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**Review: Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*. Eds. Pascale Anne-Brault and Peggy Kamuf, trans. Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).**

If one googles “life death Derrida” one receives (at least for now—the publication of *Life Death* is sure to change this) a panel labeled “Jacques Derrida / Date of death,” an appropriately solemn photograph of the author’s face, and the piece of information the algorithm assumes you sought: October 9, 2004. Unlike Derrida’s life, which (in a limited sense) ended with this death, his *Life Death* seemsto be just beginning. It is the seventh of his seminars to be translated into English, with unparalleled grace and rigor, by the Derrida Seminar Translation Project, with Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas taking the lead on this volume. For a posthumous publication, it’s unusually timely. It offers a spectral dialogue with all the academic work over the past decades that has cast itself as part of a “materialist turn,” claiming that past thinkers were too caught up in theorizing culture to understand the importance of nature, an imperative in the face of our climate crisis. Derrida is typically placed on the retrograde side of this dichotomy, which has sparked a recent interest in this 1975-76 seminar. Derrida could not have anticipated, almost a half century ago, that his lectures would come, this belatedly, to feel so *present*.[[1]](#endnote-1) But this is precisely their subject: one cannot write about life by imagining it to be something separate from the writing, as if, for example, one had a philosopher’s life story on one side and their philosophy on the other—rather, any writing necessarily holds the *life death* of its author as one of its stakes.

Given that so many readers or non-readers of Derrida dismiss him as abstract and abstruse, there will likely be many who view *Life Death* either as anomalous, the one time in his corpus or his life he considered something to do with the natural sciences, or even as still too immaterial, more concerned with the life of human beings, language, and other cultural artifacts than with *life proper*. These readers would be mistaken. One could show, as Francesco Vitale has done in his *Biodeconstruction*, that from Derrida’s earliest writings to his last, deconstruction was a deconstruction of life, which means anything but a turning away from biological life toward things cultural or all too human. The problem facing recent materialist studies, which means the problem facing us all, if the stakes of this work include averting ecological catastrophe, is precisely one of deconstruction. One cannot return to or rescue nature, matter, and life unless one already knows what nature, matter, and life are. Can we accomplish this goal without acknowledging that *nature,* for example, is a word in a given language, belonging to a particular history and history of thought, which means that it may be the most cultural thing of all? To point this out does not at all commit one to the ‘idealist’ position that nothing outside language (in the narrowest sense) exists, but rather makes it possible to challenge and displace the limits of our knowledge or assumptions about nature. The risk of ignoring this seemingly trivial point is the risk of absolutizing a contingent and conditional construction of nature. Even when we turn to the sciences and their celebrated empiricism, we find that they are in constant upheaval as to their basic concepts and everything built upon them—which is to say that we cannot take the science of life for life “itself.” Deconstruction begins with this problem, that even or especially when it comes to understanding its life, the living thing is at odds with itself.

For many readers, the sessions of *Life Death* dealing with François Jacob’s *The Logic of Life* are likely to hold the most interest.[[2]](#endnote-2) Jacob was a Nobel Prize-winning French geneticist who, in this theoretical work, described the living being as nothing more than a genetic program written in or as DNA, a union of cybernetics (life as program) and structuralism (life as language). Derrida’s reading of Jacob is therefore his closest engagement with the life sciences, though we would be guilty of fetishizing the discourse of a scientist if we thought that meant it was any more a deconstruction of *life itself* than Derrida’s readings of Canguilhem, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Freud. While the readings of Jacob and Canguilhem also hold special interest for having been previously unpublished in any form, the other sessions (which Derrida reworked into *The Ear of the Other*, “Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger),” and “To Speculate—On ‘Freud’”) gain a particular resonance when read in the context of *Life Death*.

In 1975, Derrida was a *maître-assistant* or *caïman* at the École normale supérieure, which meant that he was in part required to teach philosophy courses that adhered to a theme dictated nationally by the French agrégation program (the previous year, Derrida organized the first meeting of what would become GREPH, a group of French philosophers and professors that fought to modernize these rigid programs and militated against conservative efforts to roll back the teaching of philosophy in French high schools).[[3]](#endnote-3) The theme of the agrégation for the year 1975-76 was “*La vie et la mort,*” and Derrida begins his first session by explaining why he altered the title only by removing the conjunction: not “life and death” but “life death.”He is attempting a careful operation, removing the *et* that suggests a logical opposition between the two terms, without letting the distinction collapse into an identity (Derrida plays here on the homophony of *et* and *est*, the latter meaning “is”). Life death without opposition means that these are not logically or ontologically separable—they are neither independent concepts nor independent phenomena. Any way one might attempt to define or recognize them, the other term is there already haunting the supposed self-identity of the same. Nevertheless, this non-opposition does not collapse into an identity (as in, life *is* death). Identity is only another ruse of metaphysical thought, which transcends the opposition of life and death by claiming that “natural” life is united with “natural” death in a higher unity encompassing both, an eternal life of the Spirit.

