

**Michael Naas.** *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments: Jacques Derrida's Final Seminar.* Fordham University Press 2014. 232 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780823263288); \$24.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780823263295).

### *Derrida's Flair*

Derrida had a certain personal flair in his person, his language, his way of doing philosophy, and his way of writing — he defied the conventions of philosophy by what can seem a wilful focus on the obscure and the paradoxical; he exercised a kind of playfulness and wit that can amuse or cause dismay with conventional philosophical expectations.

Starting from Derrida's seminars, in the introduction of the book *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments: Jacques Derrida's Final Seminar*, Michael Naas writes: 'Since the seminars differ greatly from Derrida's published works, and since only a mere fraction of the seminar materials has been made available before now, the result will be what can only be characterized as a wholly *other corpus* besides the one we already know, a second corpus that will no doubt cause us to reconsider everything we know or think we know about Jacques Derrida'(1). Later Naas adds '[t]he central aim of this book is to show that there is no better place to begin such a reappraisal of Derrida's work than the two-year *The Beast and the Sovereign* (University of Chicago Press, vol. 1 2009 and vol. 2 2017), Derrida's final seminar, where questions of death, mourning, solitude, and the end of the world come to mark the seminar—and, as a result, Derrida's entire corpus, his published works as well as his other seminars—in a unique and rather uncanny way'(2).

In this review I'll follow the organization of the book in seven different and significant path-chapters suggested by Naas.

In the first path, Derrida's flair, Naas takes the cue from the lecture delivered by Derrida as part of the conference *L'animal que donc je suis* (Éditions Galilée 2006), on the animal and on the relation between the human and the animal. Dealing with the nudity between man and animal, the reflection begins with 'a scene of seeing or of gazing, the unexpected and somewhat uncanny scene of Derrida describing the experience of suddenly finding himself being looked at naked [coming out of the shower] by his cat' (20-21). In nature, the cat is not naked, it doesn't feel its own nudity; general speaking, it doesn't have knowledge of its nudity. For humans, however, nudity can be a problem. Derrida imagines living the experience of nudity seen by another animal, the animal-cat, naked in front of him. In the form of a soliloquy, Derrida asks himself: Who I am-and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment?

After he says: what happens when 'a philosopher lets himself be gazed at naked by a cat and then tries to think this experience *philosophically*?'(21)

We are just at the beginning of a very long and open-ended list of attributes that are regularly granted to the human and denied to the animal and vice versa. We are handing over, in front of the dichotomy of the beast and the sovereign, the beast as opposed to the sovereign, the sovereign as a beast.

### *If you could take just two books*

Derrida retakes the tale by means of a thought experiment: 'If you were going to be stranded on a desert island and you could take just *two books* with you, what two books would you take?' (41). 'The replay is an old couple about the concept of world.' The first, the book *Robinson*



*Crusoe* (William Taylor 1719), ‘a novel that essentially creates or recreates the world itself, a novel whose central character resembles either the first man, abandoned to his solitude while being granted dominion over all the creatures of his world, or the very last man at the very end of the world’ (BS 2 21/47) (43). The second, Heidegger’s Three theses of 1929 with: the stone is without world [*weltlos*]; the animal is poor in world [*weltarm*]; and man is world-forming [*weltbildend*]. Although Derrida’s thought is always very close to that of Heidegger, Derrida contests the Heideggerian distinction between the human and the animal based on the presumed, anticipated access to world. Derrida’s critique ‘will focus essentially on what is, to his eyes, Heidegger’s unjustified confidence regarding the distinction between human Dasein and the animal, a distinction that falls in line ... with an entire history of Western philosophy that attempts to draw a single, indivisible line between the human and all other animals’ (43). See the texts *Of Spirit* (University of Chicago Press 1991) and *Geschlecht* (University of Chicago Press 2020) or *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Fordham University Press 2006) and the first year of *The Beast and the Sovereign* (University of Chicago Press 2009).

What Derrida admits is first ‘[i]ncontestably, animals and humans inhabit the same world, the same objective world even if they do not have the same experience of the objectivity of the object. [Second,] ‘[i]ncontestably, animals and human do not inhabit the same world, for the human world will never be purely and simply identical to the world of animals’ (BS 2 8/30-31)(45).

But let us turn to Robinson Crusoe and his question: What is the human world? Following his personal, finite experience and meditation Crusoe can respond ‘there is no world, no common world, only islands, with no bridges or means of translation between them.... The world is thus not quite some regulative idea, an *as if* designed to organize our knowledge of nature and encourage us to seek its universal laws, but a fiction or a phantasm in the precise sense that Derrida will have given to these terms since at least *Glas*’(57-8). Such a world leads to solitude, perhaps to solipsism and to think of death. Crusoe is obsessed with being buried alive, of living one’s death or dying a living death.

