

Jean-Paul Martinon, "Bearers and Proper Names," in Suzana Milevska, ed., *The Renaming Machine* (Ljubljana: PARASITE Institute Slovenia, 2010), 60-71, © Parasite Institute, 2010.

Here I am, in Kigali, Rwanda, at the gates of the Genocide Memorial Centre, known locally as Gisozi. I pass through the gates and walk slowly towards the Centre, approaching it with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. This is no ordinary memorial centre; this is a place of mourning. I see people converging towards a garden to the left of the Centre. I follow them silently. Once past an arched gate, I find myself in what looks like a garden surrounding a set of very large slabs of concrete laid flat side by side and stretching from one end of the garden to the other. At one end, a portion of the slab has been cut open revealing beneath it a pile of coffins. One of these coffins is open. Instead of the usual single corpse or skeleton lying inside, the coffin contains piles of human bones and skulls crammed neatly to the top. The effect is unsettling and trivial questions suddenly preoccupy me: Lack of space? Too many bodies? If yes, then why retain the shape of a coffin? Finding no answers, I go back to staring without thinking at this mass grave and the garden surrounding it. After a moment, I glance around at the other visitors.

I hear someone whisper: "250,000 bodies are buried here." A quarter of a million bodies squeezed in a few coffins placed side-by-side and one atop of the other. The macabre funerary work of arranging these coffins and these bones is astounding. I try to imagine this gruesome task and then, as if finally realising the horror of what I'm seeing, I stop and freeze, staring at these graves without thinking. However, the longer I look at this sombre site, the less I am able to truly understand what it means. I have no point of referent. Nothing in my past or in my current social, cultural, or theoretical context can help me make sense of this number. What do 250,000 dead bodies mean? This is not a rhetorical or insolent question; this is a question that, like its live counterpart, (what do 250,000 live bodies mean?), has no answer, always fails to make sense. One person yes, one

can barely make out what that means, but 250,000 becomes a number that can only call for other similar equations in a game of comparison that has no meaning whatsoever: Auschwitz, Yerevan, Perm, Nanjing, Tuol Sleng, Vilnius, Potocari, etc.¹ With such equations, no mark of respect for those who have died is possible. So I stop looking at this mass grave, averting my eyes with shame for not being able to understand what I am seeing.

To the left of the mass grave, a few names have been engraved onto a large black granite funeral wall dedicated to the victims. The wall only lists 25,000 or so names. The rest of the large wall is blank, as if waiting to be engraved. Most of the people buried here have lost their lives *and* their names. It is as if the machetes have not only taken their lives, but also their identity, their history, and their belonging. We therefore have here in this mass grave, 225,000 dead corpses. No, worse than that, we have here a pile of bones and skulls that *adds up* to 225,000 bodies with no identity and no one to mourn them. This impossibility to mourn gives the impression that in addition to having been robbed of their lives and identity, they have also been robbed of this ultimate human gesture that aspires to reconcile life and death; this gesture that never succeeds, but is always necessary. Without mourning, these bodies are without after-life. Standing in front of such a nameless grave that evades mourning, one feels as if at the edge of a precipice, as if faced with the ghost of 225,000 blank faces, dead to the world and this forever. How is one to think such anonymity? What difference would it have made if their names had been inscribed? How can one mourn a pile of bones? The questions abound and the answers are, as usual in such circumstances, short coming.

Without going any further, I need to make here a confession: I decide that I simply cannot grieve or feel sorrow. I am simply left speechless, without being able to mourn. This is not because I am insensitive, but because I am literally faced with an incomprehensibility that is truly overwhelming, a madness, if you will, that fails language. The problem has nothing to do with the fact that I have

no relation with the Rwandan Genocide. Even if I was a surviving Tutsi, I would not be able to mourn because I would not know *whom* to mourn. Obviously, if members of my family, relatives, or friends were buried here, I would be able to mourn, feel sorrow. But I can't; no one who is not related or connected to the few *named ones* can. The issue is therefore not the impossibility of grieving, but the impossibility of naming *and therefore* grieving. There is an order of priority here that is rarely emphasised. There is no mourning without first a proper name. The question is here therefore not so much "how to mourn them?", but "why does the name hold such importance?" and "how is one to mourn in a situation where the usual distinction between the name and the bearer of the name has been violently eradicated with machetes?"

