Introduction: Derrida's Classroom

Adam R. Rosenthal
Texas A & M University

Abstract Beginning in 2008, with the French publication of volume 1 of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Éditions Galilée, the University of Chicago Press, and an international editorial team initiated the process of editing, publishing, and translating, in reverse chronological order, the complete seminars of Jacques Derrida. These seminars, given variously at the Sorbonne, the École normale supérieure, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, the University of California, Irvine, the New School for Social Research, the Cardozo Law School, and New York University, encompass material presented as early as 1959 and as late as 2003.With Derrida's death in 2004, the seminar publications—projected to continue well into the 2050s—became the principal source of all Derrida's future, posthumous publications, now under the direction of Katie Chenoweth, director of the Bibliothèque Derrida series at the French publishing house Éditions du Seuil. This special issue of *Poetics Today* addresses two questions that are raised by this enterprise: First, how does the publication, mediatization, and mass dissemination of Derrida's teaching transform his corpus? Second, how does this corpus already speak to, anticipate, and preprogram the virtualization, translation, and transmission of the space of "the seminar"?

Keywords Jacques Derrida, seminar, translation, pedagogy, French philosophy, deconstruction

Poetics Today 42:1 (March 2021) DOI 10.1215/03335372-8752573

> ("You already know," I keep saying, and that must imply in what is called the pedagogical scene that is being played out here, that you already know everything I am talking about, or at least that I am making as if you already know everything I am talking about, such that the nature of what we receive here from one another remains very uncertain.)
>
> Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*

By the end of 2022, nine years of the seminars of Jacques Derrida will have been published in French and English translation.[1] Focusing on topics such as the death penalty, sovereignty and animality, the juridical concepts of pardon and perjury, Marxist discourse in France, and the biological concept of life, these volumes both supplement many of the already well-known subjects of Derrida's work and present wholly undiscovered elements of it. Taken from all periods of his career, the seminar material has put on display the range of Derrida's scholarship and made newly accessible previously lost or neglected segments of his writing. It has also further clarified the relationship among Derrida's published work, his teaching, and the institutions to which he was beholden, and reinforced the commitment of his teaching, especially from the time of his appointment to the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in 1984, to direct engagement with political and ethical questions concerning nationalism, hospitality, and the aporias of the democratic state. At once proximate to the published writings in substance and rigor, yet stylistically unique and intellectually novel, the seminars have reinvigorated interest in Derridean deconstruction while effecting a reexamination of the scope and shape of this corpus. A corpus, the seminars regularly remind us, that remains both constitutively and substantively incomplete.

1. In order of their publication, these include *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, *(2001–2002)*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2, *(2002–2003)*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); *The Death Penalty*, vol. 1, *(1999–2000)*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013); *The Death Penalty*, vol. 2, *(2000-2001)*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017); *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History (1964–1965)*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017); *Theory and Practice (1976–1977)*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019); *Life Death (1975–1976)*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020); *Perjury and Pardon*, vol. 1, *(1997–1998)*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021); *Perjury and Pardon*, vol. 2, *(1998–1999)*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022). To these, one should also add *Geschlecht III: Sex, Race, Nation, Humanity*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington and trans. Katie Chenoweth and Rodrigo Therezo (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), which includes significant portions of Derrida's 1984–1985 seminar titled Philosophical Nationality and Nationalism: Ghost of the Other.

Now roughly ten years after the publication of the first seminar volume in French, yet still some thirty years before any likely culmination of the undertaking, "Derrida's Classroom" offers a venue to reflect on the situation of the Seminars of Jacques Derrida as a whole. Taking a step back from the individual editions, as well as the torrent of scholarship that they have elicited, this issue of *Poetics Today* asks about their overall significance, their ramifications for deconstruction, and their place vis-à-vis the corpus that Derrida himself authorized for print. More specifically still, it asks what we have learned from them, over the past decade, about Derrida as a teacher, and how the mass circulation of the pedagogical side of his thought promises to affect the legacy of deconstruction for years to come.

