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"The Almost Nothing of the Unpresentable": the Experience of "My Death" in the thought of Jacques Derrida

Derek Liu, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Jan Plug, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in
Theory and Criticism

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“THE ALMOST NOTHING OF THE UNPRESENTABLE”: THE EXPERIENCE OF “MY
DEATH” IN THE THOUGHT OF JACQUES DERRIDA

(Monograph)

by

Derek Liu

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the understanding of Derrida's major concepts of *différance*, trace, and writing requires the reference to the impossible experience of my death as having always already occurred. The thesis tries to make this experience explicit with reference to the work of Blanchot and Heidegger. Having argued that an experience of "I am dead" is the bedrock of Derrida's early concepts and the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, the last chapter shows the centrality of this experience to the undoing of the animal/human binary. Coterminous with an experience of a disjointed temporality, the radical evil and expropriation of the posthumous survival of one's own death is a kind of suffering that has received innumerable material instantiations in our era. It thereby urgently calls forth an ethical response and forms the condition of the possibility of justice.

Keywords

Deconstruction, Derrida, Blanchot, Heidegger, death, dying, survival

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Introduction

Death is the unknown. We have heard this phrase so often that its repetition threatens to bleed it empty of meaning. To Wittgenstein, to want to speak about death is to condemn oneself in advance to silence. For Kant, death constitutes a kind of epistemological limit, beyond which one cannot, and should not cross, if one wants to save oneself from the impasse of pure reason. The impossibility of the experience of death is a philosophical truism. When we look a bit closer, however, we notice that this interdiction on speculation, or even the act of speculating on death itself, always presupposes that death is *something* in the beyond, separated from life by an absolute and unbridgeable space. But does it make sense any longer to insist on this separation of life and death, the most common of commonplaces, *good sense* par excellence, in the wake of the thought of Jacques Derrida? Does not deconstruction begin with an affirmation of survival, a weave of life-in-death or death-in-life which, as Derrida confesses in his last interview,¹ never ceased to haunt and obsess him?² The idea of survival deconstructs the life/death binary by installing death on *this side of* life, or in the immemorial past of the “always already.” Conversely, the insistence that death is the should-not-be-thought seems to us to bespeak a metaphysical desire, the desire to exile death to an exterior, where, separated from life by an uncrossable boundary, it will finally stay. If, as deconstruction insists, the concrete relation to death is the origin of the world, or, if

¹ Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*.

² Derrida writes, “the question of survival [*la survie*] or of reprieve [*le sursis*], a question that has always haunted me, literally *every instant* of my life, in a concrete and unrelenting fashion, has come to have a different resonance today” (*LL*, 25-6).

everything begins with survival, then death has always already begun, on this side of life. A certain experience of death is borne by everything living without exception, even though it is a knowledge that is permanently denied.

The experience of “my death” constitutes what I would call a gothic and tragic aspect of deconstruction. This aspect has been forgotten, no less for the reason that Derrida himself has contributed to its effacement. In *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida indicates that deconstruction is not morbid; it is not on the side of death but rather of life. Derrida writes, “already from the beginning...I maintained that survival is an originary concept that constitutes the 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” (*LL*, 51). By affirming survival as the structure of existence, Derrida recalls his familiar formulation that all life is posthumous, in the wake of death, especially one’s own. *Dasein* is neither dead nor alive, but rather *survives*. But at the sight of these specters, Derrida turns the conversation in another direction: “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...my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living” (*LL*, 51-2).

Granting that deconstruction is affirmative—we will get to the character of this affirmation below—we must also consider the context of the interview, as Derrida himself gives much care to the context. Though it is infamously titled “The Last Interview,” we should not take these “last words” of Derrida as the last words pronounced on deconstruction, a transcendental signified of sorts, a final judgment that could determine the essence and meaning of deconstruction once and for all. It could well

be that in saying survival is not about death, but about affirmation and the preference for life, Derrida is trying to protect the legacy of deconstruction from the corrupting accounts of journalists, which he held in contempt. And these words are the result of a self-censorship that conceals an aspect of deconstruction directed toward an abyssal experience of death that is central to the life of the mortal. It would not be difficult, I think, to derive this aspect of deconstruction from these “last words” as well. Indeed, the experience of survival, as we will show below, is an experience of death *avant la lettre*, before the event but also before the letter, since the letter, the signifier, is irreducibly testamentary, the impossible testimony of my death. “I live my death in writing” is a formulation that bears a distinctly Derridean signature (*LL*, 33). What has been covered over or forgotten in the critical literature is that Derrida’s early notions of writing, trace, *différance*, and spacing are formed out of an encounter with this unthought, an unthought that would no longer take the form of philosophical conceptuality but what we might call an experience, an experience of my death that would situate us beyond death and also beyond life, beyond the present in general, if the word “experience” did not obstinately belong to the metaphysics of presence, if it did not always entail the experience of something present, the irreducible perception of a phenomenon.³

Indeed, the desire that motivated deconstruction from the get go, *d’entrée de jeu*, would be to retrieve for presence an experience that could not be “resumed” or summed up in the form of presence. The critique of the metaphysics of presence proceeds by pointing toward this experience of the posthumous, an “experience” of the erasure of

³ “Violence and Metaphysics,” 152: “Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence? Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of a phenomenality?”

presence and self-presence that would no longer be an experience, but the impossibility of experience *tout court*. The desire for presence, as Derrida points out, is the suppression of difference or trace, which, itself the forgotten unthought, would hover on the edge of experience until retrieved by an exorbitant thought. In the course of an interview given much earlier in his life, wherein the force of his conviction can be heard from the simplicity of his language, Derrida says,

How could the desire for presence let itself be destroyed? It is desire itself. But what gives it, what gives it breath and necessity—what there is and what remains thus to be thought—is that which in the presence of the present does not present itself. Difference or the trace does not present itself, this *almost nothing of the unrepresentable* is what philosophers always try to erase. It is this trace, however, that marks and relaunches all systems.⁴

According to Derrida, the idea that presence is the form of all experience is not absolutely originary, but rather a product of a desire to erase the anterior experience of the sign and of death. If the ethico-theoretical decision that has governed philosophy from Plato to Husserl is “the obstinate desire to save presence and repetition,” to “reduce or to derive the sign” (*SP*, 51), then the “almost nothing of the unrepresentable” to which deconstruction adheres is an experience of my death as already come upon me, an experience which gives rise to this decision in the favor for presence. This most basic “experience,” “what there is and what remains thus to be thought” invokes what

⁴ Derrida, “The Almost Nothing of the Unrepresentable,” 83.

Heidegger calls *das zu-Denkende* (what gives us thought/to be thought) of oblivion as such, which is to be retrieved (unreflectively, as Gasché would say⁵), through the “step back” or the mindfulness of *Besinnung*.⁶ Heidegger’s task can be summarized as the return to the “place where, without having experienced it and without having seen penetratingly into it, we have long been sojourning,”⁷ or, to retrieve the *hidden ground* of metaphysics through the destruction of the history of metaphysics. For Derrida, the hidden ground of experience is an experience of survival as the retrospective and anticipatory participation in one’s own death, a “groundless ground” that gives rise to the present while preventing its closure as something in and of itself. Despite such programmatic statements, commentators on Derridean thought have averted this aspect that lies at the heart of its most important moments: a view of the “almost nothing of the unrepresentable” which deconstruction somehow phenomenalizes in a manifestation of the non-manifest. This negative aspect of deconstruction is avoided in commentary of various kinds in order to rescue deconstruction from the charges of nihilism. And yet this attempt to align deconstruction with a “positive thinking” of finitude assiduously turns a blind eye to the “what there is.” These patently “mad, weird, unsettled, ‘out of joint’” aspects of deconstruction are exorcised, passed over, forgotten, because they disturb the norms and etiquette of philosophical colloquia.

Martin Hägglund’s popular book *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, is on the forefront of this effacement and forgetting. Identifying Derrida’s thought with

⁵ See Gasché, 117.

⁶ I explain these Heideggerian terms below. See section 3.5.

⁷ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 180.

finitude as well as the refusal of God and immortality, Hägglund claims that the idea of survival is the thought that life is always finite, that it is bounded by death. In his interpretation, this mutual imbrication of life and death that occurs in *sur-vie* would not be a lamentable fact, but forms the very basis of desire. It is only because life is finite that it is desirable. As Hägglund puts it in the introduction to his second book, *Dying for Time*: “the mortality of life is the reason why anything is precious” (17). If life were infinite, if immortality were possible, this infinite life would be the most undesirable, a case of absolute presence which Derrida calls “the worst,” since it would annihilate both life and desire. The implication here is that if we never lost anything, we would be incapable of caring about anything; the love or meaning of life proceeds from the necessity of death. But his account of contamination or autoimmunity that characterizes the relation between life and death as a double-bind of life-death, does not go far enough, insofar as life and death are still related to one another externally. Life is irreducibly finite, but this finitude of life is precisely what re-establishes a border between life and death, a border toward which life and death are drawn in a *vis-à-vis* without ever crossing into one another. This encounter makes it possible for us to know that life is not and not yet death; it confirms, in other words, my here-and-now presence and my *this-sidely* existence as reprieve.

However, a contamination that produces an external relationality would not be worth its name. If what lies at the heart of survival is, as Hägglund says, “a coimplication of life and death” (*RA*, 14), then survival by rights should also “co-imply” finitude *and* infinity, mortality *and* immortality. An alternative way of thinking of survival would be the untimely superposition of life and death, the instant of my death in which I am both

dead *and* alive, mortal *and* immortal.⁸ A few words from *Of Grammatology* would seem to sum up Derrida's objection to the entirety of Hägglund's theoretical premise:

But it would not mean a single step outside of metaphysics if nothing more than a new motif of “*return to finitude*,” of “*God's death*,” etc., were the result of this move. It is that conceptuality and that problematics that must be deconstructed. They belong to the onto-theology they fight against. *Differance is also something other than finitude*. (68; emphasis added)

Hägglund excludes the possibility that a mortal might have an experience of this “something other than finitude,” that experience of the grave and of the pyramid, which would finally install death—an experience of the posthumous—on this side of life and *within* the most living present. He claims explicitly that for Derrida, “there can be nothing beyond mortality” (RA, 109). But in revamping deconstruction as a philosophy of pure immanence, his discourse inexorably complies with the onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence that it purportedly “deconstructs.” The experience of death for the living is another experience of immortality, and this is finally what the Derridean logic of contamination is getting at.

Life and death are inseparable, not only because every life is internally exposed to the threat of death,⁹ but because the experience of life itself, the experience of the Living Present, involves a constant repression or forgetting (tracing) of its own hidden ground,

⁸ I am making a reference here to Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death*, the discussion of which is to be found in Chapter 3.

⁹ “Even if all external threats are evaded, life still bears the cause of its own destruction within itself...the source of attack is located within what is to be defended” (RA, 14).

the spectral memory of an anterior catastrophe of my death to which deconstruction draws our gaze and lifts the veil. This anterior death of the self, giving rise to the present, originally corrupts it with a “past-ness.” Now, I do not to give short shrift to the mysteriousness of the idea of an absolute past, the past which has never been present. Instead, this experience of this immemorial past must be amplified in its strange nostalgia and uncanny pathos, and in whose twilight every present is mourned “in advance” as an eternal yesterday. While it would be dangerous to reduce deconstruction to just one thing, as the thought of Being was for Heidegger, I nevertheless maintain that this notion of my death, of an uncertain, anterior death, possesses profound explanatory power and helps us navigate a host of deconstructive (non)concepts. Indeed, the experience of reading Derrida is not, and should not be one of total incomprehension. I locate the possibility of meaning in the “unexperienced experience” of “my death,” in the “retrospective anticipation” of my death which has always already happened.

Perhaps no one has delved further into this “experience” and struggled more vigilantly to abide with it than Maurice Blanchot, even as the idea of “dying” defies clarity and resists any discourse that attempts to name and re-appropriate it. In order to remain faithful to it, one has to be committed to a double-gesture of the trace, writing with one hand and erasing with the other, and simultaneously. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot confesses the difficulties of a discourse on “passivity.” Passivity entails the disaster of dying, a dying which has always already occurred: “Passive are the throes of dying” (28). The conundrum of describing such an experience consists no less in the fact that “speaking of passivity, we cause it to appear,” when passivity itself “does not belong to the world” (15). Finally, Blanchot gives some examples of this “absolute

passiveness of total abjection” or “the inert immobility of some states said to be psychotic”: “the *patior* of passion, servile obedience, the nocturnal receptivity of mystics—dispossession, that is, the self wrested from itself, the detachment whereby one is detached from detachment, or again the fall outside the self” (15). These situations of passivity, “anonymity, loss of self; loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion” (18), are no doubt helpful in signaling the incessant movement of dying, but they are nonetheless inadequate to “what we seek to understand” (15). “The discourse on passivity necessarily betrays passivity,” since it “presents and represents passivity, whereas passivity is...that ‘inhuman’ part of man which, destitute of power, separated from unity, could never accommodate anything able to appear or show itself. This part of man makes no sign or indication of itself and thus, through dispersion and defection, always falls short of what can be stated, even provisionally, about it” (16). It is for this unstatable characteristic of passivity that *The Writing of the Disaster* is written in fragments, in “the language of shattering, of infinite dispersal” (19). For our purposes, it is enough to hold onto the implied connection between passivity and dying. The “passivity of a past which has never been” returns “as the immemorial past” of dying that, by its return, disperses the present (17). Blanchot writes,

Dying means: you are dead already, in an immemorial past, of a death which was not yours, which you have thus neither known nor lived, but under the threat of which you believe you are called upon to live. (*WD*, 65)

In what follows, I propose that what Blanchot calls “dying,” being “dead already, in an immemorial past,” is an important key to unlocking Derrida’s (non)concepts of trace, *différance*, and writing. My main aim is not one of comparison, but rather to show that this experience of dying is the hidden, self-withdrawing center of Derrida’s ideas, an aspect of deconstruction which, due to its subterranean nature, has retained only a minimal and effaced—indeed, spectral—status in Derrida commentary. The body of this thesis unfolds via close readings of the important moments of Derrida’s concept formations, to show that his rhetoric in these moments bears impossible witness to the experience of dying. Throughout his career, Derrida has never ceased to “have it out with death,” *s’expliquer avec la mort*.¹⁰ As Ian Balfour puts it, Derrida was almost always engaged in “an impossible mourning in advance for himself” (208). More specifically, Derrida has never ceased to “have it out with” Heidegger’s notion of being-toward-death, which, carried out for the most part silently and tacitly, leaves its traces in a number of texts. In Chapter 1, “*Différance*, Trace, and Originary Mourning,” I present my take on the first of these notion, *différance* and trace. My interpretation seeks to demonstrate that making sense of what Derrida means by the trace or *différance* requires the reference to the prior and primordial moment of my death. I also contextualize this experience of my death in relation to Heidegger’s notion of Dasein’s historicity. In the second section of the first chapter, I show that this experience of “dying” or surviving one’s own death, the impossible mourning in advance for oneself, is a continuation and a radicalization of Heidegger’s notion being-toward-death [*Sein zum Tode*]. In Chapter 2, “Writing, Death,

¹⁰ “The expression here is ‘s’expliquer avec la mort’: literally, to explain oneself with death. But the idiomatic French sense here is close to the German expression: *auseinandersetzen*, to have it out with someone, to argue with someone, to come to grips with a problem” (*SM* 223, n.2).

and Responsibility,” I relate the experience of posthumous survival to Derrida’s notion of writing (*écriture*). The author, in no longer answering for what he has written, undergoes a kind of living death. I then establish a relation between this non-responsibility (*sans-réponse*) of the author and justice. In Chapter 3, “*Mourir Vivant* and the Opening toward the Other,” my reading of Derrida’s last seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign, II*, focuses on its dominant motif of the phantasm of dying alive (*mourir vivant*). I open up the somewhat confining context of this experience to its instantiation in the works of other writers, J. M. Coetzee, Lisa Guenther, and Catherine Malabou. By way of these references, I discuss the important role this phantasmatic experience of lifedeath [*la vie la mort*] plays in undoing the animal/human binary, as well as the intricate and indeed inextricable relationship it has to Heidegger’s notion of *Walten*.

Chapter 1

Human weakness, which even affliction does not divulge, penetrates us on account of our belonging at every instant to the immemorial past of our death—on account of our being indestructible because always and infinitely destroyed.

Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30

1 Différance, Trace, and Originary Mourning

In *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida writes that “survival is an originary concept that constitutes the structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*” (51) In this chapter, I show that Derrida’s notion of survival or originary mourning revolutionizes the notion of *being-toward-death* as it is formulated in *Being and Time*, §46-53. To begin, I articulate Derrida’s notions of différance and the trace¹¹ to an experience of my death as having already arrived. To do so, I show that these notions emerge out of an encounter with another subsection of *Being and Time*, namely §72, “The Existential-Ontological Exposition of the Problem of History.” This section plays a decisive role in Derrida’s course on Heidegger, given in 1964-1965 at l’ENS (École normale supérieure)-Ulm.¹² In this section, Heidegger shows that *Dasein* is always toward its birth and death, that is, extends itself and stretches itself toward these absences. And since birth and death are not events that can be envisaged in the mode of the present, death is included within the life

¹¹ In what follows, the words trace and différance are occasionally used interchangeably. This is because they designate the same operation of primordial synthesis: “*The (pure) trace is différance*” (OG, 62).

¹² Derrida, *Heidegger: la question de l’Être et l’Histoire: Cours de l’ENS-Ulm (1964-1965)*. Hereafter *Cours*. All translations are my own.

of Dasein as a dissimulated absence. In Derrida's *Cours*, Heidegger is lauded as the founder of deconstruction, for beginning to "shake" (*ébranler*) or "make tremble" (*solliciter*) the history of metaphysics of presence with the notion of historicity, a notion which contests the privilege accorded to presence as the form of all truth and of all experience.¹³ From this point of view, it becomes easy to see why Derrida insisted on thinking or proceeding "not within but on the horizon of the Heideggerian paths, and yet in them" (*OG*, 23). If, according to Heidegger, the being of Dasein, in its character as extension (*Erstreckung*) always already includes the absences of birth and death within its presence, then in this formulation, death is not "outside" Dasein, but rather always already tied up with and imbricated *in* its life and its being. This determination of the existence of Dasein as inclusive of its death helps us understand the way Derrida's formulation of survival as a deconstruction of the life and death binary remains within the Heideggerian horizon. The first section of this chapter shows Heidegger's thinking of Dasein's historicity as extension penetrates Derrida's notions of *différance* and trace. These two notions, *différance* and trace, in turn prefigure the idea of survival as "the structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*." The second section of this chapter will show the ways in which Derrida's notion of originary mourning transgresses and departs from the Heideggerian horizon, and rewrites the notion of being-toward-death. I will do so with help of some remarkable pages from Derrida's last seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign, II*.

