Heidegger, avoiding means.”57 In the ten chapters of the book, he addresses the question of Nazism, the question of what remains to be thought through of Nazism in general and of Heidegger’s Nazism in particular. It is also “politics of spirit” which at the time people thought, they still want to today, to oppose to the inhuman. Derrida does not justify Nazism in the case of Heidegger but writes that Heidegger spiritualizes National Socialism which rather than being any justification, is the main difficulty with his legacy58. This study of Heidegger is a fine example of how Derrida can make readers of philosophical texts notice difficult problems in almost imperceptible details.

ACTS OF LITERATURE: DERRIDA ON AESTHETICS

Derrida advanced deconstruction beyond philosophy and theory into different fields, particularly art and literature. Derrida’s work is examined at present by its interface with various disciplines. Derrida and aesthetics is one of such exemplary exploration in this chapter. Derrida confessed to have been interested as a young man primarily in

57 Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question, p.1
literature than in philosophy. Even at the time of defending his thesis, he affirmed: “my constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if this is possible, has been directed toward literature”

59 In a 1983 interview, Derrida said: “My ‘first’ inclination wasn’t really toward philosophy, but rather towards literature – no, towards something that literature accommodates more easily than philosophy”

60 He wrote profusely about literature in his life. His engagements with literary works are so varied that one cannot stand for all the others, for example his famous essay “Devant la loi” (“Before the Law”) which is titled after Kafka’s parable or fable “Vor dem Gesetz,” translated as “Before the Law”. Derrida’s essays on literary works cannot be imitated even, as they are unique and original responses. The spirit in which he engaged with texts, in the face of widespread misunderstanding and denigration, was brilliant. He has chosen texts that fit his presuppositions about literature, but in many cases the literary critical essays are occasional.

Derrida’s writing on literary texts is what he sometimes called his passion for literature. In an interview in April 1989, four years before delivering the lectures that became Spectres of Marx (1993), Derrida speaks of Shakespeare: “I would very much like to read and write in the space or heritage of Shakespeare, in relation to whom I have infinite admiration and gratitude; I would like to become (alas, it’s pretty late) a “Shakespeare expert”; I know that everything is in Shakespeare; everything and the rest, so everything or nearly’. In the original French version of this interview, Derrida glides into English, ‘un “Shakespeare expert”’

61 Although Derrida was pre-eminent among modern thinkers in taking the possibility of literature to be worthy of sustained


61 Spectres of Marx, p.67
philosophical attention, his purpose was never to produce a general theory of literature as such. Derrida’s response to the texts he read raised wider philosophical, politico-ethical questions. There was no contradiction, as far as Derrida was concerned, between the singularity of the reading encounter and the universality of its implications. To read Shakespeare, Mallarmé, Kafka, Proust, Celan, Baudelaire, Poe, Melville Joyce, Blanchot and less known authors was not, for Derrida, to treat their writings as privileged models illustrating some general rule; it was rather to cite them as examples or counter-examples whose testimony served not to exhibit the law but to expose it, that is, show what it was while also exceeding it, revealing the counter-law of contamination and impurity inseparable from the law’s very authority. Derrida, along with all the other things, is one of the great literary critics of the twentieth century. By saying he is a literary critic, it is not meant just that he has contributed to literary theory from a philosophical perspective, but that he has written and presented in seminars, detailed and brilliantly original readings of literary works. Derrida wrote full length essays on *The Merchant of Venice* called “What is a Relevant translation?”, on *Hamlet* called “The Time is Out of Joint”62 and on *Romeo and Juliet* titled as “Aphorism Countertime”63. Through these essays Derrida tries to answer an unanswerable question what is it that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare?

The question of literature in Derrida’s work is entangled with the question of philosophy. The tension between philosophy and literature is played out in much of Derrida’s early and mid-career work. By the 1950s, philosophy and literature in France had new points of contact. The Surrealist poets of the 1930s had addressed philosophical issues. The novels, plays and poetry of Albert Camus (1913–1960) and

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Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) explored existentialist themes. Paul Valéry (1971–1945) saw philosophy as a practice of writing and therefore as a sub-category of literature. Derrida took a cue from Valéry that it is necessary to study philosophical texts like literary texts and pay attention to their styles, forms, figures of speech, titles, layouts and topography. But since Plato’s banishment of the poets from the Republic in the tradition of Western philosophy, philosophy’s quest for truth has claimed precedence over literature’s concern with style. Literature occupies a subordinate place in philosophy vs. literature binary opposition. Unlike Valéry, Derrida had little interest in simply overturning the hierarchical claims of philosophy over literature. He does not see literature as philosophy’s excluded binary opposite, but as a rival mode of theoretical engagement: literature as philosophy’s secret partner and enabler. He looked for ways of destabilizing or displacing the boundaries between them, putting the categories themselves into question. For him, there is no assured essence either of “literature” or of “philosophy”. Both are unstable categories and are premised on “foundational thinking” which is the “metaphysics of presence”.  

