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Un/civil Mourning: Remembering with Jacques Derrida

Michael Warren Tumolo, Jennifer Biedendorf, and Kevin J. Ayotte

The death of philosopher and public intellectual Jacques Derrida drew international attention and generated public acts of mourning in the media. Several of the published obituaries for Derrida are notable for their overtly hostile and dismissive tone. This essay explores the genre of epideictic rhetoric and is grounded in Derrida's work on mourning, analyzing several instances of "uncivil" epideictic rhetoric including three hostile obituaries and several responses to them written by friends and colleagues of Derrida for the insight that they yield regarding ethical public remembrance. We argue that a sincere engagement with the ideas of the dead, while always incomplete, is at the heart of an ethical, civil mourning.

Is my death possible?

—Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*

On October 8, 2004, Jacques Chirac, president of France, announced the passing of Jacques Derrida: "With him, France has given the world one of its greatest contemporary philosophers, one of the major figures of intellectual life of our time" (qtd. in Woo B16). Prominent newspapers took notice and published obituaries for Derrida, which is generally seen as an honor since "journalists see the obituary as largely a mark of status or professional recognition" (Fowler, *Obituary* 121).[1] However,

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[1]The publication outlet also influences the content, which can be seen, for instance, in the different approaches to the obituary taken by editors of the *NYT* and *Le Monde*. In interviews with Bridget Fowler,

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Derrida's praises were not sung unanimously, with several prominent newspaper obituaries departing from conventional eulogistic norms by decrying Derrida and deconstruction. While atypical for the genre of the obituary, the overtly hostile and dismissive tone of these obituaries was not completely unexpected, since "the vilification of deconstruction dates back to the culture wars of the 1980s" (Benjamin). Those battles both spilled over into and, in part, scripted the obituaries for Derrida and the subsequent public responses to them by his friends and intellectual colleagues. Consequently, the obituaries for Derrida demonstrate how these acts of remembrance were less about Derrida's life and intellectual contributions than they were attempts to impart a range of civic lessons to the general public.

In elucidating a provocative set of texts remembering Jacques Derrida, this essay seeks to expand our understanding of the civic functions of epideictic discourse and the ethical dynamics operating in Derrida's work. Used to varying degrees by many critical and cultural studies scholars, Derrida's analyses of language, epistemology, and philosophy have for some time been recognized for their utility in rhetorical theory and criticism (e.g., Biesecker; Desilet; Gunn). And despite the fact that nearly all teachers of public speaking and rhetoric will introduce students to the concept of epideictic discourse, many discussing funerary discourses as examples, the obituary sub-genre is "still academically virgin territory" (Fowler, *Obituary* xi). In this essay, we address these conditions with a close reading of a set of memorial discourses responding to Derrida's death alongside his own discourses of mourning. In his philosophical texts and commemorations of famous scholars and friends, Derrida demonstrates that critical engagement with the dead, while always incomplete, is at the heart of any ethical, civil mourning. This essay argues that mourning civilly requires not the eulogistic praise of a life but robust engagement, even disagreement, with the deceased's ideas. With Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, we agree that "[t]he work or labor of mourning would seem to consist in attempting to dialectize, as Roland Barthes said, the undialectical death, and in so doing, to be faithful by means of betrayal" (24). On this point, Derrida's reflections on the relationship among politics, friendship, and mourning acknowledge that critical interrogation might "betray" the friend as it refuses to validate her or his ideas. Nonetheless, mourning in this fashion would remain true to the spirit of intellectual inquiry represented in the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Moreover, the consideration of "friendship" in this sense involves fidelity both to those whom we "like" affectively and those whose ideas we dislike intensely yet respect as fellow human beings with a right to divergent opinions. We introduce the

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the *NYT* editor emphasized that the newspaper's "decisions are made on news value," emphasizing "people whose lives and careers, well known to the public or not, left a significant lasting imprint for good or ill on those of us who remain among the living" (*Obituary* 116). The paper's criteria for using a particular author for an obituary include "(1) expertise, (2) familiarity with the subject, (3) acquaintance and (4) ability to write—sometimes, not always, ability to deliver soon" (116). In contrast, the editor of *Le Monde* indicated that her paper's obituaries stressed "'objectivity,' over and above the journalists' individual styles," adding that "'it is a question above all of retracing a life, a career, a passage in the most objectively possible manner without being either hagiographic or negative'" (112).

term *uncivil mourning* to designate discursive acts that approach death as an opportune moment for advancing supplementary claims without engaging the ideas of the deceased. That some of Derrida's obituaries opportunistically seize on the moment of death and/or fail to facilitate ongoing dialogue will be the crux of their uncivil character.

In the first two sections, we discuss the genre of epideictic rhetoric and Derrida's theory of mourning. This essay draws broadly on Derrida's work and on recent secondary literature to help understand his ongoing negotiations of the role of ethical mourning in civil discourse. The third section offers a reading of three hostile obituaries of Derrida published in two major newspapers and one magazine—the *New York Times* (*NYT*), the *Wall Street Journal* (*WSJ*), and *The Economist*. Our reading locates several common themes in the obituaries that, taken together, indicate a series of anxieties for which Derrida stands surrogate. The editorial decision by the *NYT*, in particular, to run an overtly negative obituary sounded an alarm for scholars sympathetic to Derrida, many of whom publicized their own hostile reactions directed against that newspaper's editors. What resulted was a different, although not always more civil, public mourning, which is the subject of the fourth section of this essay. In contrast to published objections to the negative obituaries, whose primary purposes were to challenge the detractors and recuperate Derrida's ideas, we examine how this rhetorical situation offers guidance toward a more civil mourning. The final section of the essay seeks to remember *with* Derrida, asking how and with what consequences one might respond differently to his passing while paying special attention to the ethical dimensions of friendship and mourning.

Epideictic Rhetoric Commemorating Death

According to Aristotle's original categorization of the three genres of rhetoric, epideictic discourse is concerned with the present and draws on the common values of its audience while emphasizing the audience's judgment of the speaker's performance (1367b30). In his translation, George Kennedy characterizes epideictic rhetoric as oratory that does not "call for any immediate action by the audience but that characteristically praise[s] or blame[s] some person or thing, often on a ceremonial occasion such as a public funeral or holiday" (7). Unlike the audience member for deliberative and forensic rhetoric who judges [*kritēs*] legislative proposals or legal claims, Aristotle describes the audience member for epideictic rhetoric as a spectator [*theoros*] who judges the speaker or speech to be worthy of praise or blame (Aristotle 1358b3; Chase 295).

