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A treatise on tricks is offered

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. I hosted an intimate, read-from-your-work soiree for visiting literary personalities this week.

In anticipation of Halloween, I invited the ghost of Jacques Derrida, the celebrated French philosopher and fountainhead of deconstructionism, to moderate an increasingly immoderate discussion.

Deconstructionism argues that its impossible for meaning and truth to be either stable or have long-term value. Nothing is anchored, so everything floats in relation to everything else.

(I should add here that I am no intellectual. This judgment was rendered by the mother of a college girlfriend 50 years ago; boy, did she hit the nail on its head. In college, I enrolled in The Experience of

Western Philosophy only to be disillusioned when we skipped over stagecoach banditry and cowboy coffee.)

Derrida troubles pragmatic Americans, because hes saying something that amounts to: Everything is nothing; nothing is everything; context is all. So Ha! Ha! (Im simplifying for the sake of both brevity and clarity.)

So who better than his ghost to illuminate the hidden meanings of familiar tales?

Jacques: Jack,
commence. Jack:

*Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his
crown, And Jill came tumbling
after.*

Jill: Ive been trying to correct this sexist twaddle for years. Only a nincompoop like Jack would go *uphill* to get water.

Jack: I was misinformed.

Jill: Normal people go *downhill* for water. Even more normal people go to their sink. And then the klutz falls down and splits his head open.

Jack: It was a slippery slope, what with all the spilled water. And dont forget, you fell, too.

Jill: I didnt fall. You grabbed my hand and pulled me down. Women always pay a price for trying to rescue the misguided, fumble-footed men in their lives.

Jacques: Ah, both hit bottom! This, I think, may have no significance. Jack: Im sorry, dumplin.

Jill: Dont you dumplin me! Did you see what that fall did to my hair and nails?

Jack: Well, at least, the pail wasnt damaged .

Jill: I should have listened to my father. He told me to not get mixed up with a boy who still carries his water in a jug.

Jack: We could try again. This time, dumplin , you can carry the pail.

Jill: This is not about your stupid pail! I am not your beast of burden! You are not listening to me!

Jacques: It is clear. This story is about the triumph of nature -- the hill -- over frail human kind. But, of course, there is no triumph in a world where defeat is its own reward.

Jacques: Now well hear from La Muffy and Monsieur Web who will read.

Mr. Web:

*Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet.
Eating her curds and whey.
Along came a*

*spider, Who sat
down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.*

Mr. Web: Muffy...you wronged me. Miss Muffet: I think not.

Mr. Web: I was never interested in your watery cottage cheese. Miss Muffet: I knew that! You were after me! I know a footsie move when at least four are put on me.

Mr. Web: I just wanted to talk.

Miss Muffet: Right! I am not interested in having sex with an eightlegged, lactose-intolerant man who has four eyes and fangs!

Mr. Webb: You just cant get beyond the superficial, can you? Jacques: Clearly, language is confusing that which is sufficiently confused. *Nest-ce pas ?*

Jacques: And now the Sprats. Jack, if you would. Jack:

Jack Sprat could eat no fat.

*His wife could eat no lean.
And so between them both,
you see, They licked the
platter clean.*

Mrs. Sprat: Jack...youre a toad for making me eat the fat, the lard and the suet at every meal...and then telling the world that I loved it.

Jack: Youre right, dearest. I am a toad.

Mrs. Sprat: And what will people think of me lapping our platter like a St. Bernard, side by side with the licks of you. Ugh City!

Jack: Youre right again, dearest. I should have given you first dibs. Mrs. Sprat: And on top of that History knows me not. I am half

of this classic, but never more than an unnamed plate-licker.

Jack: Would you like me to speak to the literary Authorities on your behalf?

Mrs. Sprat: The very ones who've made me an object of derision? Certainly not!

Jack: Would you like to switch from fat to lean? Mrs. Sprat: No.

Jack: Would you like to eliminate trans-fats? Mrs. Sprat: No.

Jack: Monounsaturated, pollywollydoodle fats? Mrs. Sprat: No! Jack: What would you like to do? Mrs. Sprat: Rail at my fate!

Jacques: Ah. The men! The women! The cuisine! I'm intrigued by their practice of confusing food and sex. This is too delicious for mere words.

Jacques: And so we go to Mademoiselle Bo. Ms. Peep:

*Little Bo-Peep has lost her [sheep](#),
And doesn't know where to find them;
Leave them alone, And they'll come
home, Wagging their tails behind
them.*

Ms. Peep: I never lost a sheep in my life. Of course, I'm not counting several ram lambs who were tailing me in high school. Them, I lost.

Jacques: So how did you...let me put it this way...get the reputation for being a scatterbrain?

Ms. Peep: I have a mind like a sprung steel trap. I got saddled

with this bad rep after my brother stole sheep from our Dads flock and pinned that tale on this donkey.

Jacques: Such richly endowed sibling dysfunction! What layers! What secrets! Did any sheep return home, wagging its tail?

Ms. Peep: Am I my brothers sheeper?

Jacques: A very important question in philosophy. The answer depends on what your definition of am is, which, as you may know, resists meaningful definition except as a non-absolute negative. The best one can say is: I ponder, therefore, I am not...but hope to be, maybe.

Ms. Peep: I think you are drowning in the shallow end.

Jacques: Ah Americans! Such innocence! And lost sheep is such a familiar metaphor though the concept of lost is not what it once was. These sheep were not lost in a physical sense, were they?

Ms. Peep: No, indeed. One ended up in my brothers freezer. The rest were sold to wolves looking to change their wardrobe.

Jacques: Can we not conclude that no shepherd is a true shepherd, because all shepherds dispose of their sheep sooner or later? We are left with language facilitating one of lifes double-crosses.

Jacques: Time for one last dive into the unending depths. Ill read it.

*Cock-a-doodle-doo!
My dame has lost her shoe,
My master's lost his
fiddlestick, And knows not
what to do.*

Ms. Peep: Sheep are one thing, but losing a shoe is another

thing.

Mr. Web: What does a missing shoe amount to when a fiddlestick cant be found? I, for one, would rather be incapable of finding my shoe than my fiddlestick. With eight feet, I can get by being one shoe short.

Jacques: *Profund!* Of course, it may not be a shoe in the sense that cant be found.

Jack: A shoe is a shoe is a shoe. Youre going way beyond the pale. Jack Sprat: Maybe shes lost so much weight that her shoe just fell off her foot. I could fatten up this dame.

Mrs. Sprat: You keep your zipper up and your plate-licking at home! Jill: At least this lady didnt lose her pail like I did.

Jack: Lets not forget the master. You cant play a violin without a bow. Why doesnt he just go down the hill and buy a new fiddlestick? Thats where I got my new pail.

Jacques: *Mais oui.* If only things were that simple, if only everything could be bought anew. If only another commodity could satisfy our base desires.

Jack: You mean a new pail wont fix everything ?

Ms. Muffet: I get it! Call on me! I know! I know! I know what a shoe and a fiddlestick are! Call on me!

Jacques: Well, look who knows what is what...when all is said and done.

Ms. Muffet: Hey Web! Why dont you come up to my tuffet sometime and see me?

Web: Legs matter.

Jacques: So we conclude. While words are imprecise, is it not clear that every trick embeds a treat, and within every treat a trick is to be found? I will now return to my day job of haunting undergraduate linguistics classes.

Jill: What a rip-off! I didnt even get a new bucket out of this reading. Mrs. Sprat: All I got was a ghost I couldnt u nderstand dressed in a white sheet.

Me: He is a writer shade of pale.

Jill: And now we know why you could never make it as an intellectual.