

Introduction

Learning to Live Finally, Jacques Derrida's last interview, released when death was imminent, suggests that we take a step back and reread his oeuvre on the track of life:

As I recalled earlier, already from the beginning, and well before the experiences of surviving [*survivance*] that are at the moment mine, I maintained that survival is an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament. But, having said that, I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the yes, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say—at least from *Pas* (in *Parages*) on—about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life.¹

Along this reverse path, we encounter autoimmunity and the religious, the community and the political; the animal and the bestial associated with sovereignty; survival and testimony, Blanchot and literature. However, to grasp the sense of these apparently recent traces, we shall go further back and shed light on a more or less explicit engagement with life sciences (paleontology, ethology, and, above all, biology and the theory of evolution) since the very first steps of deconstruction. We shall consider the investigation of *life* not only an issue of deconstruction but the latter's very matrix; we shall think *différance* as the irreducible and structural condition of the

life of the living, and thus *trace* and *text* as the structures of the organization of life (from the most elementary forms to the organization of the psychic system of the human being, to the formation of the ideal objectivities that structure life and institutions in our cultural habitat). I put this hypothesis to the test through the groundbreaking reading of the unedited seminar *La vie la mort*, which Derrida taught in 1975. The first part of the seminar is dedicated to biology and, in particular, to the biologist François Jacob, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1965, alongside Jacques Monod and André Lwoff, and who is the author of *The Logic of Life* (1970). In this part of the seminar, according to a hypothesis already advanced in *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida takes into examination the heuristic bearing of the scriptural model imported from cybernetics and adopted in biology to account for the genesis and structure of the living. In particular, he aims to verify the possible congruency of this model with the notion of “general textuality” formalized in *Of Grammatology*, in view of a deconstructive elaboration of the relationship life/death, traditionally understood as a reciprocally exclusive opposition. It is worth remarking that Derrida never abandons this hypothesis as attested in *For What Tomorrow* (2001), where it is recalled as the framework for the question of animality:

Beginning with *Of Grammatology*, the elaboration of a new concept of the *trace* had to be extended to the entire field of the living, or rather to the life/death relation, beyond the anthropological limits of “spoken” language (or “written” language, in the ordinary sense), beyond the phonocentrism or the logocentrism that always trusts in a simple and oppositional limit between Man and the Animal. At the time I stressed that the “concepts of writing, trace, grammar or grapheme” exceeded the opposition “human/nonhuman.”²

In the seminar, this project goes alongside a deconstruction of the philosophies of life elaborated on the basis of the metaphysics of presence and exemplarily represented by Hegel’s philosophy. From this perspective, the seminar allows us to go back to *Glas* (1974) as a moment of this deconstruction of the traditional philosophy of life, in view of a differential conception of life (death). The seminar also allows us to go further back to *Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (1962), in the wake of this deconstructive elaboration of the question of life and of the necessary engagement with the life sciences.

The first chapter of this book is thus dedicated to the reconstruction of the path that Derrida followed at the beginning of the deconstructive adventure in view of what I call *biodeconstruction*, especially through “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and *Of Grammatology*. It is precisely through the biological and neurophysiological hypotheses formulated by Freud in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) that Derrida breaches the way that leads him to engage with the life sciences and, above all, with the evolutionistic perspective that Leroi-Gourhan adopted in *Gesture and Speech* (1965) to go back to the prehistorical origins of the invention of technics and, in particular, of the technical devices of conservation and exteriorization of memory.

The central part of the book, the most conspicuous one, is dedicated to the analysis of the seminar *La vie la mort*, to the examination of Jacob’s biology (chapters II–IV) and to Derrida’s interpretation of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, specifically the biological speculation through which Freud aims to justify the hypothesis of the death drive as the originary tendency of the living (chapter V). This section of the seminar is further developed in “To Speculate—On ‘Freud,’” published in *The Post Card* (1980). In the central part of the book I highlight the irreducible differential conditions that structure the life (death) of the living as a text, as a weave of traces and their implications for the constitution of the psychical individuality understood as the emergence of the living. Furthermore, I show how and why the effects of these structural biological conditions are propagated beyond the “natural” living, through psychic individuality, and also how they affect the “cultural” products of the living. This allows us to suspend the validity of the nature/culture opposition and thus also the opposition between the life sciences and the humanities, in view of a different (differential) articulation of these terms that the tradition imposed on us to think as opposed.