¹³ See *Cours*, Sixième séance, p. 214

1.1 Différance, Trace, and Dasein's Historicity

As we know, the notion of *différance* encompasses the two meanings of the French verb *différer*, to differ, to be different, and also to defer, postpone, put off. *Différance* thereby unites two heterogeneous ideas of deferment and difference. Now *différance* as deferment cannot be considered as an activity which supervenes upon a prior perception of the presence, either as the presence of the object before intuition or as the representative structure of consciousness. Rather, *différance* must be thought as the action of originary delay or deferral in relation to which the present is constituted. A pivotal passage from the essay "Différance" reads,

Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be "present," appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. (142-3)

First of all, *différance* is a radicalization of Husserl's theory of internal time consciousness. According to Husserl, the impression of time as flowing for a subject depends on retention and protention within the actual present. The continuity of time impressions requires that the present be modified by a retention of impressions from a moment before and the protention of what will arrive the moment after. Thus Husserl

concedes the fundamental character of the modes of time other than the present. But as Derrida points out in the *Cours*, despite the important role retention and protention play in temporalisation (the synthesis of time), in Husserl's theory, the past is still considered as a past present, while the future is expected as a future present. Moreover, this double opening itself, that which opens, is itself a present, and thus does nothing to question the unity of the Living Present that rests secure in its substantial identity and unity.¹⁴ The seemingly disjointed structure of temporal synthesis is thus leveled out on the basis of the present and is finally reducible to presence. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes,

It is not a matter of complicating the structure of time while conserving its homogeneity and its fundamental successivity, by demonstrating for example that the past present and the future present constitute it originarily, by dividing it, the form of the living present. Such a complication, which is in effect the same that Husserl described, abides, in spite of an audacious phenomenological reduction, by the evidence and presence of a linear, objective, and mundane model. (67)

Departing from this model, the trace or *différance* would “install in the heart of the present” “a ‘dialectic’ of protention and retention...instead of surrounding it with it” (67).

In the Husserlian model of time, the present is constituted by a trace, the trace of retention and protention, which relates to a past and a future. But this past and this future are determined as modalized presents, as past present or as future present. In Derrida, in contrast, the present is constituted by a trace that relates to an *absolute past*, a past that

¹⁴ *Cours*, p. 211: “Il ne faut pas oublier que non seulement les deux ouvertures modifiantes ouvrant sur le Passé et le futur ouvrent sur un présent passé et un présent futur mais que l'ouverture elle-même, ce qui ouvre sur les autres présents, c'est déjà un *Présent*.”

was never present. As we know, Derrida inherits this idea of the absolute past from Emmanuel Levinas. Derrida writes, “I relate this concept of the *trace* to what is at the center of the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his critique of ontology: relationship to the illeity as to the alterity of a past that never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified form of presence” (*OG*, 70). The trace or *différance* is precisely the appearance of that which infinitely and irreducibly withdraws from phenomenality and from presence. *Différance*, the minimal activity of postponing, displaces the privilege of the present by re-inscribing it as an effect of an absolute past, a past that cannot be thought under any circumstances as a past present. In *The Tain and the Mirror*, Rodolphe Gasché explains that this idea of the absolute past, which another commentator has deemed “an utterly strange notion,”¹⁵ as “a time anterior to time, a past *of* time, a past that has never been present” (198). Recognizing the importance of this “absolute past” to the idea of *différance*, Gasché thinks of this idea only negatively. He determines the absolute past as a kind of “radical alterity” that differs absolutely from the present, and then quickly evades the issue by moving on to a discussion of how it introduces spacing into time (197).

I suggest that we can sufficiently think this absolute past only by making reference to the time of a death that is not in the future but infinitely past. Indeed, only the tense of the “always already” of my death can be adequate to this time that was never present. The quotation from Blanchot in my epigraph states that we belong in each instant to the immemorial past of our death. This death is not in the future but in a past, not in a

¹⁵ Krell 112.

past that is a past present but rather an “immemorial past,” a past which, extremely ancient and old, no longer belongs to the mundane order of chained presents. Derrida explains this experience of a death that has already taken place this way: “what will come, what is coming at me, this is what will already have taken place: death has already taken place. I can testify to it, because it has already taken place. Yet this past, to which I testify, namely, my death itself, has never been present” (*Demeure*, 49-50). What Derrida calls the trace, then, is a relation to this impossible testimony to “my death itself,” since only my death, situated in an immemorial past, can evoke this time that is entirely other than the present. If, as Blanchot says, “I die before being born,” my living present that issues out of this anterior death is lost in advance (*WD*, 101). If *différance* or the trace is this relation to a primordial or immemorial death, then the present that it makes possible is also impossible, impossible because both living and dead.

Aside from having a Husserlian echo, the traces of Heidegger can also be detected in this passage from “*Différance*.” In §72 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger broaches the problem of the historicity of Dasein. In the classical, i.e., vulgar, account of Dasein as a being “in time,” the connection of Dasein’s life, its *Zusammenhang des Lebens*, is conceived as a sum of interconnected nows. In this account, only the “now” that passes in each moment is real, while the “now” which has just passed and the “now” that is about to arrive have no reality. Heidegger’s objection, however, is that such an account of temporality fails to solve the problem of the unity of Dasein’s life. For we cannot think this *Lebenszusammenhang* as an empirical synthesis of present-at-hand moments. These moments can “hang together” only because the being of Dasein is transcendence and grounded in ek-static temporality. Dasein does not traverse the series of nows as if

hopping through them. Rather, as transcendence, Dasein exits absolutely from each present toward the past and the future. Only on the basis of the temporality of Dasein as *ekstasis* (absolute exit) can the question of the ontological unity of the *Lebenszusammenhang* be posed.

Heidegger does not conceive of Dasein as a present-at-hand entity that “maintains itself in a certain sameness as self [*hält sich das Selbst in einer gewissen Selbigkeit durch*]” (342/373). Instead, he postulates the being of Dasein as extension (*Erstreckung*) or as the between (*das Zwischen*), to which “birth” and “death” always already belong. As Heidegger says, “Factual Da-sein exists as born, and, born, it is already dying in the sense of being-toward-death [*Das faktische Dasein existiert gebürtig, und gebürtig stirbt es auch als Sein-zum-Tode.*]” (343/374). According to this existential interpretation of Dasein, birth and death are not to be understood as nonrealities (*Nichtwirklichen*) that surround Dasein,¹⁶ as something no-longer-present (*Nichtmehrvorhandene*) or not-yet-present (*noch nicht vorhandenene*) (343/373). Birth and death exist *in* the being of Dasein, and “[b]oth ends are” (343). As the “between,” Dasein is the site of difference; its being is marked by birth or by death, by an absence or nothingness that nonetheless exists. This appearance of birth and death within the being of Dasein is that of the nonphenomenalizable and non-presentable. Heidegger’s formulation of Dasein’s being as the “between” of life and death prefigures the lifedeath of survival.

¹⁶ “it is by no means the case that Dasein is real in a point of time, and that, in addition, it is then ‘surrounded’ by the nonreality of its birth and its death [*Keineswegs dagegen »ist« das Dasein in einem Zeitpunkt wirklich und außerdem noch von dem Nichtwirklichen seiner Geburt und seines Todes »umgeben«*]” (343/374).

This conception of the being of Dasein as extension is an example of what Derrida would call contamination. This reformulation questions the privilege or authority given to the living present by positing a certain *mixing up* of absence and presence. This “mixing up” blurs the boundary separating the now of Dasein from its past/future, between the so-called “reality” or presence of the now and the “non-realities” of modes of time other than the now, therefore between the *Vorhandenheit* and *Unvorhandenheit* of different temporal modes. Although Derrida might think differently, I would argue that this “mixing up” performed by Heidegger by characterizing the being of Dasein as a “self-extending extension [*erstrecktes Sicherstreckung*],”¹⁷ which installs absence within presence, would be adequate to the idea of contamination that Derrida characterizes with the French word “flou,” as something blurry or “out of focus.”¹⁸ Since birth and death are not present-at-hand realities that can simply be surpassed or awaited, the being of Dasein would therefore be both presence and absence, and neither presence nor absence, but rather the mirage of a *flou*. Birth is a past that was never experienced in the mode of the present, and death is a future that can never be a future present. The being of Dasein, insofar as it includes these non-presences, is also constituted by them: “The ‘between’ of birth and death already lies *in the being* of Da-sein” (*BT*, 343). What we call the present is a remaining in the wake of absences that continue to exert a certain force.

¹⁷ Dasein “stretches *itself* along in such a way that its own being is constituted beforehand as this stretching along...The movement of existence is not the motion [*Bewegung*] of something objectively present. It is determined from the stretching along [*Erstreckung*] of Dasein. The specific movement [*Bewegtheit*] of the *stretched out stretching itself along* [*erstrecktes Sicherstreckens*], we call the occurrence [*Geschehen*] of Da-sein” (343-4).

¹⁸ Derrida, *On Reading Heidegger: An Outline of Remarks to the Essex Colloquium*. p. 180.

This Heideggerian context allows us to better engage with Derrida's *différance*. Recall that for Heidegger, birth and death are not "modified presents." As has already been quoted, "birth is never something past in the sense of what is no longer objectively present (*Nichtmehrvorhandene*), and death is just as far from having the kind of being of something outstanding that is not yet objectively present (*noch nicht vorhandene*)." Derrida's language is remarkably similar. Derrida writes that "[t]his trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present." The trace is the relation to an absolute past or an absolute future, just as the extension or between of Dasein's being is itself this relation ("mit Bezug auf") to a past or a future that can never be thought in the mode of the present: "In the Being of Dasein already lies the 'between' with relation to birth and death [Im Sein *des Daseins* liegt schon das »Zwischen« mit Bezug auf Geburt und Tod]" (*BT*, 343/374; trans. mod.).

Derrida also writes, "In order for it [i.e., the present] to be, an interval must separate it from what it is not; but the interval that constitutes it in the present must also, and by the same token, divide the present in itself" ("Différance," 143). This interval or "double articulation" within the present (*SM*, 29) through which the present retains and is vitiated by the past and the future, holds the present together while also opening it up to its other or others. This double articulation lets the trace of nonphenomenalities of birth and death enter into the present, a present which in turn dissimulates and conceals them in order to be what it is. Thus the passage from "Différance" quoted above is Derrida's answer to the perennial question of philosophy, "How is it possible, that which is?",

“How is presence [*Anwesenheit*] and being possible?” And his answer is the trace or *différance*, the “presentation” of which takes the form of an aporia: the trace constitutes the presence of the present, lets it be, but it does so through a relation to the Other of the present—a past that was never present or a future that will never be present—the nonphenomenality of birth or death that is both traced and effaced.

In the same colloquium referred to above (see note 18), in reply to a question that assimilated the idea of trace to the image of the mould, Derrida says:

[T]he model of imprinting, mould, etc., of τύπος...is not mine...I would prefer something which is neither present nor absent: I would prefer *ashes* as the better paradigm for what I call the trace—something which erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself. (177)

Why does Derrida choose the image of *ashes* to designate what is meant by the word trace? This seems to be an odd choice, since ashes do not erase themselves—they can be kept in an urn and preserved—unless we remember that ashes are always *of* something. Ashes evoke a presence that disappears in its appearance. It is this vestigial presence that “erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself.” The same thing happens when we come upon a signature. The monument of the signature is always a testament to a disappearance that belongs structurally to the person who signs. Thus, even when the signer is still alive, to commit his name to a piece of paper is always to receive in advance the impression of his death. The images of ashes is also apt because the trace is that which is simultaneously living and dead. In “*Différance*,” Derrida writes,

Proposing *all at once* the monument and the mirage of the trace, the trace simultaneously traced and erased, simultaneously living and dead, and, as

always, living in its simulation of life's inscription [*vive comme toujours de simuler aussi la vie en son inscription gardée*]. Pyramid. (25)

Having no grammatical subject, the sentence above does not say “who” or “what” proposes this simultaneity of the monument and the mirage. This disappearance of the grammatical subject reflects the trace structure which involves the effacement of selfhood. The sentence has neither head nor tail. One cannot make heads or tails of it. It runs amok like a zombie, “simultaneously living and dead,” or like a mummy, a posthumous remaining that simulates life as a preserved inscription (*inscription gardée*), as death. It is this simultaneity of the living and the dead which Derrida ranges under the name of trace or *différance*. This simultaneity in which life and death simulate each other introduces an anachronism or non-contemporaneity of the present with itself. It inscribes, in other words, the posthumous moment into the most living present. The return of the absolute past, a past that was never present, is the *unheimlich* time of the mummy and of inscription. In the twilight of this oscillating anachrony, the privileged present would no longer appear as all that there is. Comprehended as a trace, the present is a trace of, nay, it traces, that is, it dis/simulates this enigmatic past outside the realm of phenomena, making it dis/appear. As we will see later, it is upon this anachronistic time of my death that Derrida has pegged the fragile hope of justice and the displacement of the metaphysics of presence, i.e., the Hegelian *telos* prescribed in advance to progress toward the parousia of absolute presence, which will finally have conjured away the living-dead specter and cast off the mummified remains of inscription.

Everything that we have been saying so far about the trace seems to be summed up in this formulation near the end of “Freud and the Scene of Writing”:

The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one's own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance, a son of God, a sign of parousia and not a seed, that is, a mortal germ. This erasure is death itself, and it is within its horizon that we must conceive...the present. (230)

As Derrida says here, the trace is the erasure of selfhood, the erasure of "one's own presence." This erasure is death, albeit a death that comes before death. Blanchot writes, "So it is that men who are destroyed (destroyed without destruction) are as though incapable of appearing, and invisible even when one sees them" (*WD*, 22). What Derrida means by the trace, then, can be understood in relation to "destroyed men," whose loss of selfhood renders them invisible, who suffer the "disappearance of...disappearance." But for Derrida, he does not have to look to the *Muselmann*¹⁹ of the camps for an example of the disaster of self-erasure; he is himself "infinitely destroyed" (*WD*, 30). This alienation and the destruction of the social bond, a social bond that is predicated on mutual visibility, emerges from the unavoidable use of language which is always idiomatic. Explaining what he means by "idiomatic," Derrida says, "A property you cannot appropriate; it somehow marks you without belonging to you. It appears only to others, never to you—except in flashes of madness which draw together life and death, which

¹⁹ The living death of *Muselmänner* is the object of Agamben's enquiry in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

render you at once alive and dead.”²⁰ Like Blanchot’s destroyed men who, “if they speak, it is with the voice of others, a voice always other than theirs” (*WD*, 22), Derrida is gripped by an “idiomatic writing,” a language that he cannot appropriate and which renders him “at once alive and dead.”

In the notion of the trace, Derrida insists that the present must be conceived in relation to a subject that has been dead and an objective world that has been spirited away. It is within the horizon of ashes, an image that signifies the irrevocable disappearance and erasure of a presence, that the present, the presence of the object before intuition and the self-presence of my consciousness, can be conceived. The trace is thus originary disappearance that comes before presence. “‘I’ die before being born” encapsulates the logic of originary mourning which subtends the thought of the trace (*WD*, 101). The ashes of a body that erases itself radically and completely becomes the structure of the present, a present that can only be considered as posthumous, as if one were still alive, still living on in a spectral form, inertly but also by the force of inertia, after the fire of the living present has died out. One can indeed think of *Bartleby the scrivener* as an example of this survival, the scribe suspended between life and death, whose idiomatic and incomprehensible phrase “I would prefer not to” signals the absolute abdication of identity and sovereign control. As the story’s last line, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” makes clear, the “eccentricities” of *Bartleby*, far from being a singular or exceptional case, have a universal applicability (41).

²⁰ “An Interview with Derrida (from *Le nouvel observateur*)”, 73.

It becomes clear from our summary above that for Derrida, the trace, as a “concrete relation with death,” is the primordial synthesis of the present. The question still remains as to how such a synthesis takes place. Recall that in order for the present to be what it is, there must be an interval within the present that both constitutes and divides it. How should we understand this interval? Because we will be talking about Derrida’s *Demeure* in more detail in Chapter 3, I will restrict myself to quoting from it just one sentence: “At the same instant, but the tip of the instant is divided here: I am not dead and I am dead [*Au même instant, mais la pointe de l’instant s’y divise, je ne suis pas mort et je suis mort*]” (68/87). Here Derrida is talking about Blanchot’s short text *The Instant of My Death*, in which a young man, almost shot to death, has an “unexperienced experience [*expérience inédite*]” (47/57) of death and immortality. We have already explained what it might mean to die without death (*mourir sans mort*), and how this experience is associated with the trace and with writing in general. This instant of my death, the point of which divides itself (“*s’y divise*”) into both “I am not dead” and “I am dead,” is not one instant among others, not only because it is infinitely removed from the mundane time of the present, but also because this instant can be understood as the hidden ground of experience itself. Derrida says, “In order for it [i.e., the present] to be, an interval must separate it from what it is not; but the interval that constitutes it in the present must also, and by the same token, divide the present in itself.” With reference to Blanchot’s text, we can understand the interval which both constitutes and divides the present to be the instant of my death, the ghostly spacing of an untimely moment. It is untimely because here time as a mundane present becomes absent, confounded with the immemorial past of my death that is also radically and absolutely future.

Just as the point of the instant of my death divides itself into the aporia of “I am not dead *and* I am dead,” the trace also divides itself. On the one hand, the trace, by relating the present to an anterior death that has always already occurred, makes the present impossible as a mode of surviving beyond death. But on the other hand, the trace also makes the present possible, lets it be, because this posthumous survival is also what, in a certain manner, *protects* life. As Derrida puts it elsewhere, “the tomb also shelters life from death. It *warns* the soul of possible death, warns (of) death of the soul, turns away (from) death. This double warning function belongs to the funerary monument.”²¹ In “Différance,” Derrida explicitly identifies *différance* with the imagery of a tomb. He writes, “The *a* of *différance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikēsis*” (4). *Différance* is the site of living death, “the monument-of-life-in-death” or of “death-in-life,” a tomb in which death is played out by the living and for the living. As an “*economy of death*,” *différance* plays at or rehearses death (*ibid.*). But this playing dead, a pretense of “I am dead already,” is the very thing which turns death away, warning the soul of possible death and letting the soul accede to the knowledge of mortality.