Life cannot be isolated as something other-than-death, but it is not the same as death. There is a difference or *différance* (a term Derrida invented to describe precisely this sort of haunting non/alterity) at the origin—a paradox and stumbling block for reason. Logic seems to dictate that *either* one thinks of death as an end state of living things, in which case there must have first been life, *or* one includes all the inanimate in the category of death, in which case there had to be death for life to emerge from it. Against this logical and chronological ordering, Derrida is suggesting that no matter where one looks for an origin, one finds the difference already there—*life death*.

Jacob offers an example of this principle at work. He seems to think that he can write directly of life, unencumbered by philosophical prejudices (meaning that his text would be adequate to life, at least to its concept, identical with it). But the life he writes about turns out to have something in common with his text, with the attempt to write a text about it: life is a language, a genetic program written in the form of DNA. Derrida says of Jacob and of biological modernity:

…what is apparently most readable in this text of the modern biologist or geneticist is that he does not write a text on something that would be outside the text [*hors texte*], something that would be a-textual, that would form a referent whose nature would be to be foreign, in its being or in its structure, to textuality but, quite to the contrary, he writes a text on a text, a text on text, in order to demonstrate, recall, or write that his object has the structure of a text, and that there is no longer anything in the object of his science or of his research, nothing as scientific object, that is metatextual. (77)

At this point, order and origin become undecidable. Do we know and identify individual living things (including the living thing we are) on the basis of a prior knowledge and experience with textuality, or vice versa? Does life produce textuality, or must there be text in order for there to be life? Is one the model of the other, or must we rethink the category “model” now that it cannot be derived from or applied to a reality preceding it? If we are not sure which produces which, which gives birth to the other, then we cannot say whether life or text is more natural than its no-longer-opposed other. The text of life (biography or biology) ends up describing itself, its own process of being written, which does not make it self-present or self-conscious but rather places it beyond its own grasp without making it something other than itself, without itself within itself, precisely the haunting, non-oppositional differance of life death. Derrida calls this the “auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphical”—self-life-death-other-writing (259).

Of course, this is not revealed so quickly, either in Jacob’s text or in Derrida’s reading of it. Jacob attempts to carefully and conscientiously separate an original, vital language from its cultural, human derivatives. Jacob calls the former genetic memory, and the latter nervous memory. The predicates he ascribes to genetic memory demonstrate the influence of cybernetics on his thought (and on much of the work in genetics during this period). Cybernetics was a term coined by Norbert Wiener, who was one of the first thinkers to describe living things as essentially identical to computers—a comparison with which we today are quite familiar. His claim was simple: computers and living things are both feedback loops capable of taking in information and executing programs in response. From this model of life comes the concept of the genetic program, written into DNA in just the fashion that one programs a computer, and executed unfailingly in response to external stimuli. Jacob’s claim is that this genetic “memory,” which is unchanging and unconsciously reproduces itself without end, is exempt from the processes of acquisition and revision to which “nervous memory,” which includes all of our cultural developments, is exposed.

Derrida is not claiming that Jacob has simply chosen thewrong model for life. The problem is not that Jacob has defined life as instinctual and rigid where it is actually supple and intentional. Rather, there is something wrong with both halves of this dichotomy, which should suggest to us that something is breaking down in the very idea of modeling—the model-machine is stalling. Here we can recognize the work or play of deconstruction: neither genetic memory nor nervous memory are coherent concepts because each presupposes the other. Like life death, they can neither be opposed, nor identified (at least, not rigorously). The constraints of code that Jacob invokes as proof of the determinism of genetic memory are not absent from nervous memory or the cultural languages that extend it. In other words, Jacob thinks that because there are rules governing the transcription and translation of the genetic code, which seems to function like clockwork, there is no place in it for the idea of intentional intervention of any kind. He is attempting to replace the idea of the purposive organism with the reproduction-machine. But one can say the same thing of the languages and all the cultural or institutional codes that form “nervous memory.” Each has rules that generate their valid instantiations (such as the grammar that produces appropriate sentences) and their transmission to future generations—Derrida reminds his students that his class is part of just such an institution of social reproduction, the university and the agrégation *program*. Indeed, the structuralist linguistic model that had transformed French thought by this period was precisely a matter of exorcising the specters of vitalist intentionalism to describe human society and institutions as self-executing programs.

