

SOLICITING DAVID WILLS
*Naomi Waltham-Smith, Derrida Today (Athens
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I hoped it could be a nice surprise. That is, I wanted to surprise David—to catch him a little unawares, to say something that he would not already have seen coming. But this was not possible—not possible in ways both banal and weighty. Given that he was to respond to our papers, David quite understandably wanted to read in advance ‘what I am about to tell you, so that [he would] hear it before you [and he] hear it and when you hear it [he] will have already heard it’ (Wills 2022), and to be able to turn around and respond without delay.

But when I say that it is impossible to surprise David, I do not only mean in this contingent way, which is not only limited to my being unable to keep secret from him what you are now hearing but also extends to the fact that I would struggle to find any argument in response to his work that he had not already anticipated and seen off in advance. Rather, I mean it is impossible in a more structural way—in the sense that a certain impossibility haunts the surprise as much as it does the secret. You might object that Derrida’s point—to slip into the idiom of Geoff Bennington for a moment—*just is* that it is *necessarily possible* that David or I or Geoff or you be surprised at any moment by what arrives. I will have to fend off the accusation—one I readily foresee—that I am reinstalling exactly what deconstruction unsettles when it turns unconditionality towards a conditional, as Derrida puts it when he is rebuking Nancy for preferring the ‘surely not’ over the ‘not [so] surely’ (Derrida 2000, 323-24; 2005, 287-88). I will, therefore, need to say more in due course about what I mean by ‘surprising’ if it is to remain impossible, without it thereby reducing everything to what is foreseeable, calculable—to a surprise of which I would be (sovereignly) capable of springing upon David. No chance!

Neither David nor those of you who attended his keynote address at the Derrida Today conference at Goldsmiths’ in London in 2016 will have been surprised by what I said, by way of opening, about my telling you what he will hear before he hears it and his having already heard it once he hears it, for I was quoting with only very minor adjustments from David’s own words eight years ago almost to the day. David’s theme was the solicitation of deconstruction.

I’ll tell you, but not before telling you that between telling you what you will hear before you hear it, and your already having heard it once you

hear it, something happens, something falls, something arrives, something comes across the sky as Thomas Pynchon might have said, not a screaming, not yet, sound perhaps, some “hazy cosmic jive,” perhaps eventually music, but in any case determined primarily as what I’ll call a “trembling.” A trembling comes across the sky. I’ll say first of all, before telling you anything, that between telling you what you will hear before you hear it, and your already having heard it once you hear it, there is trembling. And that or there, at trembling, is where I hope to arrive with this talk. Now, before that there, here it is, what I’ll tell you: deconstruction would always have been about solicitation. (Wills 2022).

If there is any surprise, it might be that I take him back to *this* moment. Of all the things that he has said and of all those moments when he has evoked the theme of solicitation, why did this moment in particular prick up my ears, when I might instead have turned them much further back to the passage in *Prostheses* when, with Barthes, he traces prostheticity emerging as a kind of ‘putting forward’ out of the corruption and prostitution of intercourse that take space at the intersection between grammar, logic, and rhetoric in the medieval trivium? (Wills 1995, 214–15). The association between soliciting and poetic rhetoric will linger, but whereas here in 1995 David uses the word ‘beat’ in a colloquial sense to refer to the locus of such commerce, the notion of beating or pulsating, which solicits my ears, will come to assume a much more prominent political significance in the Willsian lexicon. Or I might have sent us to the discussion of *La carte postale* in *Matchbook* where solicitation is a matter of ‘put[ting] one moment of reading back to back with another even as the two face each other’ and already also a matter of falling into the abyss of writing’s opening onto the other and the generosity of reading, with the possibility of a *rendez-vous* that outbids any economy of return or quid pro quo (Wills 2005, 74–77). Solicitation thus points to the inherent adestinality and hence asynchronicity in any exchange. Or I might have returned—that is, turned (the clock) back—to the passage in *Dorsality* where solicitation entails an ‘eroticization of the back’, the caress promoting the dorsal relation that embraces less what I face than what is ungraspable, incalculable, obscene, out-of-bounds, secret, and hence capable of surprising (Wills 2008, 48).

My ears are instead turned towards and attuned to David’s keynote in 2016 because it is there that he *head-on* (if such a thing is possible) describes solicitation as something sonorous: as ‘sound perhaps . . . eventually music perhaps’. Aurality is an enduring thread running through the Willsian corpus from the musicality of the poetic to listening as a ‘dorsal technology’ that prostheticizes the ear (Wills 2015, 74).