1.2 Originary Mourning and Being-Toward-Death

In the previous section, I presented my take on *différance* and trace. My interpretation sought to demonstrate that making sense of these terms requires the reference to the experience of a death which has always already occurred. The notion of

²¹ “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” 82.

différance involves the claim that the anterior erasure of self-hood and self-presence is what makes the present possible, the horizon in which the present must be recontextualized. The implication or consequence of this claim is that the present is never in itself, as present life as such, but a posthumous surviving that lives and dies “beyond the grave.” Throughout my discussion, I have tried to make this enigmatic and difficult idea explicit with reference to Blanchot. I have also tried to demonstrate a certain kinship between the idea of posthumous survival and Heidegger’s formulation of Dasein’s being as the “between” of life and death.

In this section, by focusing on just a few pages from Derrida’s last seminar *The Beast & the Sovereign, II*, I reconstitute the idea of originary mourning, which reformulates the logic of the trace or différance in a different way. Recall that the trace is the “effacement of self-hood” and “self-presence,” an erasure that is tantamount to death. This past death of the self is “prior” to the present and therefore the condition of the possibility of its synthesis. The present is therefore comprehended by the ever-receding horizon—that is, the trace—of my disappearance or my death. In the seminar, by reading two “infinite and sublime lines from John Donne,” Derrida articulates the idea of originary mourning as a mourning in advance for myself, without which there can be no self-presence. The pleasure of being alive cannot be conceived as if it were present in the first moment, and mourned in its loss in the next. Rather, the loss of pleasure precedes pleasure itself and gives rise to it.

In the passage that we are about to analyze, Derrida uses the words “pleasure” and “present” interchangeably. This rhetoric implies that the present *is* pleasure, for to be alive is to feel joy. Indeed, this idea goes against the grain of the common recognition,

derived for the most part from religion, that to be alive is to feel pain: the baby's cry from the trauma of birth emblemizes the way existence is tantamount to suffering. Derrida's equivalence of "present" and "pleasure" measures the extent to which his thought is *affirmative*. And yet, since this total identification of present and pleasure, life and joy, cannot be thought except *from the place of* my death, from the perspective in which my present is irretrievably and irremediably lost, this affirmation rests on a ground that is inconsolably melancholic. The affirmative idea that to be alive is to feel joy is thoroughly *unthinkable*, unless I can *begin from* the phantasm of my life and my present as *always already lost*, or, what amounts to the same thing, unless I can be as if I were already dead. What Derrida affirms is not life as such and in itself, but rather survival, a life already lost. The character of this affirmation is therefore intermingled with the melancholy and nostalgia of a primordial loss.

This loss is what Derrida calls "originary mourning." The impossible mourning in advance for myself precedes and gives birth to all my present and all my pleasure, but it gives rise to them as already lost from the get go, as "already yesterday." For Derrida, this melancholic filter through which originary mourning sees everything as always already lost is paradoxically assimilated to the hope and imminence of a future-to-come. Below, I give an account of how this assimilation takes place. I contribute to the scholarly conversation²² surrounding this particular section by throwing light on Derrida's critique, implicit and concealed within the formulation of originary mourning, of Heidegger's notion of being-toward-death.

²² See, for example, Michaud, 137-178, and Miller, 63-66.

In the midst of discussing Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Derrida turns to two lines from John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*: "I run to Death and Death meets me as fast / And all my Pleasures are like Yesterday." Derrida's commentary is exemplary of the accord between content and style. Resembling the movement of acceleration and "a speed beyond speed, a speed winning out over speed" of a race toward death, Derrida's sentences run on to epic lengths, literally rendering the speaker breathless (51). And because the text seeks to enter into the zone between life and death, it names something secret that cannot be brought into the open without immediate dispersal. Feverish utterances like "affecting itself in advance, via what in photography is called a delay mechanism, with its own photograph, a photograph that is itself not reappropriable," or, "Everything begins with the archive or with archive fever" (51), are wonderfully suggestive, but they are expressed so elliptically and telegraphically that they cannot be made to signify without a certain degree of hermeneutical violence. However, the language here is appropriate to the mysterious nature of an anterior death, which Derrida names explicitly: "It is as if presently I were already dead...what I live in the present, or even what I expect from the future, is already past, already memory and melancholy, or nostalgia" (50-1). The archive is nostalgic because it refers to a bygone past. But here nostalgia is "in advance" of the loss of the object. One is nostalgic for something that has not been really lost. Through this proleptic nostalgia one is projected to a time beyond the present, a perspective from which the present and even the future appear as if already past. The infinite speed that runs ahead of death, "as if presently I were already dead," describes the movement of what Derrida means by originary mourning. This mourning of

my death begins with nostalgia of the archive and thus installs within the present a torsion of temporal perspective.

In his interpretation of the second line, “And all my Pleasures are like Yesterday,” Derrida reads the word “like” to mean an equivalence or identification of “Pleasure” and “Yesterday.” It is not as if we first experienced a present pleasure, which was then, in the second moment, marked as past. It is the other way around. Because Donne uses the word “Yesterday” not as an adverb but as a noun, this gives us to understand that “pleasure is originarily yesterday,” in its essence “Yesterday.” Derrida says,

No, it is the contrary, the other way round, if I can say so, it is yesterday that gives the pleasure, pleasure is yesterday, like yesterday, it begins now by being yesterday, not only in the manner of yesterday but as yesterday. I have pleasure only because there is the past of yesterday, only because pleasure is originarily yesterday, it is in its essence (*Wesen*), in its now...a *Gewesenheit*, a being-having-been. (52)

For Derrida, what gives pleasure, the source of the present or of the day, is an originary mourning of a death already come:

and that’s the nostalgia of yesterday, of a death already come, an originary mourning, this is the nostalgia that does not come after pleasure but which, alone, gives me pleasure and gives it to me *as yesterday*. I do not enjoy a pleasure first present that is immediately past, nostalgic, in mourning: no, the pleasure is born only of the mourning, of enjoyment as mourning. (52)

Derrida stresses that this mourning is not just for anyone or anything, but first of all a “mourning of myself”: “And not any mourning and any memory of death, but the

mourning of myself. I am from yesterday, I am no longer, I am no longer present, I am already yesterday...only my death or the feeling of my death...lets me enjoy and take pleasure—in this very moment” (53).

Notice here that Derrida insists on the syntagms “my death” and “the feeling of my death.” One of the major premises of this thesis is that there has been a general effacement and elision of this syntagm “my death” from critical commentary. On the one hand, this elision occurs for good reason. For what could be more absurd than “the feeling of my death”? And what could be more narcissistic, more closed to the other, more susceptible to the charges of solipsism? But on the other hand, the question of “my death” is a heavily laden philosophical problem, and to ignore it is to miss something crucial about Derrida’s corpus. As Derrida holds, it is in this passage through the grave, my own, no doubt, that the “I am,” *cogito*, or consciousness can be established. Moreover, it is through an experience of my death that one can get to the shores of the other, an arrival without arrival, an arrival that is always too late.

In his contestation against Heidegger’s determination of death as “in-each-case-mine” (*Jemeinig*), a *Jemeinigkeit* that characterizes Dasein’s singularity, Levinas sought to redefine death as in the first place as the death of the other. On this point, Derrida seems neither Heideggerian nor Levinasian, but presents a quasi-synthesis of their respective points of view. For Heidegger, death is first of all my death, a death that nobody can take from me or undergo in my place.²³ On the one hand, Derrida is very close to Heidegger on this point. In *The Gift of Death*, for example, he seems to subscribe

²³ “Der Tod ist, so fern er »ist«, wesensmässig je der meine” (SZ 240).

without reserve the way the *Jemeinigkeit* of death constitutes my singularity and irreplaceability.²⁴ But on the other hand, for Derrida “my death” also opens up a passage to the other, a passage that is however an impasse. As Derrida points out later in the seminar, when he uses the syntagm, “I am...dead,” he presupposes a pre-definition of death. For Derrida, death entails first of all a situation of total passivity, of having one’s remains entrusted into the hands of the other: “being dead, before meaning something quite different, means, for me, to be delivered over, in what remains of me, as in all my remains, to be exposed or delivered over with no possible defense, once totally disarmed, to the other, to the others” (126). And thus some commentators have seized upon this opportunity to claim that the Derridean thought of death is ultimately oriented toward the other. But the irony that gives the lie to this view is that in death, which is supposed to be the privileged locus for a *rapprochement* with the other, no encounter with the other actually takes place. In thus going over to the other, in being delivered over to the other in my remains, I am no longer present. This encounter with the other in death is an encounter without encounter, arrival without arrival. When the phone call to the other finally gets through, there will no longer be anyone on this side of the line to respond. This pre-definition of death tells us, therefore, that in the moment when I am delivered into the hands of the other, there will be no communication. This opening up to the other is infinitely asymmetrical. There is no intersubjective *tête-à-tête*. When my remains finally arrive at the shores of the other, when I am finally entrusted into his or her hands, totally exposed and totally passive, a non-passage will separate the “I” more infinitely

²⁴ See *The Gift of Death*, 42-48.

from the other than ever before (since I am already dead). I am infinitely more secret to the other in this very moment when, completely “exposed” and “disarmed,” I am also in a sense the least secret. This supposed being delivered over to the other, this going over to the other in death, finally implies that no contact between self and other takes place. Needless to say, this double-bind is not limited to the context of the transferring of remains, but is true of the normal situation. If the living present is a moment in which I am already dead (we will come to this in Chapter 2), or, if I can relate to the other only as if I were already dead, this means that I am always infinitely exposed as much as infinitely secret to the other. The relation between self and other is a non-relational relation, a bond without bond.

In §50 of *Being and Time*, “A Preliminary Sketch of the Existential and Ontological Structure of Death,” Heidegger begins by determining the end of Dasein as something that is outstanding (*Ausstand*). But this analysis proves itself to be insufficient, insofar as it makes the problematic presupposition that Dasein is something present-at-hand (*Vorhandenes*). To avert this danger, Heidegger determines the end instead as imminence (*Bevorstand*; lit: standing before). As Heidegger’s argument goes, “With death, Da-sein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being” (232). Since Dasein is not indifferent to its being, when it comports itself toward death as the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-in-the-world, it is concerned about its being-in-the-world absolutely. Death is therefore Dasein’s ownmost (*eigenste*) possibility of being. When Dasein stands before itself as the possibility of losing its being-in-the-world, it is thrown back upon its own potentiality-of-being in which “all relations to other Da-seins are dissolved” (232). Death is therefore also a non-relational (*unbezüglich*) possibility.

Death is also Dasein's the "outermost" (*äußerste*) possibility, because "Da-sein is unable to bypass the possibility of death" (232). Death is therefore a possibility not-to-be-bypassed (*unüberholbar*). To summarize, there are three moments to Heidegger's analysis of death as a possibility of being: ownmost (*eigenst*), non-relational (*unbezüglich*), and not to be bypassed (*unüberholbar*). Finally, the authentic mode of being-toward-death involves the "anticipation of this possibility," or, "*Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit*," literally, "running into the possibility" (*SZ*, 242/262). Both the word "Vorlaufen" and the accusative case connote a sense of movement.

With this in mind, we can see that when Derrida talks about a "race to death," a tacit reference to Heidegger is being made, even though the phrase is ostensibly a commentary on Donne's poem. Derrida writes,

perhaps that this race to death, this race to death of death, this running out of breath, this being-in-the-race at high speed, a speed that is all-powerful and indifferent, without speed-differentiation, this absolute speed, this speed beyond speed, this speed that is the whole, as infinite speed that takes itself by speed and overtakes itself, passes itself, as they say in American English for overtake, when one vehicle overtakes another, this speed that passes itself, this race at full speed, this race of death to death, this race unto death... (*B*, 52)

As we have summarized above, for Heidegger, death is a possibility not-to-be-bypassed, *unüberholbar*. *Überholen* is most often used in the context of driving, when one vehicle "passes" or "overtakes" another. Dasein cannot bypass or outstrip death, cannot get to the other side of death. This *Unüberholbarkeit* of death thus determines Dasein's finitude.

Derrida's insistence on the automotive metaphor, "when one vehicle overtakes another," is an implicit reference to Heidegger. Ordinary mourning occurs when I run toward death so fast that I overtake death just like I pass a car on the highway. From the perspective of an infinite speed that "overtakes" and "passes itself," "my death" is no longer a future possibility awaiting actualization, but rather already actualized; or better, it has *always already* been actualized. For Derrida, death is not only bypassed but infinitely bypassed. Dasein does not run ahead *into* death, but rather runs ahead *of* death to see it coming in the "rearview mirror." In *Aporias*, Derrida exploits this automotive metaphor in a similar way and writes about "the rearview mirror of a waiting-for-death at every moment" (55).

Heidegger says that death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. This means that death is the most proper possibility of being for Dasein, but it also means that it reveals Dasein to itself authentically. As Heidegger says, when Dasein assumes the possibility of death and stands before itself as this possibility, it is fully thrown back upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being (*BT*, 250). Dasein can authentically be itself, can announce itself to itself as such, that is, ontologically and existentially as "care," only when it runs ahead into death and becomes singularized by it, thus breaking off all ontic attachment to worldly worrying (*Besorgen*) and being with others (*Mitsein*). Heidegger writes, "Death...lays claim on it [i.e., on Dasein] as something individual. This individualizing is a way in which the 'there' is disclosed for existence [*eine Weise des Erschließens des »Da« für die Existenz*]" (*BT* 243/263). Death discloses the "Da" of Dasein, throws it back onto its there, and thereby confirms its existence and its being-in-the-world.

Derrida employs the same logic of "I die therefore I am." He writes:

Without mourning, and the mourning of myself, the mourning of my “I am present,” there would be no pleasure. There would not even be an “I am,” consciousness, *cogito*, I think, or present enjoyment of my Cartesian-Robinsonian existence. (53)

If for Heidegger, an authentic world is disclosed by running ahead into the possibility of death, for Derrida too, the world is born from an anticipation of death, but of a “death already come.” In originary mourning, anticipation becomes retrospective; one fast-forwards into the future at top speed, such that the film of life unfolds as a testament to something that is already lost. Retrospective anticipation is a “nostalgia that does not come after pleasure but which, alone, gives me pleasure; “only my death or the feeling of my death...only my death lets me enjoy and take pleasure—in this very moment. Only absolute yesterday gives me pleasure” (53). Originary mourning or “the feeling of my death” is what gives rise to the present and pleasure, the present of pleasure or the present as pleasure itself. Originary mourning is thus the condition of possibility of the world. And yet, the world that it makes possible is corrupted in its essence. It is not in its essence (*Wesen*) a present, but a past-having-been, a *Gewesenheit*. Derrida writes, “Of what is born but, since we are here dealing with a past like a death already happened, having won the race, faster than speed itself, what is born as though stillborn [*mort-né*]” (53/90).

Thus, the eternal yesterday of originary mourning is what gives rise to the present and to the future, but the world that is born is already past. The future-to-come, the imminence of the *l'à-venir* of death, is already this past that was never present, an absolute yesterday of a death already come. As Derrida writes, “yesterday is the day ahead...the imminence of day’s dawning, the dawning that gives light to the day [*donne*

le jour au jour]” (53). We receive in this quotation a *précis* of Derrida’s peculiar notion of disjointed temporality that creates a thoroughly unbelievable and impossible tense: the imminence of that which is always already. In *Demeure*, Derrida writes, “‘The imminence of what has always already taken place’: this is an *unbelievable* tense. It seems to deport what has always, from all time, already taken place toward the coming of the to-come” [*« L’imminence de ce qui s’est toujours déjà passé », voilà un temps incroyable. Il semble déporter vers le venir d’un à-venir ce qui a, depuis toujours, déjà eu lieu]*” (*Demeure*, 49/60) The tense is unbelievable because it encompasses two absolutely incompatible temporal modes. What has always already happened since time immemorial is by definition irretrievable and absolutely past, and yet, this past is experienced as repetition and return of the future; it refers to (“déporter vers”) the future as a future-to-come. As the imminence of the dawn, the immemorial yesterday gives rise to the future itself, but gives rise to it as already yesterday. Derrida talks about the “death that precedes me, that is ahead of me, before me—since yesterday. Always anterior, in its very futurity, like what remains to come” (*B*, 51). The death that precedes me, which is both “before me” and “behind me,” is an experience of infinite awaiting and infinite patience. This is why this anterior death is synonymous—by a strange, oneiric principle of analogy—with that which remains to-come. *L’à-venir* is the coming of that which cannot be expected but only awaited without term in infinite passivity.

In this reading of Donne’s poetry, Derrida re-inscribes all the markers of Heidegger’s being-toward-death. The notion of originary mourning appropriates and reverses this Heideggerian schema that determines death as the ownmost, non-relational possibility not to be bypassed, all the while providing a beautiful and melancholic

account of a death already come in an eternal yesterday, a melancholy that is delicately and tentatively intermingled with a kind of hope.

Chapter 2

2 Writing, Death, and Responsibility

In *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida explains the two senses of survival: “To survive in the usual sense means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death” (26). To *live* after death can mean to live in the wake of the deaths of others, whose memory and mourning we bear. But to live *after* death (Derrida underlines the “after”) is also to live in the wake of one’s own death, in the manner of death, as if death has already occurred. Now this latter sense of survival is precisely what philosophy, common sense, or good sense cannot think. And it is what poetry, literature, and writing have always already thought, the space in which writing has always found its element. Derrida writes, “each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, ‘proceeds’ from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing” (*LL*, 32-3). Blanchot likewise destines writing to the death: “To write is no longer to situate death in the future—the death which is always already past.” “This uncertain death, always anterior” is “the vestige of a past that never has been present” (*WD*, 66). To write or to leave a trace behind, then, is to cease to be, to undergo the experience of a “death which is always already past,” a past that was never present. By writing, we stand beyond the event of our death. From this impossible, posthumous perspective, we look back on and testify to death, as if we had been dead long ago. For Blanchot, the writer is someone who “died; lived and died” (*WD*, 36). The life of the writer is therefore one of lifedeath, of surviving beyond the event of death. Living posthumously “beyond the grave,” the writer, like Bartleby the scrivener, lives the impossible contradiction of being dead and alive at the same time. In what

follows, I will try to answer the question of how writing entails an experience of “my death” in relation to the work of Derrida. I supply two different answers to this question. The first comes from *Speech and Phenomena*, which traverses Derrida’s reading of Husserl’s theory of meaning. The second comes from a reading of selected passages in “Signature, Event, Context” and *Of Grammatology*. In this second answer, I suggest that the disappearance and death of the author that happens in writing is due to the originary corruption of attention and the erasure of self-presence—Derrida calls the essential *dérive* (“drift/derivation”)—which occurs *when* one writes and *because* one writes. Finally, I suggest the ways in which we might think about this experience of self-effacement in writing as an experience of responsibility.

