

DERRIDA'S

SO, IF WE AGREE TO DISAGREE ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER THE TABLE IS, SHALL WE MOVE ON TO THE NEXT QUESTION...

WHY IS A MOUSE THAT SPINS? THE HIGHER THE FEWER!

OH.

WOW! IN NEW YORK, WE'VE BARELY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE OF THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLOFFING!

WHAT'S THEIR PROBLEM?

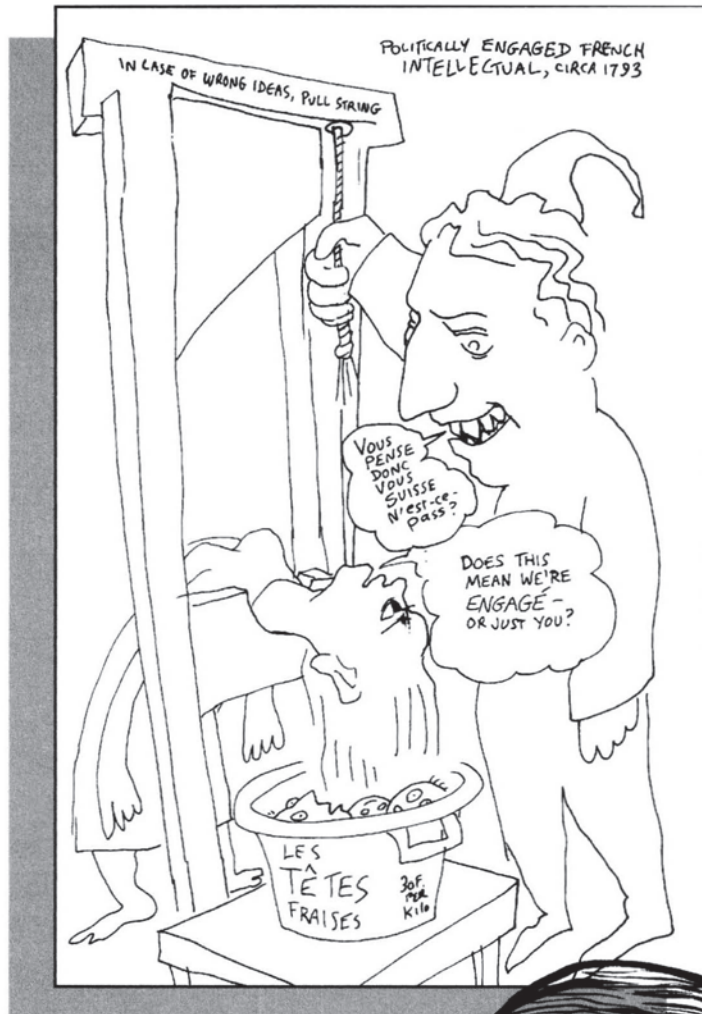
SOMETHINK IN THE WINE, MAYBE...

MILLEUX

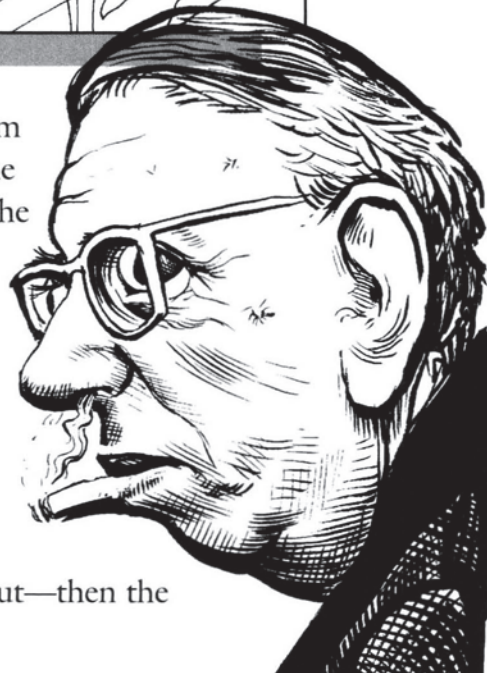




France, for intellectuals, has long beckoned as a kind of paradise, a place where philosophers and thinkers have been looked upon as national treasures. For decades, on the sidewalks outside the cafes of Paris, light has danced down through the boughs along the boulevards, playing over the surfaces of objects, dappling tablecloths and variously attired torsos in swarms of ephemeral hues. Cafe-goers, many of them people of intelligence and culture, have placed orders, fumbled for cigarettes, and found it very attractive to be able to sit at a table and talk about the table and, raising a philosophical eyebrow in the dappled light, to ask if the table *is*. Such tabletalk has long overspilled the cafes and boulevards, crept in under the window sills and doorways of museums and galleries, studios and publishing houses, to permeate all the arts, including literature.



