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Jacques Derrida

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Jacques Derrida : Without Alibi (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Without Alibi (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics):

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Seeing the World Spirit in a CigarBy Etienne RPWithout Alibi, it is said in the foreword, is a very American book. What makes it so? Several explanations are listed. The five essays bound in this volume were published separately in their original French. They were collected by the American editor, Peggy Kamuf, who wrote a lengthy preface and requested a foreword by Jacques Derrida. The very existence of the

book should therefore be attributed to the editor-translator, who Derrida playfully acknowledges as the real author of *Without Alibi*, preferring to claim for himself the role of reader, spectator, or actor on the book's scene. *Without Alibi* is also a book about "deconstruction in America". Four of the five essays were originally written for presentations or initial publication in the United States. Deconstruction, Derrida's brand of philosophy found a warm welcome on American campuses, and belongs as much to the US academic landscape as it does to France's. Again, Peggy Kamuf, who reveals she first spoke up in Derrida's seminar in 1974, is credited with playing a "major role" in the development of deconstruction in the United States. (Am I the only one to detect a touch of irony in Derrida's remark that "*her** book is also, and this is perhaps its greatest audacity, the book of an American thinker about the United States of America"?) Several essays address themes that are specific to the United States, such as the refusal to abolish the death penalty (a unique case among Western democracies), the disappearance of psychoanalysis from clinical practice and its very ambiguous status in academia ("Freud is dead in America"), and the tradition of "civil disobedience" and of resistance to sovereign power forcefully illustrated by Henry Thoreau. Deconstruction is identified as a synonym for "resistance to something that is specifically being named, today, the United States" (Kamuf). But again, writes Derrida, "what the 'United States' means remains to come," and we cannot hold its meaning or truth as self-evident. But Derrida also engages with the US context in another way, which is both trivial and revealing. By this, I am not referring to his defense of his friend Paul de Man, who was posthumously accused of having written nearly 200 articles for Nazi-controlled newspapers in his native Belgium during World War II. Derrida, who published his *Mmoires* for Paul de Man in 1988, only comments obliquely on the "de Man affair": "I will not go back over this by now abundantly 'documented' episode, concerning which I have said what I felt at length and publicly." Instead of addressing the charge of collaboration writing and of antisemitism, Derrida concentrates on another episode in de Man's tumultuous life, which was fictionalized by a French author in a novel published in 1964, long before the "de Man affair" burst open. In *Le parjure*, Henri Thomas tells the story of a character who is being pursued by both his first wife and the American authorities under charges of bigamy and perjury because he contracted a second marriage in the United States, while a first marriage in Europe had not ended in legal divorce. Derrida, whom his friend Paul de Man long ago advised him to read this literary fiction "if you want to know a part of my life," places his commentary under the sign of the anacoluthon, a rare figure of speech that de Man himself detected in Proust and that shifts one character or figure for another, exhibiting "abrupt breaches of syntax" or a failure to follow a single narrative line. In Proust, Albertine's anacoluthons, changing a "she" for an "I", is a way to mix lying and fiction in order to cover the character's lesbian liaisons, or to cloud the issue of the narrator's homosexual longings. For de Man, who explains in another essay about Jean-Jacques Rousseau "why confession is in a certain manner impossible", the anacoluthonic lie "mixes inextricably constative and performative language," which is why "for Proust it is impossible ever to be sure whether or not someone is lying." Derrida's commentary of this literary fiction--reflecting a real episode in Paul de Man's life, which was later exposed by the same journalist who unearthed his collaborationist past--is non-judgmental and doesn't read as a defense of his friend or of his former apologetics. He concludes his reading of Paul de Man's essay about Rousseau's confessions by a singular plea: "sooner or later, our common innocence will not fail to appear to everyone's eyes, as the best intentioned of all our machinations." When Derrida loses his cool, however, is when he refers to people who stood on the accusing side in the de Man affair: unnamed "university professors who for a long time had been poisoned by the impotence of resentment", and news outlets "bearing the name of New York in their title"--namely, the New York Times and the New Yorker--against which Derrida's resentment borders on paranoia. No, I see another reason why *Without Alibi* is a very American book, and why it reflects the spirit of the time and place in which its chapters were drafted. At the time when Derrida's lectures were delivered, America was in the midst of a political psychodrama that had to do with cheating, lying, perjury, confession, repentance, and a cigar. These, with the exception of the cigar, are the themes that Derrida chose to focus on in his annual seminar at UC Irvine and in the texts written around that date. Indeed, perjury and forgiveness became key concepts in his system of "unconditional" notions, along with the gift, hospitality and death, and were present in his thinking until the very end. The confrontation between President Bill Clinton and prosecutor Kenneth Starr about the Lewinski scandal was not, as Europeans often dismissed it, an inquisition into a very private matter, but a controversy over whether the President had lied under oath. As Derrida reminds his readers, "the crime of perjury finds in the United States the zone of its most intense gravity." The Clinton-Lewinski scandal exposed the wide gaps in legal conceptions between Europe and the United States, and acted out "the scene of repentance and forgiveness" in a way that Europeans often characterized as hypocritical. Derrida's essays on *The History of the Lie*, *Rousseau's Confessions*, or Paul de Man's fictionalized character, can also be read as a running commentary about the events of the day. Witnessing Napoleon patrolling Jena on the evening of the famous battle, Hegel saw "the world spirit on a horseback". He considered this battle to be "the end of history", in terms of evolution of human societies towards what he would call the "universal homogeneous state". Likewise, Bill Clinton was not just another political leader. He was the incarnation of the hopes and aspirations of a whole generation, the embodiment of what Europeans respect the most in the nation that now stands at history's end. What if Hegel's Napoleon had found his match in Derrida's Clinton, and victories on the battlefield were now replaced by the mediated proceedings of legal battles? The fate of the world spirit would then hang on a cigar, that empty signifier...