2.1 Writing and Death in *Speech and Phenomena*

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida deduces the relation between “I am” and “I am dead.” As Derrida argues, the “I am” is not experienced except as “I am present.” And thus “I am” presupposes a relation to presence. But to say “I am present” also means “I am dead” or “I am mortal,” since a relationship with my death is the hidden, self-withdrawing origin of presence. By unpacking these movements below, I argue that the understanding of what Derrida means by *écriture* requires the reference to the experience of my death, an experience which moreover subtends what we call “living experience” in general.

Derrida points out that the founding principle of phenomenology is the value of presence as the form of intuition and the source of meaning and evidence. The form of the present as eternal or immortal is the *a priori* of my experience. This is the certitude

that the universal form of experience has always been and will always be in the present, before my birth and after my death, and thus this certitude presupposes the prior neutralisation of my birth and my death, that is to say, my mortality and my finitude. The immortality of the present can only be thought or determined on the basis that *it was* before my birth and *will still be* after my death. Therefore (and this is the paradox or aporia), the immortality of the present is constituted through a secret relation to my mortality. As Derrida writes, “The relationship with *my death* [*le rapport à ma mort*] (to my disappearance in general) thus lurks [*se cache*] in the determination of being as presence” (*SP*, 54/60). Mortality is the origin of immortality and this relation to my disappearance or my death is hidden ground of the determination of being as presence.

And because the syntagm “I am” partakes of this universal form of the present, to say “I am present” is also to say that “I am mortal.” Thus, hidden or dissimulated within the experience of auto-affection, in the relation of the “I to itself” in the “I am,” is an experience of “*my death*” or “my disappearance in general” (54). As Derrida puts it: “If the possibility of my disappearance in general must somehow [*d’une certain manière*] be experienced [*vécue*] in order for a relation with presence in general to be instituted...The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is thus originally a relation with its own possible disappearance” (*SP*, 54/60). Thus, the auto-affection or self-reference of the I to itself, that which is supposed to be self-identical in its living presence, is broken by an originary relation to its Other in the very moment of its constitution. Moreover, the determination of my being as a *res cogitans* and thus as immortality is the movement by which the condition for the constitution of presence, i.e., the relation to my disappearance and my death, conceals itself in the very presence and ideality that it institutes. Presence, the

movement by which “I am” is determined as immortal thinking substance (*res cogitans*), is thus shown to be derivative in relation to a more originary effacement or withdrawal of my disappearance or my death. Presence can therefore never be present *as such*, when it is shown to depend for its constitution upon a dissimulated mortality and finitude. Because an experience of my death simultaneously constitutes and divides the present, this relationship with my death also divides everything that can be thought on the basis of the present, that is to say, everything.

For the sake of our argument, we should underline Derrida’s declaration that this possibility of “my disappearance or my death” is lived or experienced, “*vécue*,” as the general structure which subtends the “I am,” with the proviso that this structural disappearance is lived “in a certain manner [*d’une certain manière*]” (*SP*, 54/60). First, my death is lived only “in a certain manner” because, as we know, physical death is not induced by the use of language. When Derrida says that “the *possibility* of my disappearance in general” must be lived in order for an experience of “I am” to be constituted, he means that “my death” or “my disappearance” is undergone *as* a virtuality or possibility. Second, as the self-effacing “origin” which makes the present possible, “my death” cannot be lived directly and in the mode of the present. Because this strange *vécu* is lived and effaced at once in the experience of presence, it can be “lived” only in the radical mode of the perhaps and only on the level of the unconscious.

Near the end of the final chapter of *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida expands the possibility of deducing the “I am mortal” from the “I am” to include the possibility of understanding “I am” from the “I am dead.” This logic derives from a reading of Husserl’s theory of meaning. For Husserl, in order for a meaning (*Bedeutung*) to be what

it is, to have “the ideal identity proper to all *Bedeutung*,” it needs to be able to signify even if it were detached from the object and subject of discourse (*SP*, 96). This possibility of *Bedeutung* to function in the absence of intuition is so integral that this absence or nonintuition is actually *brought about* in the enunciative situation itself. In Derrida’s example, when I say, “I see a particular person by the window” when I actually perceive him, this statement should be comprehensible both to someone who is standing next to me and to someone who is infinitely removed from me in time and space (*SP*, 93). But because this possibility of an enunciation to be understood in spite of the absence of the referent is constitutive of the possibility of speech, this absence of the object of intuition and the subject of the statement should “structure the very act of him who speaks while perceiving” (*SP*, 93). In other words, the absences of the object and of the subject of discourse are not only tolerated by meaning, but are “radically requisite,” that is, effectuated in and by the speech act itself (*SP*, 93). The death of the speaker and the object to which the speech refers precede the ideality of *Bedeutung* and make its plenitude possible. As Derrida writes, “My nonperception, my nonintuition, my *hic et nunc* absence are expressed by the very thing that I say, by *that* which I say and *because* I say it [par ce que je dis et parce que je dis]” (*SP*, 93/104). The speech situation is an opening in which the subject and object of discourse endlessly disappear. To use language is the process of becoming-blind and becoming-absent.

The same logic applies to the phrase “I am.” As Derrida writes, “Just as I need not perceive in order to understand a statement about perception, so there is no need to intuit the object *I* in order to understand the word *I*. The possibility of this nonintuition constitutes the *Bedeutung* as such, the *normal Bedeutung* as such” (*SP*, 96). In order for

the *Bedeutung* of “I” to function, there must be a relation to the nonintuition of the “I.” The fact of “I am dead” must precede any utterance of the I. Whenever the word “I” is spoken or written, the signifying act produces the occultation of “the object *I*” and thus obliterates the author of the utterance.

This logic of effacement is constitutive of writing. According to Derrida, writing is the common name of signs that function despite the “total absence of the subject,” that function by way (*par*) of his death and beyond (*par-delà*) his death (*SP*, 93). This is to say that a general elision of the subject of inscription is required for writing to be what it is and for it to function as writing. My disappearance is not only foretold and foreshadowed by my writing, but actively brought about by it; it is that to which my writing testifies. This is how the phrase “I live my death in writing” must be understood (*LL*, 33). Now, Derrida’s claim is that the extenuation of the subject at the hands of writing is also implicated in what we call live speech, and this is because when I say to myself “I am,” the iterability of this *Bedeutung* must be attended by the fact of my death. Recall that for Derrida, the ideality of the meaning of the “I” is constituted by the nonintuition of the I, that is, by my disappearance or my death. The phrase “I am,” insofar as it can be meaningful and iterable beyond its immediate context, implies the effacement of selfhood. Derrida writes,

When I tell myself “I am,” this expression, like any other according to Husserl, has the status of speech only if it is intelligible in the absence of its object, in the absence of intuitive presence—here, in the absence of myself... The statement “I am alive” is accompanied by my being dead, and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead...The anonymity

of the written I, the impropriety of *the I am writing*, is...the “normal situation.” (95-7)

The experience of “my being dead” is not only tolerated but required and brought about by the emission of “I am,” “I am alive,” or “my living present is” (*SP*, 96). To write is therefore to become expropriated from oneself, to witness and to testify to one’s own disappearance. The death and disappearance of the author that is produced within and by writing is, as Derrida claims, a situation always already at work in the normal situation of speech. The experience of the “I am dead,” as Derrida says, “is not an extraordinary tale by Poe but the ordinary story of language” (97).²⁵ The mutual imbrication of speech and writing occurs because every utterance, spoken or written, is accompanied and made possible by an “experience” of my death. And thus when Derrida writes, “My death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the I” (*SP*, 96), and that “it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life” (*LL*, 32), we can understand the structure of my life to be an experience of my death and the anonymity of writing.

2.2 The Originary Dérive of Spacing

The previous section dealt with how the experience of writing as an experience of death subtends the structure of experience in general and the normal situation of speech. This explication took place via a confrontation with Husserl’s theory of the sign. Now, by

²⁵ A quotation from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” is one of the epigraphs of *Speech and Phenomena*: “Yes; —no; —I have been sleeping—and now—now—*I am dead.*”

turning to other texts, I will show another interpretation of the way in which writing bears death and portends death.

In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida argues that in order for writing to be writing, it must continue to act and be readable in spite of the absence of the author. Derrida writes,

For the written to be the written, it must continue to “act” and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for [*ne répond plus*] what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning. (316/376)

As Derrida indicates above, the author in general “no longer answers for [*ne répond plus*] what he has written.” Levinas determines death as the “no-response [*sans-réponse*].”²⁶ This *sans-réponse* or death of the author is not so much an irresponsibility, the opposite of responsibility, but rather an un-responsibility beyond responsibility and irresponsibility as the economy of calculative justice, of guilt and retribution, debt and duty. Indeed, such un-responsibility is akin to the “absolute responsibility” Derrida develops in relation to the story of Abraham, who, in order to be responsible, must decline the temptation of the ethical which requires him to speak, to “say that which would explain everything” (*GD*, 62). This “absolute responsibility” as “irresponsibilization” is

²⁶Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 11.

a responsibility [that] keeps its secret, it cannot and need not present itself. Tyrannically, jealously, it refuses to present itself before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications, summonses to appear before the law of men. It declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification. (*GD*, 62)

In order to protect his singularity and his freedom, Abraham has to remain secret and to betray a general responsibility that asks for a manifest account before a public, before the “law of men.” And writing, as it puts the author to death of the *sans-réponse* and foils the demand for explanation and the openness of disclosure, is also a requisite condition for an absolute responsibility, which ensures that the delicate alterity of what is written is not dissolved in the generality of the same. The pyramidal silence and resolute secrecy of writing that betrays the general responsibility and the call for public explanation, the *sans-réponse* that is tantamount to an experience of death, is precisely that which leaves writing “outside the sphere of the violence by which [it] would be caught, grasped, snared, identified, reduced to sameness” (*WD*, 54).

There are two ways in which the author’s *sans-réponse* or death can be conceived. First, writing has an essential and structural tendency to “drift” from the signifying intention: “This essential drifting [*dérive essentielle*], due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the authority of the last analysis, writing orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is indeed what Plato condemned in the *Phaedrus*” (316). Writing is therefore an iterative machine, whose capacity to be read and re-written is not affected by the disappearance of the author. Writing is “orphaned” from its birth. There is thus a structural relation

between the inscription of the mark and the non-presence of the signifying intention, the *vouloir-dire*. But if the structural tendency of writing to become orphaned from its origin refers to the future disappearance of the author, it does not explain how writing produces an absent consciousness within the here-and-now situation of inscription itself. There is thus a second, more radical claim hidden in the passage above. It is not as if there was at first a signifying intention, which is in the second moment lost due to the fact that the writer is usually absent when one reads what he has written. Rather, there was never any fully present writing consciousness to begin with, since writing entails the *a priori* decay of the “wanting-to-say” or the *vouloir-dire*. As Derrida suggests, “in general he [the author] does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written ‘in his name’”(316). One thinks for example of the “automatic writing” which Barthes invokes in “The Death of the Author,” which proceeds by “entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of” (1467). In this type of writing, the hand functions all by itself independently of the author’s consciousness like an iterative machine, and therefore no fully present *vouloir-dire* is hidden behind the written text, to be unearthed by a hermeneutic effort. For Derrida, “automatic writing” is not just one type of writing among others, but the act of inscription par excellence. Therefore we can understand the “essential drifting” (*dérive essentielle*) not only as the structural way in which writing becomes orphaned from its author, but also as the originary drifting of the writing subject’s “intention or attention.” This originary loss or decay is what produces writing in the first place. Writing is that space in which the author dies and disappears, because a sort of inattentiveness and automaticity is part and parcel

with it. Granting that death in general is the *sans-réponse*, we understand why writing is related an absolute secrecy and also to a kind of death.

Why does writing necessitate or presuppose this originary drift of attention? Does not writing, in contrast, require the fully present consciousness of the author? Derrida seems to think otherwise. His point seems to be that even if the writer can be tracked down, conjured up from beyond the grave, and interrogated as to the meaning of what he has written, he would still be unable to answer for himself and be finally responsible. Writing is structurally cut off from “absolute responsibility,” because the one who writes drifts away from his own *vouloir-dire*, becomes infinitely absent while writing and because he is writing. In writing, there is a general becoming-absent of the subject, because thought requires originally an inwardness, the drifting of attention from the here-and-now of the living present. As Blanchot’s paratactic phrase will have it, “To think, to be effaced” (*WD*, 7). Because the writer does not respond, is un-responsible or *sans-réponse*, the one who writes is dead. In relation to this transcendental death that is essential to the making of any mark, empirical or organic death is a secondary and derivative phenomenon.

The essential drifting that produces at once the author and the written can be compared to what Blanchot calls inattention. Blanchot distinguishes between two kinds of inattention. The first type is a “disdainful insensitivity,” but there is a second,

more passive inattention which, beyond any interest or calculation, lets others be other, leaving them outside the sphere of the violence by which they would be caught, grasped, snared, identified, reduced to sameness.

This inattention is not the attitude of an I more attentive to self than to

others; it distracts me from myself and this distraction strips the “I,” exposes it to the passion of the utter passive, where, with eyes that are open but that look not, *I become infinite absence*. (WD, 53-4; emphasis added)

This passive inattention is similar to the originary *dérive* of “spacing as writing” (OG, 69). Writing “is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost,”²⁷ because the author, in contrast to what is commonly believed, is inattentive, carried away and borne away into the elsewhere of thought, cut off from all responsibility, even the responsibility for his own *vouloir-dire*. Writing or thought is an experience of distraction and *ekstasis* (“standing outside oneself”), a distraction that strips me from myself and sweeps me away. “Writing is the decay of the will, just as it is the loss of power” (WD, 11). Surely, this is the reason why writing is condemned by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. As Derrida writes, “The incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song” (“Plato’s Pharmacy,” 1833). Writing is an activity that distances the self from itself. This movement of *ekstasis*, expropriation, and absolute exit from the self, is how we must understand the *dérive* that is essential to writing. What Blanchot describes here as passive inattention, the “infinite absence” of “eyes that are open but look not,” is the indifference of the writing subject, an indifference that is tantamount to a kind of living death. And yet, as Blanchot stresses,

²⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 1466.

this inattention is not a solipsism which “an attitude of an I more attentive to self than to others”; rather, the infinite absence of living dead author is the sole condition for “letting others be other.” Thus, this “decay of the will” that is part and parcel with writing is also the only hope for justice, when justice is understood according to Levinas as “the relation to others” (qtd. in *SM*, 26). In writing, the author disappears in order to address himself or herself to the other. The utter passivity of writing, the separation from the power of consciousness which writing occasions, is a situation of “the least power.” Blanchot asks, “Where is there the least power? In speech, or in writing? When I live, or when I die? Or again, when dying doesn’t let me die?” (*WD*, 12). The “least power” and the abdication of the sovereign will within writing as inattention is alone that which can let others be other.

Derrida’s assertion that the author “does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning,” goes against the common understanding, which sees writing as the absolute gathering of attention or intention. Derrida claims, in contrast, that drift of attention is essential and necessary in order for the written to be written. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes,

Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation [*dérive*] the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence. That becoming—or that drift/derivation—does not befall the subject which would choose it or would passively let itself be drawn along by it. As the subject’s relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity. On all levels of life’s organization, that is to say, of the

economy of death. All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent. (*OG*, 69)

To summarize Derrida's dense line of argument above, *dérive* is the movement that belongs to "spacing as writing." *Dérive* is therefore "the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject." This becoming, as the "subject's relationship with its own death," is the originary "constitution of subjectivity." Now, *dérive* means "drift," "going downhill," "abuse," "excess," and indeed, "injustice." Taking it in its primary meaning as "drift," the word bespeaks a certain passivity, the passivity of speech to which no intramundane metaphor is adequate. Because this *dérive*, the "abuse" and "excess" of spacing, "does not befall the subject," this radical passivity of *dérive* is a nonoriginary origin. The "becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject" is an originary drift of attention, the movement of becoming *enraptured* and *carried away*. Risking the occult, we could even say that the *dérive* of originary "spacing as writing" is an out of body experience. In this experience, the subject's own body, its most assured evidence of its living presence, becomes diaphanous, invisible both to itself and to others. We are reminded again of Blanchot's "destroyed men" of writing or the disaster who are "incapable of appearing, and invisible even when one sees them" (*WD*, 22). But this experience of losing or forgetting one's body is not exceptional or psychopathological, a fringe phenomenon that would finally do very little to dislodge the privilege of presence. Much more radically, this drifting of attention, the imprudent error and delusory fancy of an "out of body experience," *occurs always already in thought, in any minimal act of thought whatsoever*. To think is to be carried away from the here-and-

now, to drift away from oneself toward the other, any other, another place or another other. This essential drifting that strips the self from itself is why writing, always risking evil and the expropriation of a living death, is the only chance for justice as the relation to the other.

And if any minimal act of writing or of thought, as soon as it begins, entails expropriation and dispossession of the proper name and of the self-same [*le propre*], i.e., “the original absence of the subject of writing” and “the absence of the thing or the referent” (*OG*, 69), there would be no truth in general, no experience of truth and thus no experience of the proper as an experience of presence. The condition of possibility of thought and of truth—the form of which is the Living Present—is predicated on what we so calmly call error or *folly*, the letting-oneself-be-deceived of an “out of body” *spacing out*. This inattention of spacing is anterior to truth and thus at once founds and unfounds it. Spacing is movement of the “becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject,” because thought or writing requires this passive inattention and *dérive*. There would therefore also be no phenomenology of this *spacing (out)* since the subject of writing is infinitely absent or *absent-minded*, invisible and clandestine. The *OED* defines error as “the action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course, a roving, winding.” Ordinary erring is spacing as writing, a winding course or track that makes thought possible while also bearing it away, deceiving it and leading it into folly. Elsewhere, Derrida writes, “C’est la complicité ou la *duplicité* qui est fondamentale, la différence, et non l’authenticité vierge et mythique [It is complicity or *duplicity* that is fundamental, the difference, and not virgin and mythic authenticity” (*Cours*, 134; italics added). The origin of all (present) thought is a kind of duplicity, a process of letting

oneself be deceived. This duplicity of being carried away, insofar as it involves the effacement of the writing subject, testifies to that subject's own death. What metaphysics in general cannot think is the fact that "the subject's relation with its own death...is the constitution of subjectivity" (*OG*, 69). That the loss of self in thinking and writing, i.e., death, is paradoxically the origin of selfhood, presence, and truth, is a logic that remains exterior to metaphysics.

