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Review Articles



Life, Death, Reproduction, and Chance

Some Recent Work by and about Derrida

Jacques Derrida, *La vie la mort. Séminaire 1975–1976*. Ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf. Paris: Seuil, 2019; English translation, *Life Death*. Ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf; trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Dawne McCance, *The Reproduction of Life Death: Derrida's La vie la mort*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.

Elizabeth Rottenberg, *For the Love of Psychoanalysis: The Play of Chance in Freud and Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.

I will say relatively little here about the recent publication of Derrida's 1975–76 seminar, *La vie la mort (Life Death)*, allowing myself only the briefest of summaries, in order to focus on the monographs by Dawne McCance and Elizabeth Rottenberg. I would need much more space and time to comment in detail on Derrida's long and difficult seminar. I have read the transcription of the seminar several times now, in both French and English, but too many thought-provoking and complicated things happen there, so that I must leave detailed analyses to other reviewers. In what follows I will provide the merest outline of the contents of the seminar and then proceed to a discussion of the two new excellent books *about* Derrida by McCance and Rottenberg.

The 1975–76 *La vie la mort* seminar, translated as *Life Death*, consists of fourteen sessions. As a whole, the seminar “loops about” three areas of questioning: it begins by considering the modern science of genetics, then advances to questions concerning the interface of biography and biology, emphasizing

the “case” of Nietzsche, and ends with an intense confrontation with Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Session 1, “Programs,” introduces the “program” that modern genetics, here represented by François Jacob’s *The Logic of the Living* (1970), claims will revolutionize the life sciences. Such a program, says Jacob, enables science to cast off every “metaphysical” or “mystical” tendency of its inherited past. Derrida replies by showing how closely Jacob unwittingly follows every thesis of Hegel concerning “the living,” such that Jacob’s account rests on classical metaphysical presuppositions. Simultaneously, Derrida resists the “program” of the French *agrégation* system, which has set the topic “Life and Death” for that year’s examinees. He resists the program by eliminating the “and,” which represents life/death as binary opposites.

Session 2, “Logic of the Living,” introduces Nietzsche’s remarkable account of his life, or lives, in *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*. Derrida places special emphasis on the multiple senses of Nietzsche’s name and the manifold senses of his double “inheritance.” Nietzsche is already dead as his defunct father but is living on as his surviving mother. In session 3, “Transition: Oedipus’s faux pas,” Derrida reads a number of Nietzsche’s early texts from the Basel period, including a remarkable text on Oedipus as “the last human being,” which seems to prefigure Maurice Blanchot’s 1957 novel of that title. Toward the end of the session, Derrida returns to the theme of genetics and Jacob’s *Logic*, contrasting it to Nietzsche’s Basel lectures on “The Future of Our Educational Institutes.” One of the key questions here is whether modern biological science is able to construct its “models” without recourse to metaphor and metaphysics alike.

Session 4, “The Logic of the Supplement: the Supplement of the Other [*au-trui*], of Death, of Meaning, of Life,” argues that modern biology is essentially “a text on a text.” Jacob proceeds as though a text were simply the communication of information that submits to mastery. Once again the focus is Jacob’s definition of “the living” as that which can and does “reproduce” itself. Session 5, “Indestructible,” takes up the relation of *re-production* as the *production* of the living. Such re-production, Derrida shows, is in effect “inconceivable,” inasmuch as its “origin” is always double, never an original, always a copy. And death? Death is introduced into life, argues Jacob, only when the living becomes complexified by sexual reproduction. Bacteria reproduce (or rather *replicate*) themselves eternally—and thus are not subject to the logic of the living. Sex and death are thus supplements to that logic, *necessary* supplements, to be sure, undecidably outside and inside the “system” of life.

Session 6, “The ‘Limping’ Model: The Story of the Colossus,” shows how “models” for genetic science fail as soon as the object for that science is a text.