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The Solicitation of Deconstruction (If I never see the English...)

by David Wills

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Abstract/Editorial Comment:

The following text is an edited and augmented version of a keynote address that was given by David Wills on June 10, 2016, at the Derrida Today Conference held at Goldsmiths University in London. Mixing the genres of elegy and scholarly essay, this text reflects on the prehistory of the term “deconstruction” and on intersections between two rather flamboyant cultural figures: the Algerian-born French philosopher and thinker of origins and genres, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and the gender and genre-bending English pop musician David Bowie (1947-2016). The guest editors of this special issue have preserved the elements of the text that mark the “present” that every keynote address struggles, perhaps in vain, to sync up with.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, David Bowie, deconstruction, solicitation

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If I never see the English evergreens I'm running to
It's nothing to me
It's nothing to see

I'm dying to
Push their backs against the grain
And fool them all again and again
I'm trying to

. . .
Don't believe for just one second I'm forgetting you
I'm trying to
I'm dying to . . .

[“Dollar Days” from *Blackstar* by David Bowie, 2016]

We're all dying to...do something. For example, make this work. We're all dying *too*, which works differently for each of us. Tell you what. I'll leave that, that epigraph, and many other things with it, for the moment. Tell you what: today, 10 June 2016, 5th Derrida Today Conference, Goldsmiths University, New Cross, London. Tell you what? This is traditionally the point where I tell you what I am about to tell you, so that you'll hear it before you hear it and when you hear it you will have already heard it. What then, you may well ask? 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. The recently edited 1964 Heidegger seminar brought that to my attention. Already working on how to translate Heidegger's *Destruktion*, Derrida repeats at various points throughout the volume the following idea: deconstruction is about shaking, or making tremble. I'll read a single long passage where that is developed:

Heideggerian destruction is not Hegel's "recollecting" refutation. It is *distinguished from it by a nothing, a slight trembling of meaning* that we must not overlook, for the whole seriousness of the enterprise sums up in this its fragility and its value. *A slight trembling, for Heidegger says nothing else after the Hegelian—that is, Western—ontology that he is going to destroy...he surrounds it with an ontological silence in which this Hegelian consciousness will be put into question, will be solicited (i.e. shaken); will tremble and let be seen what it still dissimulates in that trembling.* (Heidegger 9; my emphasis)

Elsewhere in the same text Derrida writes of the "metaphysical ontology that Heidegger wants to destroy—that is, to deconstruct, de-structure, shake (solicit)" (18); or "It must be clearly understood that what he is going to *solicit* (I prefer this word to 'destroy')" (138); or again, "this preliminary stage could only be passed after the *solicitation* (what I shall now call solicitation rather than destruction) of metaphysics and onto-theology" (178). In all, the seminar has 7 or 8 usages of "solicitation" as synonymous with "deconstruction."

Deconstruction, then is that nothing: nothing but *solicitation*, in the sense of shaking, making tremble. The verb *soliciter*, with the same sense, is used a number of times in Derrida's early period: for example, in "Force and Signification," "Violence and Metaphysics," "La Parole soufflée," "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," and "The Ends of Man," where he refers in conclusion to a "total trembling" (*Margins* 133), and where Alan Bass, the translator, adds a note pointing to the etymological sense Derrida is relying on, "as he often does elsewhere." The essay "Differance" also says it very explicitly: "It is the predominance of beings that *différance* comes everywhere to solicit, in the sense that *sollicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety" (21). "Force and Signification" explains further the etymology: "This operation is called (in Latin) 'causing worry' [*soucier*] or 'soliciting' [*solliciter*]. In other words, *shaking* with a shake that relates to the *whole* (from *sollus*, in archaic Latin 'the whole,' and from *citare*, 'to push' [*Writing and Difference* 13; translation modified]). To push or shake the whole. Make everything shake, rattle, or tremble. Derrida's etymology refers to *citare* as the Latin verb, but, as the OED prefers, *ciere*, (pp. *citus*), might have been the more accurate root for a stronger sense of shaking. *Ciere*: disturb, stir, agitate, move, distress, harass, make uneasy, vex, solicit, tempt, seduce, attract, induce. A little more etymological information concerning solicit/*solliciter* and then I'll stop vexing you with it. In English, the sense of *citare* or *ciere* as disturb, shake, disquiet, trouble, make anxious, or fill with concern didn't survive through the Latin and French beyond the second half of the 18th century. It did in French, however, where one *solicits* a horse, goading, spurring it on; one *solicits* an apparatus or organ, making it work, inciting it to action; and, more to the point here, one *solicits* a text in the sense of interpreting it in a tendentious manner, making it say more than it expresses.