In ‘To Die a Living Death: The Phantasm of Burial and Cremation,’ Michael Naas refers to Derrida’s *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Melville House 2011), a sort of confession: ‘I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. 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. It’s the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs? (LLF 32-33) (62). All writing speaks in the absence of the writer.

Keeping on the Crusoe’s meditation, Derrida goes on to suggest that life and death as such are not separable, and considers the question of the relative advantages and disadvantages of being buried or cremated. From two books to two means of disposing of the corpse, burial and/or cremation, the decision is taken by the heir, by the other.

### *Reinventing the Wheel*

Returning to the solitude of Crusoe in the island, Derrida observes ‘on an island where one goes round in circles, like a wheel, like the rotation or rather the wheeling of a wheel, can also be <the one> closest to it. My last footstep always might coincide with my first. This is the law of the island and the law of the wheel. (BS 2 74/118) (88-9). At the beginning in the island Crusoe has problems with the wheel; he looks to reinvent it as technical machine, but he understands that it is a

figure, a metaphor of the other, such as the reinvention of sovereignty. No doubt, Naas adds, Derrida ‘turns round Robinson Crusoe’s reinvention of the wheel, thinking it in relationship to developments in human civilization and technology but also in relationship to sovereignty, the possibility of the trace, the autos, and autobiography. (99)

### *Pray Tell*

What is it to pray? What does it mean to pray? The book *Robinson Crusoe* ‘can be read as a rhythmic series of attempts to learn how to pray properly, authentically, in the Bible, on the Bible’ (BS 2 48/83) (108). Derrida observes ‘if praying consists in doing something, in a gesture of the body or a movement of the soul, what is one doing when one prays? . . . Is one doing something with words, as in a performative that consists in “doing things with words,” doing something with words’ (BS 2 202/285-286) (111). ‘Prayer, for its part, a human thing, is a *logos semantikos* but not *apophantikos*; it speaks but could neither lie nor tell the truth’ (116). Here, in contrast to Heidegger, Derrida can suggest that a certain prayer, a certain performative of prayer, is at the origin of all discourse, constative as well as performative (BS 2 229/320)(118).

### *Derrida’s Preoccupation with the Archive*

In the past Derrida stressed that literature represents the rare human space which stands in a non-submissive and non-competitive relation to the sovereignty of power (the state, capital, the media, and religion). Here he speaks of archive, its function and its value as trace, writing, spectrality, and so on. Above all of the Omnipotence of literature, of keeping secret and thus secretly working, of the force of the literary language. On the matter Naas adds ‘the archive is clearly not just one question among others for Derrida... in some sense [it is] the central question, even, as I will argue in conclusion, the central question of philosophy itself.’ (126)

### *‘World, Finitude, Solitude’ Derrida’s Walten*

*Was ist welt?* Previously Crusoe has affirmed that the world is a construction, a fiction, a phantasm. Following Heidegger’s seminar, Derrida returns almost obsessively to the vocabulary of *Walten* as physis or as difference. ‘Heidegger thinking of *Walten* as the originary prevailing of world or as the appearance of beings in their totality gathers together in logos, as *logos, polemos* and *philia*, the one and the other, the one as the other’ (147). Physis, then, ‘is the *Walten* of everything which depends, as *Walten*, only on itself, which forms itself sovereignly, as power, receiving its form and its image, its figure of domination, from itself’ (BS 2 39/72) (152). *Walten* thus ‘signifies,’ Derrida argues, ‘not something or someone, neither man nor God, but the exercise of an archi-originary force, of a power, a violence, before any ontic or ontological determination’ (BS 2 103-104/158; see 94 n. 2/147 n.1) (156)

At the end of seminar, Derrida adds, that ‘I will read Heidegger as he writes it, or interpret it as he auto-interprets it—we would have to reconstitute the whole passage: “(There is only one thing against which all violence-doing, violent action, violent activity [all *Gewalt-tatigkeit*], immediately shatters [*scheitert*])” That is death [*Das ist der Tod*]’ (BS 2 290/397) (163). Each time something dies, it’s the end of the world.

It seems that if one wants to learn about Derrida’s thought there is nothing to be done but to read his texts. And yet, by means of Naas’s book it is possible to gather many points of Derrida’s work and at the same time to follow his remarkable itinerary along the forty years of his critical thought. Naas offers us a fascinating opportunity for re-reading Derrida’s last work.

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