In this interpretation of *dérive* of spacing as the originary decay of attention, I have given an alternative account of why "the almost nothing of the unrepresentable" is the hidden ground of presence, experience, and truth. The technical and "clinical" definition of spacing as the becoming-space of time or becoming-time of space,²⁸ as the originary articulation or synthesis of time and space, clears spacing of its "occult" elements and its association with the loss of selfhood. But this traditional and orthodox account is unable to explain why "[s]pacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject." We can think spacing and becoming-absent together only by determining the movement of spacing or writing—*dérive*—as passive inattention, the spacing (out) that sets the writing subject adrift. As I sit here and type these words, the writing that comes to fill the page brings about my absence, because my oneiric absorption sidetracks me into the elsewhere of writing or of thought. This absent-mindedness or inattention literally defers the phenomenalisation of presence. In the inattention of spacing as writing, "I become infinite absence." By means of this drift/derivation, which liquidates "passage through the world" (*OG*, 154), writing as

²⁸ See, for example, Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism," 46, and Hägglund, *RA*, 2,

spacing (out) bears witness to and portends my death. By writing I sacrifice myself and commit suicide *avant la lettre*. As Foucault maintains, writing in our culture is “linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer” (1624). For Derrida, this “obliteration of the self” takes place through the essential drift of writing away from the producing consciousness and the drift of the producing consciousness from itself, the deathly un-responsibility or *sans-réponse* of the writing subject.

In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida argues that this disappearance of the subject that occurs in writing cannot be confined to the limited context of written communication. This drifting from one’s own *vouloir-dire* or consciousness, a death that occurs before death, is true of all experience in general, insofar as what we call experience is comprehended by the horizon of the mark. As Derrida writes, the disappearance or death of the subject of writing is “to be found in all language...and ultimately in the totality of ‘experience’... to the extent that it [i.e., experience] is not separated from the field of the mark, that is, the grid of erasure and of difference” (318). Derrida puts the word “experience” in quotation marks, because experience determined as the experience of essential drifting is no longer an experience proper, an experience of presence or of phenomenality. Such diminution or extenuation of experience, an experience of becoming-blind, can only be an “unexperienced experience” that happens to no one and therefore not an experience. Blanchot writes, “The fact of disappearing is, precisely, not a fact, not an event; it does not happen, not only because there is no ‘I’ to

undergo the experience, but because, since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it” (*WD*, 28).

In my discussion of *Speech and Phenomena* above, I have explained why graphemes have a testamentary status, why they testify to my death by dint of their survival and their independent, machinic iteration beyond the immediate, living context of inscription (*OG*, 69). My reading of “Signature, Event, Context” and *Of Grammatology* provides another interpretation of the relationship between writing and death. “Spacing as writing” is the originary forgetting of presence (*dérive*), which, bringing about my *hic et nunc* absence, would also testify to my ultimate disappearance: death. Discomfited by this rem(a)inder of the subject’s radical disappearance, philosophy from Plato to Husserl has always sought to reduce writing and the sign by exiling it to the outside, as *derivative* in relation to the full presence of live speech: “if this movement [of the reduction or “resumption” of the trace] begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics” (*OG*, 71). What Derrida teaches us, as does Blanchot, is that the experience of being carried away or borne away, this somnambulism which we see so well in the few existing photos of Blanchot, is an irreducible dimension of thought and of writing. Moreover, this experience of dying has to be borne with an infinite patience, because only the oneiric opening of “infinite absence” and inattention can let others be other.

Chapter 3

3 *Mourir Vivant* and the Opening toward the Other

Jacques Derrida's last seminars, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, "are a work of great genius, comparable, in their strange combination of repetitive abstraction and a kind of eerie ethereal passion, to Wallace Stevens's late poems or to Beethoven's late quartets" (64). Miller compares their structure to a work of free jazz, which returns to and repeats its dominant motifs while altering them ever so slightly. But the last of the late seminars that we will consider in this chapter, *The Beast and the Sovereign, II*,²⁹ is also dream-like; its themes and topics are called up by free association. There is a lot of "like" in this seminar—*this is like that*—which marks out a certain way of proceeding, a certain *methodos* that moves by the logic of metaphor or metonymy. And this is what gives the seminar a kind of flatness or horizontality, which spreads out before us like a static dream-text. But despite the immense resistance such a repetitive and horizontal style poses to summary, the notion of survival,³⁰ the experience of "dying alive" or "mourir vivant," introduced during the climax of the fifth and sixth sessions, as well as a long discussion on Heideggerian *Walten*, stand out as major signposts. As I will show below, it is in this experience of the *mourir vivant* that Derrida locates the possibility of transgressing the limit between the beast and the sovereign, and of hindering the super-

²⁹ Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*. In-text citations abbreviated as *B*.

³⁰ I use the terms "survival," "survivance," and "living death" interchangeably. This assumption that these terms are synonymous is warranted by Derrida's text. This logic of "like" is also operative here. Survivance is like "living death," but one can invent another explanation: to desert one's life and to die before being dead is to survive one's own death. Survivance is a death without death and life without life, neither death nor life, and dead and alive at the same time.

sovereignty of Heideggerian *Walten*, a word, which, appearing at decisive moments in the account of the origin of ontological difference, is heretofore unremarked by existing Heideggerian scholarship. The juxtaposition of survivance and *Walten* will allow us to grasp the theoretical stakes in Derrida's formulation of *mourir vivant*.

3.1 The Organizing Fantasy of Robinson Crusoe

If there is one thread that should guide our reading of Derrida's seminar, it is this figure of "living death" or "mourir vivant." In these lectures, delivered at the *l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in 2002-2003, Derrida collects a number of examples of this experience of dying a living death, all of which come from literary fiction or fantastic narrative. In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist who is shipwrecked and abandoned to a solitary existence on a deserted island becomes obsessed by the possibility of being "bury'd alive" or "swallow'd alive" by the earth or the sea or some living creature. This obsession is, as Derrida underscores, Robinson Crusoe's "organizing fantasy" and "fundamental fear" (*B*, 117, 77). The experience of living death can also be understood as see[ing] oneself surviving, present at one's death...in all the signs, traces images, memories, even the body, the corpse or the ashes...that we leave behind," or, more concretely, as the imagination of "that horrible thing that consists in waking up inside a sealed coffin, a closed grave, a sealed tomb, and having to cry out in the impotence of suffocation in order to call on the other for help. (*B*, 164)

But dying a living death is not only a psychopathological condition that arises as the result of trauma or a perverse exercise of the imagination. Departing for a moment from the letter of Derrida's seminar, we can affirm that dying a living death is a reality

for the animals in the slaughterhouses, for victims of cerebral trauma and depersonalization,³¹ or for prisoners undergoing solitary confinement.³² It is moreover exemplified by *der Muselmann* of the concentration camps and aboriginal tribes in the wake of total cultural devastation.³³ In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben cites the testimony of a camp survivor: “I remember that while we were going down the stairs leading to the baths, they had us accompanied by a group of *Muselmänner*, as we later called them—mummy-men, *the living dead*” (41, emphasis added). An objection might be raised that the *Muselmann*, “who had long since lost any real will to survive,” is a counterintuitive choice for representing what Derrida calls survivance (Agamben 45), for if the *Muselmann* is “defined by a loss of all will and consciousness,” it does not sit well

³¹ In her book *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, Catherine Malabou points to the patients suffering irreversible brain lesions as the figures of a beyond of the pleasure principle. Freud’s failure to imagine a beyond of the pleasure principle results from his inability to supply material figures that embody the death drive. As Malabou puts it, the totally disaffected and indifferent subjects of brain lesions are “figures of the death drive...less figures of those who will die than those who are already dead; or rather...those who *have already been dead*, who ‘have lived death’...Those who have come back—as in the Orpheus myth that we evoked—are those people who, in the very form of their psyches, present us with an image of the place they have come from [i.e., death], an image that does nothing but prolong their death in the past” (201). What Malabou calls “survival without sublation” resonates powerfully with Derrida’s notion of survivance (213). But instead of limiting this phenomenon to victims of brain damage, in whom Malabou sees the chilling embodiment of the death drive, Derrida says that, in a certain sense, we are all potentially “the new wounded,” if not always already. Despite its speculative extravagance, this claim is not too far off from Malabou’s identification of a “destructive plasticity [that] reveals the possibility, inscribed within each human being, of becoming someone else at any moment,” that is, of undergoing the trauma of death and return (200). “It is not only my death that is possible at each instant, as Heidegger says, but also the destructive transformation of the ego” (200). To identify and properly *think* the living death of the new wounded and a negative, destructive plasticity is the task Malabou assigns to contemporary psychoanalysis and neurology: “The figural improvisation (i.e., the creation of a new, disaffected subject in the wake of trauma) that emerges within the experience of death is the phenomenon that neurology must adopt as its defining question without occulting it through confident insistence upon reparative plasticity” (201). The argument of my thesis, that the capacity to think the living dead will help us unlock some of Derrida’s key concepts and to understand what is at stake in Derrida’s ethics, is not altogether dissimilar.

³² For the discussion of Lisa Guenther’s book *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, see below, Section 3.3.

³³ The living death of the aboriginal crow tribe was admirably described in Jonathan Lear’s book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.

with the definition of survival as “the most intense life possible” (Agamben 45; *LL*, 52). To this potential objection, I will reply that the “most intense life possible” is one of the layers of survivance, the outermost. But the constitution of this layer depends on subterranean strata in which the distinction between life and death is decidedly more obscure. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the writer is someone who is already dead. It would not be unfruitful to try and think the living death of the author in relation to instantiations of living death elsewhere. Preliminarily, this chapter will argue that survivance or living-death, considered as the quasi-transcendental and hidden ground of experience in general, is a temporal disjointure which alone is able to do justice and to render justice to the other. If, as Primo Levi says, the “faceless presence” of the *Muselmann* condenses “all the evil of our time in one image” (qtd. in Agamben, 44), the possibility of justice requires the opening toward and the willingness to undergo—in a certain manner—the experience of self-expropriation and self-effacement of *mourir vivant* in the first place. This is because only the psychical and virtual (Derrida calls this the “phantasmatic”) experience of living death is able to unveil the *a priori* moral wrong of the violence of inflicting this living death upon others.

While recognizing that this thought of surviving one’s own death has neither inductive nor deductive validity, Derrida seeks to bring out the way this phantasm is at work, “affects us,” especially in the process of deciding between inhumation and cremation. At the beginning of session six, Derrida writes, “What I called the ‘phantasm’ in this context is indeed the inconceivable, the contradictory, the unthinkable, the impossible. But I insisted on the zone in which the impossible is named, desired, apprehended. Where it affects us” (148). The phantasm of the living dead “affects us”

because the affective, bodily, or emotional dimension of this experience, the profound anxiety, panic, terror and pain, is inextricable from the cognitive appraisal of “I am dead,” that is to say, of being dead and alive at the same time. And even though this phantasm of “I am dead” is not and cannot be *materially real*, Derrida indicates that it is nonetheless operative, that is, *psychically real*, in the “zone” of funereal convention that remains all too conventional and undemocratic. According to Derrida, the two choices available in modern western society, burial or cremation, have the express aim to repress and exorcise this phantasm of the living dead, to ensure that the dead is really dead, “dead dead and not living dead,” or, in other words, that the death has been proper, in all the senses of the term (145).³⁴ And yet, the rigorous confinement of choice to these two possibilities betrays the irreducible power of this phantasm to rankle the unconscious. Derrida asks “whether, at bottom, behind or in the unconscious of funerary culture...the savagery of the unconscious does not continue to operate with the cruelty that Robinson seems to fear when he is afraid of dying a living death like a beast” (145).

A major point of contestation of Derrida’s reading of Heidegger turns on the question of the animal. The Heideggerian demarcation of the animal and human rests on the capacity to accede to death as such. Heidegger writes, “[t]he mortals are human beings. They are called mortal because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes.”³⁵ To be capable of death *as* death means one can anticipate it in the mode of the “being toward death” or recall the death of the other in mourning. In contrast, as a living being, the animal surely dies, but its mode of

³⁴ “*Le propre* – self-possession, propriety, property, cleanliness” (OG, 26).

³⁵ Heidegger, Martin. “The Thing.” P. 171

dying is only a perishing, insofar as it has no understanding of death “as such.” Derrida’s assertion, however, is that perhaps human beings do not have access to an authentic death either, to death as such separated from life as such. He writes, “Life and death as such are not separable as such. Whence Robinson’s great organizing fantasy (terror a desire): to be ‘swallow’d up alive’ or ‘bury’d alive.’ He [i.e., Robinson] knows that one dies a living death anyway” (*B*, 117). There is no possibility of dying any other way, because all our thoughts of death are originarily thoughts of survival. We can represent our death to ourselves only as if we were still alive and present after death, “at our funeral.” Derrida writes,

our thoughts of our death are always, structurally, thoughts of survival. To see oneself or to think oneself dead is to see oneself surviving, present at one’s death, present or represented *in absentia* at one’s death...All of which is banal and well known: one can go on about it endlessly. (*B*, 117)

This impossibility to represent one’s death as such and in itself is so self-evident that it seems hardly worth pausing over. But this inability is important, since it is only within this necessary horizon of living death or survival, in which human beings are deprived of an authentic death, that the Heideggerian distinction between animality and humanity based on the capacity for death falters. Indeed, as Derrida says, the question is not whether or not animals can die, but rather whether or not they can suffer.³⁶ This capacity for suffering is not a power, not an activity, like the power of speech or *logos* used by

³⁶ “as I said here quite insistently not long ago, Bentham always seemed to me to be on the right track in saying—in opposition to this powerful tradition that restricts itself to power and non-power—that the question is not, “can the animal do this or that, speak, reason, die, etc.?” but “can the animal suffer?” is it vulnerable? And in the case of vulnerable suffering, of *pashkein*, of patience, passion and passivity, or the affectivity of suffering, power is a non-power” (*B*, 244).

classical philosophy to mount the barrier between animality and humanity. As we will see below, it is only in the infinite suffering or passivity of living death—which Blanchot calls *subissement*³⁷—that the distinction between the animal and the human becomes out of focus.

The maintenance of the animal/human divide has been the cornerstone of philosophy from Descartes to Lacan. In the closure marked out by this limit, Derrida has chosen Heidegger and Defoe as the prime examples. In the previous chapters, we have discussed the anterior disaster of my death that subtends Derrida’s quasi-concepts of trace, *différance*, and writing. This “unexperienced experience” of my death is akin to the specter of the living dead that Derrida evokes in this last seminar. Thus, we can see the remarkable endurance of this phantasm of living death in Derrida’s career. It is a kind of *clef de voûte*, present not only in the early readings of philosophical texts, but forms a major pillar in the later attempt to displace the animal and human binary as well. In what follows, I develop the idea *mourir vivant* such as it appears in Derrida’s seminar, while also supplying examples from other writers. In this development, I demonstrate that the phantasm of *mourir vivant* is a key moment in the articulation of Derrida’s ethics of the other. And finally, I show the ways in which the “quasi-transcendentality” of survivance or *mourir vivant* arrests the super-sovereignty of Heideggerian *Walten*.

³⁷ See *The Writing of the Disaster*, 15: “Passivity, the contrary of activity: such is the ever-restricted field of our reflections. We might coin a word for the absolute passiveness of total abjection – le *subissement*” (15).

3.2 Survivance and Immortality: Derrida and Blanchot

To think the living dead, that is, “die a living death, or die in one's life time,” as Derrida puts it, requires courage. This is the courage not to be intimidated by formal and logical contradictions. As an example of this intrepidity of thought, Derrida cites Freud's theory of the drive or the phantasm. It is Freud's claim that instinctual impulses (*Triebregungen*)—“highly organized, free from contradiction”—belong to the system Cs, even as they are at the same time “unconscious and are incapable of becoming conscious” (150). Derrida notes Freud's “abyssal audacity” in drawing this distinction between the factual and the qualitative (151). The instinctual drives belong *factually* to the unconscious but are *qualitatively* conscious. This distinction is “quite unintelligible, impossible even, it even seems to have no sense, it appears to defy sense and good sense” (151). Indeed, these remarks would also apply to the imagination of the living death, of dying in one's lifetime, an idea that is on the surface so laughable, because it contradicts the “sense” and the “good sense” of the first principle of philosophy, that of non-contradiction. But in thinking the living dead, in inciting courage in his students to “defy sense and good sense,” Derrida follows in the footsteps of Freud and Heidegger, whose styles are analogous at least in this one point, the conviction “not to be discouraged by formal contradictions that scare good sense” (152). It is no longer clear whether Derrida is summarizing the Heideggerian/Freudian point of view or if he is expressing his own when he says, “Thought must have courage to enter into them, into these circles, to dive into them rather than fleeing and avoiding them,” especially “if we want to continue to dare to think what ‘phantasm’ seems to mean, and *die a living death, or die in one's life-time*” (151-2).