Though in many cases destined for eventual publication, the seminars are, in all essential aspects, pedagogical documents, produced for and presented to international audiences within French and American institutional settings.[2] As such, they call for their own form of reading, one that is sensitive to these scenes of production and dissemination, and the specific differences that they entail. As Derrida himself cautioned on at least two occasions before proceeding with close readings of Heidegger's 1929–30 seminar, The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude, the text of a "seminar" bears its own distinction among a philosopher's works:

> Having recognized without recognizing what [Heidegger] has just recognized without recognizing, he nevertheless promises not to do it again. And precisely in the seminar he is in the process of giving. For let us not forget that he is speaking to students, and that traces remain of that, of that pedagogical situation and of what the master avows without avowing to his disciples—traces remain, then, that he would have wished to be both effaceable and ineffaceable. Could he foresee that in the posterity of the probable improbable archive, the day would come when a French animal, in turn conducting a seminar on this seminar and every Wednesday sniffing out the footprints or the track of an improbable Friday, would come to worry away at these "*pas d'aveu* [non-avowal, steps of avowal]," on these traceless traces of an avowal without avowal . . . ? (2011: 240–41)

> Finally, another interesting thing concerning this text is the fact that it is a "seminar," which retains all the marks of a long seminar (and one mustn't forget what a seminar is, with its share of contingency, improvisation, and labor, and a relatively unjustifiable fixation on certain statements) (2008: 144).[3]

2. For a fuller account of Derrida's various teaching engagements, see Bennington et al. 2016.
3. Thanks to Francesco Vitale for directing me to this passage.

As any reader of *The Beast and the Sovereign* or *The Death Penalty* will note, however, what distinguishes the seminars of Jacques Derrida is hardly the haphazard character of "relatively unjustifiable fixations," nor is it their "provisional and incomplete" state (2019: 50n122), even if Derrida feared this, and even if they do often represent early drafts of texts later revised for print. Instead, the most stark evidence of the seminar scene is to be found in the rhythm of their progress, regulated as it was by the academic calendar; in the often inquisitive disposition of their speaker, who was frequently working through problems over the course of multiple years; and, of course, in their periodic moments of self-reflection, such as one finds so poignantly articulated in *Life Death*, which were so critical to Derrida's teaching, and during which he would turn back upon the space of the seminar to interrogate its implications for the subjects specifically elected for discussion. Contributors to this volume have consented to meditate on the meaning of the seminars *as seminars*, which is to say, as the imprints of certain defined pedagogical spaces that both do and do not lend themselves to publication and translation, to publication *as* translation.

One of the inevitable effects of the seminar publications over the past decade has been the continued blurring of the distinction between the self-authorized work and the multiplicity of generically indistinct, hybrid, yet no less "signed," documents that fill Derrida's archives.[4] One cannot raise the question of sovereignty or animality in deconstruction today without reference to the two volumes of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, much as the many interviews Derrida gave, his impromptu, recorded responses at conferences, his handwritten marginalia, as well as everything that might more broadly fall under the traditional category of the "autobiographical," have all become essential elements of an extended, ever-growing corpus. This unavoidable traversal of discursive and disciplinary boundaries, of the always-tenuous gap between "work" and "life," or "research" and "teaching," was of course one to which Derrida himself was quite sensitive. Central to the thought of deconstruction, it was an ambivalence that essays such as *Archive Fever* openly reflected on; it was one that, especially in the later work, the text signed "Derrida" appeared to knowingly cultivate through the intermingling of autobiographical and philosophical commentary; and it was one that, throughout his teaching career, the seminars themselves staged and problematized, the scene of instruction never remaining entirely absent from the object of investigation.

4. As is well known, Derrida never explicitly authorized the publication of his seminars *de son vivant*. The decision was made posthumously, by his heirs, to undertake the process of editing, translating, and publishing their contents.

