

Article

## Sovereignty without Mastery

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**Abstract:** In *The Beast and the Sovereign* v.1, Derrida argues that classical sovereignty is linked to the performative act of declaring oneself master. Thus, each sovereign asserts a distinction between the masterful self and the mastered other. Derrida contends that the sovereign distinction between self and other maps onto a distinction between sovereign autonomy and a mechanical determination said to characterize others of all kinds. This gives rise to a differentiated binary between responsibility, capacity and restraint on the one side against reaction, instinct and danger on the other, which, Derrida suggests, operates across traditional separations, such as man/animal, man/machine, mind/body and, of course, sovereign and beast. This paper argues that Derrida's reading of Paul Celan and Georges Bataille may be understood as a pursuit of an alternative sovereignty. This alternative sovereignty would be without mastery and its binaries. I suggest that Derrida finds such an alternative sovereignty in the "majesty" of poetry, which, in his own poetic gesture, allows him to upset traditional distinctions.

**Keywords:** sovereignty; poetry; testimony; 'The Animal'; Derrida; Bataille; Celan

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### 1. Introduction

This paper considers the way Derrida associates sovereignty with poetry in his 2001 lecture course, posthumously published as *The Beast and the Sovereign* V-I [1]. In Derrida's text, as in wider usage, sovereignty has a divided sense. Sovereignty may mean either liberty or mastery. Derrida notes that the sovereign must enforce some instituted order of law on obedient subjects if he is to be master. This means, says Derrida, that the sovereign master is not independent, free and in full possession of himself.

*The Beast and the Sovereign* responds to this contradiction within sovereignty in two ways. First, Derrida explores how those who claim sovereign mastery get around the contradiction as a practical

matter. He argues that mastery is a performative fiction that depends for its existence on its subject-recipients accepting it. In order to secure such acceptance, the master's fiction of power and right redoubles itself by claiming that it is not fictional, but a foundational truth. Second, following Bataille, Derrida wagers on the chance of a sovereignty beyond mastery and finds its example in Celan's poetry.

'Poetry' may be a word for sliding signification, fiction and excess. As such, 'poetry' denotes the possibility of a break with common sense discourses and received truth. The writings of Bataille, Celan and Derrida each suggest that poetry draws our attention to the groundlessness of all claims to know truth or right by displaying its own performativity or lack of foundational meaning. As such, poetry may be said to possess a majesty, which is contrary to the classic sovereign's claims of mastery. Mastery itself is revealed as fiction when confronted with the majesty of poetry. While the one who would be master posits a fiction of power and right on his own behalf and claims that he offers truth rather than fiction, poetry presents fiction as such.

The significance of a poetic majesty or sovereignty without mastery thus transcends the reading and writing of poetry. Poetic thinking calls into questions the foundational fictions of mastery. In Derrida's own poetic gesture, he cuts to the quick of sovereign hierarchies by calling into question the privilege traditionally accorded to the speaking subject, to 'man' over the other animals and to the living over the dead.

At the moment he wagers on an ethical obligation to the animal, Derrida immediately ups the ante by positing an ethical obligation to remember the dead. In the context of a reading of Celan, this obligation to memory speaks specifically to the challenge of the violently dead. While neither a critique of humanism nor concern with the politics of remembrance are unique on their own, Derrida's effort to think the two together—at times almost in the same breath—is a compelling move. It seems to me that by poetically bringing the human dead together with the animals we eat Derrida works to disrupt the idea of 'the animal' as a creature that may be killed without injustice and the common sense that we (good, law-abiding people—perhaps citizens of democracies) are not responsible for the deaths of humans who have been killed like animals.

## 2. The Master's Word

Derrida tells us that mastery is staged through the tautology of someone saying "I am right because you will listen to me... stand in fear, I am the strongest, and I will finish you off if you object" ([2], p. 109). (Note: Reference 2 is to 'Majesties,' a text composed of excerpts from the February 20 and March 6 sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign* lecture course. I cite it with fidelity to Derrida's own habit of consulting multiple versions of the texts he analyzed.) For Derrida, this assertion of right and power which constitutes mastery is inherent in speech acts, ranging from tyrant's orders, to national declarations of independence to an individual's invoking her liberty. He writes that, "There are different and antagonistic forms of sovereignty, and it is always in the name of one that one attacks another" ([1], p. 76). He adds further that each form of sovereignty "merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure" ([1], p. 282). What determines the success of a speech act that asserts sovereign right is not whether the nation, head of state or liberal individual 'really' has the rights or powers they posit, but that people believe they do.