residing over all this tabletalk, from the time of the French Revolution, the image of the philosopher was one of the intellectual engagé, who, besides wondering if the table is or is not, was to be found immersed in political and public affairs, bucking the tide of established values, setting a moral tone, taking a stand, and—most important—being avant-garde. In recent times, up until the late 1960s, Jean Paul Sartre defined the image. But—then the icon of the intellectual changed.

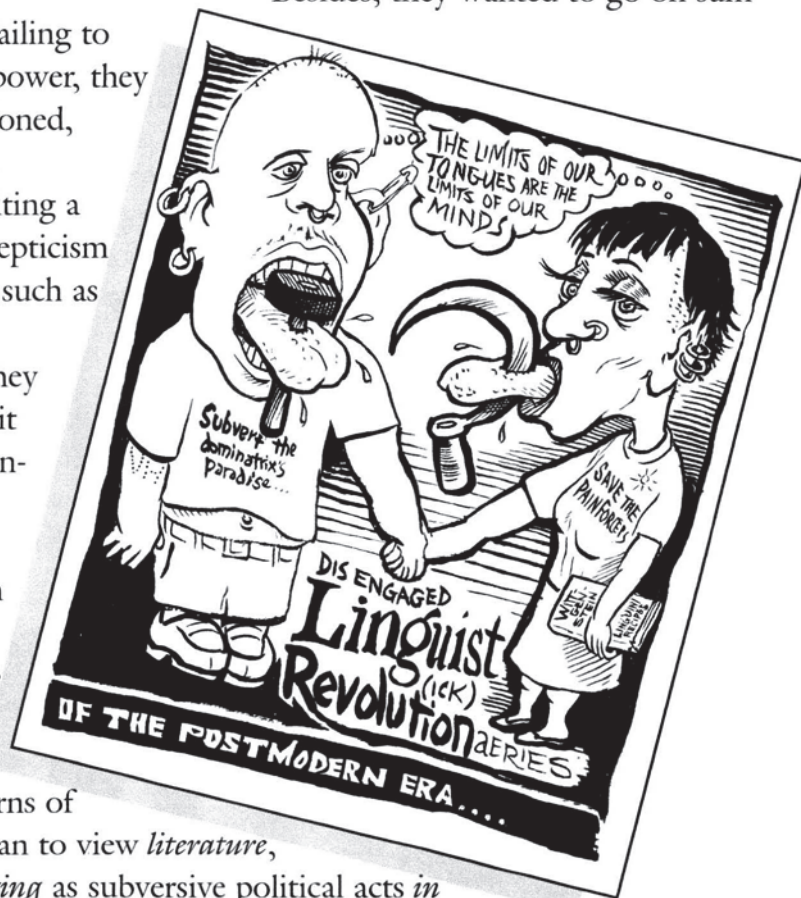




At the same time young Americans were tripping to Jimi Hendrix, “Hey Jude,” *Hair*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a student movement swept across Europe. French students, supported by the Marxists, took to the streets, fighting the army and police in order to overthrow the government. They nearly succeeded, but were eventually subdued.

Besides, they wanted to go on sum-

mer vacation. Failing to demolish state power, they became disillusioned, inward-looking. Suddenly exhibiting a **postmodern** skepticism of grand myths such as Marxism and Communism, they began to commit themselves to language itself. Disengaging themselves from politics, they became **linguistic** revolutionaries, finding revolution in turns of speech, and began to view *literature*, *reading* and *writing* as subversive political acts *in themselves*.



Intellectuals began attending to *how* words mean more than *what* they mean. Increasingly distrustful of language claiming to convey only a single authoritarian message—they began exploring how words can say many different meanings simultaneously.

But by the time all this had taken place in France, Jacques Derrida had emerged, in the late 1960s in America, as the most avant-garde of the avant-garde. At his lecture given at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” he had caused a stir in American academia. His thought struck a new chord that caused many previous philosophers to be reassessed, and it set the tone for much thought to come. It was something of a disharmonious chord, for his forte was a subversive mode of reading authoritarian texts, or any texts. This style of reading came to be known as **deconstruction**. Then in France **deconstruction**, kicking existentialism aside, was suddenly much in vogue. Derrida became the philosopher of the day, the new *enfant terrible*, the new philosopher punk, of French intellectualism. And then, after the American debut at Johns Hopkins, deconstruction and Jacques Derrida took America by storm, turning much of the Western worldview topsy-turvy.

