Derrida after the End of Writing

Crockett, Clayton

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/55742

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2021810

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Interrupting Heidegger with a Ram

Derrida’s Reading of Celan

This chapter is a kind of interruption as well as a continuation of my readings of Derrida and religion. We saw in the previous chapter how Derrida considers Celan’s phrase “The world is gone, I must carry you” along with his reflections on *Robinson Crusoe* and Heidegger in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume II. My understanding of Derrida’s reading of Celan here is not a mere focus on poetics in the form of writing, but a much broader perspective on Derrida’s thought. Of course, this was always the conception of writing for Derrida, but it becomes more and more evident in his later work. My argument is that Celan’s poetry gives Jacques Derrida something incredibly important, which is a kind of writing and a kind of thinking that allows him to interrupt Martin Heidegger, who is the predominant philosophical voice in Derrida’s work.

The primal scene for this interruption at the source concerns the famous encounter between Celan and Heidegger at Heidegger’s home in Todtnauberg in 1967, which Celan memorialized in a poem with the same name. Heidegger attended a reading by Celan in Freiburg and invited him to his home in the Black Mountains of southern Germany where Celan signed his guestbook and they took a short walk, after which Celan was driven back to Freiburg. Celan published his poem “Todtnauberg” in 1968, and it is an incredibly ambivalent testimony of this fraught encounter.¹

The longest stanza of “Todtnauberg” references Heidegger’s guest book, which Celan signed, and he asks who signed the book before he did, before mentioning
This “hope of a thinking man’s coming word in the heart” indicates Celan’s desire for Heidegger to acknowledge his Nazi activities in the 1930s and take responsibility for his refusal to apologize for them after the war. The poem indicates Celan’s disappointment, since on the drive back there was
course stuff, later, clear
in passing,³

on which the driver listened in. The end of the poem offers an image of the walk Celan took with Heidegger, which ended up being a damp slog over half-trodden logs rather than a fresh stroll along a path into a clearing: “the half- / trodden fascine / walks over the high moors, / dampness, / much.”⁴

The English translator Michael Hamburger translates Knüppel, which generally means sticks, as fascine, to indicate the connection with fascism as a bundle of sticks, although this might be a little overdetermined. At the same time, the last line of the poem, “dampness, / much” (Feuchtes, / viel) does not suggest any sort of resolution or exhilaration, but rather a desultory culmination of their encounter.

For Celan, this encounter was an unsatisfying one as expressed in the poem, although the German philosopher and student of Heidegger Hans-Georg Gadamer puts a much more positive spin on it, celebrating the fact that Celan and Heidegger could have this encounter despite their pasts, and revealing that Heidegger greatly enjoyed the poem “Todtnauberg” and had it framed. According to Gadamer, Celan was “among the pilgrims who made their way to Todtnauberg, and from his meeting with the thinker a poem came to be.”⁵ Gadamer reproduces the poem at the end of his reflections on Heidegger in his book Philosophical Apprenticeships. He mentions the line of hope, but ascribes it to Celan’s desire to have a meaningful encounter rather than an expectation of Heidegger to take responsibility, and Gadamer then says that they walked “across soft meadows, both alone, like the individually standing flowers—the orchis and the orchid.”⁶ It is then only on the way home that Celan realized that what Heidegger said still seemed crude, but the walk itself was an act of breathless daring. This interpretation follows the chronology of the meeting, but not the poem,
which ends with the walk. And the walk was not a daring engagement between two solitary people, a thinker and a poet, but rather a damp trudge that went nowhere. In the poem, the crudeness precedes the walk and leads up to it. In his text, Gadamer idealizes Celan’s poem as well as Celan’s encounter with Heidegger.7

Derrida clearly remembers Gadamer’s misunderstanding of Celan’s encounter with Heidegger when he is invited to say something about Gadamer after Gadamer’s death in 2002. Derrida’s essay, published in French in 2003, is entitled “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem.”8 In this powerful essay, one of Derrida’s last works before his own death in 2004, Derrida reflects on Gadamer’s life and thought, as well as Gadamer’s understanding of Celan. Derrida does not directly discuss “Todtnauberg,” although he does barely mention it at the end of the essay. Instead, he analyzes a poem by Celan called “Vast, Glowing Vault.” At the end of his essay, Derrida concludes with some reflections about Heidegger, as he so often does.