"Philosophy and literature enact two distinct relations toward totalisation. Literature is open-ended and indeterminate while philosophy thirsts after totalisation. But both literature and philosophy differ in their attempts to say everything or they have their own modes of totalisation. What separates them is the ways in which literature accommodates more easily than philosophy the fact that the very possibility of saying everything is at the same time the very condition of its impossibility: trying to say everything will inevitably fail. The boundaries between literature and philosophy can never be entirely certain. Literary texts have characteristics which they share with philosophical texts. In order to exploit this, Derrida tries to disturb the respective categories and their

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boundaries, so that the hierarchy between the two can be loosened. Following the
deconstructive strategy, he opens literature and philosophy to a mutual contamination.
Some traits of philosophy and literature would remain, but they won’t be allowed an
assured overarching mastery of what is written and how it is read. Derrida said, “Still
now, and more desperately than ever, I dream of a writing that would be neither
philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still
keeping—I have no desire to abandon this—the memory of literature and philosophy”\footnote{Acts of Literature, p.73}.

Derrida is interested in how the study of literature can reveal something about
philosophy’s limits of interpretation. This idea is pursued by Derrida in two ways: (i)
by writing about literary texts, and (ii) by borrowing devices and strategies from
literary writing to destabilize philosophy. Searching out texts that have “made the
limits of our language tremble,” Derrida has turned to avant-garde literature and to
the modernist or postmodern writings of Mallarmé, Kafka, Joyce, Ponge, Blanchot,
etc. Habermas criticised Derrida’s work by suggesting that it reduces philosophy to
literature or treats philosophical texts in a literary manner\footnote{The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 1987}. The whole philosophy of
Derrida is literary and everything is literature in the world of deconstruction.
Deconstruction endlessly restages the fight between philosophy and literature.
However, Derrida objects to Habermas’s characterization of his work as privileging
literature over philosophy or reducing philosophy to a demonstration of endless
indeterminacy. He points to the moments of 
\textit{aporia} in the philosophical text when it
attempts to accommodate the failure of the project of saying everything as
impossibility. Literature “allows one to say everything, in every way.” By juxtaposing
the serious philosophical discourse of Hegel with Jean Genet’s literary texts in the two

\footnotetext[5]{Acts of Literature, p.73} \footnotetext[6]{The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 1987.}
columns of *Glas* [67] (1974), Derrida illustrates beautifully the totalizing pretensions of philosophy against the untotalizing and excessive drive of literature.

Derrida remarked that “there is no—or hardly any, ever so little [à peine, si peu de]-literature” [68] against the view that literature is everywhere in his work. In order to understand Derrida’s view of literature, we need to study or deconstruct his works on literature. Since Derrida has passed away, it is an important time now to examine his works properly. Derrida’s thinking did not change the world the way it works nor caused any danger as suspected by some of his critics, but it offered an important lesson about the self-imposed limits of philosophy and about what philosophy wants to exclude itself from but it cannot. Thus, Derrida’s writings on literature and philosophy are relevant for any understanding of literature today. The present chapter examines a few late and posthumously published works by Derrida on art and aesthetics. It studies Derrida’s writings on aesthetics after the Holocaust and specifically those written after his discovery in America in 1988 of Paul de Man’s anti-Semitic wartime journalism between 1940 and 1942 in occupied Belgium in the newspaper *Le Soir* such as *Mémoires d’aveugle: L’autoportrait et autes ruines* (1990), translated as *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993); *Acts of Literature* (edited by Derek Attridge, 1992); *L’instant de ma mort* (1994) and *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (1998), translated and published in a single book as *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (2000); “Die Fotografie als Kopie, Archiv und Signatur: Im Gespräch mit Hubertus von Amelunxen und Michael Wetzel (2000),” translated as *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography* (2010); *H.C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . .* (2000), translated as *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (2006); *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*

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translated as *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II* (2011). Through an exploration of these works, it seeks to address the future of humanities today, together with the future of Derrida’s works.