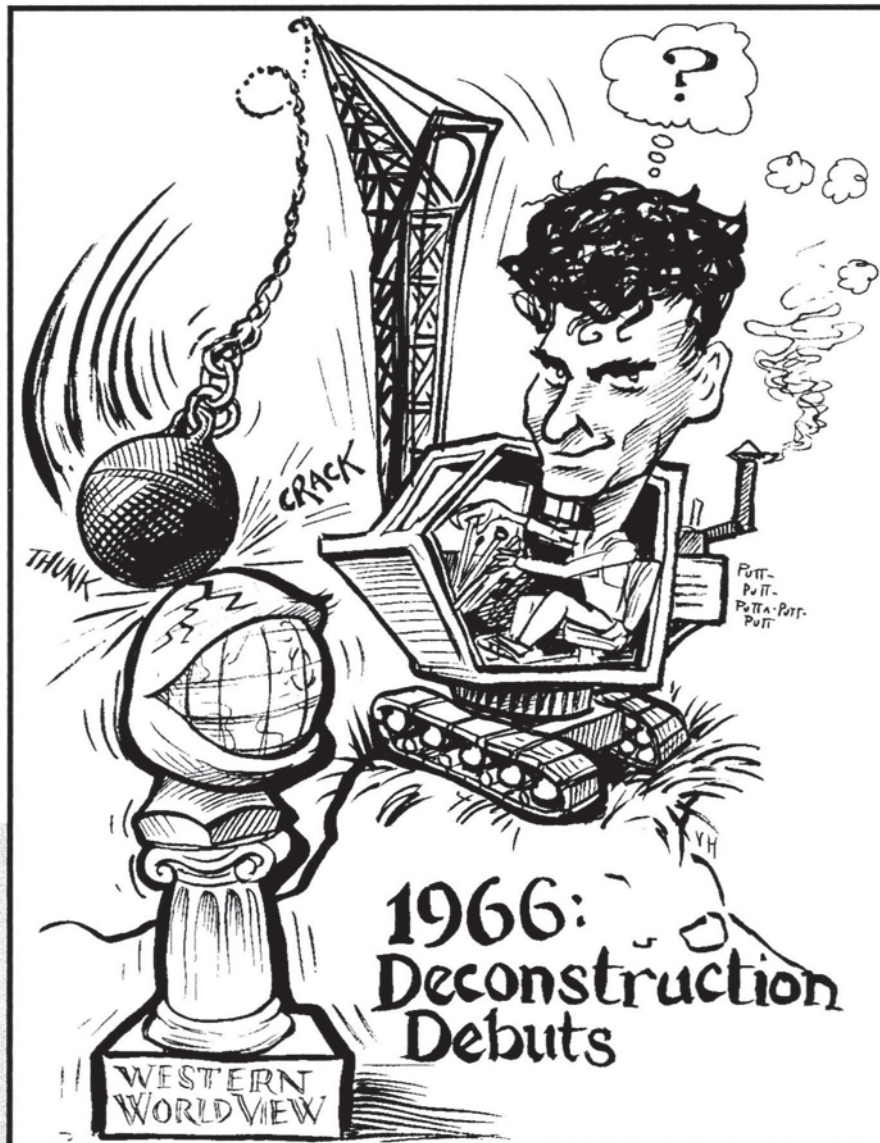
As we shall see, Derrida was not simply a French intellectual, for the milieu influencing his emotions, intellect, and career were neither simply French nor Jewish nor Algerian nor American.