This is a complex encounter among four extraordinary thinkers: Derrida, Celan, Gadamer and Heidegger. In the background of Derrida’s essay lies another encounter, a broken-off or interrupted encounter between Derrida and Gadamer in Paris in 1981, where Derrida seemed to rudely refuse to engage Gadamer in dialogue.9 So Derrida is reflecting in “Rams” on his own previous non-encounter with Gadamer, Gadamer’s misunderstanding of Celan, and Celan’s ambivalent encounter with Heidegger. Furthermore, there is Derrida’s own appreciative but complicated relationship with Celan, who taught German at the École Normal Supérieure in the 1960s, and was introduced to Derrida by Peter Szondi in 1968. Derrida explains in an interview that “Celan’s presence was, like his whole being and all his gestures, extremely discreet, elliptical, and self-effacing. This explains, at least in part, why there was no exchange between us, although for some years I was his colleague.”10 Even after they met, Derrida says, “a series of meetings can be dated, always brief, silent, on his part as on mine. The silence was his as much as mine.”11 This silence prevailed over any kind of dialogue, conversation, or interaction, and it was cut off in a way by Celan’s suicide in 1970, which prompted Derrida to work to recover the significance of these brief but powerful memories. He says that “with regard to Celan, the image that comes to mind is a meteor, an interrupted blaze of light, a sort of caesura, a very brief moment leaving behind a trail of sparks that I try to recover through his texts.”12

One of Derrida’s earlier essays also focuses on Celan, although I am not going to analyze it here except to acknowledge it in very general terms and to indicate one specific reference. In “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” Derrida

Derrida Reads Celan  ■  61
reads Celan’s poem by the same name and reflects on the concepts of circumcision, date, and language that “Shibboleth” raises in its reference to the month of February. Here is the stanza Derrida focuses on:

Heart:
here too reveal what you are,
here, in the midst of the market.
Call the shibboleth, call it out
into your alien homeland:
February. No pasarán.

Derrida claims that the last line of this stanza refers to February 1936, when the Spanish Republicans won an electoral victory against fascism, a “no” to Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler. And three years later, during the siege of Madrid, “no pasarán was a shibboleth for the Republican people, for their allies, for the International Brigades.” In another poem, “As One,” Celan specifically mentions February 13, and Derrida suggests that one of the references here is to February 13, 1962, and a massive march in Paris for the victims of a massacre near the end of the Algerian war. Derrida cites this second poem because Celan repeats the same phrase from “Shibboleth,” no pasarán, right after he refers to the “Peuple de Paris.” Here Derrida reads “Shibboleth” along with the poem “As One” in a meditation on the nature of language and the circumcision of language because it is the mispronunciation of the word shibboleth as sibboleth that gives away the enemy, and defines the border between nations and peoples, originally in the encounter between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites as related in the Book of Judges.

As Derrida claims in his reading of Celan, “shibboleth is a circumcised word” that is an “unpronounceable name for some.” There is a sense in which all of Celan’s poetry functions as a kind of shibboleth because it is so difficult to read and understand, despite Celan’s insistence that his work is “ganz und gar nicht hermetisch”—absolutely not hermetic. Another reason Derrida turns from the poem “Shibboleth” to the poem “As One” lies in the final line of the latter poem: “Freide den Hütten!” Peace to the cottages or huts, a line “whose terrible irony must surely aim at someone.” So Heidegger, who ends up isolated in his hut in the Black Forest, appears, however indirectly, in Derrida’s substantial essay on Celan, “Shibboleth.” And he reappears, more explicitly, at the end of Derrida’s later essay “Rams.”

At the center of “Rams” lies a poem by Celan, and Derrida’s subtitle suggests that the poem lies between two infinities. I will come to the poem in a little bit, but let me suggest that these two infinities progress in a kind of parallel line, without meeting or touching along their trajectories. I will
not hesitate to name these two infinities for Derrida: One name is the infinite philosophical thought of being of Heidegger, and the other is the infinite ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas, which takes place in some respects “otherwise than being.” Derrida has written and thought about Levinas and Heidegger more than all the others, and much secondary work has been done on these two powerful influences on his work. In fact, it could be argued that the most crucial essay of all of Derrida’s corpus is his incredible essay on “Violence and Metaphysics,” which appears in *Writing and Difference* and has the subtitle, “An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.”