In 1964, then, and for three or four years thereafter, it seemed as though nothing other than solicitation might become the word for deconstruction. So, allow me to imagine for a bit what deconstruction as solicitation might have been. I'll try that by mentioning a couple of moments where there is more trembling: the first of those moments is more than 25 years beyond that 1964 Heidegger seminar, the second is from the very end, in 2004. I'll use those moments to argue how or why shaking or making shake might be assimilated to a generalized trembling, like

a leaf, trembling like a flower, perhaps even an English evergreen I'm running to, which, if I never see, it's nothing to me, it's nothing to see.

First example: Derrida begins chapter 3 of *The Gift of Death* (the original French text dates from 1990) with about three pages discussing the *mysterium tremendum* of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. In those pages he is interested as well in a generalized trembling provoked by such things as "a secret...fear, anguish, apprehension of death...[or] anticipation of what is to come...the arrival of pleasure or an orgasm" (*Gift* 54). Beyond that, "one could say that water quivers [*frémit*] before it boils," which he also refers to as "a seduction" (54); at the other end of the scale is the earthquake (*tremblement de terre*). In the end, however, for Derrida as much as for Kierkegaard and Saint Paul, who tells us in Philippians 2:12 to "work out your own salvation in fear and trembling," trembling is owed to God or to death, or to both; to God's gift of death: "We would need to make new inroads into the thinking of the body...in order to one day come closer to what makes us tremble...to that *cause* which...can be called God or death" (56). On that interpretation, it is God or death that makes us shake all over; God or death solicits or deconstructs us; God or death appears as the outside cause or agent that, without doing anything, without acting as such, makes us shake to our very core. Physiological science would seem to recognize something of that generalized deific trembling in calling one form of the eponymous nervous disorder "essential tremor" (as if it were a trembling of the essence), a trembling produced by some unknown abnormal cerebral electrical impulse processed through the thalamus and affecting motor control.

That trembling disassembling of the body is read as a function of a subject shaken in its essence in my second example. It is a short, untranslated text from the very end of his life called "Comment ne pas trembler? [How not to tremble/how to avoid trembling]." Derrida also refers there to "a sort of universal quakerism...[such that] all trembling, in a literal or metonymic way, trembles before God" ("Comment" 95-96; my translation here and below). But "Comment ne pas trembler" begins in an autobiographical mode, with two anecdotes: Derrida's memory of fear and trembling as a twelve-year old during the bombardment of Algiers in 1942-43; and his trembling hand of summer 2004 that was a secondary effect of chemotherapy for the pancreatic cancer that would kill him three months later. Those experiences lead him to emphasize the effect of an "absolute passivity" ("Comment" 94), something that is "heterogeneous to knowledge" (93), and that, more specifically, represents a deconstruction of the subject and of self-identity: "The trembling worthy of the name makes tremble an "I" to the extent that it can no longer posit itself as subject (active or passive) of a violent trembling that happens to it, of an event that deprives it of its mastery, will, freedom, hence of its right to ipseity, that is of the power to think or say to itself, autoaffectively, 'I'" (94).