To this extent, if I may be so bold, he and I have been having something of a secret conversation over a number of years. In my book *Shattering Biopolitics*, for example, I sought to swerve the sense of *solliciter*—a word at the heart of David’s keynote—in the direction of a trembling so forceful that, like a glass made to vibrate at its natural frequency, it *shatters* with the force of this resonance—and all in the service of putting sovereignty into deconstruction by making it tremble (Waltham-Smith 2021, 15 and 151–52). I say a *secret* conversation, though, since this is the first time that David and I have met face-to-face, and before that there was no expectation of reciprocity, or listening and responding. I was avidly pressing my ear up to and devouring every word David penned, though, sadly, I was not present at the 2016 conference, only reading those words two years ago once they had become public and only once it was already long ago since they had been heard in the comparative secret of a face-to-face conference. Whereas I was occasionally at risk of the ‘abandonment’ that David describes in *Killing Times* of ‘ecstatically allowing oneself to get lost in the other as though outside of time’ (Wills 2019, 182), I was under no illusion as to the asynchronicity and adestinality of a conversation that might now, in the presence of this giant of a thinker, have finally arrived in a present that any address is nonetheless always ‘running after’ and ‘struggles, perhaps in vain, to sync up with’ (Wills 2022).

From my side, David and I seemed to be *simpatico*, resonating on a similar frequency. And yet, in a bid to be as faithful as possible to that secret concord, I want in the time that remains to put some pressure on the idea that deconstruction is ‘nothing but *solicitation* . . . shaking, making tremble’ (Wills 2022) and on the musicality of this resonant vibration. I will seek to *solicit solicitation*, to shake up shaking, to surprise trembling by placing a little syntagm in its echoing wake—trembling, *s’il y en a*, solicitation, if there is such a thing. I, on my side in this fictionalized telephonic exchange, find myself thinking: ‘Would that I might [*puisse*] believe him!’ (See Derrida 2002, 10; 2006, 2). I wish I might believe David that there is *nothing but* a generalized trembling that might at some fourth or higher-order level prefer to make life coincide with life in a harmonious vibration, even as he thinks the differential technologization of the living more ‘exactly’ than Nancy’s exscription.¹ In *Le toucher*, immediately before calling for an exact (and exacting!) analysis of the exscribed, Derrida writes of Nancy:

he gauges (thinksweighs) the impossible as exactly as possible, whereby he remains a rigorous philosopher at the very moment when the limits of

¹ On this point, see Derrida, *Le toucher* and Bennington 2008, 182.

the philosophic come to tremble. It is without trembling, then, that Nancy submits himself to the trembling. (Derrida 2000, 89; 2005, 73)

What is the upshot of such a solicitation where a philosopher submits to trembling without himself trembling? Can such a philosopher *listen*? Or will he only make any penetration of his tympanum vibrate within his inner ear? Derrida's conclusion would seem to be that Nancy is perhaps right that a philosopher can only hear because he has foreclosed listening in order to philosophize (Nancy 2003, 13; 2007, 1).

At the moment when Nancy's thinking . . . always sets itself to think while measuring exactly the "incommensurable" and measuring itself with [à] the "incommensurable," his thinking is "with" Merleau-Ponty, as near and far as possible in relation to the Merleau-Ponty who claims . . . to coincide with a noncoincidence [NWS: that is, having 'exactly' identified the noncoincidence of self-touching he then proceeds to make it coincide with the noncoincidence of touching the other]. . . which in fact does resemble Nancy's "simultaneity of distance and contact." However, at this point . . . the other of the with' interrupts all contemporaneity, coappearance, and commensurability. (Derrida 2000, 225; 2005, 199)

My solicitation of David, then, ought not be too *fraternal*, but perhaps I may be permitted a minimally heretical mishearing. Sketching out the etymology of solicitation as what disturbs, agitates, troubles, disquiets, spurs to action, shakes as a whole or to the very core, David traces how Derrida, from the 1964 Heidegger seminar through the early published writings to *Donner la mort*, deploys the idea of soliciting-trembling-shaking almost as a synonym for deconstruction—or, I am thinking, perhaps as another non-synonymous substitution that re-marks that set of terms (they cohere as a set only in their trembling). But it is in a short text written close to his death entitled 'Comment ne pas trembler?' (2006) that Derrida develops the notion of generalized trembling, which is worthy of the name to the extent that it makes the 'I' tremble, unsettling any autoaffection or mastery.