Although Levinas does not appear directly in “Rams,” I think that Derrida’s theoretical reflection on Celan’s poetry essentially substitutes for Levinas’s philosophy, whereas Gadamer serves as a substitute for Heidegger early in the essay, only to give way to Heidegger himself at the end.

So the death of Gadamer is an interruption of an ongoing (or “uninterrupted”) dialogue between Gadamer and Derrida, and it substitutes for a number of other interrupted encounters, including Derrida’s and Celan’s, and Celan’s and Heidegger’s, as well as foreshadows Derrida’s own death. Derrida uses Celan’s poetry to think through these fundamental issues of encounter, dialogue, hermeneutics, interruption, ethics, ontology, aesthetics, and poetics.

Derrida views death, which we have seen as the ultimate sovereign in the previous chapter, as not simply the interruption of an uninterrupted dialogue, but as catastrophic: “death is nothing less than the end of the world.” The survivor, in this case Derrida in the wake of Gadamer’s death, remains alone “in the world outside the world and deprived of the world.” Derrida says that every friendship or dialogue is haunted by the anticipation of the certainty that one friend will die before the other, bringing the dialogue to an end. At the same time, even though it comes to an end, the dialogue in some way continues, in the one who is still alive, beyond the death of the other. Death haunts every friendship and interrupts every dialogue, and yet this very mortality makes dialogue and friendship possible.

After a few pages reflecting on the death of Gadamer, as well as death and dialogue in more general terms, Derrida interrupts his discussion to introduce Celan’s poem “Vast, Glowing Vault.” He says that like Gadamer, he shares an appreciation and a friendship with Celan, even though Celan is (also) dead. First Derrida quotes the final line, and then he reproduces the entire poem. The last line reads: “The World is gone, I must carry you.”

One of the reasons that Derrida wants to read this poem is to repeat Gadamer’s hermeneutical efforts to read Celan’s poetry, and here Derrida explains how Gadamer understands another poem by Celan, “Paths in the
Shadow Rock.” In Gadamer’s reading of Celan’s poetry, which takes place primarily in the short book *Who Am I and Who are You?*, Gadamer declares that the final line seems to encapsulate the meaning of many of Celan’s enigmatic poems. Gadamer does not analyze the poem “Vast, Glowing Vault,” but he does affirm that Celan’s poetry sets up a dialogical relationship between an I and a You, a speaker and a recipient, that occurs in the poem and does not require any external knowledge on the part of the reader to participate in this encounter. Gadamer states that “I fully agree with the poet that everything is found in the text, and that all biographical-occasional moments belong to the private sphere.”

Gadamer resists the idea that Celan’s poetry requires an esoteric or inside knowledge in order to be read and understood, and primarily contests the interpretations of Otto Pöggeler to the contrary.

One of the poems that Gadamer analyzes in *Who Am I and Who Are You?* is “Paths in the Shadow Rock,” and Derrida follows this interpretation, opening it up and attending to the interruptions that Gadamer sees in the poem. The key phase is “Out of the four-finger-furrow/I grub for myself the/petrified blessing.” Derrida shows how Gadamer appreciates the fact that the blessing is withheld, it is petrified, and the speaker, the I, grubs for it out of the closed hand, which is the hand of God. Gadamer responds to the withdrawal or petrification of the blessing, but he also subverts and reverses this reading. According to Gadamer, “the beneficial hand is inverted boldly into the hand where palm-reading can reveal a message of beneficent hope.”

Despite Gadamer’s attempt to read Celan’s poem as a message of beneficent hope, he concludes his interpretation with questions about this blessing, including whether it is in fact a blessing. Derrida, who is suspicious of the reversal, says that he admires the respect Gadamer shows for the “indecision” of these final questions. Derrida affirms, both with and against Gadamer’s reading, the unreadability and untranslatability of the poem, which also refers to an unreadability of the world: “Even where the poem names unreadability, its own unreadability, it also declares the unreadability of the world.” The poem constitutes an abandoned trace of the unreadability of the world to which it attests. Gadamer makes the poem more readable because he has faith that the world is readable in light of an ongoing, potentially infinite hermeneutical process.