Epideictic rhetoric has long been considered an inferior, even if common and perhaps socially necessary, form of discourse. Having been associated with "sophism and sophistry from its very beginnings," Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard explains, "epideictic discourse was burdened from the start by suspicions of the speaker's self-indulgence and opportunism, his manipulation of audience sentiments, and his distance from the interests of the community" (767–768). Such views have

contributed to a general dismissal of the epideictic genre as "irrelevant and gratuitous display" that places style over substance (Rollins, "Ethics" 7). Plato, for instance, condemned the Athenian funeral oration in the *Menexenus* on the grounds that soaring rhetoric was used to exalt an ordinary life by pandering to the audience's vain desire to hear one of its own praised (Loraux 267–270, 314). In fact, Roman rhetoricians eventually dismissed epideictic discourse to the discipline of grammar, seeing in ceremonial speaking merely the repetition of well-worn aesthetic forms (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 48; Loraux 223).

Epideictic performances have received a warmer reception from contemporary rhetorical scholars, many of whom redeem the genre for the civic functions that it performs. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell demonstrate through their analysis of eulogies for major political figures that deliberative appeals on behalf of specific public policies can sometimes be embedded in memorial speeches. Jamieson and Campbell frame such discourse as a "rhetorical hybrid," wherein the distinct genres of epideictic and deliberative oratory may be combined when deliberative advocacy is "consistent with and contribute[s] to the goals of the eulogy" (150). The theory of rhetorical hybrids usefully explains the potentially complementary work of these two genres, but Jamieson and Campbell still treat epideictic and deliberative as separate genres, the overlapping of which is "transitory and situation-bound" (150). By contrast, Lawrence Rosenfield argues that epideictic rhetoric always does more than invite spectatorship—it invites us, individually and collectively, to become something new, to form a sense of community, to internalize collective virtues (242). Brooke Rollins argues that such scholarship presents epideictic rhetoric as a "utilitarian double for deliberative oratory" and highlights the genre's presumed role of creating a sense of unity and social cohesion for political communities (19; see also Danisch 292). Beyond a potential for leveraging support for specific policy options, these latter approaches present epideictic rhetoric as involving both the simple act of spectators praising or blaming a cultural moment, practice, or person, and the more complex acts of constituting, reconstituting, or reinforcing what it means to be a citizen. As Bradford Vivian observes, "[w]hether in somber elegies or celebratory tributes, epideictic organizes the terms of public remembrance in order to shape perceptions of shared values and commitments serviceable to future deliberative agendas" (65). Such cultural and political work is acutely displayed in epideictic discourses commemorating death.

In ancient Greece, the ceremonial orations delivered at public funerals created the occasion to pay tribute to the dead while simultaneously reinforcing the values of the community. Nicole Loraux argues that the "political nature" (16) of the Athenian funeral oration suggests that it should not be understood as epideictic at all, since, "[a]part from the few very brief allusions [to the dead], the funeral oration generally prefers to develop at length . . . the immortality of civic glory" (37). In effect, the praise of the dead and of the Athenian audience took on an exhortative quality, serving as "a lesson in civic morality intended for the living" as much as a display of public grief (Loraux 98). For our part, we are less concerned with

the generic categorization of memorial discourse than with the need to understand better the political and ethical implications of mourning, and this rhetorical work is not limited to the classical funeral oration. Amos Kiewe demonstrates how eulogies "function beyond commemorating the deeds of the dead" by invoking the "emotional state of loss and the memories of the deceased . . . to rhetorically instruct, educate, guide, and motivate" as part of a process of "crafting stable and stabilizing public memories" and hence of creating a more cohesive community consistent with a society's values (250–51).

As a type of written eulogy, the obituary is a sub-genre of epideictic discourse that responds to the occasion of death in the public record. Obituaries create and distribute memory, often in the form of eulogistic praise, to ease the grief of the bereaved while enabling communal reconstitution. Obituaries, sociologist Bridget Fowler explains, invite readers to empathize with great people while "elucidating the inheritance left behind to the nation" and functioning as "weather vanes of popular antagonisms" that "serve to crystallize memory images for collective remembering—and forgetting" (*Obituary* 55). Scholars may therefore turn to obituaries as a potent resource for understanding the cultural history and values of an era. Examining the rhetorical framework and content of over 8,000 newspaper obituaries published in the United States between 1818 and 1930, Janice Hume observes that obituaries commemorate the dead in ways that reflect and reveal prevailing cultural and political norms, particularly those involving "issues of virtue and exclusion" (12). As such, Hume notes, obituaries perform the dual functions of vernacular and official remembrance by publishing "memories of individual lives with generational, or family, memory" while reflecting "American collective memory" (12). The "obituary distills, publishes, and thus legitimizes something more abstract than mere facts" about the deceased, making the obituary function "not just as an indifferent chronicle but as a commemoration, a representation of an ideal, with its own distinct contribution to the understanding of history" (14). Fowler similarly explains that obituaries "mould collective memory" (*Obituary* 10) insofar as they operate as "a semi-ritualized nexus of ethical, political and professional worlds" that grieve while offering "a verdict, derived from professional peers, about the worth of the dead person's contribution" ("Collective Memory" 61). Although the obituary is most commonly expressed as a eulogy, there also are instances of the rarer "negative obituary" that "effectively undercuts the obit's ostensible objective" of praising the deceased (*Obituary* 18).

Regardless of the eulogistic or dyslogistic intent of those in mourning, the content of mourning in general and the obituary in particular is not normatively prescribed and can include a host of affects and practices that range from sadness and lamentation to a will to community or even elation.[2] Thus, discursive remembrances of the

[2]On this point, Joshua Gunn locates a type of dyspeptic mourning in the "public mêlée between smug journalists denouncing Derrida's playful, poststructuralist prose at the event of his passing, and outraged academics defending his intellectual legacy and humane character, [which] reenacts the Freudian allegory of

dead perform the "work" of mourning, even if their mourning is dismissive, hostile, solipsistic, or narcissistic. This work must be understood as rhetorical, as the writing and reading of obituaries, initially effected in but not limited to language, seek to establish attitudes toward the dead, mourning in general, and the community of the living. Our concern with the obituaries for Jacques Derrida is thus motivated by recognition of the ethical and political consequences of the modes of remembering encouraged by those texts and the responses to them. Before considering the remembrances occasioned by Derrida's death, however, we turn to the philosopher's own efforts at ethical commemoration.