The questions of mourning and proper names, which together point to the difference between life and death, is, as has been noted many times before, central to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. I would like to take up this work (of mourning) in order to make sense of the madness I am facing here in Kigali. Mourning is not, as Jacques Derrida himself noted many times, a simple lament, or sorrow. Mourning is, as we will see briefly later, *an activity*, the task never completed and always to-come of letting the other *remain* other, of allowing the other *to be* who (ever) they are or were, dead or alive. And this is what I would like to do here with Derrida in this Genocide Memorial Centre: not to imagine *who* these 225,000 people were, but to let them *be* and in doing so to mourn them as well as I can. In other words, the task that I would like to accomplish in this short essay is not to analyse the situation in Kigali with a cold deconstructive philosophical gesture, but *to think* about these lost souls, about their unfortunate nameless status and this without projecting anything about and/or unto them (a name or an identity, for example). In doing this, my hope is that perhaps one can begin the activity of letting these nameless beings not only rest, but also, albeit for a little while, the short time of reading this text perhaps, *be* again. This is the only way I can be truthful to their nameless status, the only way I know I can be truthful to their memory. Let us pay them homage.

Let us begin again with this memorial wall. The “lucky” few that have their names written on this wall appear to us, who are alive, to have retained something specific that not only identifies them, but also makes them whole. One named person, one life. Their name gives them an identity, a history. They belong to something, which often, here in Rwanda, can be summed up by referencing the hill where they lived. In this way, they are whole and through death, they are healed because their temporal and spatial dimensions have been brought together: they lived a span of life (time) somewhere specific on earth (space). However, this unity, this wholeness is only illusory and this for two reasons. The first one is that someone’s name is always made up of a first name and a surname. As such, the bearer of a name is always divided by the promise brought on through baptismⁱⁱ by the new first name and the potential inherited by the surname. This division can never be overcome; it is part and parcel of anyone’s identity. The proof of this comes here in Kigali when one looks at the names of those who only have one name: saints and patrons of Rwanda’s catholic churches: in most cases, their division has been omitted in order to emphasize their wholeness, their holiness. By contrast, for us, mere mortals, the brunt of division (first name/surname) can only be assumed, at once brought on and inherited and this is also true of these Rwandan names carefully engraved on the black wall.

The second reason we are not addressing here a unity or a wholeness relates specifically to the situation at the Gisozi Genocide Memorial Centre in Kigali. In most cemeteries, proper names are engraved onto slabs of stone, marble, or pieces of wood. This tradition of engraving the name helps not only to identify, but also to mourn the bodies buried six feet under. As such, the engraving continues to relate the name to what was once alive and is now buried. There is a link or a correspondence in most cemeteries that firmly establishes the name

with the bearer of the name as if life had not been interrupted. This is unfortunately not the case in Kigali. Unless one did a DNA test on every single bone buried in Gisozi, no one would be able to identify amongst the pile of bones and skulls the remains of those whose name is inscribed on this wall. So the names exist suspended from any reality, engraved one by one, line after line on the cold granite surface. This unfortunate situation is double: On the one hand, it is as if what was once alive, what was once flesh and blood no longer carries a proper name. And on the other, it is also as if the proper names inscribed on this wall have no referent outside themselves. No one can truly attribute a body to these proper names and no names have readily identifiable bearers. This is an exceptional situation that only the gruesome creation of mass graves is able to generate.

What we have here is therefore not a unity or a wholeness, but a two-fold situation: on the one hand, there is the name (engraved) and on the other, there is the bearer of this name (now, a pile somewhere). Let us look at the first situation: The name (first name and surname) engraved on this wall really stands for death. It is that which continues after one has died. It is that which is engraved on this wall and will be engraved on our very own burial stone. But this is not something that only takes place after we kick the bucket. Our names, our proper names also stand for death *while* we are alive. As Derrida remarks in the context of a discussion of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is *always and a priori* a dead man’s name, a name of death.”ⁱⁱⁱ Here it is worth stopping to consider what Derrida is telling us: a name is “always and a priori” a dead person’s name. The dead person’s name is obviously familial; it is what comes with inheritance. But it is also that which will come: our own name, the name that eventually will be engraved on our tomb stone. In this way, no matter how we look at it, a proper name is always already and a priori the name of death. This is the first situation.