Derrida affirms his appreciation of Gadamer, but his affirmation of Gadamer’s philosophy is also ambivalent because, for Derrida, every poem harbors “an irreducible remainder or excess” that “escapes any gathering in a hermeneutic.” Rather, “the hermeneutic is made necessary, and also possible, by the excess.” Over the next few pages of “Rams,” Derrida offers
his own interpretation of Celan’s poetry by reading “Vast, Glowing Vault.” He subjects the poem first to a kind of formal analysis and then opens up onto a broader perspective on the issues raised by the poem.

“Vast, Glowing Vault” is an incredibly rich poem, as all of Celan’s poems are, and Derrida helps us read this poem in “Rams.” The first stanza gives us a cosmological and celestial backdrop, which Derrida calls a tableau. Derrida says that “the black, star-spangled swarm carries the poem away in a hurried, hurrying, headlong movement of properly planetary errancy.”27 The stars themselves are black and they swarm away; they scatter apart. Although Derrida does not mention this, we could also think of the scientific discovery in 1998 of dark energy, an unknown force that is accelerating the expansion of the universe and may eventually pull all matter apart.

The stars have an astrological reference in the poem and invoke the zodiac, especially once the ram is introduced in the second stanza. Derrida claims that the planetary movement is also an animal movement precisely because a ram “will soon bound into the poem: sacrificial animal, battering ram, the bellicose ram whose rush breaks down the doors or breaks through the high walls of fortified castles.”28 The second stanza is the longest and most complex of the poem. “Onto a ram’s silicified forehead / I brand this image, between / the horns,” an image sealed between the coiled horns of the ram. Derrida suggests that this image branded onto the ram’s silicified (or petrified) forehead could be the poem itself. And its resonances are multiple. For one thing, the ram’s horn in the Jewish tradition becomes the shofar, “the instrument with which music prolongs breath and carries voice.”29 Furthermore, the ram recalls the scene in the Bible where Abraham goes to sacrifice Isaac and his hand is stayed at the last moment. Isaac survives, and a ram is substituted and sacrificed in his place.

This scene is important to Derrida, and he published a book called The Gift of Death that was in part a reading and commentary on Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, which considers this enormous sacrificial event. Here is a longer passage by Derrida from “Rams” that evokes this famous scene:

Between the most animalistic life, which is named more than once, and the death or mourning that haunts the last line . . . , the ram, its horns and the burning, recall and revive, no doubt, the moment of a sacrificial scene in the landscape of the Old Testament. More than one holocaust. Substitution of the ram. Burning. The binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). After having said a second time, “Here I am,” when the angel sent by God suspends the knife Abraham had raised to slit Isaac’s throat, Abraham turns around and sees a ram caught by its
horns in a bush. He offers it as a holocaust in the place of his son. God then promises to bless him and multiply his seed like the stars of heaven, perhaps also like the stars of the first stanza. They can also become, in the poem, terrible yellow stars. And it is again a ram, in addition to a young bull, that God, speaking to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons, commands Aaron to offer as a holocaust in the course of a grand scene of atonement for the impurities, infamies, and sins of Israel (Leviticus 16).\(^\text{30}\)

Derrida draws out and makes explicit some of the resonances of Celan’s stanza, dealing with sacrifice, substitution, atonement, and holocaust, above all that of the Jewish people as a whole.

The third stanza of the poem asks a question: “In-/ to what/ does he not charge?” The charge refers to the charge of the ram, that hurls itself about, charging into anything and everything, “in all directions, as if blinded by pain.”\(^\text{31}\) The sacrificial ram resists the very logic of sacrifice, or sacrificial atonement, just as Celan resists the sacrificial interpretation implicit in the name Shoah. The charge is both a charging and a ramming, but it is also an accusation, as in the charging of someone with a crime. According to Derrida, the charge of the ram suggests “the violent rebellion of all scapegoats, all substitutes.”\(^\text{32}\) The lamb is the meek animal who goes willingly to meet its sacrificial death, whereas the ram thrashes about, at least in the poem. Derrida imagines that Celan’s ram indicts the entire world, because there is nowhere or nothing that he does not charge into: “no one in the world is innocent, not even the world itself.”\(^\text{33}\) The ethical force of Celan’s poetry calls into question the entire world.