*Mémoires d’aveugle: L’autoportrait et autes ruines* (1990), translated as *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins,*\(^6\) (1993) offers compelling insights into famous and lesser known works, interweaving analyses of texts – including Diderot’s *Lettres sur les aveugles*, the notion of mnemonic art in Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life* and Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*. He engages with meditations on the history and philosophy of art and reveals the ways viewers approach philosophical ideas through art, and the ways art enriches philosophical reflection. *Memoirs of the Blind* contains a number of paintings (examples and illustrations). Derrida bridges the relationships between written word and art which reflects his conviction that each can flow in either direction and can be understood reversely. In doing so, Derrida deconstructs the material institutions and practices which have governed the philosophy of art in the continental tradition. He also projects his own activities against the tradition of Kant, Hegel and Heidegger and expresses doubts about their desire to understand art by enclosing art within philosophy’s own circuits. According to him, philosophy is logocentric and desires to dominate and master art by subordinating vision and image to speech. Derrida tries to disturb the respective categories and their boundaries so that the hierarchy between the two can be loosened and following the deconstructive strategy, bring art and philosophy to a mutual contamination. He is interested in the study of painting as visual art which can reveal the limits of philosophical interpretation of art. He pursues

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this in two ways: by writing about literary and artistic texts and by using the devices and strategies of art and literature to destabilize philosophy. *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990) extends and deepens the meditation on vision and painting presented in *The Truth in Painting*. It explores issues of vision, blindness, self-representation and their relation to drawing, while offering detailed readings of an extraordinary collection of images. Derrida selects 71 prints and drawings about fictional, historical and biblical blindness from the department of the Louvre, Paris for which he curated an exhibition of paintings and drawings called *Memoirs/Memories of the Blind* in 1990. His idea was to bring what is exterior and to set up passages across inside and outside, essential and inessential. The ‘inessetial’ for the traditional art history includes Derrida’s reaction to the Louvre; studies of mythology in Western religion and mythology; considerations of monocularity, and of winking, blinking and sleeping; blindness as metaphor and clinical condition; his own two week affliction with paralysis, left eye unable to close properly, medical treatment for it and his jealousy for his brother’s drawing skills. The opening image of the exhibition was Joseph-Benoit Suvee’s “Butades or the Origin of Drawing” (1791), a painting of the young Corinthian woman Butades in Greek antiquity who, facing separation from her lover, traces his shadow on the wall. He offers provocative interpretations of images which include Old and New Testament scenes (p), the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon (p), the blinding of Polyphemus (p), etc. For Derrida, drawing is blind and drawing as an art is rooted in memory and anticipation; it replaces one kind of seeing (direct seeing) with another (mediated seeing). He explains that the very lines which compose any drawing are themselves ever fully visible to the viewer since they exist only in a tenuous state of multiple identities: as marks on a page, etc. When the lines of a drawing summon the supplement of the word (verbal discourse), it obscures the visual experience. The act of
drawing a blind person raises multiple statements about blindness and insight. The book is a powerful contribution to the study of the visual arts.

*Acts of Literature*70 (1992) is a collection of Derek Attridge’s interview with Derrida entitled “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature” and important essays on literature such as “Mallarmé,” “Before the Law,” and “Aphorism Countertime” by Derrida. Derek Attridge’s “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature” considers the relationship between philosophy and literature, particularly the response of each discipline to the troubling question “what is literature?”. Although philosophy and literature are oppositional terms, the tradition of literature is dominated by philosophical assumptions. By asserting that all texts are ultimately literary, Attridge argues that Derrida the philosopher is also Derrida the writer of literature. Attridge reads Derrida for aesthetic reasons - pathos, elegance and humour in Derrida’s writings and reading Derrida is a literary experience for him. The answer to the riddle “what is literature?” is Derrida’s writing itself. In Attridge’s interview with Derrida called “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” (33–75), Derrida reflects on his literariness as a writer of autobiography, a socio-political commentator, an historian and as a literary critic. He writes: “I would like to become (alas, it’s pretty late) a “Shakespeare expert”!”71 When asked by Attridge what Derrida means by literature, Derrida answered: “[...] literature seemed to me, in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything, in every way.*”72 He adds further that the institution of literature in the West is connected to the modern idea of democracy. Literature for Derrida is not the suffering “other” of philosophy. Literature does not have the totalising pretensions of philosophy; it enacts its own