In other words, Derrida argues, the master “fakes it ‘til he makes it.” Sovereign mastery is the fictional product of a successful declaration of sovereignty. This does not quite mean the sovereign lies. Derrida follows J.L. Austin’s argument that performative assertions are neither true nor false in the moment they are made, but only become such retrospectively [3]. Thus, Derrida says that a claim to sovereignty is better understood as a confession of faith or as a wager than as deception ([1], p. 77). The one who would be recognized as master offers a hypothesis about themselves as one who is strong enough to be considered sovereign.

The self-referential character of this discursive move is essential. Following Emile Benveniste’s etymological studies, Derrida argues that the master is the one who says ‘I am the one who can name myself and force you to recognize me,’ or in Derrida’s paraphrase, “The Sovereign [master]... is he who has the right and the power to be and be recognized as *himself*... he who is said to be, and who can say himself to be the (self-)same myself” ([1], pp. 66–67). Sovereign mastery, then, is a matter of autobiography and an ability to *testify* about oneself. Derrida explains that such testimony calls for an “act of faith beyond proof” on the part of the hearer. This call to faith amounts to saying “you must believe me because you must believe me” ([4], pp. 40, 75).

When a would-be king says he has the power to command, this claim becomes true only insofar as others accept it. By contrast, the claim becomes false when someone successfully challenges it and demonstrates that the sovereign was ‘really’ only a pretender ‘all along.’ Only then, in retrospect, does it become possible to charge the discredited person with deceit ([1], pp. 77–79).

The trick of mastery, of those who declare their right and power, lies in disavowing the performativity of their word. In pretending to possess power or right, the would-be master pretends that he is not pretending. The master says that he is already master in order to benefit from the slippage between the act of declaring sovereignty and the act of describing it. Through this slippage, power and rights that are only possibilities are taken to be facts, and the option of challenging them is concealed. As Derrida writes, the slippage between the descriptive and the performative mode cannot “be declared, mentioned, [or] taken into account” if it is to work with its full force ([5], p. 10). Derrida strives to reveal this slippage. He tells us that the ruse of claiming to simply describe right or power does not relieve the master who “intends to take power” of the need to “get people to believe” the master’s word ([1], p. 92).

Nor may the master rely on his physical strength and the threat of violence to escape this dependence. An explanation of “coercive physical power” given in a recent text on jurisprudence is illustrative: “If I care for my bodily safety, and you credibly threaten me with physical violence unless I act in a certain way, you give me reason to act in that way” [6]. This definition shows that coercion is subject to two key limits. First, the recipient of the threat must believe the one issuing it has greater power than they do in order to take the threat seriously. Second, they must believe that the life they will have under their new master is worth the costs of obedience. Only when we passively accredit the master’s claim to power and right, and so allow him to defer proving the strength and the right he asserts, is mastery possible ([1], pp. 77–79).

Derrida dramatizes the force of deferral by ironically noting his own reliance on his “accredited position as a professor authorized to speak *ex cathedra* for hours, weeks, and years” and the way this position supports his discourse only so long as his students accept the conventional fiction that he is a

person possessed of philosophical mastery: despite the fact that, as he reminds us, this fiction always “remains to be proved” ([1], p. 78).

Citing Jean de La Fontaine’s fable ‘The wolf and the lamb’, which begins “The right of the strongest is always best / as we shall shortly show”, Derrida finally shows his students not what this phrase means but what it does. Appropriating and paraphrasing Fontaine, he says “I authorize myself by reason of the strongest (that I am here, by situation, by hetero—and autoposition) to defer the moment at which I shall show or demonstrate that the reason of the strongest is always best.” Derrida then explains, however, that as soon as his students allow him to put off the demonstration, the demonstration is made. He declares, “I’ve already shown” that the reason of the strongest is best “by the very fact of deferring... by producing the event of which I speak... at the moment I announce you will have to wait a little” ([1], p. 78).

### 3. Sovereignty’s Fabled Enemy

At the same time as the master relies on his subjects to let him defer the moment when he will prove the power and right he claims, Derrida notes, the master relies on another sort of deferral. This time the master defers to the idea of an enemy who only the master can protect the subjects from. This idea of the dangerous enemy allows the sovereign to posit that he is doing his job precisely when no enemy is evident.

It almost goes without saying that ‘the enemy’ is supposed to be a threatening power of a different sort from the sovereign. Yet, Derrida notes that when political sovereigns have been attacked and deposed historically it always appears to be by competing claims to supremacy, which themselves mirror the classic logic of mastery ([1], p. 76). Democracy, liberalism and communism posit the supremacy of the people, the individual and the proletariat. If they oppose monarchical or executive sovereignty, they do not oppose the classic logic of sovereignty itself ([1], pp. 67, 76).