In light of all of the above, the appeal of the present issue to read the seminars as seminars cannot entail falling back upon an idle notion of authorial intent, which might be able to distinguish, absolutely, the teaching from the nonteaching document, or what might be no less tempting, the unpublished from the published or the unauthorized from the authorized work. Especially in the case of Derrida's teaching, which was always composed in advance and performed from a written text, it would be difficult to establish any simple difference between what he wrote for instruction and what he wrote for print. To all intents and purposes, the published seminars constitute an extension of, and even an integral supplement to, what we might think of as his "thought." To ask about their specificity, their impact, and their context, as each of the contributors to this issue has, is, then, less to assert a rift between them and Derrida's published work than to raise the question of their generic difference. It is to ask how we are to read the genre of the seminar, in its specificity—a specificity not otherwise shared by the texts that were authorized for print during his lifetime.

To ask about genre in this way is both to ask about the generic predispositions of a given text that calls itself "seminar" and to ask about the possibility, if not the necessity, of the *glissement*, or slippage, that tends toward displacing, without rest, that very disposition. Which is to say, that tends toward the effacement of this generic difference itself. What is the genre of the seminar? What conditions, internal or external to the corpus, establish the possibilities and impossibilities of maintaining it? And how does the seminar itself become a site of experimentation and reflection on this, its (in)distinction? "Derrida's Classroom" takes stock of the aporias that one must confront in reading the Seminars of Jacques Derrida, beginning with the problem of the physical, institutional, temporal, linguistic, and geographic spaces in which they took place. Beginning, that is, with the problem of the "classroom."

The teaching career of Jacques Derrida was notoriously itinerant. Though he occupied positions at the Sorbonne from 1960 to 1964, at the École normale supérieure (rue d'Ulm; ENS) from 1964 to 1984, and at the EHESS from 1984 to 2003, beginning in 1968 he also maintained multiple visiting positions at American institutions, spending weeks at a time at universities such as Johns Hopkins (1968–1974), Yale (1975–1986), the University of California, Irvine (1987–2003), and New York University (1992–2003), where he would present extemporaneous English translations of his composed French *séminaires* from 1987 on. It has long been a cliché to say that deconstruction made its greatest initial impact on the American academic scene, and throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties the reception of works such as *Of Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Margins*

of Philosophy was bolstered by the steady presence of Derrida's teaching body at many of the country's most prestigious educational institutions.

One could, therefore, only with difficulty speak of something like "Derrida's Classroom." For if anything, one would have to speak of Derrida's *classrooms*: the multiple spaces, institutions, languages, nations, and idioms in which he taught, and the plurality of venues, disciplines, and subjects in and under which he was audited. The difficulty of discerning all of these specific characteristics, as well as the impossibility of effacing them from the scene of instruction, was one of the recurrent themes of his teaching. In one notable example, from the inaugural session of his 1984 seminar titled Philosophical Nationality and Nationalism: Ghost of the Other (1984–1988)—the first given at EHESS, and thus the first in which he was able to freely select his topic, liberated from the constraints of the *agrégation* to which instructors at the ENS are held—he addresses this confluence and conflict of spaces and disciplines:

> I insist on this fact so as not to evade reflecting on the situation of this seminar and the initiative I'm taking in it, the slightly odd place marked here. Officially, legally, symbolically this is a seminar given in the premises of the Ecole normale supérieure in the rue d'Ulm, in a room, on a day and a time at which I am supposed to have been teaching philosophy for 20 years, but this time a seminar given under the aegis of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, an institution to which I henceforth belong, having been elected to it last year. Does this mean that *de jure* or *ipso facto* the discourse I shall be producing or the teaching I shall be giving here will fall under the social sciences, social sciences talking about philosophy or "philosophical institutions" (since this is the title of the post I chose to occupy)? This seminar will also be a philosophical seminar talking philosophically about philosophy, even if it is not limited to this self-questioning or reflexive dimension of philosophy. (1992: 8–9)