Solicitation, though, has an unsettling relation to sovereignty as self-presence and as absolute present. In *Donner la mort*, Derrida suggests that it is God, a secret, or the apprehension of death that solicits and disturbs in this devastating way—I want to say, *shatters* us. This prompts the question whether the disturbance comes from outside or is stirred up from within, but immediately this very opposition is made to tremble. As David observes, if Derrida in 'Les fins de l'homme' argues that a solicitation which cannot but come from a certain outside is necessarily already inscribed in the structure it solicits, the effect is to solicit that very architecture, predicated as it is on a

division between inner and outer (Derrida 1972, 161; 1990, 133). Under the force of solicitation, the boundaries of metaphysics, like the tympanum of the philosopher's ear, tremble and disperse chiasmatically (Wills 2005, 108).

This mechanism whereby an unsettling condition of possibility is disavowed and projected onto the outside as an opposite or negation—this defence against the ruin of the transcendental that tries to put it behind us, as it were—gives solicitation an affinity with the secret. In his 2016 keynote, David takes an idea from *La donner la mort*—one which he will repeat in *Killing Times*—according to which God names both the impossibility of keeping a secret (for he can penetrate any interiority) and the possibility of maintaining a secret innermost sanctum, which finds its most exquisite expression in Anne Dufourmantelle's *Défense du secret*:

Before all confidence, there is that hidden word which passes between the self and the self. The echo inside us of an interior voice, the intimate confession of dreams, does its work of germination to the point of creating what we call the secret garden. Starting in childhood, this immense reserve is the source of creation, freedom, and joy. But for these same reasons, it has been sequestered. (Dufourmantelle 2015, 21; 2021, 4-5)

In *Killing Times*, David distinguishes the kind of secrecy that is amenable to solicitation from absolute secrecy, or, rather the linking of absolute secrecies that he discerns in both what he calls the drone penalty and suicide bombing. He sees an intimate connection between decisions made under the cover of secrecy, formed in two inaccessible sacrosanct recesses that share the same structure—the two godlike minds (or hearts) of the US President as he gives the order to kill and of the terrorist activating their bomb, both exercising sovereign power in a simulacrum of divine justice to take place in a single critical instant. One of the central arguments in *Killing Times* is that forms of killing predicated on such sovereignty 'eliminate the duration that is consonant with sensibility' and shortcircuit the time that might be given to the other in judicial process and deliberation, for example (Wills 2019, 91).

While Dufourmantelle urges that 'wisdom [instead of jealous prying] would mean turning around, diverting yourself—better to cultivate your own garden', she also understands this turn inwards as a prelude to 'invit[ing] the other to lose themselves in it, for nothing is as powerful as an invitation into yourself to heal the desire to break into the other' (Dufourmantelle 2015, 162; 2021, 104). Note how such solicitation is a matter of turning around and away from the object of desire that solicits or seduces to the point of insolubly stirring up the inner sanctum. David's point, though, might just be

that this disturbance comes from a place that is neither inside nor outside the garden. It just is the garden insofar as its trees cannot but tremble. The secret solicits. And this gives its solicitation a different temporality from the absolute instant of sovereignty accelerated to an infinite speed in the drone penalty.

The secret space of a god in us, if that is what we want to call it, is the source of every intersubjective relation. From within it—though necessarily disturbing any absolute purity we assumed that it had—comes an impulse, need, or desire to reach (out to) another. That inevitably means that any solicitation of another, however welcome it be, will somehow ‘disturb’ the other, encroach however minimally upon her space, and more specifically, her time. (Wills 2019, 182)

The worst kind of solicitation, then, is the ‘tyranny of sovereign power and violence’ which, taken to its extreme in the death penalty, appropriates and subjects to calculation the instant that divides life from death, and ‘mocks that temporal relation, the retention or detention of one by another, by means of an absolute reduction, where the first approach to the other, the first hailing or greeting, is an instantaneous death sentence’ (Wills 2019, 182–83). Far from preserving the boundary of death’s secret, the effect of making no secret of the instant of death is to ‘to *infect* the time of life with the now of death’ (Wills 2019, 99).

David, though, also envisages a more ‘innocent’ and originary solicitation. If the caress that solicits comes from behind and embraces the back, what distinguishes it from the absolute foreseeability and calculability of the drone strike executed from thousands of miles away without necessarily even needing to identify its target, is the time it takes for the other to turn in the apostrophe of solicitation. The thought, reading Derrida in *Passions* (1993, 66–67; 1995, 29), would be that there is something secret precisely because there is an originary solicitation, because in everything I say, insofar as it is addressed to the other as a call [*appel*] of the secret, there is a secret from myself (Wills 2008a).