Here at this moment in Derrida’s reading of Celan’s poem I want to pause, to interrupt and to insert another ram from another context and another language. In Chinese, the word for beauty or beautiful is transliterated as měi, and the word měi (美) is composed of two images, one for large (大) and one for ram (羊). According to most scholars, beginning with the late Han lexicographer Xu Shen (ca.55–ca.149), the etymology is culinary because a large ram is not only beautiful but delicious. Xu writes in his dictionary: “when a ram is large, it is beautiful.”\(^\text{34}\) And so the aesthetic as well as gustatory feeling of the feast provides the origin of the word beauty in Chinese.

Of course, we should have learned from reading Heidegger not to fully trust etymologies, and from Derrida to be suspicious of any claims to origins. In this context, it is interesting that a contemporary Chinese philosopher, Li Zehou, suggests an alternative meaning for the term. In his book on *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li argues instead for a ritual meaning of měi,
where a large ram headdress sits on top of a person, and the ram is a kind of totem. Here beauty coincides with what is good in a ritualistic context. “The character for ‘beauty,’ then, with the man on the bottom and the ram on the top, is the manifestation in the written language of this type of animal role or shamanistic totem,” according to Li.35 The point is not to choose between these two proposed origins or etymologies, but to think about their shared resonance with each other, and with Celan’s ram. In ancient China, as in ancient Israel, the ram has both a ritual and a culinary function that is connected to sacrifice. Into what culture does he not charge?36

There is then an interruption of the ram, but also in the poem an interruption that takes place after the charge of the ram, the ram that charges into and charges against the world. This interruption is a pause, an Atemwende, where we catch our breath before the sentence of the last line. The last line stands alone. “It stands,” Derrida states, “it supports itself, it carries itself all alone, on a line between two abysses.”37 Now the world is no longer here, it is gone: “Die Welt ist fort.” Derrida explains that the world recedes and, in effect, goes away precisely because there is an ethical obligation. He says that “as soon as I am obliged, from the instant when I am obliged to you, when I owe, when I owe it to you, owe it to myself to carry you, as soon as I speak to you and am responsible to you, or before you, there can no longer, essentially, be any world.”38 The world is the mediating ground of the ethical encounter between you and I, but in the singularity of the encounter the world is gone. We are alone in our encounter, you and I, absolutely alone without world. And yet, there is an obligation. I must carry you, which is an unbearable obligation.

Derrida breaks off his discussion and summarizes five concluding points, dealing with the some of the resonances of the German words tragen, which “also refers to the experience of carrying a child prior to its birth,” and Welt, or world.39 I only want to focus on the last few paragraphs, where Derrida invokes Heidegger’s three theses from his 1929–1930 lecture course, which was published as The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. According to Heidegger, the fundamental concepts are: world, finitude, and solitude. In order to elucidate the first question, the question of world, Heidegger introduces three guiding theses: “the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming.”40 Understanding the sense in which a non-living rock is without world and an animal has a world but only in an impoverished and tightly limited sense whereas humans are capable of constructing worlds, sheds light on the fundamental question “What is a world?” for Heidegger.

According to Derrida, Heidegger is above all a thinker of the concept of world, and Derrida struggles powerfully in his later years with and
against Heidegger’s three theses, in works such as *Of Spirit* and *The Animal That I Therefore Am*. For Derrida, there is problematic invidious difference to this unfolding, this dispersal of being as *weltlos* to nonliving stone, *weltarm* to living animal, and *weltbildend* to human being. Each of these beings has its ownmost possibility of being. However, the worlding of the world takes place providentially in and for *Dasein*, the being who has language and can ask the question of being.