Derrida's Epideictic: Lessons on Mourning

Derrida was, as Brooke Rollins notes, "one of our most accomplished and sensitive epideictic orators" whose eulogies "point towards an ethical imperative inhering in the genre of epideictic oratory" (11–12). Derrida himself offers a series of reflections on how to mourn ethically and responsibly in *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of obituaries, eulogies, letters, and essays that he wrote to mourn the death of prominent scholars and friends. Those mourned include Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas, with some of whom Derrida carried on intellectual disagreements. As this series of epideictic discourses illustrates, Derrida was acutely aware of the dangers posed by the obituary genre for those who mourn. His epideictic discourses reflect the great aporia of death in which writers and readers alike are forced to confront the (im)possibility of remembering with language that is resolutely unable to represent adequately the depth and complexity of the deceased's life and work. As Brault and Naas remark, "There is surely a kind of infidelity in the biography or obituary, which tries to encapsulate a life, to reduce the dead to their accomplishments, to a series of dates and places" (21). No matter the breadth of the obituary's account, the summation must always be partial, incomplete, something less than the deceased was, and is, for us.

In his memorial text for Barthes, Derrida considers as the "worst ones" those rhetors whose responses to death evince the desire to "maneuver, to speculate, to try to profit or derive some benefit, . . . to draw from the dead a supplementary force to be turned against the living, to denounce or insult them more or less directly, to authorize and legitimate oneself" (Derrida, "Roland Barthes" 51). Derrida's condemnation does not, however, entail a prohibition against disagreement with the deceased's ideas. Derrida himself mourns these thinkers through acts of repetition, explanation, and criticism. However, he argues that the mourner has the responsibility of carefully attending to the thought of and reasoning dialectically *with* the dead. Drawing a parallel to Aristotle's writings on epideictic rhetoric, Rollins argues

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primal horde: the exiled sons, desiring equality and resentful of the father's control over women (knowledge), band together, kill the father, and eat him. 'As soon as they kill and devour the deceased father,' explains Laurence Rickels, 'they double over with indigestion . . . and thus they find that they must also mourn him, that they are already mourning him'" (Gunn 96).

that Derrida's epideictic discourses mourning the deaths of scholars and friends "intervene strategically in order to respond to texts rather than to appropriate them" (12).

Derrida brings to light the obituary's hazards and offenses with regard to speaking both about the dead and about our relations to them. Derrida's memorial texts for deceased friends expose the risk that mourning might become a vehicle for narcissism—showing itself as self-pity or an attempt at asking for forgiveness (Brault and Naas 7). Under such circumstances, mourning is reduced not to a remembering of the other but a solipsistic use of the other's death as a means to expiate one's own guilt. What then does it mean to mourn the texts and questions of the deceased (un)faithfully yet responsibly? For Derrida, this question emerges in the issues of citation and representation. Derrida's work interrogates whether "we cite merely to repeat the words of the other," a kind of consolation of our loss by ventriloquising the voice that we no longer hear, or whether we cite to "reenact an inimitable gesture, a singular way of thinking, a unique way of speaking" that would instead celebrate the impossibility of adequately representing the other (Brault and Naas 22). Derrida recognizes that an

> excess of fidelity would end up saying and exchanging nothing. It returns to death. . . . On the other hand, by avoiding all quotation, all identification, all rapprochement even . . . one risks making him disappear again. . . . We are left then with having to do and not do both at once, with having to correct one infidelity by the other. (Derrida, "Roland Barthes" 45)

Derrida's remembrances of others suggest that there is a double imperative involved in citing the words of the deceased. It involves the duty to let deceased friends go while carrying on a conversation with their ideas, leaving them "alone without abandoning" them (Derrida, "Lyotard" 225; see also Brault and Naas 24).

In his mourning of Barthes, Derrida addresses this double-bind of speaking with and for the deceased other while remaining faithful to both the other's and our ideas:

> I was searching *like him*, as him, for in the situation in which I have been writing since his death, a certain mimetism is at once a duty (to take him into oneself, to identify with him in order to let him speak within oneself, to make him present and faithfully to represent him) and the worst of temptations, the most indecent and most murderous. . . . Like him, I was looking for the *freshness* of a reading in relation to detail. (Derrida, "Roland Barthes" 38)

By suggesting a responsibility to engage and re-engage with these thinkers and their works, Derrida offers a conceptualization of mourning that, at its core, is a transformative process. As a site of potential transformation, civil mourning must maintain a sense of undecidability that defers claims of absolute knowledge of the other so that remembrance may promote ethical growth rather than perpetuate a backward-looking melancholy mired only in grief. In seeking an alternative to the

"worst" approaches to remembering the dead while extending current understandings of the political and cultural work performed by epideictic rhetoric, we turn now to the hostile obituaries written after the death of Jacques Derrida.

Uncivil Mourning: The Burden of Reading

It should come as no surprise that major U.S. newspapers and magazines carried prominent obituaries remembering Derrida. When world-renowned scholars pass on, some rituals of mourning are performed in highly publicized contexts by people far beyond the deceased's immediate family, colleagues, and friends. Yet, the epideictic discourses responding to Derrida's death are particularly noteworthy for the distinctly uncivil mourning performed by both critics and supporters. Extending upon Derrida's insistence that ethically responsible mourning must abjure an appropriative will to knowledge of the deceased other, we conceptualize civility as the vital rhetorical characteristic of such ethically responsible mourning. Civil rhetoric in this sense respects the irreducible alterity of the other by refusing a singular or final interpretive claim in favor of an indefinite openness to public dialogue. Civil mourning, then, would not necessarily involve decorous praise of the deceased[3] but instead would answer the call to remember by encountering the deceased's ideas and facilitating ongoing conversation about them. That civility entails a commitment to pluralism does not mean that civility lacks boundaries, however. For the term to be useful, it serves as a liminal marker indicating which attitudes, beliefs, and practices are included and which are excluded from the category "civility." The uncivil is characterized by polemic commentary or cynicism designed to undermine or arrest the productive dialogue necessary for the negotiation of difference. "Uncivil mourning," then, describes a utilitarian impulse to use death as a kairotic moment for advancing supplemental political or ideological agendas rather than a rigorous engagement of ideas.