In the sixth chapter I aim to demonstrate that the introduction of the autoimmunitarian lexicon in Derrida’s oeuvre from the 1990s consists in a further development of the findings of the seminar *La vie la mort*. My argument is that, to understand the bearing of this lexicon and its extension to the religious, the political, democracy and sovereignty, we should go back to the biological sources of autoimmunity, on which Derrida draws more or less explicitly and, in particular, to the theory of cellular suicide, namely, apoptosis. The irreducible co-implication of life and death structures the living in such a way that the living must relate to the other in order to be itself, but, in so doing, it must destroy its own immunitarian defenses, that

is, it must suppress the immunitarian defenses of the organs that preside over the relation to alterity in view of the survival in the environment and of reproduction (brain, eyes, and female uterus).

In the last chapter I suspend the focus on biology and verify the outcome of *Biodeconstruction*: the *différance* life/death makes us think life as survival and survival as the condition of the testamentary and thus testimonial structure that affects the production of traces, the writing of the living, beyond the supposed biological and natural limits of the living, up to the spectral conditions of the constitution of the ideality. This part, titled “Living On: The Arche-performative,” has already been published in the collected volume *Performative after Deconstruction* (2013), edited by Mauro Senatore. Here I refer to the seminar *La vie la mort* for the first time. I had to write it again in the light of the deeper analyses I have developed over the last few years, which led me to the completion of *Biodeconstruction*. But this is somehow what I have done, so long as *Biodeconstruction* may be read as the rewriting of the essay “Living On: The Arche-performative,” a rewriting necessary to justify the latter’s theses, as much as “Living On: The Arche-performative” may be read as the matrix or the seminal trace from which *Biodeconstruction* has been developing, by differentiation and through successive stratifications, as the elaboration of the survival I attest to be through the traces that constitute this book.

A few words about the method. In a note in “From Restricted to General Economy,” Derrida describes precisely the deconstructive method adopted in his reading of Bataille, but which is valid for every text, as follows:

Like every discourse, like Hegel’s, Bataille’s discourse has the form of a structure of interpretations. Each proposition, which is already interpretive in nature, can be interpreted by another proposition. Therefore, if we proceed prudently and all the while remain in Bataille’s text, we can detach an interpretation from its reinterpretation and submit it to another interpretation bound to other propositions of the system. Which, without interrupting general systematicity, amounts to recognizing the strong and weak moments in the interpretation of a body of thought by itself, these differences of force keeping to the strategic necessity of finite discourse. Naturally our own interpretive reading has attempted to pass through what we have interpreted as the major moments, and has done so in order to bind them together. This “method”—which we name thus within the closure of knowl-

edge—is justified by what we are writing here, in Bataille's wake, about the suspension of the epoch of meaning and truth. Which neither frees nor prohibits us from determining the rules of force and of weakness: which are always a function of: (1) the distance from the moment of sovereignty; (2) the misconstruing of the rigorous norms of knowledge. The greatest force is the force of a writing which, in the most audacious transgression, continues to maintain and to acknowledge the necessity of the system of prohibitions (knowledge, science, philosophy, work, history, etc.). Writing is always traced between these two sides of the limit.³

Undoing the textual knots that bind a given system of interpretation to a certain order of knowledge and tying together again, in a different way, the propositions that constitute that system: this is the work of deconstruction. A minute and patient work that can be imperceptible but can also produce irreducible effects of deconstruction in the field in which it intervenes, a field that will never be the same. Hence, to account for the work of deconstruction, we should follow with the same patience the process of deconstruction of the systems of interpretation in which it intervenes in order to isolate the moments in which the graft of the deconstructive interpretation displaces the sense of the texts interpreted while remaining intimately adherent to them. For this reason, to let the sense of the deconstructive reading/writing emerge and to follow the latter's elaboration, I thought it is necessary to recur to long quotations from Derrida's texts and from those interpreted by Derrida, in particular, in order to reconstruct step by step the close engagement with Jacob and Freud, because the step of deconstruction does not come to a halt in the presence of a sentence or thesis but survives in the network of references it interweaves.