As essays by Peggy Kamuf, Thomas Clément Mercier, Samir Haddad, Brian McGrath, and Adam R. Rosenthal show, reflection on the situation of the seminar was a constant element of Derrida's teaching, which often incorporated the time, place, language, or season of the presentation as so many integral, ineliminable, yet always decontextualizable elements of the session. How does one *read* such a seminar that is itself inscribed within the particularity of a unique context? One that also thematizes and theorizes its specificity, rendering it at once translatable and untranslatable, translatable as untranslatable? But can one do anything but *read* such a situation, marked by the both unique and iterable singularity of its unrepeatable event? The aporia announced by this situation—the publication of the scene of teaching, the transcription of a pedagogical scene that reflects, precisely, on its unrepea-

table mise-en-scène—is what is announced by the somewhat awkward figure of the "classroom" in our title. For if the "seminar" has come to name an all-too-transparent space of legibility and transmissibility—a global and virtually idiomless form that we not only take for granted but that in fact *teaches us* to take it for granted—if the seminar, in some sense, then, transmits its own transmissibility, thereby assuring in advance the possibility of the separation of its prized tenor from its discardable vehicle shell, then the "classroom," by contrast, might serve to remind us of what remains a bit too idiomatic, a bit too colloquial, and a bit too local ever to be carted off in this way. The classroom is perhaps what one loses when one publishes a seminar.

Each of the following five articles reminds us of this irresolvable tension, at work throughout the seminars of Jacques Derrida. In our first article, "Teaching to Live, Finally," Kamuf identifies the centrality, for Derrida's own understanding of pedagogy, of the uncanny presence of the teaching body within the scene of instruction. Next, in "Re/pro/ductions*: Ça déborde*," Mercier reveals, through considerable archival research, the persistent return of the thematic of reproduction throughout Derrida's teachings of the 1970s. In the following paper, "The Seminar in Deconstruction: From *Clang* to 'The Truth That Hurts,'" I look at Derrida's own efforts to deconstruct the concept of the "seminar," as early as 1968 and as late as 2003. In our fourth article, "Questions of the Foreigner in *Of Hospitality*," Haddad turns to the relation between translation and hospitality in the seminars, arguing that the problem of the "untranslatable" not only is a significant theme in Derrida's work but also functions as a crucial operator within it. In the following article, "A Cell in Waiting: Reading the Death Penalty Seminar, at Dawn," McGrath demonstrates the profound implications to be drawn, in Derrida's late studies on the death penalty, from the inextricability of practices of militancy and practices of reading. Finally, responding to each of these contributions is Herman Rapaport, who in "On Derrida's Seminars: Reading Derrida's Readers" offers a clear-eyed look at some of the problems that shape the reception of deconstruction within the current academic scene. His response offers yet another view on issues of the idiom, translation, and nationality in Derrida's writings, while raising important questions for those tasked with carrying on the work of publication, translation, and transmission of the posthumous seminar texts.

References

Bennington, Geoffrey, Marc Crépon, Marguerite Derrida, Thomas Dutoit, Peggy Kamuf, Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, Ginette Michaud, and Jean-Luc Nancy. 2016. "General Introduction." In *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, by Jacques Derrida, edited

by Thomas Dutoit, translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Derrida, Jacques. 1992. "Onto-Theology of National Humanism (Prolegomena to a Hypothesis)." *Oxford Literary Review* 14, no.1–2: 3–23.
Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Wills. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
Derrida, Jacques. 2011. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Vol. 2, *(2002–2003)*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Derrida, Jacques. 2019. *Geschlecht III: Sexe, race, nation, humanité*, edited by Geoffrey Bennington, Katie Chenoweth, and Rodrigo Therezo. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
Derrida, Jacques. 2020. *Life Death*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Pascale-Anne Brault, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.