71 *Acts of Literature*, p. 67
72 *Acts of Literature*, p. 36
alternative form of totalisation. Literature is the proper name of the failure of the project of the (im)possibility of saying everything. Literature is an institution which “allows one to say everything, in every way.” Derrida’s notion of literature is also distinctly modern and Western in being tied to the political rise of European democracies in the nineteenth century. Literature signifies Western European avant-garde writing in the mode of aesthetic high modernism. Derrida replies to Attridge: “Let’s make this clear. What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political.” He also clarifies further his idea of literature: “The name “literature is a very recent invention. [...] The set of laws or conventions which fixed what we call literature in modernity was not indispensable for poetic works to circulate. Greek or Latin poetry, non-European discursive works, do not, it seems to me, strictly speaking belong to literature. One can say that without reducing at all the respect or the admiration they are due. A series of conventions and institutions guarantees literature in principle the right to say all [le droit de tout dire]. In this way, literature binds its destiny to the space of democratic freedoms: “No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy.” The high modernist writers of European avant-gardism are James Joyce, Jean Genet, Francis Ponge, Stephen Mallarmé, Franz Kafka and Antonin Artaud. Derrida’s concept of literature as a uniquely exhausted but inexhaustible voice that tries to say everything is most intensely on display in Samuel Beckett’s work. Therefore, he never wrote about any work by Beckett. The stylistic and conceptual

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73 Following Maurice Blanchot, Derrida adopted as literature’s emblem the famously embattled words of the Marquis de Sade’s heroine Juliette, according to whom ‘philosophy should say all’ [doit tout dire].
74 Acts of Literature, p.37
75 Acts of Literature, p.40
ambition in the modernist works of Joyce and Genet is what can be defined as literature in Derrida’s sense. So there is little that qualifies as literature because the field of Western European high modernism is relatively small, and within it, precious few writers approach the magisterial “say everything” ambition of Derrida’s chosen canon on literature. The avant-garde literature of the modern period takes its form and content from a sort of hesitation toward totalisation. Literature accommodates more easily than philosophy the fact that the very possibility of its project of saying everything is simultaneously the condition of its impossibility: trying to say everything will inevitably fail. As far as literature was concerned, there was no absolutely self-identical object to be addressed by that name. But if there was no essence of literature, this did not mean there was not an institution called literature, whose conditions of possibility and evolving history needed investigation. On the contrary, it was precisely because literature had no autonomy or identity that it was possible for it to exist in and through history in a series of ever changing forms and contexts. As Derrida points out to Derek Attridge, “if a phenomenon called “literature” appeared historically in Europe, at such and such a date, this does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn’t mean there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite.” If literature was an institution, Derrida suggested, it was an institution of a strange kind, without proper purpose or goal, and marked as a result by its enduring fragility and constant reinvention. It was an institution always on the brink of dissolution, Derrida observed in the same interview, “a place at once institutional and wild, an institutional place in which it is in principle permissible to put into question, at any rate to suspend, the whole institution.” As such, it corresponded to a set of structural possibilities and a series of changing historical

77 Acts of Literature, p.41
78 Acts of Literature, p.58
circumstances. Between the two the relationship was dissymmetrical, which explains the remarkable persistence and yet strict unanswerability of the question: what is literature? Derrida wrote in 1984: “The events known by the name of literature can be delimited.” Literature as writing was governed by the conditions of possibility of all writing: différance, iterability, and trace.