One of major themes of Derrida’s later work, most explicitly in *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, is the exploration and contestation of this poverty that is attributed to the non-human animal, which is something not only Heidegger but the entire Western philosophical tradition presupposes, including Levinas and in some respects even Celan. Drawing on Jacob von Uexküll’s influential studies of animal behavior, Heidegger claims that the animal is poor in world because it is captivated by its instinctual drives in “an intrinsic self-encirclement.” This encirclement is tightly drawn around the animal like a bee or a tick such that it opens up a very limited sphere of behavior beyond with the animal cannot experience. According to Heidegger, “the life of the animal is precisely the struggle to maintain this encircling ring or sphere within which a quite specifically articulated manifold of dispositions can arise.” The animal has no awareness of a world beyond this encircling ring.

On the one hand, Derrida points out that Heidegger claims that the animal does not die because it does not have a relation to being that takes the form of an “as such.” It cannot die because it cannot be related to death as such as its ownmost possibility of being. But on the other hand, as Derrida explains, Heidegger admits that what distinguishes the animal from the stone is the fact that it can die because it is a living being. It possesses “the living character of a living being,” which is fundamentally related to the possibility of dying. So the animal sort of lives and sort of does not fully live. According to Derrida, Heidegger fails to confront or fully engage with the animality of *Dasein* as a living being because “*Dasein* is explicitly described by Heidegger as a being that is not, essentially, a ‘living’ being.”

Derrida wants to undermine the identification of the essence of *Dasein* as a world-builder, one who creates worlds with language and participates in the worlding of the world that being (*Sein* or *Seyn*) accomplishes. According to Heidegger, the “poverty in world” that characterizes the animal “implies a deprivation of world.” But in Celan’s poetry, Derrida finds a provocative deprivation of world for human being. Here Celan’s poetry, and in particular this poem with its powerful final line, interrupts and breaks this secure process of world formation at work in the implicit pro-
gression from stone to animal to human. Derrida claims at the end of “Rams” that “for reasons I cannot develop here, nothing appears to me more problematic than these three theses.” For reasons he elaborates on more explicitly in *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, therefore, nothing appears more problematic than Heidegger’s theses about stone, animal, and world.

Derrida asks about the being-gone (*Fort-sein*) of the world in Celan’s poem, and suggests that it proceeds according to a completely different logic than Heidegger’s. If the world is gone here, for human beings, at the heart of the asymmetrical ethical relationship with the other, then “isn’t it the very thought of the world that we would have to rethink, from this fort, and this fort itself from the ‘ich muß dich tragen’?” This, Derrida says, is one of the questions that he would like to pose to Gadamer, “appealing to him for help,” “in the course of an interminable conversation.” This conversation, of course, has been interrupted by death, but it is always already interrupted by death, and this death and this interruption are what make conversation and dialogue possible in the first place. Gadamer’s death is the end of the world, and so is Derrida’s, and so is Celan’s. We who live bear witness to the end of the world.

This is Derrida’s faith, although it is not a conventional faith. As I have already considered in various ways, in “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida claims that what we call religion always has two sources, one of which is the sacred or holy, and the other is faith or the experience of belief. These two sources conflict and contaminate each other, preventing any certain assurance or indemnification. As Michael Naas explains in *Miracle and Machine*, which I have also discussed, Derrida prefers the second source of religion, faith, as an experience of social trust or belief, over the source of the sacred as the unscathed. At the same time, Naas points out that “Derrida is quite clear about the disruptive nature of this faith.” Derrida’s faith, like that of Celan, is disruptive rather than constructive; belief undermines the machinic nature of religion even as it functions as an expression of it. These two sources can be distinguished but not fully separated, and they work in nature and in natures in the world, not simply in language.

Being and world, like the poem, exist only insofar as they are in a state of being gone, a gone-ness that as interruption gives the possibility for ethical relation. A poem is also a kind of machine, infected and inflected with an originary technicity. This technicity exceeds any simple mechanical understanding of a machine because it incorporates both the machinic repetition and the exceptional miracle that exceeds it.

Worldlessness is a kind of original possibility for a world to be, to exist. The world is not absolutely disappeared for Derrida, but it withdraws in
order to foreground the ethical relation, ungrounded from any literal writing. In a disruptive way that attests to the worldlessness of world, Celan’s silence, cryptic poetry, and even suicide offer interruptive breaks that are the basis for ethical relations today. Derrida profoundly appreciates the ethical force of Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*, and this is the same Levinas who asks of Celan: “does not he suggest a modality *otherwise than being*?”