In identifying several of the obituaries and responses to them as examples of uncivil mourning, we contend that the obituaries offer an opportunity to reflect on important facets of contemporary U.S. culture. Critical analysis of this mourning discourse yields a better understanding of the ways in which epideictic rhetoric—civil or not—constitutes community in both positive and negative ways. We now turn to a discussion of three obituaries that, we argue, demonstrate degrees of uncivil mourning. Specifically, we examine four prominent critical themes in the obituaries that collectively suggest a set of dispositions and cultural anxieties toward

[3]Uncritical defense of decorum as a standard for public discourse has been rightly questioned by Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud as sometimes insulating the powerful from criticism. A full engagement with the nuances of that critique of the potentially silencing effects of calls for "civil" discourse, which may rule legitimate and necessary protest against injustice outside the bounds of decorum, is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we want to endorse that project of reflecting on the ideological assumptions and consequences of language use while preserving a critical space that utilizes concepts like "civil discourse" that demand ongoing critique even as they remain necessary (see Spivak, "Translator's Preface" xiv).

deconstruction and the politics of knowledge more generally. The subsequent section then discusses a set of responses sympathetic to Derrida that, despite displaying a more generous attitude toward the deceased, likewise perform a kind of uncivil mourning characterized by cynicism. Recognizing both the hostile obituaries and sympathetic responses as instances of uncivil mourning brings into sharper relief the ethical requirements of a more civil mourning informed by Derrida's own practices of public remembrance.

The four prominent themes held in common by the obituaries for Derrida in the *NYT, WSJ*, and *The Economist* allege that Derrida's philosophy lacks merit, that it promotes nihilism or moral relativism, that it is blameworthy for Derrida's association with Paul de Man and Martin Heidegger, and that it invites academic demagoguery. The first prominent theme disputes the philosophical validity of Derrida's work through three interrelated charges regarding the complexity of Derrida's writing, his reluctance to define "deconstruction," and his allegedly deceitful use of convoluted prose to obscure a lack of content. The logic behind the first charge is that compositional clarity and accessibility bespeak philosophical validity and their stylistic opposites belie scholarly merit. In fairness, Derrida's writing style can be difficult; however, there is also no necessary correspondence between stylistic accessibility and philosophical value. The parsimonious may be banal and the complex profound. Nonetheless, the charge regarding Derrida's style becomes increasingly more vitriolic as the obituaries center on deconstruction and Derrida's presumed deceitfulness. The obituaries take aim at Derrida's reluctance to reduce deconstruction, which holds as a central tenet the impossibility of capturing exhaustively any meaning in the language system, to a pithy definition. After charging deconstruction with "robbing texts . . . of truthfulness, absolute meaning and permanence," Jonathan Kandell's *NYT* obituary momentarily considers how some objectives of deconstruction (e.g., to make visible the limitations of language's ability to communicate precise meaning) might bear upon a writer's style. He quotes Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*: "when he [Derrida] is wary, he's never difficult for its own sake but because his philosophical positions make him that way" (49). Rather than ending here and leaving readers with the notion that deconstruction, or any learned perspective, engenders particular modes of discourse, this concession is immediately undercut by the inclusion of one of Derrida's "frostily" delivered answers to an interviewer's question in 1998 that makes the philosopher sound merely petulant and arrogant: "Why don't you ask a physicist or a mathematician about difficulty? . . . Deconstruction requires work" (49). Confronted by the opportunity for civil mourning through the engagement of Derrida's extended responses to this exact charge (see, for example, Derrida, "*Honoris Causa*" 406), Kandell instead elides the very existence of that ongoing conversation.

The Economist and *WSJ* obituaries, more than Kandell's in the *NYT*, epitomize the work of uncivil mourning by avoiding even a superficial engagement with Derrida's writings while invoking stylistic concerns to denounce Derrida's

entire corpus. Roger Kimball asserts in the *WSJ* that Derrida's complicated writing style is actually a strategy of deception, leading adherents to wrongly consider deconstruction as a theoretical innovation. He writes, "deconstruction comes with a lifetime guarantee to render discussion of any subject completely unintelligible. It does this by linguistic subterfuge" (D6). *The Economist* offers the most blatant example of a willful refusal to engage the philosopher's work in advancing the claim that Derrida's writing style purposefully obscures the work's lack of substance. It leverages its attack on Derrida's writing by citing a public letter opposing Cambridge University awarding Derrida an honorary doctorate in 1992, dismissing the faculty's majority support of the award and averring the critics' portrayal of Derrida's work as "absurd, vapid and pernicious" ("Jacques Derrida" 89).

Kimball's *WSJ* obituary argues that Derrida's philosophical ideas lack merit by asserting that his intellectual status "has been fiercely contested ever since Mr. Derrida burst onto the intellectual scene in the mid-1960s" (D6). Kimball's snide tone displays disregard for Derrida's work, as when he declares that "[a]cademics on the lookout for a trendy intellectual and moral high-explosive tended to love Mr. Derrida. The rest of us felt . . . otherwise." The ellipsis is presented as a more decorous substitution for some term of derision that cannot be uttered explicitly at the risk of sounding gleeful about Derrida's death. He seeks to maintain this appearance of decorum when he cites the Latin "*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*" (let us not speak ill of the dead) only to add that "Jacques Derrida is dead. Let us not speak ill of him. But his ideas are still very much alive. They deserve unstinting criticism from anyone who cares about the moral fabric of intellectual life" (D6). By positioning these hostile obituaries as doing the work of protecting a presumed moral foundation of the scholarly world, Kimball affirms our claim that the obituary offers communal lessons to readers about what constitutes appropriate intellectual culture. Moreover, the hostile obituaries demonstrate uncivil mourning not merely through their failure to engage the wealth of debates regarding the stylistic form of Derrida's writing, but additionally in their tenor of having performed last rites on any viewpoint other than their own. It is the finality of interpretation that is ultimately uncivil.