Derrida argued, in so far as the word “literature” named a particular, though relatively recent historical phenomenon, were various legal principles and socio-political assumptions bound up with the history of the European legal system from the seventeenth or eighteenth century to the present. Without these, Derrida pointed out, literature in the modern sense was hard to imagine at all. Rather than the nature of poetic language, it was the law that was primarily responsible for determining what was right and proper to recognise as literature. In ‘Before the Law’, dealing with Kafka’s story of the same name, Derrida details the axioms, legal in origin, without which the institution of literature in the modern sense would be unsustainable. These were three in number. (1) The law demanded of any would-be literary text that it be properly identifiable, whole in itself, distinct from all others, with a beginning and an ending, and belonging to a given, recognisable language: in a word, possessing and possessed of an authoritative and authorised title. (2) The law insisted that the text be attributable to a named, real-life author, whose intellectual property it was, and who was therefore legally responsible for it. (3) It was necessary, according to the law, that the text be classifiable by genre, so that it might be correctly located in the library. The presumption a text was part of literature, Derrida maintained, was on these conditions. This is not to say decisions were always unproblematic. For at every step there was room for undecidability. Derrida’s discussion of Kafka’s parable is a richly detailed exploration both of textual minutiae – e. g. the pointed nose of the
doorkeeper – and of the large questions that are posed within it. One of these questions is that of the relation of literature to the law: both the determination of literature by the law (the legal status of the title, the institution of copyright and so on) and the not so obvious dependence of the law on literature (the narratives that underlie the law’s apparent autonomy and timelessness). Kafka gives us a literary work that is recognised as such because of the laws that govern literature, but which challenges, both in its singularity and in its narrative staging of singularity, those very laws. The law is open to all and yet at the same time inaccessible; the law is both wholly general – or it would not be law – and yet meaningful only in so far as it applies to (or refuses access to) singular individuals. The intervention of the law was not necessarily repressive. In fact, literature no doubt benefited from these provisions. Literature was inseparable from a certain rule-governed socio-political environment, in which, for instance, intellectual property rights were more or less recognised, freedom of expression more or less protected, and the right to artistic license more or less respected. This is also to say that literature, this precarious institution, was nothing neutral, but political through and through. Derrida’s essay explores these and other related issues, always returning to Kafka’s words to puzzle out what they might mean. Like any good literary critic, his aim is always to do justice to what is unique and surprising in the work, a singular response to a singular text. The readers of Derrida’s essay are implicitly invited in their turn to do justice to the singularity of this extraordinary piece of literary and philosophical commentary. We can never articulate its laws, or the laws of literature, in wholly general terms, but each of us can, like the man from the country, find ways of creatively inhabiting the space outside the particular gate that it presents. Thus, Acts of Literature is a remarkable introduction
to Derrida’s contribution to literary studies as it not only provides the conception of literature but also stresses the importance of literature in contemporary times.

*L’instant de ma mort* (1994) and *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (1998), originally published as separate pieces by Blanchot and Derrida respectively, but translated in a single book as *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*[^79] in 2000, records a remarkable encounter in critical and philosophical thinking between two great pioneers in contemporary thought. Blanchot and Derrida are bound together by friendship and a complex relation to their own pasts. A powerful short prose piece by Blanchot and an extended essay by Derrida in the book read them in the context of questions of literature and of bearing witness. Blanchot’s narrative concerns a moment when a young man is brought before a firing squad during World War II and then suddenly finds himself released from his near death. The incident of death becomes, in the instant the man is released, the accident of a life he no longer possesses. The text raises the question of what it means to write about a (non)experience one cannot claim as one’s own, and as such is a text of testimony or witness. Derrida’s reading of Blanchot links the problem of the secret and to the notion of the instant. It thereby provides the elements of a more expansive reassessment of literature, testimony and truth. In addressing the complex relation between writing and history, Derrida also implicitly reflects on questions concerning the relation between European intellectuals and World War II.

*Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*[^80] (2010), originally published in German as “Die Fotografie als Kopie, Archiv und Signatur: Im Gespräch mit Hubertus von Amelunxen und Michael Wetzel,”[^81] (2000), is an important

interview on the topic of photography that Derrida granted in 1992 to the German theorist of photography Hubertus von Amelunxen and the German literary and media theorist Michael Wetzel. Their conversation addresses the questions of presence and its manufacture, the tacticity of presentation, the volatility of the authorial subject, and the concept of memory. Derrida offers a penetrating intervention with regard to the distinctive nature of photography vis-à-vis related technologies such as cinema, television and video. He questions the facile divisions between old and new media, between original and reproduction and analog and digital modes of recording and presenting. By doing so, Derrida provides stimulating insights into the ways in which we think and speak about the photographic image today. He suggests that we did not have to wait for the invention of photography to learn what it can teach us about memory, inscription, death, mourning and even love. Therefore, Derrida associates the medium with thought in general. Derrida’s philosophical mediations on photography comprehend and anticipate recent developments in reproductive technologies, as well as tell us why we must remain today concerned with photography’s past and present as its future. Derrida’s discussion also interrogates fruitfully with the question of photography in relation to such key concepts as copy, archive and signature. Copy, Archive and Signature is important contribution in the field of photography, aesthetic theory and contemporary European critical thought.