According to Levinas, Celan’s poetry represents an “insomnia in the bed of being, the impossibility of curling up and forgetting oneself. Expulsion out of the *worldliness of the world* . . .”

Despite his affinity for Levinas, however, Derrida wants to hold on to just a thread of being, a threading of worlds, like the thread-suns or *Fadensonnen* of Celan: “there are still songs to be sung on the other side of mankind.” But there are no more songs for us when the world is gone. Every death is the end of the world, which is different and unique every time. And in the absence or withdrawal of world, which hangs only by a thread, I must carry, I must bear (*tragen*) you, even if I cannot bear you. There is no other way. Every world is an island separated by an unshareable abyss that constitutes an almost unimaginable archipelago, as Derrida suggests in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. This conclusion is just one of the rich threads of Celan’s disturbing and powerful work that Derrida brings to bear. And in the next chapter, I will further reflect on the theme of the end of the world in Derrida as it relate to the object-oriented ontology of Timothy Morton and other speculative realists.

But first, wait, I want to pause and insert into this potentially infinite conversation another ram from the Bible. This one is not from the *Aquedah*, but from the book of Daniel, chapter 8, verses 3–7:

I raised my eyes and there I saw a ram with two horns standing between me and the stream. The two horns were long, the one longer than the other, growing up behind. I watched the ram butting west and north and south. No beasts could stand before it, no one could rescue from its power. It did what it liked, making a display of its strength. While I pondered this, suddenly a he-goat came from the west skimming over the whole earth without touching the ground; it had a prominent horn before its eyes. It approached the two-horned ram which I had seen standing between me and the stream and rushed at it with impetuous force. I saw it advance on the ram, working itself into a fury against it, then strike the ram and break its two horns; the ram had no strength to resist. The he-goat flung it to the ground and trampled on it, and there was no one to save the ram.
Is this ram in Daniel similar to the ram that Abraham substituted for Isaac in Genesis? What if the ram is not just a sacrificial animal but, in fact, a name of God? According to Jacques Lacan, the ram is an Elohim, as well as a Name-of-the-Father. For Lacan, and I suggest also for Derrida, our discourses about animality, especially in its sacrificial element, are caught up in our theological understandings about divinity.

In November 1963, two days prior to John F. Kennedy’s brutal assassination in Dallas, Lacan delivered his final seminar at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne. This seminar was to focus during 1963–64 on “The Names-of-the-Father,” which was announced at the end of his previous seminar, Seminar X, on Anxiety. Unfortunately, the political expulsion of Lacan as a training analyst by the French Psychoanalytic Society terminated his Seminar at Saint-Anne just before it began, and Lacan only gave one lecture, an “Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father” on November 20, 1963. His seminar was interrupted, and it would reconvene later at the École Normale Supérieure, at the invitation of Louis Althusser, in early 1964, but Lacan never returned to or completed his seminar on “The Names-of-the-Father.” Instead he taught his famous seminar XI on “The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis.”

The lecture from November 20, 1963 was not published until 2005 by Jacques-Alain Miller. In it, Lacan reflects on the scene of the Aqedah, as expressed by Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, Caravaggio’s paintings of The Sacrifice of Isaac, and the medieval French rabbinical commentator Rashi. Caravaggio paints two distinct canvases of this primary scene, featuring Abraham, Isaac, an angel, and a ram. Lacan points out that in one of these paintings, “there is one in which the ram is on the right and where you see the head that I introduced last year, invisibly, in the form of the shofar—the ram’s horn. This horn has indisputably been ripped off of him.”

In Seminar X on Anxiety from the year before, Lacan discusses the shofar as an instantiation of the objet petit a, the object cause of desire. The object a encapsulates desire and focuses it on an object, but in such a way that the object expresses the infinite nature of desire. The object a substitutes for any and all objects of desire in a metonymic way. The first object a for Lacan is the breast because the breast represents all of human nourishment, care, vitality, and sexuality for the infant.

In Seminar X, Lacan says that there are five stages of the object a, and the shofar expresses the fifth stage, the object of desire at the level of the ear, the voice or sound. The shofar encapsulates and represents the voice of Yahweh for the Israelites. Lacan relates that “the horn is generally, though not always, a ram’s horn.” The shofar is an object that gives voice to the
voice of God. The object a expresses an element of the Real because it represents something that exceeds the symbolic order. And every god, including Yahweh, is “an element of the real, whether we like it or not, even if we no longer have anything more to do with them.”