The second theme emerging from these obituaries extrapolates a necessary moral relativism and thoroughgoing nihilism from deconstruction's insistence upon the undecidability of meaning in any final sense. *The Economist* and *WSJ* obituaries characterize Derrida as a proponent of a truth-less world marked by the "nihilistic tenets of deconstruction" (Kimball D6) and "the undisciplined nihilism of his imitators" ("Jacques Derrida" 89). Kimball warns that deconstruction is "an attack on the cogency of language and the moral and intellectual claims that language has codified in tradition" and is designed to emancipate adherents from "the responsibilities of truth" while offering "the prospect of engaging in a species of radical activism" (D6). In support of their assertions, neither *The Economist* nor the *WSJ* offer a single quotation, citation, or specific paraphrase to introduce readers to the extended scholarly debate around these claims. Even a half-hearted encounter with Derrida's

ideas might note the admission in Kimball's own language that such cherished ideas are in fact products that have been "codified" and are therefore subject to reasonable inquiry regarding how they came to be considered truths. Again, the point here is not to rehash that debate but to note the elision of it; these obituaries ignore the myriad responses by Derrida and others and do not offer newspaper audiences any grounds for their conclusions. Rather, these obituaries approached Derrida's death as a kairotic moment that could be exploited to indict deconstruction without engaging seriously the ideas of the deceased. In refusing the possibility of a viable philosophical perspective that challenges the epistemological certainty of their own, these obituaries renounce the openness to transformation that would mark civil mourning.

The third common theme attempts to discredit Derrida due to his friendship with and defense of Paul de Man and his association with Martin Heidegger's philosophy. While at Harvard in 1955, de Man was anonymously denounced for his wartime journalism in Belgium. During the inquiry, de Man explained that his move to the United States required a "'*certificat de civisime*' which stated one was cleared of any collaboration" (qtd. in McQuillan 108–109). Interest subsided in the intervening years when he taught at universities including Yale, Johns Hopkins, Bard, and Cornell. Following his death in 1983, public scrutiny resurfaced regarding essays he wrote from 1940–1941 for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*, including "Jews in Contemporary Literature" in which he makes several anti-Semitic statements. This issue emerges in Derrida's obituaries because de Man was a famous proponent of deconstruction in the United States. In the *NYT*, Kandell notes that some of de Man's colleagues saw this controversy as an attempt to "discredit deconstruction by people who were always hostile to the movement." However, he adds, "Derrida gave fodder to critics by defending Mr. de Man, and even using literary deconstruction techniques in an attempt to demonstrate that the Belgian scholar's newspaper articles were not really anti-Semitic" (49). The de Man case, Kimball's *WSJ* obituary concluded, "cast a permanent shadow over deconstruction's status as a supposed instrument of intellectual liberation" (D6). Rather than cite any of Derrida's own writing on the subject, Kandell remains content to quote Mark Lilla's judgment in *The New York Review of Books* that "Mr. Derrida's contortionist defense of his old friend left 'the impression that deconstruction means you never have to say you're sorry'" (qtd. in Kandell 49).

Kandell further connected the controversy around de Man to Derrida's alleged failure "to condemn Heidegger's fascist ideas," given that Derrida had long identified Heidegger as important to his own philosophy (49). Kandell does not mention either Derrida's book-length treatment of Heidegger's Nazism (*Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*) or Derrida's explicit condemnation of Heidegger's support of the National Socialist regime ("Heidegger, the Philosopher's Hell"). *The Economist*'s obituary synthesizes a relationship among these first three themes, charging that Derrida's "convoluted rhetoric" regarding de Man and Heidegger proves suspicions that "the playful evasiveness of deconstruction masked its moral and intellectual

bankruptcy" ("Jacques Derrida" 89). Also declining to quote or paraphrase Derrida, *The Economist* similarly cited Lilla's quip for its only reference on either matter.

The fourth shared theme in the obituaries claims that Derrida's work has produced a type of intellectual demagoguery. Kimball notes that "the nihilistic tenets of deconstruction have cropped up" beyond philosophy and literature departments to include "departments of history, sociology, political science and architecture; in law schools and—God help us—business schools" (D6). Kandell is more direct on this point when he states, "[f]or young, ambitious professors, his teachings became a springboard to tenure in faculties dominated by senior colleagues and older, shopworn philosophies. For many students, deconstruction was a rite of passage into the world of rebellious intellect" (49). *The Economist* similarly laments that Derrida was, "unfortunately, one of the most cited modern scholars in the humanities" before asserting that Derrida's work gave teachers of literature in the United States an "impenetrable new vocabulary" that enabled them to "masquerade as social, political and philosophical critics" without the need to "master any rigorous thought" ("Jacques Derrida" 89). The critique here reads that Derrida's work either cast a spell on students, professors, and entire intellectual disciplines, mesmerizing them into doing deconstruction's bidding, or that followers of Derrida and deconstruction are merely opportunistic career essayists using the newest fad to build job security or prestige. In either case, the hostile obituaries rely upon the uncivil premise that Derrida's work already had nothing to offer, at once affirming the singular "truth" of the obituaries while simultaneously denying the very possibility of "rigorous thought" by their philosophical others.

Taken together, these themes suggest a series of anxieties surrounding both the philosophical execution and practical consequences of Derrida's thought. There is anxiety over a loss of meaning in the context of pluralism, which meets its extreme representation in philosophies that find meaning and truth in singular or local contexts and experiences. There is a fear of both the freedom and the responsibility that emerges from such a worldview. His critics fear that his philosophical perspective would allow for any abuse to be justified and responsibility to be evacuated from the realm of human affairs. Derrida's own work on mourning comes to the opposite conclusion, namely that the notion of responsibility demands accountability to all others when we think, act, and judge in the world. We consider further Derrida's answers to the aforementioned anxieties as we turn next to the responses to these negative obituaries presented by sympathetic friends and scholars.

Uncivil Mourning: Sympathy without Engagement

Of the critical obituaries published upon Derrida's death, Jonathan Kandell's in the *NYT* drew the most ire. With the *NYT* still considered the official record of noteworthy events and newsworthy deaths in the United States, colleagues and supporters of the late philosopher reported a sense of betrayal as they sought to amend that

record. Ross Benjamin explains that "even though American papers had scorned and trivialized Derrida before, the tone seemed particularly caustic for an obituary of an internationally acclaimed philosopher who had profoundly influenced two generations of American humanities scholars." A number of scholars wrote responses in the form of individual and collectively signed letters to the editor, representing the views of a broader community of sympathetic mourners. These responses lament Derrida's death and attack the *NYT* obituary, thus participating in the ritual of public mourning.