The risk of applying this computer- or machine-model to life is, on the one hand, that of human exceptionalism, pretending that any sort of receptivity or adaptivity (within rather than between ‘generations’) belongs to the human alone. On the other hand, one cannot contain all of life, from the prokaryotic to the human, within the concept or model of the instinctual genetic program. Essential to this program is that it remains always what it is, regardless of what might come from the outside. Derrida could not have known, at the time he was writing, that epigenetics and developmental systems theory would challenge the idea of DNA as a self-contained and self-repeating destiny. A nucleic acid sequence can remain “the same” without producing the same phenotype (without executing the same program), for any number of reasons. Derrida was not anticipating this discovery, but rather intuiting its necessary possibility, which is the alterity haunting all repetition:

…is there not—and this is also acknowledged by Jacob—a structural outside of the cell without which it would not reproduce itself and which thus makes of the *itself*, of the relation to self of reproduction, an always fissured and open structure, a system that functions only insofar as it is in relation to the other or to the outside, such that the identity of the itself and of the *re*- is and functions only in its difference with itself, and this just as much in the living as in the nonliving? (132)

We are now in a position to understand why it is not simply a matter of choosing a better model. Jacob has defined the essence of the living thing as self-reproduction. Despite his many efforts to free himself from the history of philosophy, this definition adheres to an entire tradition from Aristotle to Hegel. Self-reproduction, as the essence of life, is not just any essence. This same tradition thought essence as the origin and nature of a thing, the kernel that makes it what it is. Essence is self-reproduction. Life, then, would not be just one philosopheme among others—a certain vitalism is the essence of philosophy.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The concept of model is outside of this self-creation. The model comes from outside; it is not the self-same revealing itself as itself of itself, but an imposition from outside, a figure or metaphor rather than a proper knowledge. What Derrida is demonstrating, by focusing on the work of one particular scientist, is that our knowledge of life appears to us as one or several models (life is a machine which is a text…) not because we have not yet stumbled upon life itself, *life proper*, but because there is no essence, no self-reproduction, no life at all—if life means a presence-to-self reproducing itself by itself. Life, if there is any, is only its exposure to the other; life receives itself from the other. If we expect true knowledge to be knowledge of a self-generating essence, we will never achieve it. Which means that our knowledge of life, and our knowledge of anything, will always appear to us in the form of this circulation of models or metaphors: a machine is a text which is life, a text is a life which is a machine, etc.—without one ever simply *being* the other.

From this vantage, we can see how Derrida can help us to avoid the pitfalls of the back-and-forth animating recent debates around materialism. When these authors argue that we need to return to nature and its agency, they are typically opposing “social constructivists” such as Foucault and Judith Butler, whose writing often suggests that culture produces nature by naturalizing some portion of itself (e.g. we create our concept of natural, biological, genetic and hormonal sex on the basis of cultural gender norms). When the debate carries on in this fashion, with a purely productive and originary culture on one side and the return to the generative agency of nature on the other, the unexamined common ground of both these positions is some form of self-reproduction. In order for a materialist to pretend that they have rediscovered the agency of nature, they will inevitably commit an act akin to absolutizing some “model” of nature, as if one were to pretend that a given moment in scientific history offered us the absolute truth about nature itself. Ironically, this is precisely the operation they wanted to oppose, the constructivist gesture that would have “culture” (from which our models are inevitably drawn) produce nature.

If we deconstruct this binary, both nature and culture will appear to us as derivative effects, without there being anything prior to or more fundamental than them from which they could be derived. Their “origin” is differance. All possible freedom and constraint will seem to come from both and neither, precisely because we cannot step outside of the difference into a neutral terrain from which they can be mastered.

In the fifty years since Derrida wrestled with Jacob, in the afterlife of *Life Death*, many inventions and discoveries have intruded upon Jacob’s conception of life as a genetic program, which has ultimately proven its exposure to alterity, its vulnerability. The process by which what we thought we knew to be nature proves to have always been different from itself, the process we call scientific discovery, by which some *other nature* subverts every model it generates, is precisely what Derrida calls deconstruction. What follows from that can only be answered by our own exposure to the future.

*Emory University, 2021*

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1. The many harbingers of this publication no doubt contribute to this contemporaneity-effect. For example: Wills, *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life*; Vitale, *Biodeconstruction*; Lynes, *Futures*; Fritsch, Lynes, and Wood, *Eco-Deconstruction*; McCance, *Reproduction*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jacob’s book was translated into English under this title despite explicitly stating that its subject is not *life*, which Jacob claims is an unscientific abstraction, but rather the *living being*. The French title is *La logique du vivant*, a literal translation of which would be *The Logic of the Living* (as the translators of *Life Death* point out). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am indebted to recent work by Thomas Clément Mercier for my understanding of the context of these seminars. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On this point, see the sixth session of *Life Death* and ch. 3 of Vitale’s *Biodeconstruction*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)