Now it does not require intimate knowledge of Derrida's work to understand the tight correspondence between a tremblingly deconstructed subject and—repeating now one of those quotes from the 1964 seminar—the "metaphysical ontology that Heidegger wants to destroy—that is, to deconstruct, de-structure, shake (18)." The Western logocentric subject and metaphysical ontology are two pillars of the same edifice, or inhabitant and house of the same philosophical economy. In deconstructive solicitation one and the other trembles as one and the

other. But something else emerges as a function of the co-dependency of those two pillars, namely a tension between a trembling that shakes to the core at the core, that is from the inside or on the inside, and a solicitation that seems to come rather from outside. Such a tension is described in the 1968 essay “The Ends of Man”: “But this trembling—which can only come from a certain outside—was already requisite *within* the very structure that it solicits” (*Margins* 133; my emphasis). Similarly, my first Heidegger seminar quote continues thus: “Hegelian consciousness will be put into question, will be *solicited* (i.e. shaken); will tremble and...be questioned from a *place that is neither outside it nor in it*” (*Heidegger* 34; my emphasis). The architectural or even structural model that one persistently, and not without reason, imagines to describe or illustrate deconstruction comes thus itself to be solicited. So it is that, in current construction business parlance, demolition has been solicited into becoming deconstruction: that is the precise word used by the contractor making a Barnard College building slowly and dustily disappear from across the street where I live in New York.



Barnard College demolition. Photo by Branka Arsić. 26 May 2016.

The notice posted in our elevator tells us that the building is being “deconstructed.” And indeed, such a deconstruction is taking place simultaneously inside and outside. Derrida can be read problematizing that architecturality, structurality, perhaps even corporality—indeed even spatiality, even photologicality—in *The Gift of Death* when he writes that the God who or which is the “cause of the *mysterium tremendum*,” “sees me, he looks into me in secret, but I don’t see him” (*Gift* 91); and conversely, that “God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior” (108). God is outside, looking right into

the most secret recess, and at the same time producing a type of space inside that would be invisible from the outside.

Given those conceptual failures of everything from the architectural to the photological we might turn back, as model for deconstruction as solicitation, to Derrida's concept of a "traced" textuality; a textuality that is, among other things, a formal heterogeneity whose elements tend—in a lesser or greater way—to tremble in relation one to another, as it were across each other's surface and depth, on the verge of a *significational* boil. Every text, as Derrida sees it, is perpetually *in trembling* in the sense of being *in deconstruction*. The elements in play in such a trembling might be formally, even generically identifiable, such as the drawing and vocality encouraged by Valerio Adami's foundation where Derrida delivered "How Not to Tremble?" There, he says, "one has never refrained from associating drawing with music and writing, painting and poetry, all of them arts requiring the usage of fingers and of the hand," the hand that, Derrida adds, quoting Dante's *Paradise*, necessarily trembles ("Comment" 96). Or in "+R," from *The Truth in Painting*, where Derrida comments on Adami's drawings, saying of the "+r effect, like the +l effect in *Glas*" that "you could also orchestrate it, for if we were here producing a discourse, he and I, it would be, rather, on music" (*Truth in Painting* 174). And indeed, in *Clang (Glas)* itself, "solicit" would be a most apposite word for what Hegel and Genet do to each other, as they are watched through the Judas peephole by a Derrida unable to resist being seduced into it in turn.

Would all that make something more than nothing? Some nothing trembling? Like a flower, perhaps the genet or broom that Derrida has bloom signatorily in *Glas*. Perhaps such a flower; or else a tree. A tree that might tremble like a flower; a tree that might tremble like an asp. An asp is a tree of the poplar family, with greyish bark and spreading branches, the leaves of which are especially liable to the tremulous motion that characterizes all poplars. Americans call the European asp an "aspen," and they have their own, variously called "quaking" or "trembling aspen." The Latin names for the European and American varieties are *populus tremula* and *populus tremuloides* respectively. I haven't made this up: Derrida refers early in "How Not to Tremble?" to "that tree called 'tremble' (*Zitterpappel* in German), that smooth-barked poplar with straight shoots whose leaves with their slender petioles (stalks) shiver at the slightest breath" ("Comment" 92).



[Poplar Trees at Hallgate Farm](#). Photo by Richard Humphrey. 6 May 2011. Wikimedia Commons.