A consequence of the similarity between claimants to sovereignty is that when a sovereign confronts enemies, it only ever confronts other sovereigns instead of Others, strictly speaking. This is the case even when the sovereign confronts criminals or terrorists to whom no one would ascribe formal sovereignty. In *Rogues*, Derrida notes that the ‘great criminal’, a term he borrows from Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’, “fascinates, because he defies the state” through the assertion of “a criminal and transgressive counter sovereignty” ([7], p. 68).

The similarity between the would-be sovereign and its foes presents a problem for claimants to sovereignty insofar as the sovereign is supposed to be a special case. Otherwise, the subjects would be as well off serving the rebellious criminal (or even becoming criminal themselves) as serving the lawful sovereign. Any acknowledgement of comparability between the sovereign and others disrupts the idea that the sovereign is unique. Thus, each claimant to sovereignty *must* assert that it is different from its enemies.

Derrida argues that this difference is claimed on the grounds of the sovereign’s *supposed* ability to behave responsibly and the enemy’s *supposedly* reactive violence ([1], pp. 118–119). In other words, the difference is founded upon the sovereign’s assumed ability to act according to laws he freely gives to himself and the enemy’s presumed inability to enter the order of law. As an example, one may think of Thomas Hobbes’ argument that the sovereign is defined by his capacity to refrain from violence

against his subjects, in keeping with the social contract, whereas the foreign enemy who is not bound by the contract will not show restraint [8]. Similarly, we find contemporary governments insisting that they have a responsibility to protect their citizens while the West's preeminent figure of the threatening enemy, the 'Islamic extremist', is said to be religiously or culturally predetermined to attack 'us' violently [9,10]. Fear of such dangerous others is presently central to sovereign authority. Our governments and leaders berate us with the idea of irresponsible and dangerous others who only the state can protect us from.

Thus, Derrida titles his lectures on sovereignty *The Beast and the Sovereign*. The sovereign master, who institutes an order of law and, ostensibly, protection for obedient subjects, cannot be thought, except in contrast to the threatening and bestial enemy. The beast signifies the one who reacts without thought, like an animal said to be driven by instinct, in contrast to the masterful one in control of himself and, therefore, responsible for his action.

For Derrida, the binary opposition between the sovereign who responds and the reactive enemy operates on analogy with the binary between man and animal. One example of this analogy at work is found in Hobbes' warning of a state of nature in which "man is a wolf to man." This conception of man as a predatory animal, when not restrained, leads Hobbes to posit that people had best subject ourselves to a sovereign power able to keep the wolves at bay ([1], pp. 11,92).

There is also Rousseau's use of the term 'werewolf' in the *Confessions* as a metaphor for a person "without faith or law." We could miss Rousseau's wolves in English insofar as some translations replace *loup-garou* with 'outlaw.' Derrida makes much of this translation because it bolsters his hypothesis of a central link between the othering of supposedly dangerous human beings and the supposed distinction between man and animals ([1], pp. 63–64).

Similarly, Judith Butler has traced the way the logic of the wolf-man plays out in today's 'war on terror,' as those held in Guantanamo are "likened to caged and restrained animals" under the assumption that if not kept under control, they will kill or facilitate killing [11]. Behind such particular manifestations of the distinction between responsible self and dangerous other is the unquestioned assumption of the difference between those who are responsible masters of themselves (the more human) and those who are not free or responsible and, so, must be mastered (the more animal).

Derrida works to undermine the idea that we have it in our power to distinguish the responsible from the irresponsible. He points out that each would-be master perpetually insists on its capacity to make responsible decisions. This perpetual insistence, however, makes the claim to responsibility a thoughtless and mechanical action and so, Derrida argues, suffices "to confirm the very thing that [the master] is trying to deny, namely a reactivity in the response" ([1], p. 120). Derrida thus concludes that we find irresponsibility or reactivity "on both sides..." of any conflict the sovereign enters. It is an empirical characteristic of "the one who manages to posit himself as sovereign" and precisely that which "the sovereign denounces or attacks as the *bêtise* [bestial stupidity] of the other" ([1], p. 183).