Criticisms of Kandell's article addressed its tone, content, and publication venue. Recurring across many of these letters is a rebuke of Kandell's perceived failure to maintain the eulogistic decorum expected of the genre, sometimes additionally inflected by condemnation of Kandell's intent. Samuel Weber and Kenneth Reinhard's letter (published online) labels Kandell's obituary "mean-spirited and uninformed," motivated by "scarcely concealed xenophobia," and an "injustice" to the paper's readership.[4] Others attack Kandell's obituary as "vitriolic and disparaging" and "most outrageous" (Butler), "ungracious and ill-informed" (Engle), "crude, even slanderous[,] . . . a slur" (Gelley), "full of innuendo and nasty asides[,] . . . an anti-intellectual rant" (J. Scott), "scurrilous" (Spivak), and an instance of "the all too familiar celebration of ignorance" (Weed). The collective letter by University of California, Irvine, faculty, students, and staff charged the *NYT* with "shabbily misrepresenting the life and achievements of a great thinker, a most generous teacher, and a courteous human being." Their letter closes with "regret that the *New York Times* was willing to publish an obituary that feels like an insult at a moment when people around the world are mourning one of the greatest thinkers of our time." Although often framed as an objection to Kandell's alleged misrepresentation of Derrida's ideas, the tenor of these responses evinces feelings of grief and loss by those who knew Derrida personally or respected him highly as a thinker despite intellectual disagreements.

Comments in a few letters rise to the level of *ad personam* attacks against Kandell's intelligence and character, suggesting that his "intellectual limitations [are] so obvious" (Butler) and that he is merely "a free-lance writer of dubious reputation" (J. Scott). One scholar labels Kandell's obituary as "full of filth" and representative of "stupidity" (Bois). Extending the indictment of Kandell to a critique of anti-intellectualism in the United States, Suzanne Guerlac asserted, "With brazen disrespect and deep misunderstanding, Jonathan Kandell's obituary of Derrida has reinforced the current tone of simple-minded reaction and self-satisfaction that has seized American political culture today." We believe that these remarks purportedly intended to defend Derrida do not contribute to mourning Derrida well. They are perhaps viscerally satisfying for some, but more significant to the work of

[4]These pointed criticisms by Weber and Reinhard are included in the online version of the letter but were excluded from the print version published by the *NYT*.

mourning is the extent of these letters' encounter with the philosophical questions that constitute so much of Derrida's legacy for those who remain.

The letters cited above seek to recuperate Derrida's memory by praising both his character as a human being and the merits of his work. Considering these letters through the framework of mourning that Derrida himself articulated, those moments when the obituary authors offer a degree of engagement with Derrida's ideas—even if only to deny Kandell's specific charges—are more important than the eulogistic celebration of the deceased. Addressing the characterization of Derrida's writing style as "turgid and baffling," Alexander Gelley argues that his "exacting and scrupulous attention to the way language is used . . . is complicated and cannot be caught in a label or slogan." Stephen Melville's letter offers the most extensive meditation on the role of written form in Derrida's philosophical argument. Melville demonstrates fidelity to Derrida's memory by seriously explaining the philosopher's project in terms that should be accessible to much of the *NYT*'s audience. Describing Derrida's concern "both with a philosophic problem of a relatively familiar kind about the structure of experience and, as an essential part of that problem, a special problem about philosophy's capacity to account for or acknowledge its own writing," Melville explains that "[i]t's this nesting of problems that drives Derrida's writing in both its difficulty and its playfulness and experimentation." Of the sympathetic letters to the editor, Melville's comes closest to the thoughtful and self-reflexive encounter we have labeled civil mourning.

Nonetheless, although his own work on mourning made clear that simply citing the dead is not sufficient for remembering well, the absence of references in these letters to specific texts where Derrida himself speaks to this theme represents a missed opportunity. Mourning Derrida might have been better accomplished with a brief demonstration of the indeterminacy of meaning decried in Kandell's obituary. Weber and Reinhard's letter does make use of Kandell's *New York Times Magazine* article quotation stating that "[m]any otherwise unmalicious people have in fact been guilty of wishing for deconstruction's demise—if only to relieve themselves of the burden of trying to understand it" to lament pointedly that Kandell's dismissive caricature "relieves readers of the burden of trying to understand" Derrida ("Homage" A26). Their sarcastic citation of Kandell stops short of interrogating whether he meant the quote as a confirmation of Derrida's burdensome style or validation that some find such burdens worthwhile. Around this indeterminacy in Kandell's text, Weber and Reinhard might have made their point about Kandell's argument and simultaneously done justice to Derrida's memory by demonstrating for *NYT* readers the slipperiness of linguistic meaning. They might have remembered with Derrida that style always has a point, always takes a position. This is not to say that just any stylistic artifice is helpful—anyone who has taken the time to read Derrida's "Circumfession" (Bennington and Derrida) must admit that, while there might be some interesting nuggets therein, the style is taxing. But that was in part the point, and if one is to grapple seriously with the tasks of thinking with

Derrida and mourning well, we should eschew off-handedly dismissing a seemingly arduous style of writing.[5] Language *is* arduous. So must be mourning.

Other letters respond to the implied link between the difficulty of Derrida's writing style and mischaracterizations of deconstruction or the uses to which Derrida put it. Whether acknowledging the conventions and limitations of news writing or imputing recalcitrance, the UC–Irvine writers admit that they "cannot expect the *New York Times* to devote pages to repairing the mistakes." So they correct two of Kandell's characterizations with journalistic brevity, noting that "yes, it is possible to misinterpret; no, deconstruction does not say that texts are confused and can mean anything you like." Although the conciseness of the newspaper medium does not allow for an extended discussion, the absence of an invitation to read, for example, *Speech and Phenomena*, where Derrida writes at length about the inevitability of meaning despite its ultimate undecidability in any objective sense (93), constitutes a remembrance inadequate to the spirit of engaged dialogue that would be civil mourning. Against Kandell's claim that Derrida gave short shrift to the classics of Western literature and philosophy, others pointed out that "Derrida wrestled with central works of the Western tradition, including Plato, Shakespeare, and the Declaration of Independence, none of which he slighted" (Weber and Reinhard, "Homage" A26). Yet, mourning (un)faithful to Derrida's work cannot be comprised solely of assertions contradicting Kandell's obituary; none of these sympathetic letters seek to immerse readers in Derrida's readings of those classics of Western literature and the philosophical arguments he was testing by way of those linguistic peregrinations.