Poplars are in fact popular, the name deriving from their being planted in places where people would congregate. Gregarious trees, then, like sheep. I grew up with such poplars; long rows of them bordering farmlands were one of the major signifiers of the English landscape that they had been exported from by British settlers in the antipodes, no doubt as soon as the colonists had the chance. Poplars grow rapidly and easily. I found them, and still find them extraordinarily beautiful in their erect but supple simplicity. I would watch their yellowing leaves lead the precipitation into the gentle goodnight of autumn, one of a relatively small number of imported deciduous trees in an overwhelmingly evergreen landscape; and then they would stand tall, proud and bare like swaying sentinels through the mild but windswept winter. So, were it not for their fatal deciduousness they could be the English evergreens I'm running to of my epigraph, which, if I never see, it's nothing to me, it's nothing to see, now back here, in England, London, New Cross, this 10 June 2016.

In that case, nothing perhaps; or perhaps a few questions. To begin: who is this "I?" In "If I never see the English evergreens I'm running to," who is "I?" Evidently, evidentially, "I" is a sound, falling across the sky like an autumn trembling poplar leaf, that sound referred to in my opening paragraph. A sound of, or sound from David Bowie in his penultimate song, what we could perhaps call his penultimate *living*, in contrast to *surviving* song: the song "Dollar Days" from the album *Black Star* (2016). Sung just before he sings "I know something is very wrong, the post returns for prodigal songs ... I can't give everything, I can't give everything, Away," and ends it all. It is a tremulous *I-sound* uttered days before his catastrophic descent into decease; something this *I*—the one who now speaks through this written instance—can do little more than parody; this *I* who, when he hears him sing how his "[brother la\[y\] upon the rocks he could be dead he could be not, he could be you, he's chameleon, comedian, Corinthian and caricature](#)" ("Bewlay Brothers," *Hunky Dory*, 1971), this *I* can manage from within that forceful concatenation only the final term, produce merely a pale alliterative caricature.

Anyway, I thought to put them somehow together, Jacques Derrida and David Bowie this June London day, approaching twelve years since the death of one and five months since the death of the other; I thought to put them into solicitation, open a peephole and see what they can do to each other. Supposedly like Bowie did with Lou Reed and Sister Flo, from “up on the eleventh floor and watching the cruisers below, He’s down on the street and he’s trying hard to pull sister Flo, My heart’s in the basement my weekend’s at an all time low, because she’s hoping to score so I can’t see her letting him go, Walk out of her heart walk out of her mind, She’s so swishy in her satin and tat, in her frock coat and bipperty-bopperty hat, Oh God, I could do better than that” (“Queen Bitch,” *Hunky Dory*, 1971). I can’t do better than that. I can’t really give a good reason for having Jacques Derrida solicited today by David Robert Jones/David Bowie or vice versa. What rhyme or reason? Some strange insistence in me that wants to pay double homage; some insistent narcissism of the coincidental dice throw that would link the facts of Derrida’s burial on my birthday back in 2004, and my sharing two forenames with David Robert Jones, to what end? Or even some wash of mourning for the paternal that comes in successive waves, my father dead at 74, Jacques Derrida dead at 74, David Robert Jones dead at 69, my own sexagenarian anxiety, you really don’t want to hear about it, it’s nothing to hear, not now, “now the dress is hung, the ticket pawned, the Factor Max that proved the fact is melted down, woven on the edging of my pillow, And my brother lays upon the rocks” (“Bewlay Brothers”), as I’ve already said. I don’t know what to make of it beyond the fact that since January, since I knew I was coming here to do this keynote, and since I knew I wanted to talk about deconstruction as a solicitation, I couldn’t shake it off. I was haunted by the idea that somehow it had to involve David Robert Jones, whatever little he might have to do with Jacques Derrida; perhaps the most influential “inaccessible” philosopher of the last 50 years, and perhaps the most influential popular musician reaching across styles and generations for about the same period of time; haunting me in very different ways but each haunting nevertheless.