One example of such detaining, which implicates the risks of holding onto and falling into one another’s secret, might be Cixous’s endless telephonic solicitation with Derrida, which he discusses in *H. C. pour la vie* (Derrida 2002; 2006) and she recounts from her side in *Hyperrêve* (Cixous 2006, 120–23; 2009, 90–91). The topic of debate is his (emphatically stated) belief that ‘in the end one dies, too fast’, and, as she recounts the conversations and her thoughts, it becomes clear that it less the fact that in the end one dies than his belief in this that is at stake. She gradually realises

that he is not trying to unsettle her belief and win her over to his side but is in fact trying to confirm for himself that ‘he wasn’t able to shake [her] conviction’. Far from trying to convince her, he seeks to convince himself that he had *not* convinced her. She has a dawning realisation that ‘every time he called . . . he was pleading against what he believed, he reached out with his voice to touch my voice so as to reassure himself it wasn’t *trembling* when I said I don’t think so’, he was ‘making sure that he hadn’t been able to *shake* her conviction’ (Cixous 2006, 122; 2009, 91—my emphasis). And yet she confesses that she does, on the contrary, become less confident in her own belief, starting to believe what he supposed and needed her to believe. Over the years she ‘ended up surrendering completely’, or so she tells herself (Cixous 2006, 121; 2009, 90). Her decision to feign obstinately remaining unshaken is taken in some ‘murmurous black corner of the mind’, suggesting that she is, in fact, shaken to the core, the solicitation penetrating the secret inner sanctum, and yet she maintains the secret of solicitation (Cixous 2006, 124; 2009, 92).

It is worth comparing this scene to David’s characterization of innocent solicitation and the way it imposes upon the time of the other as an ‘I pray you’, ‘I beg your pardon’, or ‘excuse me’. My question—my solicitation—of David is whether solicitation can be of the order of excuse if it is not already to have resolved itself into a universal ‘absolute interior vibration’ in the way that he describes the Hegelian dialectic dissolved its self-differentiating drive into the ‘pulsating motionlessness or vibrating rest of the absolute concept’ (Hegel, 366; cf. Wills 2019, 108). Undoubtedly, the dismantling that my solicitation of David seeks is already underway in his solicitations elsewhere, especially, for example, in how he teases out the internal self-differentiation of hearing under the force of its prosthetic substitutability (Wills 2015, 81). The upshot of this is that the ear does not simply solicit or, to the extent that it does, it has already been solicited by the technologization of hearing that he calls listening. David makes a similar move in *Killing Times* by pointing to the stepping aside and exteriorization of the Hegelian restless circulation of blood when it comes into contact with the air. While, for Hegel, the heart’s systolic and diastolic interruptions are absorbed under the force of the flow and even the movement outside capitalizes on differentiation’s vampiric thirst to assimilate, David settles on a more radical stepping aside and outside, a chiasmic turning inside-out and outside-in of pulsating difference that makes its temporality a prosthetic technologization.

My thought would be that this syncopation of Hegelian dialectics, whereby time is revealed as a prosthesis in blood pulsating on this outside,

ought also to be solicited and syncopated. The pulsation itself ought not only be radically displaced but furthermore made to tremble. Death solicits not only time but sovereignty. As I argue in *Shattering Biopolitics*, sovereignty is kept in check precisely when, as a hyperbolic *Walten* or über-sovereignty, it shipwrecks and shatters itself on nothing other than death (Waltham-Smith 2021, 22; cf. Derrida 2010, 397; 2011, 290).

I wonder, then, whether when Derrida and Cixous come up against the test of death, the logic of an ‘excuse me’, and even of forgiveness, is also exploded. In the first year of seminar on ‘Le parjure et le pardon’—which is translated by David, so it will come as no surprise to him!—Derrida considers various possible conditions of possibility for reconciliation. At once less generous than forgiveness, which requires no explanation, and more (even *too*) indulgent, excuse leaves nothing to forgive or reconcile for want of discord over the fault committed. Excuse exculpates or exonerates such that it removes—or perhaps puts in a secret place—the disagreement over the wrong perpetrated. It whispers, in a practically unvoiced intonation, ‘*y a pas de mal* [no harm done]’ (Derrida 2019, 218; 2022, 163–64). Even forgiveness, which must remain impossible if it is to be worthy of the name, is at risk of an excessive sympathy, indulgence, or an identificatory accord, for I cannot forgive without minimally sanctioning the fault or identifying with the guilty, and thereby become guilty of forgiving.

In the address he gave to the 37th Colloquium of French-Speaking Jews in Paris in December 1998 Derrida suggests that reconciliation might in fact require giving up any attachment not only to harmonious attunement but even to the ‘right false note’, which is out-of-tune but still allows us at least to agree on what is out-of-tune. I therefore wonder whether deconstruction might not be straightforwardly musical but necessarily possibly unmusical. If surprise is out of the question because there is already too much attunement, solicitation might always already be solicited by another tone that de-(at)tunes it. Under such conditions, can a solicitation ever be excused, or might it always need to be at least a bit inexcusable?

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