

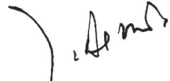


Paris, le 10 juillet 2003

Chère Petra Schweitzer,

Je me sens tout à fait incapable de vous envoyer pour le 1^{er} juillet (date déjà dépassée) l'essai que vous me demandez. J'avais déjà fait part à Bennington du mal-entendu qui s'était insinué dans nos rapport à ce sujet. Il vous confirmera que des problèmes de santé m'empêchent plus que jamais d'être au rendez-vous.

Avec mes vœux les plus cordiaux.



Jacques Derrida

a preface to “Trauma, Memory, and Testimony”

by Petra Schweitzer, special issue editor

Brian McGrath, Ben Miller, executive editors

The editors would like to open the inaugural issue of *Reading On*, “Trauma, Memory, and Testimony,” with this letter by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Jacques Derrida graciously agreed to include a piece by him on trauma and philosophy, but as the letter explains, he was unable to send the essay. By including these few words, the editors hope to mark the absence of Derrida’s work from the issue and therefore make present the felt obligation to honor his teaching. Derrida’s presence, though in words that announce his absence from “Trauma, Memory, and Testimony,” focuses attention on the future—a future possible only given one’s responsibility to live on, to read on, even when confronted by the impossibility of knowing how to proceed.

At a time punctuated by emergencies and catastrophes, every reader must respond to the call of promise and responsibility toward others. The propinquity of war, terrorism, and natural catastrophic events that ignore domestic boundaries as they span continents viciously expose humans to suffering and death. These acts of violence emerge as threats to life, which all too often end in brutal death. Various media display these events and make it possible to watch from home what is happening at these sites of destruction. As a viewer, one is exposed to devastating images that capture escalating conflicts on a daily basis and often leave lasting imprints, *presumably* at a safe distance.

Yet survivors of individual and collective traumatic histories carry on a past that is neither forgotten nor remembered. Haunted by the secret of particular traumatic experiences, survivors long to give testimony and tell their stories even when words and images fail. Such testimony demands a response. That response must not safely inscribe the event within a narrative that aims to make sense of the event but must respond in kind to the force of testimony itself and to the needs of survivors to find words for that

which cannot be spoken.

In focusing on contemporary issues of subjectivity, representation, testimony, historical artifacts, and cultural memory, this inaugural issue of *Reading On* reexamines the conceptual role of trauma in contemporary critical discourse. Committed to the memory and testimony of survivors, the scholars and artists whose work is included in this issue each attempt to respond to unique voices of human anguish. These scholars and artists challenge our understanding of human experience in voices that are equally unique. Though it is impossible to foresee the impact of trauma in a century of cruelty, the burden of one’s responsibility to respond is never reduced by one’s inability to find an adequate way to respond.

We are deeply indebted to Cathy Caruth for writing the introduction to this special issue. Her work on trauma and literature is integral to our own intellectual pursuits and continues to inform our understanding of the human psyche, trauma, and language. In writing the introduction, she responds to the surprising and unexpected traumas testified to by the essays and artwork of our contributors. We welcome our readers to respond in kind to the content of the texts included here.