The experience of the living present, of life as separated from death, far from being ordinary, is the result of the tracing—simultaneous tracing and effacing—of this primal phantasy of the living dead. For Derrida, it is necessary to think this phantasy, because it is the only confirmation of finitude. We see here knotting up the double-bind of survival. It is by “living of death” that we can testify to the finitude of life. Without this phantasm of dying alive, there can be no understanding of life as *sursis*, as reprieve. For Derrida, it seems insufficient simply to state the finitude of life as brutal factum. Rather, to accede to the embodied knowledge that “I am mortal,” it is necessary to go beyond the finite time of life, and to think “the inconceivable, the contradictory, the unthinkable, the impossible” of the syntagm of the “I am dead.” As I will show more clearly below in relation to Blanchot, to be dead without death and to be alive without life, is at once the experience of immortality. This experience of “immortality *as death*” is not identical with the belief in the Platonic or Christian eternal beyond; it is rather the certain knowledge that life is finite (*Demeure*, 69). The certitude of death remains a kind of inexplicit and abstract, or, to use Heideggerian terminology, an inauthentic and fallen understanding, so long as it does not pass through the phantasmatic experience of “immortality *as death*.” And thus we reach another point of our contention with Hägglund, for whom there is a “central distinction...between survival (a temporal process of living on) and immortality (an eternal state of being)” (184). From my exposition of Derrida’s perspective, survival, mortality, and finitude can be attested only by undergoing a contradictory immortality, the immortality of the instant of my death. This circling movement between immortality and mortality, of infinitude and finitude, is why Derrida states so pointedly in *Of Grammatology* that deconstruction is also “something other than

finitude” (68). The possibility of becoming mortal depends on one condition alone, the phantasmatic experience of “the living death that scared Robinson Crusoe so much, that state in which the dead man is alive enough to see himself die and know that he is dying, to live his own death, to last, perdure, and endure the time of his death, to be present at his death and beyond, without however failing to die, to survive his death while really dying, to survive his death” (*B*, 148).

This is the argument encapsulated in Derrida’s reading of Blanchot’s “The Instant of My Death,” *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Blanchot’s text is a short, quasi-autobiographical account of a young man who had narrowly escaped death at the hands of Nazi officers. Right before the moment when the execution was about to be carried out, the young man, “at whom the Germans were already aiming...experienced then a “feeling of extraordinary lightness...He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead—immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Rather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal” (5).

In *Demeure*, Derrida analyses at length this strange syntagm “Dead—immortal,” which “sums up everything in a single stroke” (67). In it, there is a kind of word play which the English translation elides. The French version reads, “*Mort—immortel*.” It is not only the hyphen that acts as a sign of equivalence; since the word *mort* is contained in the word *immortel*, their apposition signals their parallelism: death *is* immortality. As Derrida explains,

dead *and yet* immortal, dead *because* immortal, dead *insofar as* immortal (an immortal does not live), immortal *from the moment that* and *insofar as* dead, *although* and *for as long as* dead; for once dead one no longer dies

and, according to all possible modes, one has become immortal, thus accustoming oneself to—nothing...Consequently, only someone who is dead is immortal—in other words, the immortals are dead. (67)

Insofar as it can be imagined, the psychical experience of death can only be one of immortality. The instant of “immortality *as death*” is an “unexperienced experience (*expérience inédite*)” (67/87), which can only be spoken about in the modality of a virtual “perhaps.”³⁸ Derrida writes,

it is in death that immortality yields to an ‘unexperienced experience;’ in the instant of death, when death arrives, where one is *not yet dead* in order to be *already dead*, at the same instant. (67-8)

The instant in which the “already” and the “not yet” of death become identical no longer belongs to the present, and hence the ecstasy of which Blanchot speaks (5), “an ecstatic wrenching from common temporal existence” (*Demeure*, 68). Blanchot writes,

dying is the passivity of life—of life escaped from itself and confounded with the disaster of a time without present which we endure by waiting, by awaiting a misfortune which is not still to come, but which has always already come upon us and which cannot be present. In this sense, the future and the past come to the same, since both are without present.

Only the disaster of dying can provide an opening to a time *other* than the present, a past which “has always already come upon us” and a future which we can only await without knowing if the misfortune that it dissimulates is yet to come. As Blanchot says, the

³⁸ “I underline the ‘perhaps,’ the modality of his [i.e., Blanchot’s] entire discourse” (*Demeure*, 68).

movement of dying “confounds” the “common temporal experience” with the “disaster of a time without present.” This “confounding” of two heterogeneous temporalities (the present vs. absolute past or absolute future) constitutes the procedure of deconstruction, which introduces a “confusion,” as Derrida says, between “the investiture of a presence...without loss” and “absolute loss, death” (“Différance,” 19). It is only through the “scientific relating” of the time of the present with a time of the disaster, in which my death is the “always already” and the “never yet,” can the privilege of presence be “displaced and reinscribed” (ibid.).

In the “unexperienced experience” of “dying without death [*mourir sans mort*]” (89, trans. mod.), death is the “always already” and the “never yet,” absolute past and absolute future, because if I am already dead, I am also infinitely distanced from death. As Derrida explains, “I am immortal because I am dead: death can no longer happen to me. It is prohibited” (68). This experience is contiguous with the nightmarish terror of “waking up inside a sealed coffin,” a feeling of pure impotence and passivity, the disaster of dying which is never over. In the instant, death flips uncannily from the possibility of impossibility to the impossibility of the possibility of dying. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot quotes Bonaventura without commentary: “I saw myself alone with myself in Nothingness...Along with Time, all diversity had disappeared, and there reigned only an immense and terrifying lassitude, forever vacant. Beside myself, separated, I tried to annihilate myself, but I remained, and felt myself to be immortal” (32). No doubt, what Bonaventura describes (dreams?) here is encapsulated with admirable density in Blanchot’s syntagm, “*mort—immortel*.” Bonaventura says, “I tried to annihilate myself, but I *remained*.” In this remaining after death, death becomes an

impossibility.³⁹ This remaining, this vigilance and this wake, the absence of time understood as the common temporal existence, is akin to what Derrida calls abidance (*demeurance*).

Derrida carefully teases this experience of immortality (Bonaventura's and Blanchot's) from the "Platonic or Christian immortality...when the soul gathers together as it leaves the body" (67). This "immortality *as death*," a "dying without death," does not "signify eternity. The immortality of death is anything save the eternity of the present. The abidance [*demeurance*]...does not remain [*reste*] like the permanence of an eternity" (69). The key difference between Blanchot's immortality as death and Christian immortality is the absolute impossibility of resurrection and redemption, and thus the unexperienced experience paradoxically yields the insight into the finitude of suffering humanity. Undergoing such an experience in the instant of my death, the young man feels not terror but ecstasy, or "rather...the happiness of not being immortal or eternal."

We can relate this ecstatic joy in the instant of my death to another scene, the primal scene that Blanchot describes in *The Writing of the Disaster*. There, a child looks through a window-pane at his "play space," grows weary and looks up at the "ordinary sky," "pallid daylight without depth." But in that moment, the sky suddenly opens,

³⁹ As Blanchot maintains, self-annihilation or suicide has a tragically aporetic structure, since the ultimate assertion of one's sovereignty that appropriates the power over death only results in the infinite passivity of the impossibility of death. Blanchot writes, "he who has been all the way to the end of the desire of death, invoking his right to death and exerting over himself a power of death, he who opens, as Heidegger said, *the possibility of impossibility*—or again, he who believes himself to be master of un-mastery—lets himself get caught in a sort of trap and halts eternally at the point where, ceasing to be a subject, losing his stubborn liberty, and becoming other than himself, he comes up against death as that which doesn't happen or as that which reverse itself—reverses the possibility of impossibility into *the impossibility of every possibility*" (*WD*, 70).

absolutely black and absolute empty, revealing...an absence” in which is “affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears...He will henceforth live in the secret. (72)

The vertiginous nothingness that presences as the “what there is” in the “primal scene” confirms that there is “nothing beyond.” The “ravaging joy” of the child is no doubt the same as the ecstasy that submerges the young man, who, having become for an instant “dead—immortal,” lives from that point on in the secret knowledge of finitude, a knowledge that can only be welcomed by the ravaging happiness or the tears of compassion. This nothingness of immortality (“accustoming oneself to—nothing”) does not signify eternity of the present. It is rather the “confirmation of solitude” (90). Derrida writes, “This non-philosophical and non-religious experience of immortality *as death* gives [*donne*] without rupturing solitude, in the ecstasy itself: it gives compassion with all the mortals, with all suffering humans, and the happiness, this time, of being not immortal nor eternal” (69). The experience of immortality *as death* “gives”; it is a gift of death. As such, the experience of immortality as death is a “quasi-transcendentality” that gives life and being, but one that is irreducibly finite.

It must be noticed that for Blanchot, as well as for Derrida, the “non-philosophical and non-religious experience of “immortality *as death*” is not a solipsistic indulgence, but rather forms the basis of a social bond itself, a bond without bond. The compassion that the young man feels at the moment of his death is a “compassion for all suffering

humanity.” This compassion, Derrida writes, is “a bond without bond [*un lien sans lien*], the disjoining, the disadjusting of a social bond that binds only, in truth, to death and on condition of death: on condition of mortal being” (69). Indeed, if there is any social bond to be had in the experience of my death, it is necessarily a bond without bond, since this experience is one of radical solitude that deprives the presence of the other (“I saw myself alone with myself in Nothingness”). Hence, this experience is the “disjoining [*désajointement*]” and “disadjusting [*désajustement*]” of the social bond itself. It links only by breaking, and it links each individual not to each other but to death. If the experience of my death gives “compassion for all mortals,” it gives “without rupturing solitude” (69). The paradox of the formulation of a “bond without bond” consists in the maintaining together of self and other by destroying their connection. For if the other can be assimilated within the element of the same, the other would lose its alterity. On the other hand, if there were absolutely no bond between self and other, only a solipsistic self would remain. In order to retain both self and other, singularity and alterity, there must be a disjointed bond of “friendship” that “binds” only in terms of the radical solitude in “the instant of my death.” The instant of my death, insofar as it is an instant of radical solitude in which *Die Welt ist fort*, is at once the condition for entering into the singularity and alterity of others.

3.3 Survivance and Becoming-Corpse: Derrida and Coetzee

There is no doubt that the living death that Derrida narrates requires a certain leap of the imagination and the courage to dismantle psychic resistances. This spirit is one at which the poets are more adept than the philosophers. As Derrida points out in the tenth

session, “*Die Welt ist fort,*” the world is gone, is a “truth” which the “poets, more than ever...are more touched by” (260). It is here that I would like to cite an important moment from J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*. Derrida mentions Coetzee in his lectures, but he never discusses any of his works at length.⁴⁰ There is a point at which the works of Coetzee and Derrida dovetail precisely, insofar as both emerge out of a certain shock and astonishment—ethical feelings, to be sure—by the violence and injustice of the modern practice of condemning animals to a living death. The passage that I would like to cite at some length from *Elizabeth Costello* serves to illustrate—if this is indeed the right word for such a nocturnal mystery—the experience or phantasm of *mourir vivant*.

In the course of a public lecture, to refute Thomas Nagel’s argument that it is impossible for a human being to access the inner world of a bat, Elizabeth Costello states that it is possible for her to think or imagine what it might be like to be a corpse. And if the power of the imagination does not encounter its limit in the radical alterity of a lifeless thing, so Costello questions, why is it unreasonable to assume that it is impossible to inhabit the point of view of a bat? This description below of what we shall nickname “becoming-corpse” resonates with a certain organizing theme that we find everywhere at work in Derrida’s seminar:

'For instants at a time,' his mother is saying, 'I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it.'

⁴⁰ “I recommend that you read at least two or three magnificent novels by J. M. Coetzee...because Coetzee bears in his thoughts and his *oeuvre* the grave concern of the animal” (46).

'All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract—"All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal"—but embodied. For a moment we are that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can.

'When I know, with this knowledge, that I am going to die, what is it, in Nagel's terms, that I know? Do I know what it is like for me to be a corpse or do I know 'what it is like for a corpse to be a corpse'? The distinction seems to me trivial. What I know is what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and will never know anything anymore. For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.'

[...]

That is the kind of thought we are capable of, we human beings, that and even more, if we press ourselves or are pressed. But we resist being pressed, and rarely press ourselves; we think our way into death only when we are rammed into the face of it. Now I ask: if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat? (77)

Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" argues that insofar as an organism has conscious experience, "there is something it is like to be that organism" (436). He calls this "the subjective character of experience" (436). Nagel does not deny that animals, or at least ones higher up on the "phylogenetic tree," have consciousness

(438). However, the human mind encounters a limit when it tries to extrapolate the inner life of the bat. Insofar as I can imagine what it might be like to be a bat, “fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth...perceive the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals” (439), what I conjure up is nonetheless what it is like for *me* to be a bat, and not what it is for the bat to be a bat. In other words, there is no way to reduce the perspective of the “I,” the subjective stratum that Heidegger calls Dasein’s *Jemeinigkeit*, an ever-mine-ness, in any attempt to inhabit an alien subjectivity. This subjective dimension cancels the veracity of the attempt to represent alterity. Nagel, therefore, would challenge Costello’s experience on the basis that it is “what it is like for her to be a corpse” and not “what it is like for a corpse to be a corpse.” Costello, however, deems the distinction trivial, since a corpse is extinct and cannot know anything anymore. Her point is that there is truth to her embodied experience; she in fact “dies” for an instant. These instants of my death in which the reality of a corpse unfolds is “repelling.” (“This knowledge repels me.”) Instead of drawing all thoughts into itself as would a black-hole, this thought of the corpse inherently repels thought. It is unthinkable or inconceivable, at least on the level of philosophical discourse. But this inconceivability of “what it is like to be a corpse” is not a natural limit of the imagination, but rather the product of repression. In the normal situation, we refuse to “press ourselves,” to “think our way into death,” because to “live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can,” is the terrifying and “embodied knowledge” of mortality. To be “alive in the contradiction,” to be “dead and alive at the same time,” is the instant when the knowledge of mortality is finally driven home in a concrete, embodied way.

And it is this suffering of being “dead and alive at the same time” that philosophical discourse, such as that of Nagel, cannot think, because the form of this experience cannot be in the time of the present. Blanchot writes, “There is suffering, there would be suffering, but no longer any ‘I’ suffering, and this suffering does not make itself known in the present; it is not borne into the present” (*WD*, 15). The experience of becoming-corpse can never be in the present, first because it violates the law of non-contradiction, and second, since it is realized only for instants at a time, does not merit the dignity of philosophical truth that pretends to super-temporal universality. Philosophical discourse declares in general that death is unknowable. Coetzee seems to suggest that death can be known, but it cannot be known by the dead; the dead is extinct and cannot know anything. It can, however, be known by the living, for “instants at a time,” granted that we are willing to press ourselves. What philosophy affirms as an apodictic truth, that the mind encounters an epistemological limit with death, is the mediated result of a repression. Death or becoming-corpse is a *permanently denied knowledge*. Philosophy recoils from the experience of becoming-corpse; its refusal to entertain that experience betrays an attempt its anxiety over the necessity of finitude. Becoming-corpse, then, is another species of that “almost nothing of the unrepresentable” which we have cited at the beginning, which gives rise to the constituting desire of philosophy but is also that which philosophy cannot think.

In the words of Coetzee’s protagonist, this instant “before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic,” when “I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time,” is no doubt similar to the Blanchottian “instant of my death.” And it is worth remarking that for Costello, this experience of becoming-corpse also serves as a

ground for the access to alterity. She says, “if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?” Indeed, the removal of psychical resistances that allows for an experience of becoming-corpse names the very *capacity for suffering* that is requisite for the ethical encounter with the other. This oneiric access to alterity is granted only by the radically passive “act” of opening oneself up, and by attacking one’s autoimmune defenses that protect the psyche from profound pain. (Costello: “The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it.”) This opening up to the other is not given *a priori*, as it is in Heideggerian *Mitsein*, but only occurs after a certain descent into the unconscious, like the Orphic descent into the underworld. It can only be performed by occupying the bifurcated contradiction of the drive, which, as Freud says, belongs qualitatively to the system *Cs* and factually to the *Ucs*. In other words, the “factual” impossibility of the phantasm of “living death” can, for “instants at a time,” be enacted “qualitatively,” granted that one is willing to press oneself and let oneself be pressed. The extra push that allows one to think into death is the same as the effort required for thinking any otherness whatsoever, be it a human other, an animal other, or a totally “worldless” other of the thing: e.g., a corpse.

Transposition into the place of another does not belong in the average and everyday mode of the understanding. This relation to the other, be it another human, animal, or thing, can be established only through an oneiric opening, a poetic making of the “as if.” But the possibility of this opening to the other does not reduce the radical alterity of the other. Costello’s alleged ability to think into the life of a bat is not an anthropomorphism, because it does not efface the recognition that the reality of the bat is

radically alien mode of being, comparable to the alterity of a corpse. Otherwise the “pressing ourselves or be pressed” would not be needed. The representation that breaks the surface of the Same accomplishes in a sense the impossible, and the tremendous effort this requires serves only to amplify the otherness of the other. A writerly or poetic imagination is required for the “bond without bond” with the other to be established. This disjointed or disadjusted bond can be established only through a sharing of finitude that does not “rupture solitude.” Borrowing a term from Montaigne, Derrida affirms that animals and humans are “commourans,” co-diers (*B*, 263). It is only on the basis of our common finitude in dying alive like a beast that the boundary between the beast and the sovereign can be displaced. On one hand, the experience of the living death, insofar as it deprives man of access to a proper death (to die a living death is to die like a beast) undoes the distinction between animals and humans. On the other hand, the putting under erasure of this distinction that has determined philosophical conceptuality for millennia does not reduce the singularity of each living being, insofar as the experience of living death remains an experience of the radical solitude without salvation. It is only the contradiction of a “death without death” that can satisfy the double demand of a “bond without bond.”

The passage from *Elizabeth Costello* implies that the access to the world of a radically different animal other can take place only through this experience of dying alive. For Costello, dying alive is the instant in which the distinction between animal and human is effaced. Derrida draws the same connection. When Robinson Crusoe is gripped by the phantasm of being buried alive, he is inspired to utter his first prayer. This prayer is an “irreligious prayer, a prayer before prayer, the precursory plaintive breath of a

distress call...it is a cry that is almost automatic, irrepressible, machinelike, mechanical, like a mainspring calling for help from the depths of panic and absolute terror” (*B*, 77-8). Undergoing the experience of living death, Crusoe is sunk into the “depths of panic and absolute terror,” and the plaintive, machinelike cry that he produces automatically erases the distinction between him and an animal. Becoming-corpse is also becoming-animal. For Derrida, this experience of the becoming-corpse, in all its profound terror and suffering, is that which alone shines a light onto the animal’s suffering. For in the animal slaughterhouses around the world, confined to spaces barely large enough to turn around, animals are condemned to a kind of living death, buried alive and swallowed alive. Without this access to one’s own living-death, the particular horror of the suffering of animals would remain *unenvisable*. Becoming-corpse allows one to understand the radical evil that imposes this living death upon animals. In that instant when one’s whole being collapses in panic, there can be no possible doubt that animals are also capable of suffering this profound pain. The panic call for help, a prayer uttered in darkness, conjoins the beast and the sovereign.