The letters criticizing Kandell's obituary remain silent regarding the charges that Derrida's critique of objective meaning necessitates nihilism and disables any ethical stance against ideologies such as Nazism. This silence is odd given that these accusations are arguably the most serious and are both extrapolations from the core theoretical premise that one needs fixed truth to act responsibly. More than casting superficial aspersions about his writing style or admirers, these charges raise substantive questions about the political consequences of Derrida's philosophical project. Instead of engaging these accusations, one response addresses the controversy regarding Paul de Man by simply suggesting that Kandell failed to do his "homework" (Bois). Yet, none of the letters refute the theoretical premise of these charges, that confidence in an objective truth secured through stable linguistic meaning is a precondition for political action or ethical judgment. More importantly, none of the letters demand of Kandell or readers of the *NYT* a reckoning with Derrida's own exploration of exactly that core premise (Derrida, *Specters* 29–30; Derrida, *Limited Inc.* 116). Although an exhaustive treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, Derrida emphatically explains that deconstruction

[5]As Derrida makes clear, playing with language is not an end in itself but rather one of the means to illustrate an argument in the philosophy of language. He disavows as "a pathology or a linguistic dysfunction . . . language games which the philosopher would take seriously without perceiving what, in the functioning of language, makes the game possible" ("Sending" 319).

> does not stop one from calculating strategies and taking decisions or responsibilities. . . . [I]t is to the extent that knowledge does not program everything in advance, to the extent that knowledge remains suspended and undecided as to action, . . . will never be measured . . . by a clear and distinct certainty or by a theoretical judgment, that there can and must be responsibility or decision, be they ethical or political. (Derrida, "Politics and Friendship" 212)

Without recourse to the certainty of an objective metaphysical Truth outside of human design—whether a divine edict, the telos of a philosophy like classical Marxism, or some other absolute standard—one must take personal responsibility for the consequences of her or his actions (or inaction). By contrast, the availability of certainty or objective Truth, in Derrida's view, allows the abdication of responsibility when one can justify any act by declaring that it was demanded by God, the State, history, honor, and so on. Only when faced with the impossibility of relying on a Truth outside of ourselves can we be said to be fully responsible for the choices we make in acting or refusing to act (Derrida, *The Gift*; cf. R. Scott 16–17).

By deciding not to address Derrida's extensive treatment of the ethics and politics of deconstruction, Kandell and Kimball as well as Derrida's sympathizers deny a public remembrance of Derrida's warning that the certainty of objective Truth is itself too often the cause of ethico-political monstrosities. In Derrida's words, the ultimate undecidability of meaning "can do harm and do evil, it is no doubt the very possibility of evil. But without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps, beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst" (*Specters* 29). The unavailability of objective Truth to guide behavior obviously allows for the possibility that people will choose to act selfishly and hurtfully, but the conviction that one is acting in accord with allegedly absolute Truth has also been used to justify innumerable atrocities such as those committed by the Soviet state apparatus under Stalin (*Specters* 88). Myriad variations on this theme—the deployment of Manifest Destiny to warrant colonial genocide against Native Americans, Christian doctrine to legitimize the Crusades, extremist Islam to mobilize al Qaeda's terrorism—offer additional examples of Derrida's claim that the very ideas of certainty and objective Truth too often excuse individuals from serious ethical reflection by deflecting the responsibility for action outside of the acting agent. None of the obituaries, nor the responses to them, reflect on these issues.

The uncivil obituaries in the *NYT, WSJ,* and *The Economist* appear to violate even ordinary expectations of what it means to mourn and remember well. This does not, however, mean that we must judge as necessarily ethical, civil, or responsible those epideictic rhetorics that speak favorably of the deceased or denounce previous instances of uncivil mourning. The series of letters written by scholars in response to the uncivil *NYT* obituary sought to honor a friend and scholar, but they do not necessarily advance the work of mourning understood by Derrida as demanding a rigorous engagement with the ideas of the dead. These letters do respond, in very limited fashion, to some of the broad argumentative themes displayed across the obituaries. However, rather than sustaining such responses, the majority of the

letters display a cynical attitude maintaining that there is no use in refuting Kandell's alleged ignorance and misrepresentation. Several of the responses, including Weber and Reinhard's with its thousands of online signatories, do explicitly fault Kandell for so obviously having failed to read, or read carefully, Derrida's scholarship. Yet, as demonstrated above, these letters admonishing Kandell and the *NYT* themselves offer remarkably little engagement with Derrida's thought by way of direct reference or deployment of deconstructive readings, even as they eulogize the philosopher and his project in the abstract.

Civil Mourning: Remembering with Friendship

Civility, or that condition in which citizens may negotiate differences, cannot happen when participants in public discourse willfully misrepresent opposing views for tactical efficiency in the pursuit of their political or ideological objectives. By contrast, we have sought to demonstrate the possibility of thoughtful conversations about the intellectual and cultural anxieties presented in these obituaries by thinking *with*, rather than merely for or against, Jacques Derrida. As discussed in the previous sections, those mourning Derrida in several prominent obituaries either willfully avoided reading Derrida or willfully refused to engage what they did read. Deference to the journalistic brevity generally expected of newspaper articles also fails to explain the largely one-sided treatment of Derrida's work in these obituaries. The authors took the time to cite and explicate the objections to Derrida's work, but, almost without exception, only the objections.