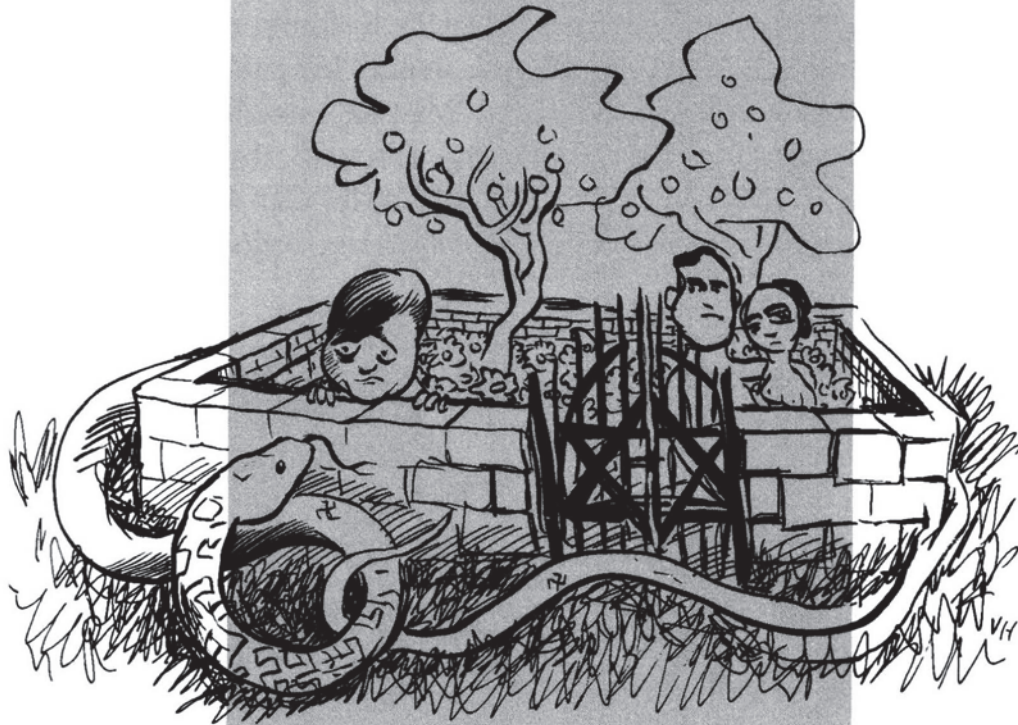
Brief Biography

Whatever one's philosophical or critical orientation, no thinker today can ignore the work of Jacques Derrida. It was in 1966 that he was invited to present a paper at a Johns Hopkins University conference. What resulted, however, was something of a major philosophical coup. Derrida, quite unexpectedly, cast the entire history of philosophy in the West into doubt.



After this revolutionary debut, in 1967 Derrida burst upon the scene of writing with three books, *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Voice and Phenomenon*. Since then, the intellectual movement he spawned, known as **deconstruction**, has gained both admirers and detractors worldwide, bringing about a global change in the way many thinkers think. Derrida has published more than 20 books and numerous papers—dividing his time between lecturing assignments in Paris and the United States. Obviously, Jacques Derrida is nobody's fool.

But for many years, he was nobody's hero either. In 1930—the year the Second Surrealist Manifesto appeared; the works of Kafka, dead for several years, were emerging from obscurity; Hemingway was becoming widely read; Gide's *Travels in the Congo* was published; D. H. Lawrence died; "Singing in the Rain" filled the airwaves; and the photo flashbulb popped upon the scene—**Jacques Derrida**, son of Aimé and Georgette Derrida, was born into a Jewish family in El-Biar, Algiers, his childhood dwelling a villa edenic enough to be named "the garden." This domestic oasis, however, was framed by an environment where Jews were openly discriminated against—subjected to verbal and physical violence and prohibited from entering the legal or teaching professions.



At the Lycée de Ben Aknoun, which the young Jacques joined in 1941, he was expelled on the first day of classes because of a policy limiting Jews to only seven percent of the student population. In 1943, he enrolled in the Lycée Emile-Maupas, but dropped out because of the intolerable anti-Semitic atmosphere. It was, perhaps, the hostilities experienced during these years that awakened in the young Derrida a sensitivity to the more general problem of identification, of the *central* and the *marginal*, which would come to dominate his mature philosophical thought. From age 13 to 17, he returned to the Lycée de Ben Aknoun, temporarily housed in a complex of huts, as the main building had been converted to a prison-camp for Italians. Here Derrida became a sports enthusiast, dreaming of a career as a football star. Upon failing his baccalaureat, he became withdrawn, lost himself in reading Rousseau, Gide, Nietzsche, Valéry, and Camus, and managed to publish some fledgling lines of verse in small North African reviews. At the age of 19, he was a student in France, where (after a couple of failed attempts) he attended the École Normale Supérieure and married Marguerite Aucouturier in 1957. In the 60's he joined the fervor of intellectualism surrounding the avant-garde journal *Tel Quel*, an ultra-left publication celebrating, among other things, Maoism, surrealism, and the material qualities of language—its sounds, rhythms and ability to suggest many meanings. Shortly after that he was invited to participate in the groundbreaking colloquium at the Johns Hopkins University.