Derrida goes on to tell us that our political task is to pursue forms of thinking and acting that "complicate any simple distinction between *responsibility* and *reaction*," together with the absolute divide between the sovereign self and the reactive enemy this distinction permits ([1], p. 120). He asks us to recognize that any identity and any action is only more or less reactive—more or less responsible. This position makes it possible to strive for greater responsibility without becoming dogmatic about one's being in the right. He tells us that, "having doubts about responsibility, decision, one's own

being-ethical, can be, or so it seems to me, and ought to perhaps remain, the indefeasible essence of ethics, of decision, and of responsibility” ([1], p. 119).

In reading Derrida, one must take note of the “perhaps” and the “so it seems to me”. These are not devices by which Derrida strives to avoid taking responsibility for his thought, but the demonstration of his position. They are moments when Derrida provides an opening for doubting his own mastery and his own word.

Against sovereign mastery, Derrida wagers on another more honest and responsible sovereignty. The fictional status of any claim to sovereignty provides the chance of making this wager. If “the affirmation of sovereignty [is] a performative, a commitment, an act of sworn faith... a *posited law*, a thesis or a prosthesis, and not a natural given... and therefore structurally fictional, figural, invented, conventional,” then sovereignty is “a human artefact... subject to infinite transformations” ([1], pp. 27, 77).

#### 4. The Majesty of Poetry

In the eighth and tenth sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida turns to a speech on poetry by Paul Celan in order to elaborate his hopes for sovereignty without mastery. The speech, called *The Meridian*, was given in 1960 on the occasion of Celan receiving a prize in memory of Georg Büchner. I have chosen to rely on two translations of ‘The Meridian’ [12,13]. The greatest difference between the two is that John Felstiner has chosen to translate the central word *Dichtung* as ‘poetry,’ whereas Jeremy Glenn translates the word as ‘literature.’ As the word first appears in a line indicating that what Celan is talking about “has no universally recognized name” (Glenn) “once and for all time” (Felstiner), it seems to me we shouldn’t worry too much about whether Celan is really talking about literature or poetry. I would suggest that what Celan wants to flag is sliding signification and the possibility of disrupting conventional discourse, which such sliding opens onto. This could be designated under the name poetry as well as the name literature, or even the name fiction, which *Dichtung* can also mean.

In his speech, Celan discusses the difficulty of separating poetry from the mastery of linguistic, cultural and aesthetic conventions (“difficulties of word choice... syntax... ellipsis”) [12]. Celan associates art in its subordination to such conventions with several inhuman figures; robots, which are “nothing but art and mechanism, nothing but pasteboard and watch springs”, a monkey in pants and the monstrous “medusa’s head,” which turns lively scenes to stone in order to preserve them [12].

Celan draws what he takes to be an example of poetry that transcends such art from Büchner’s historical play *Danton’s Death*, which depicts events of the French Revolution and the Terror. At the end of the play, Büchner has Lucile Duplessis, whose husband Camille Desmoulins has been executed with the other Dantonists, cry out an oppositional “Long live the king!” before the guillotine [14]. She is then “led away,” presumably to be executed, as was the historical Lucile. Celan suggests that her “Long live the king!” is not an oath of allegiance to the *ancien régime*, but a “counter-word” offered in defiance of the revolutionaries and “an act of freedom” [13]. Celan goes on to say that this counter-word is “a tribute to the majesty of the absurd, which bears witness to mankind’s here and now.” [13] “That, ladies and gentlemen, has no fixed name once and for all time, but it is, I believe... poetry [*Dichtung*]” [12].

This ‘I believe’ indicates that one can never be certain Lucille’s word escapes the conventional meaning on which it depends for its sense. There’s always the possibility that Lucille renounces the revolution in her last moments. Yet Celan believes that Lucille’s word is poetry. Derrida reads Celan’s claim that the “Long live the king!” speaks to the majesty of the absurd, rather than to the majesty of the monarchy, as a claim that there is a majesty beyond that of the classic sovereign.

“[Celan’s] recourse to the word *majesty*... consists in placing one majesty above another, thus in bidding up on sovereignty. A bidding up that attempts to change the sense of *majesty* or of *sovereignty*, to displace its sense, while keeping the old word or claiming to restore its most dignified meaning. There is the majesty of the sovereign, of the King, and there is, more majestic or otherwise majestic, more sovereign and otherwise sovereign, the majesty of poetry” ([2], p. 117).

I want to stress the phrase “bidding up on sovereignty.” According to Derrida’s logic, when one makes a claim to sovereignty one is always betting, because one doesn’t know what is sovereign until one takes a position and discovers what others will let you get away with calling sovereign. Celan’s claim for the sovereignty of poetry is no different in this sense.