We recognize that the space available in an academic journal provides an opportunity for citation and reflection on Derrida's thinking that far exceeds what is allotted to a newspaper obituary. Nonetheless, an opinion article by Mark Taylor published in the *NYT* a few days after Kandell's obituary demonstrates that newspaper obituaries can, in fact, do justice to complex thought while performing a more civil mourning. Without rancor or trivialization, Taylor acknowledges that the broad range of concerns thematized across the aforementioned obituaries all connect to an "important criticism," that Derrida's skepticism toward epistemological certainty risks a "relativism that inevitably leaves us powerless to act responsibly." Taylor's response, so very different from the caricatures in the other obituaries, represents Derrida's thinking relevant to this subject in a manner that is both nuanced and accessible. Taylor explains that the ultimate undecidability of any question in the sense of objective certainty

> does not mean, however, that we must forsake the cognitive categories and moral principles without which we cannot live: equality and justice, generosity and friendship. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the unavoidable limitations and inherent contradictions in the ideas and norms that guide our actions, and do so in a way that keeps them open to constant questioning and continual revision. There can be no ethical action without critical reflection. (A29)

Without shrinking from the legitimate questions raised in various quarters about deconstruction, Taylor insists upon mourning Derrida well by engaging his ideas in a manner that not only does justice to Derrida's life but also to the philosopher's lessons on mourning.

Our effort at criticism explores the way in which these diverse acts of mourning find themselves *haunted* by Derrida's legacy. Adapted from the work of Derrida and others, Joshua Gunn suggests the idiom of haunting to "preserve the central values informing rhetorical criticism while nevertheless embracing the notion of a subject that is constructed, decentered, fragmented, performed, and/or split" (78–79). As demonstrated by the very controversy surrounding Derrida's intellectual legacy, all parties recognize that his thought remains powerful and thus haunts the academy, even when it is refused (Gunn 96–97). Citing *Specters of Marx* for Derrida's observation that mourning "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present" (9), Gunn concludes that "Derrida characterizes mourning as something to avoid" (82). By contrast, Derrida's reflections on friendship demonstrate that mourning is necessary. Yet, friendship imposes special demands on those who mourn. Civil, ethical mourning is difficult not just because of the grief one feels at the loss of a friend, but because sadness at the loss makes it all too easy for remembering to slip into a nostalgic imagination of the dead as fully present to those who remain.

The seeming contradiction in Derrida's characterization of mourning as something both necessary and to be avoided is in reality an affirmation of ethical, civil mourning's inevitably paradoxical nature. A crucial aspect to Derrida's understanding of friendship is the necessity of simultaneously acknowledging a friend's singularity and alterity. My friend is unique to me as well as always something other than that subjective experience. In *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, Derrida writes:

> If death comes to the other, and comes to us through the other, then the friend no longer exists except *in* us, *between* us. In himself, by himself, of himself, he is no more, nothing more. He lives only in us. But *we* are never *ourselves*, and between us, identical to us, a "self" is never in itself or identical to itself. This specular reflection never closes on itself; it does not appear *before* this *possibility* of mourning. (28)

Recognizing this difference between oneself and the other, acknowledging this ultimate alterity, is crucial in the act of mourning. This difference between oneself and the other allows for an element of surprise and unpredictability, the ceaseless recognition of which prevents a colonization of the other by the self, which in turn creates the very foundation for the deceased to live on. Derrida writes in *For What Tomorrow*:

> Mourning must be impossible. Successful mourning is failed mourning. In successful mourning, I incorporate the one who has died, I assimilate him to myself, I reconcile myself with death, and consequently I deny death and the alterity of the

> dead other and of death as other. I am therefore unfaithful . . . . Faithfulness prescribes to me at once the necessity and the impossibility of mourning. It enjoins me to take the other within me, to make him live in me, to idealize him, to internalize him, but it also enjoins me not to succeed in the work of mourning: the other must remain the other. (159–160)

Derrida reminds us that upon death, we have to internalize the other. Remembrance involves an act of interiorization, as suggested by the German word for memory—*Erinnerung*—which contains the linguistic root of interiorizing (Derrida, *Mémoires* 35).

The requirement to resist that appropriation, to recall always that the presence imagined in the act of mourning our friend is *only* a re-presentation filtered through our unique perspective and never an adequate knowledge of the other, marks the impossibility of mourning. For instance, in his obituary for Michel Foucault, Derrida writes: "What we can and must try to do . . . is to pay tribute to a work this great and this uncertain by means of a question that it itself raises, by means of a question that it carries within itself, that it keeps in reserve in its unlimited potential, one of the questions that can thus be deciphered within it, a question that keeps it in suspense, holding its breath—and, thus, keeps it alive" (Derrida, "To Do Justice" 88). Derrida thus asks us to honor the unpredictability of the works of the deceased while returning to the questions posed in their texts, to read and re-read them so that they may live on in us. In mourning a death, a scholar is to return to a space of inquiry to explore the possibilities opened by the deceased when they were with us, possibilities that remain open as long as we remember the impossibility of stepping outside the text. What we call *civil mourning* must therefore always remain incomplete, haunted by the words of the dead without seeking to put the encounter with such specters to rest.

Derrida establishes a theory of mourning by offering propositions on how to mourn civilly that include a responsibility to interrogate our relationships to other humans. One of these propositions calls for recognizing the irreducible alterity of the deceased other who is remembered only through those who remain despite being entirely unassimilable by the living. That someone like Jacques Derrida, who was preoccupied in his own writing with the politics of mourning and the question of what it means to mourn ethically, should be so openly disparaged in several obituaries without much care to the man or his work is a sadly ironic albeit unsurprising manifestation of longstanding epistemological debates in Western culture. Since mourning discourses are "political acts" that offer guidance for negotiating the world in which we live (Loraux 336), these hostile obituaries invited additional acts of public mourning that invoked the ethical and political dimensions of public remembrance.

Scholars and friends of Derrida confronted this situation, holding the media accountable for the character and content of information that was being provided to their reading publics. Their letters responding to Kandell's obituary in

particular raised objections to the dyslogistic tone and perceived misrepresentation of Derrida's philosophical work. However, it is with Derrida that we must reckon. His work and life demonstrate why civil mourning is so important for ourselves and our communities, not only as a cathartic release of grief but as an ethical call to read and think seriously the insights of the dead, even when we disagree vehemently. This essay has argued that critical attention to the civic functions of epideictic rhetoric and the politics of knowledge advanced in the obituaries for Jacques Derrida is imperative for understanding the sort of community envisioned by these discourses. In remembering with Derrida, we might first of all learn to mourn in ways that encourage the critically engaged and constructive negotiation of difference within the public discourse called forth by loss.

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