The second situation is this: This emphasis on the proper name as the name of death has only one aim: the attempt—and the attempt only—to identify what we call *the bearer* of the name. Here, it is not a question again of scouring through the bones and attempting to pin down through DNA tests who is who. Here, it is a question of focusing on what can be identified as *the holder* of a proper name. What do we truly understand when we speak of *the bearer* of a name? How to name that which has a name? The bones and skulls in the mass grave were once bearers of names. I too am the bearer of a name. As such, they (and I) stand for life, for what was or is alive and carried or still carries a name. If one pushes the argument a little further, then it becomes obvious that what makes us carry a name is the fact that we are alive. It is the condition of being alive, *to carry a name*. In this way, as soon as one is baptised or simply given a name, one becomes a bearer, a carrier, a holder. You pass as *this* or *that*. I pass as *this* or *that*, i.e. as someone who is *identifiable* as “me,” the *possessor* of an identity card.

However, the fact of holding, bearing, carrying, or possessing does not tell us what this “me” is; what a bearer *is*. The bearer (this “me”) is paradoxically an impossibility. It simply cannot be thought out because in order to think it, we need names and proper names. In this way, every time one attempts to think for a minute—without naming it—what bears a name, one is confronted with an impossibility. What thinks, walks, moves objects, what shudders, suffers, and experiences ecstasy is effectively without name. In other words still, what holds a name has no name. Of course, one can call it in a generic way, a man or a woman. Some even call it in a generic and abstract way Being. Being or Dasein holds, carries, or bears a name, a familiar name, the name of a family. If one decides not to fall for these problematic abstract terms (or their doubling Being/beings), then one can only conclude in all simplicity that a bearer of a name is merely *the impossible*, unthinkable, unsayable, and inevitably, *the unnameable*.

The question here is not simply one of equivalence between on the one hand, name and death and on the other, bearer of name and life. The question here is not that of a generic and abstract fit-all word (man, Being) and the specificity of a proper name. And the question does not even concern the distinction between the universal and the particular, or ontology and the ontic sciences. The question here is one of possession. To *have* a name—and who doesn't?—is *to possess* some “thing” that, as we have already seen, always already stands for death. In other words, to live is therefore *to possess* death, the name *of* death. Hence the fact that we call ourselves with *proper* names: it is a *property*. To be a bearer of name is to be a proprietor; it is to be a name-lord, if one would allow me such an odd composite word. The crucial thing in this context is therefore that life can *only* be understood through an act of possession (“yes, I have a name and my name is...”). Without this act of possession and specifically without this act of possessing a name, you or I, the Hutus or Tutsis buried in this mass grave would be nothing, an impossibility. It is through this possession that we identify *the act* of living.

But do we really possess this name? Is my name truly mine? Are the names engraved on this huge slab of granite truly those whose remains lay here in Gisozi? Can a naked bearer truly bear his name as if a cross or a handbag? Can we think of a bearer without reference to possession? The questions abound and again they all relate to the nature of what appears to possess. The verbs “to possess,” or “to have,” or “to name,” all evade the fact that what is possessed does not *really* belong to us. Our name, what identifies us as such, is really only a repetition of another bearer. My name is Jean-Paul Martinon. The first double-barrel name is made up of two first names, the names of Saint Jean and Saint Paul. Together, they form the name of two dead popes, another two potential saints. As such, my first name does not really belong to me. The surname is also not mine. It is my father's and before him, his father's father, etc. As this simple example shows, I really do not possess my name; it is not *truly* mine. And the same can be said of the names engraved on this funerary wall: they might

identify some of the remains, but they paradoxically never truly belonged to those who lived. A bearer of name always bears a false property. A proper name is therefore not as we thought a property, but, as Derrida says elsewhere, *an impropriety*. A difficult thing to accept when one is asked to mourn.

The important thing when it comes to accept the idea that a proper name is an impropriety is not think of it as a mere play on words. When it comes to think a proper name, one is simply always facing something uncanny and un-masterable, something that falls apart and is difficult to pin down. In a way, when one thinks the issue of proper names, one always finds oneself in a double-bind: having *and* not having something, a propriety *and* an impropriety. Jacques Derrida was famous for highlighting this uncanny double-bind in many of his writings, using and playing with his own name in order to show that the author identified as Jacques Derrida is not necessarily the man living and writing. On one occasion, he highlighted the fact that one is effectively always stranger to one's name. As he writes in 'Envois': "you will never be your name, you never have been, even when, and especially when you have answered to it."^{iv} In other words, there is no escaping this double bind, this un-masterable and uncanny situation, because what you possess has, however bizarre this might sound, a *life* of its own.

