Derrida on Heidegger and… Robinson Crusoe?


In a course description designed for his American audience during the spring of 2003 Derrida restates the argument of the entire seminar, now entering its second year, and announces the themes to be taken up:

Under this title we are pursuing the research from previous years around the sovereignty of the nation-state and its onto-theologico-political foundation. This research was made necessary for us by the question of capital punishment, which always implies the right of a sovereign power to have the life and death of its subjects at its disposal (the right of pardon, for example). But this reflection on sovereignty will be inflected this year toward the great questions of animal life (that of “man,” said by Aristotle to be a “political animal,” and that of the “beasts”) and of the treatment, the subjection, of the “beast” by “man.”

We shall ask questions about the literary or rhetorical history of the forms and genres (figures, tropes, metonymies, metaphors, allegories, fables, theater, etc.) which propose “animal representations” of the political. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* or La Fontaine’s *Fables* would be only two examples among many. The question of gender and sexual difference will intersect all the others.

We shall also analyze, through the history of the concept of sovereignty (Bodin, Hobbes, Rousseau, Schmitt, etc.) what tends to associate and dissociate the figure of the sovereign and the beast (which is not exactly the animal). Both indeed seem to stand above or at a distance from the law. Both are, in different ways, of course, but in common, outlaws. What then is the law? And right? The sovereign, says Schmitt, is the one who has the right to suspend right.

Referring frequently to the contemporary situation and to the problems of globalization that affect the logic of nation-state sovereignty, we shall also address the question of rogue states and their leaders who are often, in the political rhetoric of the most powerful states, compared to “beasts.” At stake here, naturally (long before 9/11, which we shall however discuss), are the concepts of war—international or civil—according to European law, of cruelty, of terror, of (national and international) terrorism, etc.

What was thus begun last year (2002) will be pursued this year with a different inflection, especially in the latter weeks of the seminar. We shall begin conjoined readings (sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting) of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, on the one hand, and of Heidegger’s seminar (1929–1930) on the animal, on the other (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World—Finitude—Solitude*). (2: 13–14)
In the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) yearbook for 2002–3, Derrida provides further details in a retrospective on this second year of “The Beast and the Sovereign” seminar:

Following and developing the premises of the research begun the previous year, we focused all our efforts toward the reading and interpretation of two texts that appear in all respects to be as heterogeneous as possible: *Robinson Crusoe*, on the one hand, and a famous seminar of Heidegger’s, on the other (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World—Finitude—Solitude*), and in it more especially the [second half of the] 1929–1930 course, which constitutes Heidegger’s most systematic and rich treatise on animality, and more precisely on the world for the animal.

For it is in this seminar that we find the three famous “theses”—problematic theses to our eyes, and extensively questioned in our seminar—(“the stone is without world [*weltlos*], the animal is poor in world [*weltarm*], man is world-forming [*weltbildend*]”).

Sometimes intersecting, sometimes in parallel, these readings aimed at a common focus: the history (especially the political history) of the concept of sovereignty, including, inseparably, the sovereignty of man over animal in the pre-colonial England of Defoe (with its religious background-studies in *Robinson Crusoe*) and throughout the many diverse and gripping readings of *Robinson Crusoe* through the centuries (Rousseau, especially, but also Kant, Marx, and many nineteenth-century political economists, and also Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Lacan, Deleuze, etc.) and in Heidegger’s modern Germany (the beginning of the 1930s).

These two books are also books on solitude, on the so-called “state of nature,” on the history of the concept of Nature (especially in Heidegger), in which we began to study the quite essential lexicon (often associated with *physis*), seldom remarked upon and so difficult to translate, of *Walten* (*Gewalt*, *Umgewalt*, *Übergewaltigkeit*, etc.) which will flood Heidegger’s texts from 1935 onward and which designates an archi-originary force or violence of “sovereignty”—as it is sometimes translated—beyond the onto-theological, i.e., beyond the philosophico-political as such; which is obviously never the case in either Defoe or in the rich philosophical, political, and religious context that determines his book.

These, broadly put, are the stakes that guided us in readings that were as minute as possible, sometimes appealing to other works by these two authors. (2: 14–15)

In this second and concluding part of the review, I will continue to follow the strategy that guided the first, which presents little more than the sources,

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1) Page references throughout this review are to vol. 2 of the French edition, inasmuch as the English translation, helpfully, places the French pagination in the outside margin. I will cite *Robinson Crusoe* (Derrida reads the Modern Library edition introduced by Virginia Woolf) only as Derrida cites it; by contrast, I will cite Heidegger’s text according to the 1983 German edition, as 29/30, which is its *Gesamtausgabe* number. At the same time, I wish to acknowledge and to laud Nick Walker and Will McNeill for their exceptionally fine English translation of that volume published by Indiana University Press.