According to Lacan, any time one encounters a God, “a God is encountered in the real.” The God of the Israelites is made manifest in and through the shofar, which produces the sound or voice of God. Lacan says that according to Rashi, the Jewish commentator, “the ram in question [at the sacrificial scene of Abraham and Isaac] is the primal Ram.” This ram “was there, writes Rashi, right from the seven days of creation, which designates the ram as what he is: an Elohim.” If the ram is an Elohim, a God, then the sacrifice of the ram is more than a simple animal sacrifice.

The ram does not simply substitute for the human son, Isaac; he substitutes for Yahweh as another form of God. The ram rushes onto the scene of sacrifice on Mount Moriah and is caught in a thicket. Lacan claims that “the one whose Name is unpronounceable [Yahweh] designates him to be sacrificed by Abraham in his son’s stead. This ram is his eponymous ancestor, the God of his line.” The primal Ram is sent to be a sacrifice, who justifies the sacrificial death of all other rams. The ram is the sacrificial animal par excellence, which is why it is an Elohim and a name of God.

Lacan argues that this situation, this charging of the ram onto the sacrificial scene, shows “the sharp divide between God’s jouissance and what, in this tradition, is presented as His desire.” Ordinary desire is what we want, or what God wants in a simple or direct way. Jouissance, for Lacan, represents desire taken to its limit, beyond any reasonable bounds. Jouissance manifests a death drive because it operates beyond the pleasure principle for the subject. Here Lacan, in psychoanalytic terms, considers how humans think about and represent the desire of God, which always threatens to go crazy, beyond all limits.

This gap between desire and jouissance at the level of God is filled by the ram, a symbolic substitute whose meaning is more than symbolic, and whose death allows the Israelites to affirm their lineage to Abraham despite the separation indicated by Isaac’s symbolic death. Israelite genealogy is wholly symbolic, not real, because this (non-)sacrifice accomplishes the task of diminishing “the importance of biological origin.” This diminishment of biological origin is especially relevant insofar as the figure of Isaac serves to stitch the cycle of stories associated with Abraham to the cycle of stories associated with Jacob. Many biblical scholars, in fact, question the historical existence of Isaac.

In his lecture “On the Names-of-the-Father,” Lacan complicates the relationship among humanity, animality, and divinity. In his work, Derrida
pursues the limits of the human being as it exists in a state of tension between animality and divinity. The human is connected at the animal level to the beast, and at the divine level to God as Sovereign, and incorporates both elements in a discordant accord. Each of these figures of animal, human, and God is caught in the tension between the miraculous singularity of life and the deathly repetition of the machine.

Here we can see how the figure of the ram from Celan’s poem as well as the ram in the story of the binding of Isaac, not to mention the desolate ram mentioned in Daniel, animate these questions about the nature and scope of Heidegger’s philosophy, including his three theses about the stone, the animal, and the human being. Much of Derrida’s later work focuses on the animal, contesting Heidegger’s claim that the animal is poor in world, and showing how the theoretical discourse on the fundamental distinction between the animal and the human from Descartes through Levinas, including that of Lacan, deconstructs. We cannot simply maintain a strict boundary between the human animal and the non-human animal.

In the next chapter, I consider further the situation of the inanimate object, in Heidegger’s case the stone. Although Derrida does not pursue this line of thinking, we can think about how his questioning of Heidegger’s threefold typology implies a challenge to the claim that the stone is simply without world in the way that animals possess a world poorly, and that humans compose worlds for themselves with the help of being. In Volume II of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida points out that Heidegger offers the stone as a particular example of an inanimate object, while for the other two kinds of things, he “says in a general way, with no examples, ‘the animal’ and ‘man.’” Derrida takes this example of a stone as a kind of stumbling block for Heidegger’s thinking but then fails to pursue it further in connection to a stone or another inanimate object. This line of thinking, however, brings Derrida up against a newer philosophy that usually is seen as incompatible with Derrida’s thought, an object-oriented ontology, as we will see in the next chapter in the context of contemporary philosophy of religion.