This book brings together for the first time five recent essays by Jacques Derrida, which advance his reflections on many issues: lying, perjury, forgiveness, confession, the profession of faith, and, most recently, cruelty, sovereignty, and capital punishment. Strongly linked by their attention to "performatives" and the "as if," the essays show the necessity of thinking beyond the category of acts that are possible for a subject. Derrida argues forcefully that thought must engage with the im-possible, that is, the order of the unforeseeable event, the absolute future still to come. This acute awareness of the limits of performative programs informs the essays throughout and attunes them closely to events of a world undergoing "globalization." The first essay, "History of the Lie," reviews some classic and modern definitions of the lie (Augustine, Rousseau, Kant, Koyr, Arendt), while renewing questions about what is called lying, as distinguished from other forms of nontruth. This inventive analysis is followed by "Typewriter Ribbon," which examines at length the famous lie recounted by Rousseau in his Confessions, when he perjured himself by accusing another of his own crime. Paul de Man's reading of this textual event is at the center of Derrida's patient, at times seriously funny analyses. "Le parjure, Perhaps" engages with a remarkable novel by Henri Thomas that fictionalizes the charge of perjury brought against Paul de Man in the 1950s. Derrida's extraordinary fineness as a reader and thinker of fiction here treats, to profound effect, the "fatal experience of perjury." The two final essays, "The University Without Condition" and "Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul," address the institutions of the university and of psychoanalysis as sites from which to resist and deconstruct the nontruth or phantasm of sovereignty. For the university, the principle of truth remains at the core of its resistance; for psychoanalysis, there is the obligation to remain true to what may be, Derrida suggests, its specific insight: into psychic cruelty. Resistance to the sovereign cruelty of the death penalty is just one of the stakes indicated by the last essay, which is the text of a keynote address to the "States General of Psychoanalysis" held in Paris, July 2000. Especially for this volume, Derrida has written "Provocation: Forewords," which reflects on the title Without Alibi while taking up questions about relations between deconstruction and America. This essay-foreword also responds to the event of this book, which Peggy Kamuf in her introduction presents as event of resistance. Without Alibi joins two other books by Derrida that Kamuf has translated for Stanford University Press: *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994* (1994) and *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (1998).

From the Inside Flap This book brings together for the first time five recent essays by Jacques Derrida, which advance his reflections on many issues: lying, perjury, forgiveness, confession, the profession of faith, and, most recently, cruelty, sovereignty, and capital punishment. Strongly linked by their attention to "performatives" and the "as if," the essays show the necessity of thinking beyond the category of acts that are possible for a subject. Derrida argues forcefully that thought must engage with the im-possible, that is, the order of the unforeseeable event, the absolute future still to come. This acute awareness of the limits of performative programs informs the essays throughout and attunes them closely to events of a world undergoing "globalization." The first essay, "History of the Lie," reviews some classic and modern definitions of the lie (Augustine, Rousseau, Kant, Koyr, Arendt), while renewing questions about what is called lying, as distinguished from other forms of nontruth. This inventive analysis is followed by "Typewriter Ribbon," which examines at length the famous lie recounted by Rousseau in his Confessions, when he perjured himself by accusing another of his own crime. Paul de Mans reading of this textual event is at the center of Derridas patient, at times seriously funny analyses. "Le parjure, Perhaps" engages with a remarkable novel by Henri Thomas that fictionalizes the charge of perjury brought against Paul de Man in the 1950s. Derridas extraordinary fineness as a reader and thinker of fiction here treats, to profound effect, the "fatal experience of perjury." The two final essays, "The University Without Condition" and "Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul," address the institutions of the university and of psychoanalysis as sites from which to resist and deconstruct the nontruth or phantasm of sovereignty. For the university, the principle of truth remains at the core of its resistance; for psychoanalysis, there is the obligation to remain true to what may be, Derrida suggests, its specific insight: into psychic cruelty. Resistance to the sovereign cruelty of the death penalty is just one of the stakes indicated by the last essay, which is the text of a keynote address to the "States General of Psychoanalysis" held in Paris, July 2000. Especially for this volume, Derrida has written "Provocation: Forewords," which reflects on the title Without Alibi while taking up questions about relations between deconstruction and America. This essay-foreword also responds to the event of this book, which Peggy Kamuf in her introduction presents as event of resistance. Without Alibi joins two other books by Derrida that Kamuf has translated for Stanford University Press: *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994* (1994) and *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (1998).