There are two or three ideas that I’ll have time merely to outline in bringing this to a close. The first is proximity. As I calculate it, here in New Cross we are, as the crow flies, about 3 miles east-north east of 40 Stansfield Road, Brixton, where David Robert Jones was born in 1947 and lived till I was born in 1953; and we are about 4 miles north-north west of 106 Canon Road, Bromley, where he then moved and spent the rest of his childhood. So it seems to me this is about as close as I’ll ever get. But not to say this is about me. I didn’t come to London to mourn, less still as a pilgrimage. I don’t see myself traipsing down to Brixton, even if I did go to 285 Lafayette Street with my wife and daughter and flowers a week after he died there. My daughter had a homework assignment to visit a New York City monument, so we chose David’s house that bitterly cold Sunday afternoon.



285 Lafayette Street. Photo by Emma Arsić-Wills. 18 Jan. 2016.

In its general sense, solicitation raises the question of proximity; it involves a negotiation of distance. To solicit one has to be distant enough to effect an attraction or seduction. But Derrida's deconstructive solicitation, "coming from a certain outside" but being "requisite within the very structure that it solicits," challenges that spatiality, as we have already seen. By the same token it challenges the terms of a relationality such as obtains between two bodies, or two textual corpora. If there is to be solicitation as deconstruction, then the sort of relation that I am evoking here between Derrida and Bowie, cannot simply be a matter of one calling to and coming to shake the other across a textual divide. We would have instead to think an originary rupture of one and the other functioning as—switching lexicons now—an immanence of one *with*, *in*, and *and* the other. Or else a chiasmus of one falling across the other, a new cross Derridavidbowie intersection here today.

Within that encounter or event there would be room for attention to a textual Bowie that my sparse references and citations are far from having entertained. I do not have room or, indeed perhaps, even the capacity for that here. This does not pretend to do justice to the Bowie lyric, or even lyricism, which calls for, solicits even, serious attention within the genre of popular song. And of course, attention to the poetic lyricism on one hand, and cut-up techniques on the other, of Bowie's songwriting would hardly begin to account for the musicality of his work. Within the radical heterogeneity of the medium of popular song and, say, among its rhythm and melody and lyrics, there are trembling and unsoundable divides but at the same time symbiotic affinities

that whatever I have said here fails absolutely to take into account. Everything that, in excess of pure verballity—supposing there were such a thing—is supplemented, overcome, I think we can say transcended by music, remains to be examined and calls for extended analysis. Indeed, one might ask, quite simply: to what extent have I even broached here the question of music?

Well, I would respond, and this would be my second concluding gambit: the trembling of which I have been speaking from the beginning can be understood as a musical trembling; and deconstruction in solicitation, I would posit, is musical. By that I mean the following: on the one hand, the heterogeneity of the medium of song just referred to is preceded, as it were (I'll come to this qualification in an instant), by an originary heterogeneity of the verbal itself, a verbal that comes to tremble within itself as its own inscriptive linearity is required to deal with spaces in, and interruptions of that linearity. The supposed fluency of the verbal, whether spoken or written, is necessarily an interrupted fluency; speech flows, words flow thanks to the spaces between and within those words. Now, one could argue—as I have elsewhere (e.g. *Inanimation* 112-16)—that those interruptions are what constitute poeticity, lyricity, even musicality (which might mean that a poet like Dickinson, far from radicalizing the lyric, was in fact defining it in its most basic sense). From that point of view, in intimating just now that the verbal is heterogeneous “before” it has added to it the putatively external medium that is music (to produce song), I was in fact contradicting myself. We cannot in fact conceive of a primary verbal that then comes to be supplemented by musicality within the logic just developed; we would have to understand the verbal, or rather utterance, as being always already musical by virtue of the spatializations and temporalizations that permit and produce it while at the same time introducing into it inflections, faultlines, tremblings. (And conversely, perhaps—though determining this would exceed my competence—imagine music as always already discursive, which might or might not mean verbal or scriptural.) No simple consequentiality of a speech that becomes song, therefore; nor of a humming that then becomes chanting that then becomes singing. Instead, there is, from the start, in all of those forms of utterance, from grunt to lyric, something that Derrida of course also called *differance*, but which should be heard here as a type of polyphonic-rhythmic otherness, one that echoes, in the chamber or context I have been developing, as a deconstructive solicitation; a shaking of it by an outside within it.

