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“WITH A VIEW TO SPEECH”
Akira Mizuta Lippit

The first two volumes of an ambitious project to publish Jacques Derrida’s complete “teaching lectures” or seminars, delivered between 1968 and 2003 in French and in English, begin at the end with Derrida’s last, unfinished seminar “The Beast & the Sovereign,” which he presented during 2001–3 in France and the United States. Geoffrey Bennington and Peggy Kamuf, who supervise the English edition of “The Seminars of Jacques Derrida,” and are also involved in the French project published by Galilée, explain the process by which Derrida’s lectures, which he called “seminars” and which were in most cases written out in their entirety beforehand, originally by hand, then by typewriter, and eventually electronically, were transcribed, and with minimal editing, published first in French and then in English translation. “In all cases,” write Bennington and Kamuf, along with their cosignatories of the “General Introduction to the French Edition” (Marc Crépon, Marguerite Derrida, Thomas Dutoit, Michel Lise, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud), “our primary goal is to present the text of the seminar, as written by Jacques Derrida with a view to speech, to reading aloud, and thus with some marks of anticipated orality and some familiar turns of phrase” (2009, xi, original emphases).

Already at work in this complex project is an irreducible ambiguity
regarding the phenomenality of the object, its objectivity (and object- 

hood) as such, but also its authority, specifically its authorship. These signatories, all of who worked closely with Derrida (including Marguerite), and whom Derrida trusted deeply, are also involved in an expanded economy of authorship that is not unrelated to Derrida’s work. As they write in the general introduction, “It is not certain that Jacques Derrida would have published the seminars as they stand; probably he would have reorganized or rewritten them” (2009, xi). These supplementary texts, written and spoken by Derrida, bear the marks then of a quasi authorship, a virtual authorship he shares with his colleagues posthumously. This precarious authorship bears significantly upon the continued understanding of Derrida’s oeuvre as a singularly important event in the history of twentieth-century thought since it is precisely one of the themes to which Derrida turns and returns consistently, here and elsewhere: Who or what writes? Is writing written or spoken by a subject or does it arrive, return, take place ipso facto with or without an author? In his or her absence? And what constitutes writing, what are its genres, its genders even? Who or what is sovereign in writing, an author, he or she?

Among the notable phrases in the editors’ introduction is the claim that these seminars, to be distinguished from Derrida’s published work, which he authorized as their author, which he authored in a more conventional sense of the term, are texts written by Derrida but “with a view to speech.” That is, their authorship is performed as it were live, in full view, perhaps, a spectacle of speech and thought. What might such a view be, and how to view or review the visuality implicit in speech, inherent in the two volumes that signal the arrival of a writing genre with a view to and perhaps of speech? What mode of speech is made visible in these publications? What does this thought look like? As the editors suggest, it is Derrida himself, the dynamic temporality of his thought, what Jean-Claude Leb- 

ensztejn once referred to as Derrida’s “extravagant patience,” and the rhythms with which his thought unfolds that become visible.1 Not simply the thought made text, made flesh, transposed from and to a body fixed in space, but a movement in time, changing in time, over time and through space from one session to the next. What is immediately but also slowly visible in these volumes is the remarkable manner in which Derrida’s signature form of teaching takes place, marks time, a genre of thought made sensual and temporal.

Along with the careful pacing that Derrida sustains in his seminars, a kind of musical structure with its own measures, refrains,
keys, motifs, variations, deviations, and contretemps, the seminars also reveal Derrida’s incredible mobilization of thought: Derrida moves vast philosophical, literary, political archives forward in the course of his seminar, even as he himself moves through them. Those who attended his seminars will recall this spectacular choreography: key terms and phrases introduced early on, but with very little sense of their eventual destination return throughout Derrida’s seminar, slowly accruing new values, layers of meaning, new sounds and tonalities, as he puts them into play throughout a massive archive of proper names and texts, drawing from these terms and phrases new etymologies, neologisms, and ultimately new epistemologies. The process is breathtaking and at times overwhelming: what is hardly visible at the beginning feels inevitable by the seminar’s end, as though Derrida anticipated all along and from a great distance the exact end-point of his seminar. As if those end points were always there from the beginning. How could one have missed them at first? What these first two volumes make amply clear is that Derrida did envision and anticipate the exact end point of each seminar, even if this particular seminar remains unfinished. Not an end that closes thought, a fixed terminal at the end of thought, but the ends of thought already there, present in each instance and instant of thought. The published seminar shows the extent to which Derrida was capable of keeping in play a multitude of thoughts and citations while moving carefully along various trajectories at once toward not a single terminal point, but a constellation of thought, a universe or cosmos, at the end of each seminar.

As Derrida indicates at the beginning of *The Beast & the Sovereign*, the seminar follows from the one that precedes it on the death penalty, and his concern with the role that sovereignty plays in the regulation of life, what has been taken up more recently (via Giorgio Agamben invoking Michel Foucault) as *biopolitics*. The seminar also has another point of origin in Derrida’s presentation at the 1997 colloquium at Cerisy-La-Salle, “L’animal autobiographique,” where he presented his first iteration of what would become his seminar “L’animal que donc je suis.” At the time, Derrida referred to this project as his largest ever. So large it remains incomplete, due to his untimely death perhaps, but the publication of the seminars themselves reveals that in some ways the seminar’s incompleteness may be intrinsic to its closure: *The Beast & the Sovereign* operates as a culmination of Derrida’s work and thought, a horizon that allows Derrida to look forward and backward at once, as he once noted in his reading of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* (1888). And one might draw a line, sometimes visible at
others cryptic, between Nietzsche’s autobiography that points to man that beholds man, and Derrida’s equally autobiographical seminar (although in a different idiom) that names two outlaws, two ends of man and of being that rest outside the law, above and beneath, and always before the law: the beast and the sovereign.