Far from suggesting that this living-death is the goal toward which living beings should aspire, the good or the “toward-which” that forms the *telos* of some ethical program, it is necessary to recognize the living-dead as the manifestation of radical evil which inspires an unconditional categorical imperative. *It is necessary* to remove this suffering wherever it occurs. However, the force of this ethical imperative cannot be felt without somehow passing through this phantasm, without allowing one’s psychic resistances—the ego’s indispensable defense mechanisms against profound pain—to be momentarily suspended. In the pages of this thesis which turn around this emotional and

affective experience of the living dead, I am not advocating for a generalization of this traumatic exercise, a mandatory period of solitary confinement for all members of society, for example. I have tried to indicate, rather, that a coming into grasp and contending with this “unexperienced experience” of living death defines the ethical task of our epoch. What is required is a having-it-out with death (an *Auseinandersetzung* or *s’expliquer avec la mort*), a rigorous contestation which can be accomplished only if one entered into death, became involved in it, if one suspended the automatic reflex of recoiling from it or being altogether insensible to it. It is my conviction that the ethical program of eliminating violence toward animals, which has energized the late work of Derrida and Coetzee, flows naturally and seamlessly from the virtual encounter with the phantasm of becoming-corpse, the erasure of one’s presence, and the solitude of an absolute and irrevocable separation from the world. Being buried alive is the specter that haunts our collective unconscious, an experience that is allowed to be reproduced in various places around the world, various living tombs in which one-lives-one-dies. What is required for any program of political change is the necessity to contend with this specter, to speak to it, allowing oneself to be haunted and gripped by it, instead of exorcising it or pretending that it does not exist. Conversely, the insensibility toward this specter, the inability to allow this specter to appear within the horizon of the Same or to emerge from the unconscious, is precisely why atrocities of this sort, of solitary confinement and the mass extermination of animals are allowed to continue.

In an online interview, Michael Naas responds to a question about what Derrida thinks about our relationship to death and to the dead. Like most commentators, Naas

veers away from the notion of “my death,” or a relationship with my own death.⁴¹ Naas says,

Instead of thinking about the subject’s relationship to his or her own death, Derrida is thinking instead about what becomes of one when one’s dead. In other words, instead of thinking of death as what is my own, he thinks of death in relationship to the hands into which I will be entrusted when I die.⁴²

Naas veers away from such an experience of living death—“of death as what is my own”—in order to fashion Derridean thought on death as one that is oriented entirely toward the dimension of alterity. Hearing Naas’s words, it becomes clear that he remains blind and insensible to this experience of the living dead, so central and so decisive in Derrida’s seminar. We can cite another example of this lacuna. In an article devoted to the phantasm of living death, Naas’s commentary provides an incredibly detailed summary of the relevant sections of Derrida’s seminar where this issue is broached. But his discussion, coming so close to the site of trauma, remains confined to the material practices and decisions of what is to be done with the dead body after one is dead. The actual corpse as an object for institutionalized and ritualistic culture of burial does not hold any interest for us. What is of interest is Derrida’s claim that the traumatic phantasy

⁴¹ When I use the term “my death,” I do not mean to question what will happen to me subjectively when I die, for such a question is absurd. The dead is extinct and has no experience. When I use the word “my death,” I rather mean the “unexperienced experience” of death which can be had by and for the living self.

⁴² “El pensamienton de Jacques Derrida, entrevista al Dr. Michael Naas [The Thought of Jacques Derrida, interview with Dr. Michael Naas]” is an online interview retrieved from Youtube, which, I recognize, is not a scholarly source. But since Naas’s book on *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminars, *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments*, is forthcoming (to be published in October 2014 by Fordham UP), I have no opportunity to address it here. But since the interview occurs while Naas is working on his book, I have reason to believe that the views he expresses therein anticipate the arguments of his forthcoming book.

which organizes these material practices is the hidden structure of living experience itself (B, 117). After citing a passage in which this experience of the living dead is evoked, Naas does not comment on it except to say that “[o]ne could spend years trying to think through the meanings and implications of this claim” (319). Thus, he deals with this negative experience only allusively. We, in contrast, have felt the necessity to concretely envisage this experience, since this phantasm is something which has never stopped haunting Derrida, which Coetzee described with consummate and trenchant exactitude, and which we have put at the root of the very kind of suffering that defines our epoch and lays claim to our thought and our responsibility.

3.4 Survivance and Solitary Confinement: Derrida and Guenther

Another major theme of Derrida’s seminar is solitude. Already in the first session, Derrida tells us that the story of *Robinson Crusoe* carries a certain universal appeal, since the shape of the world is that of an archipelago, and every person is moored onto his or her island, with no possibility of crossing or passage to the shores of another: “There is no world, there are only islands” (9). It must be said at the same time that the irremediable solitude of each mortal is the *only chance* for responsible ethical relations to the other.⁴³ The insistence on solitude has been remarkably consistent in Derrida’s career. In the original discussion after “Différance,” Derrida says, “Différance marks the separation and the relation to the entirely other and is never found without solitude.”

⁴³ For a development of Derrida’s idea on the fundamental and irremediable isolation of each Dasein, see Miller, “Derrida Enisled.”

Even though Derrida does not make use of the word solitude, he does not “absolutely reject the proposition according to which *différance* would be solitude” (86).

It is perhaps no accident that Jack Henry Abbott’s memoir, which documents the fourteen to fifteen years of his solitary confinement, is entitled *In the Belly of the Beast*. As Lisa Guenther reports in her book *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, “Many prisoners describe their experience in solitary confinement as a form of living death” (xii). The experience of solitary confinement is akin to Robinson Crusoe’s “fundamental fear” of being “swallow’d alive or bury’d alive.” As Guenther writes, “To be imprisoned in such a machine was to be buried alive” (16). The idea that survivance is not unlike solitary confinement is given proof by Guenther’s evocation of “afterlives” in her title. As a prisoner reports, “[y]ou feel as if the world has ended but you somehow survived” (xii). The example of solitary confinement therefore allows us to align the various vectors floating in Derrida’s seminar: radical solitude, survivance, and living death.

Guenther concludes that the psychological trauma of prisoners undergoing solitary confinement attests to the primordially of intersubjectivity. She writes that “we are not simply atomistic individuals but rather hinged subjects who can become unhinged when the concrete experience of other embodied subjects is denied too long” (xii). Here, we see an interesting difference with Derrida, who firmly asserts that each human being is irreducibly solitary. Derrida does not cease to wonder at his “feeling that the worlds in which we live are different to the point of the monstrosity” (266). For Derrida, there is never “the world” in which two human beings might be together in the mode of *Mitsein*, being-with. Rather, the word “world” is “a cobbled-together verbal and terminological

construction destined to mask our panic," and "to protect us against the infantile but infinite anxiety of the fact that *there is not the world*" (266). The "absence of a common world" means "the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being" (266). This is how Derrida interprets Paul Celan's line "Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen."⁴⁴ If Guenther's argument is based on the observation that human beings are intrinsically social, that some kind of *Mitsein* or hinge is fundamental to our being which becomes destroyed in the inhumanity of solitary confinement, for Derrida, on the other hand, we do not need solitary confinement to come along to teach us that each person is alone in the world.⁴⁵ The emergence of solitary confinement is not the origin or source of living death, but rather, living death or survival already describes the inescapable structure of Derrida's life, the "very tissue, the unwoven tissue [*tissue sans tissage*], the ever unsewn and torn tissue of our most constant and quotidian experience" (B, 266). For Derrida, Pinson's apocalyptic hallucination or phantasm that "the world has ended but you somehow survived," is "what I [that is, Derrida] must think and say according to the most implacable necessity," that *perhaps*, there is no longer a world and *perhaps*, there was never one to begin one (266). The penitentiary practicing solitary confinement, originally conceived as "a place of death and resurrection," turned out to be "a living tomb, a site of living death" (Guenther 15). For Derrida, this silence as deep as the grave that rests over cells is already the general structure of living experience, no less because "living death" belongs essentially to the trace and to writing, from which experience is

⁴⁴ The line is from Celan's poem "Große, glühende Wölbung," *Atemwende*.

⁴⁵ "In the words of Dumm, the Pennsylvania system was designed to teach prisoners 'one fundamental lesson, that they were alone in the world'" (Guenther 15).

woven. As Derrida writes, “a book is both alive and dead or, if you prefer, neither dead nor alive.” “[A]ny trace...is the living dead, buried alive and swallowed up alive” (130). The trace, writing, and the archive are crypts which we can associate, oneirically perhaps, to the “living tomb” of the solitary cells of prisoners, for both are “sites of living death.” Nothing escapes, “everything from which the tissue of living experience is woven” is “taken, surprised in advanced, comprehended, clothed” in “the very inextricability of this weave” of “death in life or life in death” (*B*, 132).

But does Derrida’s assertion on the generalized structure of survival constitute an advocacy for solitary confinement? How can Derrida oppose, in other words, the living death of solitary confinement, which we are certain he will, when he at once designates living death to be the inescapable structure of his life? There are two points that we can make about this.

First, the possibility of ethical action depends on the awareness of the capacity of the other to suffer. And this compassion for the suffering of the other cannot take place unless one undergoes by imagining this suffering for oneself in an embodied way. In other words, it is only by undergoing an experience of one’s own death—psychically real but not materially real—that the radical evil of the real instances of living death can be shown, and that the full force of the ethical imperative for its removal can be felt. And this is why the superimposition of one text over another that I have performed above, between the living death of the archive (Derrida) and the living death of solitary confinement (Guenther) is absolutely necessary. To undergo one’s own death, to know what it means to die a living death, is necessary, because only such an experience, when felt in its full affective and emotional dimension, can give rise to the action that seeks to

relieve the suffering of others, animal or human. This is why Derrida returns repeatedly to this theme in the seminar, multiplying his words again and again to dramatize this experience, so that his auditors may get a glimpse of, or may actually give themselves this death in the theatrical context of the lecture hall.

Second, we must remember that Derrida's gesture of positing survivance—that is, living death—as a kind of “quasi-transcendentality” or “groundless ground” is not the same thing as endorsing solitary confinement as an actual practice. Instead, we must take Derrida's argument about the “quasi-transcendentality” of living death *seriously* in order to realize that this transcendentality of living death is what makes the horror of solitary confinement *thinkable* in the first place. Catherine Malabou's book *The New Wounded* is a remarkable work that stays tenaciously close to the theme of living death. Her argument, which I summarize in note 31, is that catastrophic brain lesions can create a “new, unrecognizable person...characterized by disaffection or coolness” and a “bottomless absence” (48-9). As anyone who knows someone with Alzheimer's can attest, the person after the onset of the disease undergoes utter and complete metamorphosis. Malabou's book, however, does not only characterize the features of “the new wounded,” its emotional coolness, the formation of a new, unprecedented identity; its philosophical originality consists in asking the transcendental origin that makes the creation of the new self possible. In order for this new self to be created, Malabou postulates the existence of a neuronal death drive which “responds to the traumatic stimulus and welcomes it, in a sense, facilitating its work of annihilation” (70). Malabou calls this work of facilitation “destructive plasticity,” the possibility of giving rise to a new identity or form “*through the destruction of form*” (17). Without being able to

elaborate Malabou's impressive way of conceiving this negative plasticity, I want to mobilize the same logic to explain the relation between what Derrida calls the quasi-transcendental of survivance and its material instantiation in solitary confinement. The quasi-transcendentality of living-death is what makes solitary confinement as a mode of punishment *possible*. If there were no such transcendental weave of survival, solitary confinement would neither produce a living-dead subject, nor can the suffering of this kind be envisaged. In other words, because solitary confinement *is* a site of living-death, we must think back to a virtuality that is made possible in this actual instance. Far from justifying the material instantiation of solitary confinement in the prison system, the phantasmatic experience of disappearance provides the *only hope* for a work of philosophical activism like Guenther's that searches for justice. Conversely, the blindness to the suffering of solitary confinement is a result of a recoil from the phantasm of living-death that rages silently in the unconscious. I have already put forth Hägglund's discourse as an example of this recoil, which both bears witness to this experience and seeks to quarantine it. I will put forth another example in the section below.

3.5 Survivance and *Walten*: Derrida and Heidegger

In his article "The Late Derrida," Miller focuses on the "repetitiveness" of Derrida's last seminars, and compares his penchant for turning over the same phrase to "a great Charlie Parker riff or a Bach fugue" (59). Miller argues that "Derrida writes in this way in order to avoid coming to an end or, so to speak, 'dying,' in more ways than one" (67). No doubt, Miller's incisive commentary brings home a salient feature of Derrida's seminar. We can observe, for example, the overabundant use of anaphora—the repetition

of a words at a beginning of a line—as well as the proliferation of synonyms and substitutions. One can count, for example, many different ways to say *mourir vivant*: “to see oneself die” (*se voir mourir*), “to be dead and alive at once” (*être à la fois mort et vivant*), “dying alive” (*le mourir vivant*), “life death” (*la vie la mort*), “buried alive and swallowed alive” (*enterré vivant et englouti vivant*) (129-130/192-3). All these syntagms are additionally analogical to the notion of survival (*survie, survivre, survivance*). Contrary to Miller, however, I would argue that rather than seeking to delay “dying,” this repetitive style, in its nearly monotonous repetition of the same, mimics dying alive, the contradictory and phantasmatic experience of being dead and alive at the same time. The “experience” of the worldless thing, the corpse, can be nothing but a kind of brutal repetition. Nothingness is nothing but a repetition of nothingness *ad infinitum*. This brutal repetition—a reigning—of nothingness, which we have nicknamed becoming-corpse, is what characterizes the trauma of dying alive or immortality in all its terror. To avoid and efface the impasse of a pure repetition also defines Miller’s primary goal, to rescue Derrida, as it were, from a living death by aligning him with the a concern that belongs properly to the living, to postpone death and prolong life. Thus, the experience of becoming-corpse remains exterior to Miller’s discourse and forms a limit beyond which it cannot go.

This idea of nothingness is important for it is identified with the problematic of *Walten*. In the beginning of the second session, Derrida alerts his auditors that his reading of Heidegger this time will be guided by one word:

As you see, late in my life of reading Heidegger, I have just discovered a word that seems to oblige me to put everything in a new perspective. And

that is what happens and ought to be meditated on endlessly. If I had not conjoined in one problematic the beast *and* the sovereign, I wager that the force and organizing power of this German word (i.e., *Walten*) that is so difficult to translate, but that informs, gives form to the whole Heideggerian text, would never have appeared to me as such. Anymore than it has appeared, to my knowledge, to others. (279-80)

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger introduces the language of *Walten* as a translation of the Greek *phusis*, “φύσις, that which prevails, means not only *that which itself prevails*, but that which prevails in its prevailing or the prevailing of whatever prevails [*das Waltende in seinem Walten oder das Walten des Waltenden*]” (30/46). This forcefulness of *Walten*, as one commentator explains, is “a centering, a gathering, a pulling together, in a continual *agon* that always pulls against a pulling apart” (Knowles 266). The play of *auseinander-zueinander* (toward and away from one another) of *Walten* is the movement that gives rise to the difference between Being and beings, which is a difference within the same. Because *Walten* opens, produces, bears, brings about the ontological difference, “it designates a sort of pre-difference, or even an in-difference to ontological difference” (*B*, 191). *Walten* is thus situated beyond or anterior to the ontological difference. In its anteriority, *Walten* is linked to the presencing of the Nothing: “If it were a force or a violence, it would be nothing, but a nothing that is not nothing, a nothing that is not a thing, nor a being, nor Being, but which forces or efforces or enforces...the difference between Being and beings” (*B*, 191).

Dasein’s access to the “as such” of beings is granted by the presencing of nothingness and of death. In an important extract from the essay “The Thing,” Heidegger

writes, “Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself [*als das Geheimnis des Seins selbst*]” (171). Commenting on this sentence, Derrida explains, “this power of the as such...this power to have access to the as such of death (i.e., Nothing as such) is none other than the relation to the ontological difference, and thereby to Being as Being” (123). To clarify this relation between death and the possibility of the “as such” further, Derrida writes, “Being as Being” is “not one ‘as such’ among others, but the possibility of the ‘as such’ in general,” and for Being as Being to take place, it must “pass through the Nothing, not-being and therefore death, as such” (123). To cement the internal relation between death and the ontological difference, Derrida adds that “death is what guards the Being of beings,” and that “it is in death that lies the secret of Being itself, the difference between Being and beings” (note 12 and 13, p. 122). If passage through Nothing and Death is what gives rise to Being as Being, to the manifestation and openness of the “as such,” then *Walten*, insofar as it is not a thing, but only forces and enforces, is another name for Nothing or Death, a presencing power which, seizing the mortals as mortal, opens ontological difference.

Derrida performs a reading of the key section in Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference* in the last two sessions of the seminar in which the word *Walten* plays a pivotal role. As Derrida points out, the emergence of the ontological difference which bears the “as such” (the *Als-Struktur*) “comes about via a *walten*” (123). The ontological difference is not one difference among others. It is not a difference between two different things but a difference within the Same. As Derrida explains, the Being that supervenes in the Overcoming (*Überkommnis*)

distinguishes beings from beings as such, it is in a certain sense *nothing*, it is not a being, it is not some thing, just as ontological difference that supervenes thus is not some thing, some other thing, is not a being different from the being that appears...it is like the supervening *of nothing* and *of the nothing* that separates Being and beings...Or rather, (this comes to the same thing), it is the supervening of an absolute alterity, but within the same. (253-4)

The “supervening of ontological difference” is a supervening “of nothing and of the nothing,” or, of an “absolute alterity within the same.” Without the *Walten* of the Nothing, that is, of death as “the mystery of Being itself,” there can be no access to the “as such.” This Nothing supervenes, *waltet*, as an internal fissure which, splitting the Same into the entity and the as such of the entity, gives rise to the *als-Struktur*, that is, the possibility to conceive of an entity *as* an entity.