But, on the other hand: music solicits in another way. Music arrives from far or near, from around, to invade or pervade a body, and by extension a subjectivity, making its corporate boundaries tremble. In listening, one is made to tremble on the inside, as Nancy has eloquently expounded: sound is “all in front, in back, and outside inside” (*Listening* 13); the listener is transformed into “a resonance chamber” (38) a subject-listener “vibrates with listening to—or with the echo of—the beyond meaning” (31). More trembling therefore, of an “I” deprived, in Derrida’s terms, of “mastery, will, freedom, hence of its right to ipseity.” That “I” deprived of mastery is something that I have often tried to stage as autobiography, a long time ago as prosthetic autobiography (cf. *Prosthesis* 1995; republished 2021), more recently as *inanimated* autobiography (*Inanimation* 29-108). The autobiographic “I” is solicited and made to tremble by a music within it for all the Bergsonian and Proustian reasons of involuntary memory; but also, in a somewhat converse way, I would venture or wager, music relies on autobiography. In saying that I am not repeating the evidence that for music to function, in the

form of a generic and artistic recognizability that we call music, there has to be a receptive and sense-perceptive historical animal subject constituting an event called listening. Rather, I want to suggest that the “space” inside the originarily ruptured utterance that I spoke of just now is shared by both music and the trace or writing of an “I”; or else that the music that begins there is also the sound of an uttering “I” that similarly begins and at the same time breaks, falters, cracks, trembles. It trembles as it falls into utterance—call it “writing”—and it continues to utter in that fractured way until it utters no more; but it trembles also because that necessary fall that is all that is the case is always its death, already its death. So that, therefore, autobiography shares with music its having, as form or structure of utterance, spectrality. It *is* by haunting, in haunting (and for that reason, no doubt, versions of narcissistic nostalgic indulgence pervade music on one side and autobiography on the other).

So, if I never see the English evergreens I’m running to it’s nothing to me, it’s nothing to see, I’m dying to, dying to(o)...regale you, regale you with a more or less overlapping history of 45 years of reading Jacques Derrida and listening to David Bowie, from Split Enz’ covers of “Changes” in the Auckland University cafeteria (I might be making that up), through endless repetitions of “Sweet Thing” in the live version from the Diamond Dogs tour when the possibility of seeing him perform remained oceans away, till finally one evening at the Porte de Pantin for the *Heroes* concert in 1978, then being a boy at a farewell party, because “[heaven loves ya, the clouds part for ya, nothing stands in your way when you’re a boy, clothes always fit ya, life is a pop of the cherry, when you’re a boy...Boys, Boys, Boys keep swinging, boys always work it out](#)” (“Boys Keep Swinging,” *Lodger*, 1979), then more than ten years later I lasted through a couple of travesties—*Glass Spiders* at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, and an awful GQ Magazine Awards at Radio City Music Hall (for my 40th birthday)—before redemption in Boston for the final *Reality* tour in 2004, weeks before his collapse and a few scant months before Derrida’s death, you see, if I regale you with it it means nothing to you, and I’ll be left running, running to whatever means something to me in that autobiocomic deciduous haze, rows of poplars lining fields of lush grass, a trajectory I’m still trying to understand that draws me from there to there to here, still running, to nowhere in particular, marking time perhaps, shuffling nervously more likely with a shuffling that resembles a trembling, I stand and tremble suspended in the absence left by the departure of giants something of whose history or contemporaneity I nevertheless had the luck or privilege to share, salad days, dollar days, days, weeks, months and years rapidly approaching a half-century of them running more or less vicariously in the company of such an epoch or such an epic, it’s nothing, you see, nothing I could necessarily hope to get you running about about, or running after before or after, and if I never, it’s nothing, on one side nothing to see, no more to hear (Bowie), on the other nothing else, one (Derrida) does nothing else, nothing seen nothing heard nothing done yet everything shaken trembling still.

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