And if the seminar makes visible a genre unique to Derrida’s thought, the seminar itself, then it also takes up the very question of genre, of gender already at work in the key terms beast and sovereign, and the very question of man, or mankind, at the origin of those concepts. For Derrida, the question of gender is also inseparable from the genre in which he addresses the question of gender. Derrida’s seminar begins with this attention to gender, to the language of gender but also to the genders of language that name his terms: “Feminine . . . masculine [La . . . le].” “Let me recall,” he begins, “the title proposed for this year’s seminar: the beast [feminine: la bête] and the sovereign [masculine: le souverain]. La, le” (2009, 1).

As Derrida makes clear from the first words of his seminar, the intersections of life and law open several lines of inquiry that intersect across the fields they traverse: a line between human beings and animals, as the seminar’s title suggests, but, within and alongside this line and across it, another set of lines including those thresholds that constitute gender traverse the beast and the sovereign, feminine and masculine, she and he. From the beginning, readers are able to see the rich layering of Derrida’s thought, not in the form of a completed book or published essay but as a living process, a movement.

Among the many displays in these volumes is Derrida’s impeccable attention to detail, his historical rigor, his careful readings of even brief passages, his creativity and unrivaled ingenuity, but also his wit, playfulness, and polemics—revelations perhaps for those who never attended these live seminars. One of the most spectacular visualizations of Derrida’s process appears in his explication of the term bêtise, colloquial French for “stupid,” but also the word that names stupidity as bestial. Derrida devotes considerable time to translating and situating the nuances of this term in its French vernacular, pointing out the inconsistency of its usage, nuance, and affect—an inconsistency that gives Derrida the exact point of entry into his reflections on the languages of animality from which animals are themselves supposedly excluded. Challenging Gilles Deleuze’s use of bêtise only ever to characterize human beings and never animals, Derrida asks what it might mean to imagine an animal capable of stupidity, an animal capable of animality. The line of inquiry is deeply suggestive and flows into a similar critique
Derrida forges against Jacques Lacan’s use of “bestiality,” or cruelty, to refer to human actions in the name of the animal. Can one imagine an animal capable of cruelty and stupidity, Derrida asks, and doesn’t the anthropocentrism of Deleuze and Lacan, among many if not most other philosophers and thinkers, rest precisely in designating exclusively human traits in the name and with the name of the animal? In Derrida’s reading of the philosophical discourse on animals and animality, from classical Greek thought to German idealism and contemporary critical theory, the animal is only ever the name for a distinctively human quality that bears the name animal: a true thinking of animals, of animality, and more precisely of a language of animality that recognizes the plurality of what was once called “the animal,” and which Derrida renames “l’animot,” is yet to come—or, in Derrida’s idiom, yet to respond. This seminar begins the process of imagining such a possibility and responsibility.

The improvisational dimension of Derrida’s teaching appears in his unexpected turn to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a gesture set in motion by a student paper on the novel submitted to Derrida’s graduate seminar at the University of California, Irvine. Derrida’s reading of *Robinson Crusoe* facilitates an extended reflection on islands and solitude, and a deeply moving elaboration of the difference between the discourses of world (in Heidegger most notably) and the concept of an island, between plenitude (multitude) and solitude. “So our seminar will have as its horizon,” says Derrida not only the questions of solitude, loneliness, insularity, isolation and therefore exception, including the sovereign exception. It will have as its horizon the question of what “inhabit,” “cohabit,” “inhabit the world” mean—and therefore what the world means. The world as a great traditional theme of metaphysics, and of theology, the world as presupposition of what is today called globalization [mondialisation], but also the world of phenomenological and ontological meditations. (2011, 11)

For Derrida, the habitat—the *Umwelt* that locates human beings and animals in their proper places, and that distinguishes being-with from solitude, and sovereignty from animality—returns to this foundational philosophical and geological dialectic between worlds and islands, rediscovered in Defoe’s novel. “Perhaps there is too much world in the world,” says Derrida, “but who can assure us that there is a world? Perhaps there is no world?” (2011, 266). Derrida’s stirring, at
times melancholic reflections on the possibility of a world without worlds, a worldless world consisting only of islands, remains in the pages of these sessions a singular pedagogical event.

It is hard not to feel, in these first publications of Derrida’s seminars in reverse, in this time machine that begins at the end and moves backward, a deep sense of regret that Derrida was unable to think this thought to its end, to complete the force of his thinking of and through the beast and the sovereign, she and he, they and him. But one also sees conversely, in hindsight, in Derrida’s method and his physics, a sense of absolute completion, even of rest. Even without a proper ending, the seminar feels thought to its conclusion, in part because one realizes in these transcriptions that Derrida’s thinking contains its terminus from the start, that the texture of his thought as he thinks and extends it moves not linearly from start to finish, but rather in volumes of thought, opening depths whose possibilities are visible before one reaches their ends. Those ends are there from the start, and this view of Derrida’s practice is invaluable.

If the first two volumes of the English-language edition of The Seminars of Jacques Derrida are exemplary of the volumes to follow, then the editors have ensured a long, sustained engagement with Jacques Derrida’s thought for many present and future readers. Beautifully translated, gently edited, and carefully assembled, these volumes capture Derrida’s vitality of thought as it emerged word by word, step by step, and turn by turn over time in his seminars. It is still there, this vitality moving slowly backward in time, irrevocably live and alive, visibly there where he once was.

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