H.C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . . (2000), translated as H.C. for Life, That Is to Say... 82 (2006) is Derrida’s literary critical recollection of his lifelong friendship with one of the great French intellectuals, Hélène Cixous. The main figure that informs Derrida’s reading here is that of “taking sides”. While Cixous in her work takes the side of life, which is an act of faith, Derrida admits always feels drawn to the side of

death. The book rethinks the concept of life in relationship to literature. In addition to being a memoir, it is also a theoretical confrontation and a philosophical and philological analysis of the crypts within the vast oeuvre of Cixous.

_Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan_\(^{83}\) (2005) is a collection of Derrida’s writings on Paul Celan, the Jewish poet in Germany, which were originally written and published in French in the years 1986, 2001, 2003, 2004 (two essays) and 2005. The book contains Jerry Glenn’s English translation (1978) of Paul Celan’s acceptance speech called _Die Meridian_ (“The Meridian”) given on the occasion of receiving Georg Büchner Prize for Literature at Darmstadt on October 20, 1960 and later published in German 1999 and in French in 2000. It also stages five powerful encounters between the Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida and the Jewish poet Paul Celan. More powerfully than any other poet, Celan has testified to the European experience of the twentieth century. It addresses the theme of the poem as addressed and destined beyond knowledge, seeking to speak to and for the irreducibly other. The memory of encounters with thinkers who have also engaged Celan’s work animate these writings, which include a brilliant dialogue between two interpretive modes – hermeneutics and deconstruction. Derrida’s approach to a poem is a revelation on many levels, from the most concrete ways of reading – for example, his analysis of a sequence of personal pronouns – to the most sweeping imperatives of human existence. Derrida’s writings are always a study in the imbrication of such levels. Above all, he voices the call to responsibility in the ultimate line of Celan’s poem: _Die Welt ist fort, ich maß dich tragen._ (“The world is gone, I must carry you.”) The line sounds throughout the final essay of _Sovereignties in Question_ like a refrain.

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Séminaire: La bête et le souverain, Volume II (2002–2003), originally published in French in 2010, was translated and edited as The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II, 84 (2011). In this second year of the seminar, originally presented in 2002-03 as the last course he would give before his death, Derrida focuses on two markedly different texts: Heidegger’s 1929-1930 course The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. As he moves back and forth between the two works, Derrida pursues the relations between solitude, insularity, world, violence, boredom and death as they supposedly affect humans and animals in different ways. The aspects of Robinson Crusoe which have remained so far unnoticed or underappreciated are brought out in strikingly original readings of questions such as Crusoe’s belief in ghosts, his learning to pray, his parrot Poll, and his reinvention of the wheel. The shipwrecked sailor Crusoe, on the “Island of Despair” is haunted by phantasms of death and being buried alive, becomes a fellow traveler of the German phenomenologist who, over two centuries later, is no less beset by the thought of that which overwhelms thinking. Crusoe’s terror of being buried alive or swallowed alive by beasts or cannibals gives rise to a rich and provocative reflection on death, burial and cremation, in part provoked by a meditation on the death of Derrida’s friend Maurice Blanchot. Throughout, these readings are juxtaposed with interpretations of Heidegger’s concepts of world and finitude to produce a distinctively Derridean account. Derrida seeks to highlight in readings of both Derrida’s and Heidegger’s texts the precariousness and fragility of the purportedly stable borders demarcating the

human from the animal. The fantasy of sovereign solitude is always secretly feeding off the bestial other it wants to banish. In this volume, Derrida shows how the disparate writers and texts engage an enigmatic otherness that captivates and rules over them.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Derrida’s thought on the Holocaust respond in ways to the problems involved in coming to understand the Holocaust. As far as aesthetics is concerned, Derrida has a quite precise and historically bounded version of the concept of literature. Literature is not the long-suffering “other” of philosophy. Literature is the proper name for the undecidability that always and everywhere haunts the totalizing pretensions of philosophy. Literature has its own alternative form of totalisation. Literature is an institution which allows one to say everything in every way. In literature, the (im)possibility of totalisation is enacted as a mode of engagement which is different each time and which is rare in its ability to move forward in the project of saying everything, while simultaneously acknowledging its own limitations. Far from being everything and everywhere in Derrida, literature is specifically confined to the Western European avant-garde project of aesthetic modernist writing over the past 100 years or so, one which specifically tries to “say everything” in a form that rivals, rather than merely undermining or abandoning, the philosophical inclination toward totalisation.