The question is why such a double bind, such a lack of mastery or propriety? Perhaps this is due again to death. Death plays indeed a crucial role in maintaining this double bind, this lack of mastery. Let us see briefly how this works out in a trajectory that will sound familiar, but is not worth repeating here in any detail: I can only *be*-come myself when I die. In other words, whilst I am alive, I bear the name of someone else. As soon as I am dead, it will be, finally mine and yet I will no longer be there to enjoy it as a possession. It will be, just like the Rwandan names engraved on this memorial wall, a couple of meaningless words engraved on a tombstone. This means that a proper name can therefore become truly proper only on condition of being no longer proper. In

other words, a proper name can only become proper when it becomes a common noun, i.e. something with no distinction and/or referent. As Derrida says: “Death reveals that the proper name could always lend itself to repetition in the absence of its bearer, becoming thus a singular common noun, as common as the pronoun ‘I,’ which effaces its singularity even as it designates it.”^v In this way, the proper name is that which always has potential (to *be*-come someone else *but* one’s father) and ceases being proper once it acquires meaning (a biography no longer identifies someone living, but *the* life of someone).

Alas, we cannot evade this double-bind, this property that is really an impropriety, not I, nor you reader, nor these Tutsis who lost their lives because they *possessed* the wrong identity cards. This does not mean that we always live in the agony of a double-bind. We should also recognize here that the proper name is also something *useful*. A proper name might not have the same status as a legal or emotive possession; but like any other possession, it brings a return and, in this way, remains paradoxically and inextricably linked to economy. To be given a name at birth is to be given an economic tool: this is what this name can be used for and this is what you can gain from it. The gain is obviously truncated in the sense that, as a bearer, one never truly gains; one is only given the impression that one gains. Everything comes down to a question of inheritance. Only a name can inherit.^{vi} In other words, inheritance passes not, as one might expect from the dead to the living, but from the dead to a name that stands for death. The economic return that the name—i.e. death—makes therefore never benefits the living, i.e. the *bearer* of the name. In this way, whatever we ascribe to a man’s name (economic value, authorship, etc), never return to *this* man as a *bearer*, only to his name, the name he bears, i.e. to his death. The proof of this is straightforward: if someone does something (write a book for example), he or she only receives a return *if* he or she bears a name *to whom* it is addressed. The economic return always goes to death, never to the living *as such*. From death to death, from one name to another, from inheritance to inheritance without ever

truly affecting *the bearer* of the name; this living who oddly cannot do without his or her name.

Such an incredible status and such an inescapable double bind clearly shows that the proper name needs to be treated with care and attention. A proper name is not something to be taken lightly. It is before anything in the world, before all the other names and before words and verbs; something that basically causes problem; it is “the name of a problem.”^{vii} The fact that it is a problem should not be seen as if to indicate that something (i.e. the double-bind) needs resolving. The fact of always being a problem shows that the proper name is effectively something that both economy and language need: a disturbance, a problem; something to which they can address themselves. *Without* proper names, economy and language would either flow without hindrance or simply not exist. *With* proper names, economy and language encounter their true limits, human limits, *finite* limits; i.e. limits that can never be overcome. A proper name, this name of death, effectively stands as our ultimate limit, i.e. the limit of what *can* be dealt with (a first name distinguishing us from our father) *and* of what we *have* been dealt with (our father’s name, or fatefully, being a Tutsi). This is what makes proper names into *necessary* problems *at* the limits and *as* limits. As such and as death, they allow *and* frame economy and language.

This unique status could be summed up by saying that, ultimately, the proper name represents the metaphysical closure of language and economy. This is a unique status that consists in *limiting* and yet *encouraging* the taking place of economy and language. How does this limiting and encouraging take place? A proper name constitutes a metaphysical closure because it can never be pinned down as an origin, a point of reference, something clearly identified. It always points in the direction of *a beyond* that is simply unfathomable: who really knows the true origins of one’s name? Who really knows what will happen to our name

after we die? A proper name always points in the direction of the radically Other, i.e. of that which cannot be made the Same. In this way, the proper name slips between the dead and the living, thus marking an unbreachable limit that can only be metaphysical. As such, one could say, perhaps more accurately, that a proper name is not so much a necessary problem, but a *disturbance*, a state of instability or imbalance in our economy and language, leaving us always already stranded *within* the limits of metaphysics.