And since the possibility to accede to the “as such” of beings is the possibility of openness (*Offenbarkeit*) and manifestation, the *Walten* of nothingness is located at the origin of the world and of history. Indeed, the important passage in Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference* to which Derrida devotes extended commentary is a kind of narrative of origins. This “story” is an originary myth in the least derogatory sense of the term. As Heidegger writes,

Being in the sense of unconcealing Supervening, and beings as such in the sense of the Arrival that shelters, are as different (*so Unterschiedenen*) by virtue of the same (*aus dem Selben*), the Dimension (*dem Unterschied*). Solely this latter Dimension grants and holds apart the “between,” where

Supervening and Arrival are maintained in relation, isolated one from the other and turned one toward the other. The difference of Being and beings as the Dimension (*Unter-Schied*) of Supervening and Arrival is the *uncovering and sheltering Conciliation (Austrag)* of the two. Within Conciliation prevails (*waltet*) a clearing (*Lichtung*) of what veils and closes itself off, and this prevalence (*Walten*) which bestows (*vergift*) the being-apart and being-related, the one to the other, of Supervening and Arrival of Being and beings as such. [Sein im Sinne der entbergenen Überkommnis und Seiendes als solches im Sinne der sich bergenden Ankunft wesen als die so Unterschiedenen aus dem Selben, dem Unterschied. Dieser vergibt erst und hält auseinander das Zwischen, worin Überkommnis und Ankunft zueinander gehalten, auseinander-zueinander getragen sind. Die differenz von Sein und Seiendem ist als der Unterschied von Überkommnis und Ankunft: der *entbergende-bergende Austrag* beider. Im Austrag waltet Lichtung des sich verhüllend Verschließenden, welches Walten das Aus- und Zueinander von Überkommnis und Ankunft vergibt]. (65/71, trans. mod.)

Our discussion of this passage will proceed with the clarification of a few words and phrases. First, Being and beings are determined respectively as Supervening (*Überkommnis*) and Arrival (*Ankunft*). As Heidegger explains, Being is that which goes or comes over unconcealingly (*entbergend*) to beings, which alone through this

Supervening arrive as something unconcealed (*Unverborgenes*).⁴⁶ Being shows itself as the movement of unconcealing Supervening, and beings appear as an Arrival which keeps itself concealed in unconcealment. Second, the word “der Unterschied” means simply difference. Heidegger divides this word up into “Unter-schied.” Joan Stambaugh tries to capture this typographical invention with the word “differentiation.” The word in French is translated, even more wildly, as Dimension. The French translation has a certain merit, however, insofar as *Unter-Schied* includes a spatial element. *Unter-Schied* grants and holds apart the “between” (*das Zwischen*) for Supervening and Arrival. The ontological difference as *Unter-Schied* is “the illuminated between,”⁴⁷ in which beings come to essence. Second, the word *Austrag* is translated into English as “perdurance,” and into French as “conciliation.” In the vocabulary of the law, *Austrag* means the settlement of a legal dispute. The verb form “austragen” means “to have it out with someone,” e.g., “einen Streit mit jemandem austragen.” *Austrag*, then, is an auto-antonym of sorts that can mean both reconciliation and conflict (*polemos*), and thereby analogous to the movement of *Walten*, as the gathering that pulls against a pulling apart. Moreover, *austragen* can also mean “to carry a child to full term.” A child brought to full term is “ein ausgetragenes Kind.” Third, that which prevails in the *Austrag* is that which “veils and closes itself off [*sich verhüllend Verschließenden*].” That which veils and closes itself off is difference as such, the ontological difference, *Unter-Schied*.

⁴⁶ “Sein geht über (das) hin, kommt entbergend über (das), was durch solche Überkommnis erst als von sich her Unverborgenes ankommt (Being transits (that), comes unconcealingly over (that) which arrives as something of itself unconcealed only by that coming-over)” (*ID*, 71/64).

⁴⁷ “das gelichtete Zwischen” (*ID*, 71, n. 92)

For Heidegger, the history of metaphysics is a history of the forgetting of the question of Being, and thus a forgetting of the ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings. This forgetting, insofar as a structure of effacement belongs to it, is itself withdrawn. Difference as such is therefore Nothing. In Heideggerian parlance, the step back (*der Schritt zurück*) goes from the heretofore unthought into that which remains to be thought (*das zu-Denkende*). *Das zu-Denkende* is the oblivion (*Vergessenheit*) of difference. This *Vergessenheit* of difference is a concealment (*Verhüllung*) which itself has withdrawn. Not only have we forgotten about difference, this oblivion itself has withdrawn. *Das zu-denkende* is therefore the attempt to think the concealment of oblivion, *Verhüllung der Vergessenheit*, the withdrawal of withdrawal, withdrawal *as such*. This “as such” of withdrawal can be likened to Nothing and to Death. This Nothing is not a thing, but which nonetheless presences, and in its presencing “harbors within itself the presencing of Being” (“The Thing,” 171). When Heidegger says that “*Im Austrag waltet Lichtung der sich verhüllend Verschleißenden*,” that which “veils and closes itself off” is the “as such” of withdrawal, *Verhüllung der Vergessenheit*, the concealment of forgetting of difference. Difference as such is withdrawal as such, i.e., Nothing. It is therefore the Nothing or Death which *vergibt* (gives, misgives, forgives) the “between” of the ontological difference in the Same, the *Austrag* of Supervening and Arrival. Death or Nothing prevails in the *Austrag*,⁴⁸ and in its prevailing gives rise to the clearing and the openness of the “as such,” the prevailing of the world (“Walten von

⁴⁸ Joan Stambaugh, the translator for the English translation of Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference*, reveals that “[i]n a consultation Heidegger pointed out the relationship of this word [i.e. *Austrag*] to man as the ‘stand-in of nothingness’ (*What is Metaphysics?*)” (note 3, p. 17).

Welt” [ID 71, n.93]). This *Walten* that opens up the world for Dasein and grants Dasein the power of letting things be in their Being is the power to accede to death as such.

In his commentary, Derrida emphasizes the word “vergeben.” Difference as such or *Unter-Schied vergibt*, bestows, the illuminated Between for Supervening and Arrival. But the word “vergeben,” whose primary meaning is to grant or to award, can also mean to forgive (as in the English cognate). Many times in the seminar, Derrida underscores the word “vergeben,” as it appears in this decisive and crucial juncture in Heidegger’s text, as “extraordinary.” Derrida does not explain why, but perhaps the word “forgive” recalls the idea of a sovereign pardon that confers upon the accused a reprieve from the death penalty. The use of this word therefore shows that Heidegger’s thinking on the origin and source of the ontological difference is never far from a model of sovereign power. As has been pointed out before, *Walten*, insofar as it grants the Between for the encircling of ontological difference, also grants a gift of death; it confers upon human Dasein the power to accede to death as death. And it is by way of this relation to death as such that Dasein accedes to the “as such” of beings and the openness of Being.

As Derrida explains this connection between death and the ontological difference elsewhere, to have access to beings as such, to let the being be, purely, as that being, means that “one doesn’t approach it or apprehend it from our own perspective, from our own design.”⁴⁹ To liberate the entity from our own design also means “to relate to the thing such as it is in itself...apprehending it such as it is, such as it would be even if I

⁴⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. p. 160.

weren't there."⁵⁰ The possibility of relating to a being such as it is, therefore presupposes our capacity to relate to our death as death. Derrida expresses doubt in relation to this possibility of acceding to an authentic nothingness, since all our thoughts of death are thoughts of survival. Even when we think of a time beyond the grave, when we will have been dead, this phantasmatic future anterior can only be thought as if we are still somehow alive, surviving our deaths and living on in the grave, even though death will have been past:

[O]ur thoughts of death are always, structurally, thoughts of survival. To see oneself or to think oneself dead is to see oneself surviving, present at one's death, present or represented *in absentia*...All of which is banal and well known: one could go on about it endlessly. But the logic of this banality of survival that begins even before our death is that of a survival of the remainder, the remains, that does not even wait for death to make life and death indissociable, and thus the *unheimlich* and fantasmatic experience of the spectrality of the living dead. Life and death as such are not separable as such. (*B*, 117)

As Derrida implies here, this phantasm of "see[ing] oneself surviving, present at one's death," is not limited to when we seek to relate to our death, but is already the structure of living experience from the get go. This structure is one of survival, of remains. The first breath is already posthumous, and hence the declaration "I posthume as I breathe."⁵¹ On

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," in *Jacques Derrida*, in collaboration with Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. p. 26. Derrida provides an auto-interpretation of this sentence in *B*, p. 173-4.

the basis of this fundamental axiom that one can live or die only in the mode of lifedeath, we cannot relate our absence as such, and therefore we cannot let the entity be as it would be in our absence. This impossibility of access to the “as such” of death unravels the *Als-Struktur*, the ontological difference, and the entire Heideggerian architectonic that depends on these distinctions (between the being as the “as such” of the being, the Being of the being).

Now, if the Heideggerian nothing, the *Walten* of Death—that which veils and closes itself off—gives Dasein the access to the “as such” of Being, the Derridean nothing of *mourir vivant* is a *mongrel* nothingness, a spectral double of *Walten* that disrupts the “as such” in the name of an “as if.”⁵² At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that the themes and figures of Derrida’s seminar are conjoined by the metaphorical logic of analogical “likeness” or “similarity” as if in a dream. The same kind of relationship reigns between survivance and *Walten*. It is as if Derrida hallucinated, dreamed one for the other, mistaking one in the place of the other. It is as if in survivance, *Walten* meets its own *Doppelgänger*, its own spectral double that puts it to death. In a certain sense, the distinction between survivance, of living beyond one’s

⁵² At the beginning of the fourth session, Derrida opens, as is his custom, with a series of questions: “Is death merely the end of life? Death as such? Is there ever, moreover, death *as such*? If I said “I am going to die living [*mourir vivant*],” what would you have to understand? That I want to *die* living? Or that I want above all not to die living, not to die in my life time? Would that be the last avowal of an unavowable desire or the panic of an unspeakable terror?” (93). For Derrida, the idea of *mourir vivant*, this ruination of the self, seems to characterize both terror and desire (Robinson Crusoe “thinks of it [i.e., dying alive] as a threat but with such compulsion that one wonders if the threat is not also nurtured like a promise, and therefore a desire” [77]). For Lisa Guenther, Catherine Malabou, or J. M. Coetzee, who are working with instances of *mourir vivant* that are more empirical or material, there is no luxury of such ambiguity or internal fission. In these cases, to die alive would only entail “the panic of an unspeakable terror” or profound pain. But since these writers implicitly affirm, in one way or another, the capacity of an imagination to “see oneself die,” to be dead and alive at the same time, one wonders, along the tracks of Derrida, if this affirmation does not amount to the presupposition of a hidden, permanently denied, and therefore unconscious *desire*, however counter-intuitive such a desire might be.

death, and *Walten*, is nothing, and yet their distinction is also unique and decisive. Two quotations will suffice to demonstrate this difference, a difference within the same. In session four, Derrida writes,

[D]ying a living death can only be a fantasmatic virtuality, a fiction, if you like, but this fictive or fantasmatic virtuality in no way diminishes the *real almightiness* of what thus presents itself to fantasy, an *almightiness* that never leaves it again, never leaves it, and *organizes and rules over everything* we can call life and death, life death. This *power of almightiness* belongs to a beyond of the opposition between being and not being, life and death, reality and fiction or fantasmatic virtuality. (130, emphasis added)

As an “almightiness” that “organizes and rules over everything we can call life and death,” this fantasm of “dying a living death” possesses that power over life and death that belongs properly to the sovereign.

Like *Walten*, survivance is also situated in a certain beyond, a beyond that is anterior to the difference between life and death, and therefore a certain indifference or predifference. And if *Walten* is the breaking force, a totally unexpected event that is situated at the origin of the world and that gives birth to the world *as such* (the word *Austrag*, as Derrida painstakingly elucidates, has this meaning of bearing a child to full term [*B*, 255-6]), survivance also possesses a generative and originating quasi-transcendentality. Survivance also gives birth to the world, but the birth is stillborn, as already dead, or, better, dead and alive at the same time. As Derrida writes, and this is our second quote,

No, the survivance I am speaking of is something other than life death, but a groundless ground from which are detached, identified, and opposed what we think we can identify under the name of death or dying, like death properly so-called as opposed to some life properly so-called. *It [Ça]* begins with survival. (*B*, 131)

If for Heidegger, everything begins with *Walten*, for Derrida, everything “begins with survival.” Survival as living death is not only true of the structure of the trace, for books or archives in the narrow sense, “but for everything from which the tissue of living experience is woven” (*B*, 132). Insofar as “the totality of ‘experience,’ ...is not separated from the field of the mark,” living experience partakes of the living-death of the archive, trace, or writing. In saying that this “weave of survival, like death in life or life in death...does not come along to clothe a more ordinary existence,” Derrida posits the “weave” of survivance in which one “lives to death” as ordinary (132). This structure of survival, of living and dying beyond the grave, is the *starting point*, that which is presupposed in any experience whatsoever: “*It [Ça]* begins with survival.” But this origin is not pure. By using the neutral pronoun “ça,” Derrida signals the relationship between survivance and Blanchot’s neuter, which, as Derrida glosses, bears a certain resemblance to Heidegger’s *Walten* in being “neither this nor that, neither positive nor negative” (190-1). If the ontological difference that *Walten* bears allows a being to manifest itself as such, to come into essence (*anwähren*) in the openness of Being, the indifference of the neuter “averts it [i.e., the ontological difference] in gently dissuading it from any presence” (*The Step Not Beyond*, 106; qtd. in *B*, 191), and thus suspending Dasein’s ability to accede to the *Als-Struktur* in advance.

And just like *Walten* which grants the “between” or the *Unter-Schied* in which Supervening and Arrival are both held toward one another and isolated from one another, survivance, as the “groundless ground,” is also the “between” from which life and death “are detached, identified, and opposed.” Survivance is a “quasi-transcendental,” because it makes what we can think under the name “life” or “death” possible, while also making any thought of “life as such” or “death as such” impossible.

Located in a certain beyond or anteriority, survivance is structurally isomorphic to *Walten*. But this is what allows us to conclude that the difference between survivance and *Walten* is a *différance*. If *Walten* is the ability to accede to the world as such and to death as such, survivance attests nothing less than to the impossibility of the *as such*. Survivance is a deconstruction, dissemination, de-structuration of the super-sovereignty of *Walten*. But it is only by resembling *Walten*, by being in a certain sense the same to *Walten*, by inhabiting the same place that *Walten* takes place, that is, the place of the origin and of transcendentality, that it usurps the sovereignty of *Walten*. Survivance is a fake king, a spectral double whose “‘sur-’ is without superiority, without height, altitude or highness, thus without supremacy or sovereignty” (B, 131). By impersonating the proper sovereignty of *Walten*, survivance stages a *coup d’etat* and fuddles the sovereign prerogative of granting (*vergeben*) a proper death, in order to reverse the violence that denies this death to the animal. It does this not by restoring to the animal the access to the as such of a proper death, but rather in depriving Dasein of the same by underscoring the originarity of life-death. If *Walten* gives the power to accede to a proper death to Dasein—a power that is denied to the animal—survivance is the reminder that all living things die a living death and therefore die like a beast. If *Walten* gives rise to the “as

such” of Spirit, survivance gives rise to the specter. The difference between spirit and specter is the one between the everlasting life in the presence of God and the radical solitude without salvation of the mortal.

3.6 Conclusion

At the end of the tenth and the final session, Derrida remarks, “death, if there be any, was our theme” (290). In the seminar, Derrida sets up the opposition between two deaths, the proper death of Dasein and the living death of survivance. The notion of living death has been so important to the seminar as a whole, because it confirms and constitutes sovereignty as such. To condemn someone to a living death is to exercise the power of one’s sovereignty. As Derrida says, “the other might bury me alive, eat me or swallow me a live, burn me alive, etc. He or she can put me to a living death, and exercise thus his or her sovereignty” (*B*, 127). Solitary confinement, if we may be permitted again to return to this example, is a sign of the sovereign power of the state, the right of the state to exercise its law-preserving violence. The ability to condemn its prisoners to a living death constitutes the almightiness of the state’s power. But as we have seen, the injustice of such an act, while founding sovereignty, is also what holds the possibility of arresting it. The living-dead bodies produced by state institutions, languishing in prisons and psychiatric hospitals, produce an immediate and urgent need for response. Those who die like a beast, who die living, before their time or in their lifetime, call forth the need for justice and the imperative for change. These material figures of the living dead need to be recognized, identified, and contended with in their psychical and material reality in order for sovereign force itself to be arrested.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida affirms a certain non-contemporaneity of time with itself as the condition of possibility of justice:

Does not justice as relation to the other suppose on the contrary the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony, some *Un-Fuge*, some “out of joint” dislocation in Being and in time itself, a disjointure that, in always risking the evil, expropriation, and injustice (*adikia*) against which there is no calculable insurance, would alone *do justice* or to *render justice* to the other as other? (32)

Indeed, the experience of the living dead is an event in which time undergoes a change. As we have explained above in 3.2 in relation to Blanchot, the temporality of living death is anachronistic; when the “always already” and “never yet” of death become the same, it gives rise to a time without present. To live beyond one’s death, to mourn one’s death as if it had already occurred in an immemorial past, is an experience of awaiting for a death-to-come whose arrival can never be presaged. The posthumous experience of survival, in which death has perhaps already occurred in the twilight of an irretrievable yesterday, runs the risk of “evil, expropriation, and injustice.” And yet, as we have argued from a variety of angles in this chapter, the openness to this phantasm is what is required to do justice to the other *as other*.

At the end of session ten, Derrida cites Heidegger once more: “There is only one thing against which all violence-doing, violent action, violent activity, immediately shatters—it is death (*Das ist der Tod*)” (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 121, cited in *B*, 290). It is death that can arrest the super-sovereignty of *Walten*, the foundation of political sovereignty in its real instantiations, but which death? Derrida asks, “Who is

capable of death, and, through death, of imposing failure on the super- or hyper-sovereignty of *Walten?*” (290). Survivance as living death is the quasi-transcendentality that imposes failure upon political sovereignty and force. It is in this spirit that we may interpret the elliptical and playful declaration in “Différance”: “This stone—provided one knows how to decipher its inscription—is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant [*Cette pierre n'est pas loin, pourvu qu'on en sache déchiffrer la légende, de signaler la mort du dynaste*]” (4/4). Just as the stony, pyramidal silence of the “a” of *différance* signals the “death of the tyrant,” survivance, even as it remains exposed and vulnerable to sovereign violence, is also the hard evidence upon which sovereign force “immediately shatters.”

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Derek Liu

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2004-2010 B.A.

University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2010-2011 M.A.

Honours and Awards: Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2013-2014

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Master's Scholarship
2010-2011

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
Western University
2012-2014