The consequence of understanding the proper name in this way is that it encourages an awareness of the metaphysical closure that always structures us. In other words, if one is going to invoke a proper name (in a religious ceremony, for example), baptise a child, or make a speech about someone else, and even when one writes a short essay on proper names like this one, one automatically falls into a metaphysical closure. There is here, in this name, in my name, in the names of these dead Tutsis, an other—a radically Other—that slips between name *and* bearer; and this Other is always already unfathomable. This does not ground us or leave us (you, me, the dead) stranded in metaphysics; this only brings to the fore the fact that one cannot escape the *ineluctable imminence* of metaphysical closure and our proper names are here to remind us of that fact. We are always already at the limits of metaphysics or—which paradoxically amounts to the same thing—at the limits of language and economy. And the proper name is the sign of this limit. It is a sign that can only *at once* and *paradoxically* evade us and yet remain a part of economy and language.

Such an unusual position clearly shows that proper names not only have to be *treated* specially, they also have to be *thought* differently from all other names. In a commentary on the instability of the name-structures of authors such as “Descartes,” Leibniz,” “Rousseau,” and “Hegel,” Derrida talks about them as if they were symptoms. He writes: “the primordial and indispensable phase, in fact and in principle of the development of this problematic [*i.e. that of the texts written by these proper name*], consists in questioning the internal structure of

these texts as symptoms; *as that is the only condition for determining these symptoms themselves* in the totality of their metaphysical appurtenance.”^{viii} In other words, the names (Descartes, Leibniz, Rousseau, Hegel) that these men carried have to be understood, like their texts, as symptoms. Again, this does not mean that we should seek to cure proper names as if they were the indication of some disease. A symptom simply shows that *there is* a disturbance, a disorder, i.e. an indication that someone was or is alive. An indication only, as the living, split up between death and life, always at the limits of language and economy, always on the verge of reaching out towards the radically Other, never ever really makes it for he or she always remain *within* economy and language.

So, what is one to do or think when faced with this wall of names and this grave full of bones without names? The only way to think these bearers without names, these symptoms or disturbances is simply as I said at the start of this essay, to mourn them. This is not a sad thought. This is a job. This job is not a lament, but the active engagement of respecting these bearers, that is, these symptoms “who” in their lives always already fell in and out of economy and language, these disturbances “who” slipped between first name and surname, proper name and bearer of name, life and death. The work of mourning consists precisely in paying respect to this other, to this living *who passed* between the two, to these living Tutsis who I have never met and whose names are now lost. As such, mourning is always an *affirmation* of the other’s existence,^{ix} of *its* existence, of an existence that no matter what managed *to live or pass* by their names, nouns, and proper names. Proper names are therefore not just expressions of bereavement; they *affirm* that *there is* an “other”; that as part of economy and language, some-“one” carried a proper name. It is only with the recognition of such an otherness (or such a sameness) that true respect can take place.

And with this mark of respect, I leave the memorial wall and the mass grave. I have never met any of these 225,000 Rwandans who lost their lives *and* their names. I don’t even know any of the 25,000 “lucky” ones whose names are

engraved on the black wall. With such lack of knowledge, with such absence of information, the only thing I hope I have managed to do is to pay my respects; to mourn them in the only possible way. This did not imply recalling memories of the dead, recalling the good times we might have spent together. My mark of respect, this mourning can never make it as a eulogy. And I didn't even cry or express anger at the injustice of it all. In front of such a precipice, in front of such an unfathomable sheer drop in meaning, I only tried to find ways to pay homage to these bearers of name, these long-gone disturbances who once tragically gave their identity cards and, as a consequence, lost their lives.

ⁱ For an excellent analysis of these places of mourning, see Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (New York: Berg, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Rwanda is a predominantly Catholic country.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Derrida, "The teachings of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," trans. A. Ronell, in *The Ear of the Other, Otobiographies, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. MacDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 7, my emphasis.

^{iv} Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 39.

^v Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs for Paul de Man*, trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler and E. Cavada (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 50.

^{vi} Derrida, *The Ear of the Other, Otobiographies, Transference, Translation*, p. 7.

^{vii} Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 99.

^{viii} Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 99, my emphasis.

^{ix} Jacques Derrida, *Points... Interviews, 1974-94*, trans. P. Kamuf, ed. Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 143.