Simultaneously, we have already seen that Derrida considers the positing of sovereignty to be “an act of faith,” and he does not fail to remark upon Celan’s recourse to the phrase “I believe” in his claim for the majesty of poetry ([1], p. 77). Derrida writes that “This ‘I believe’ so close to the majesty of the absurd ... seems to suggest “I believe where I believe, because it is absurd, *credo quia absurdum*. Faith in poetry as faith in God...” ([2], p. 117). Indeed, Celan provides for such an interpretation when, in defence of poetry’s ‘obscurity’, he quotes Pascal’s quip that “We don’t complain about the lack of clarity when we make profession.” In doing so, Celan redoubles the equivalence between faith in poetry and religious faith [12].

Just as the one who would claim sovereign mastery must get others to believe in or bet on their right and power, we find that if poetry is to be sovereign, its majesty will also be a product of faith. Yet, there is a crucial difference between Celan’s claim for the sovereignty of poetry and the self-positing of the classic sovereign. Celan’s “I believe” puts the central role of faith up front for all to see. Unlike the sovereign who attempts to gain power over others by stating that he is already powerful in the hopes they won’t notice the ruse, Celan posits the majesty of poetry without trying to make a fact of it. Indeed, insofar as Celan notes that poetry is always bound to convention (word choice and syntax) and at risk of remaining merely mechanical, Celan really does *wager* on poetry since he shows that the majesty of poetry remains perpetually open to question.

In “Poetics and the Politics of Witnessing”, Derrida makes a similar wager. Reflecting on his own fascination with Celan’s writing he attributes to this writing a “poetic force,” which “we understand without completely understanding it, feeling at work in the economy of the [poem’s] ellipsis a power more powerful than that of meaning and perhaps even than that of truth, of the mask which would manifest itself *as mask*” ([15], p. 87). This is another example of a groundless bidding up, where the poem’s ambiguity is read as a power that trumps clear meaning.

This “power... of the mask which would manifest itself *as mask*” is the power of a performativity that reveals itself as such. In its similarity to the master’s claim to know who or what is sovereign, this poetic force reveals the groundless performativity of all masterfully posited truth. This is the power of Lucille’s ‘Long live the king!’ which is so close to a commonplace oath of allegiance as to be factually indistinguishable from it, but, uttered in a moment when it might be an act of political dissent or

madness, gives the lie to the idea of established meaning and interpretative authority. Celan's belief in the majesty of poetry and Derrida's wager on the power of Celan's poetry, each reveals other assertions of sovereignty to be merely performative (and thus contingent, doubtable, artificial, transformable) through their explicitly performative character and their comparability to traditional political assertions of sovereignty.

### 5. The Poetry of Forgetting Yourself

We may also distinguish the majesty of poetry from assertions of sovereign mastery in another way. Celan never claims the power that both he and Derrida ascribe to poetry as his own power or as the power of the poet. Citing Büchner's character Lenz, the artist who 'forgets himself' in speaking of art, Celan tells us that "Art produces a distance from the I" [13].

Celan draws what seems to be an ethical hypothesis from the separation between art and self-identity. He tells us that "Perhaps, literature [*Dichtung*; poetry], in the company of the I which has forgotten itself, travels the same path as art, toward that which is mysterious and alien," perhaps "to speak... *in the cause of an Other*—who knows, perhaps in the cause of a *wholly Other*" [13]. One of the ways poetry wants to speak in the cause of the other, Celan argues, is by remembering "personal-historical" dates. *The Meridian* itself does so quietly when Celan takes "the 20<sup>th</sup> of January" as a figure for dates in general. Ostensibly, this 20th of January is drawn from the opening lines of Büchner's *Lenz*, but, as Derrida points out, it is also the date of the Wannsee Conference at which plans for the Holocaust were made ([2], p. 113).

This indirect reference to the Shoah must be read alongside another point at which Celan almost mentions that disaster. He tells his audience that "The reason for my persistent lingering over this subject [of art] today is probably to be found in the air—in the air which we have to breathe" [13]. Celan is alluding to a trope, which is frequent in his poetry and which associates 'the air' with the legacy of the Holocaust by way of the crematoriums' smoke; as in *Todesfuge*; where "a master" tells his victims that he will make them "a grave in the air" [16].

Taking this turn that makes 'the air we have to breathe' a cipher for totalitarian genocide, it seems to me that Celan's endorsement of poetry as estrangement from self and an approach to the other might be read as a powerful counterword against the logic of self-centred national identity, or national sovereignty, which led to the Shoah.

This interpretation helps us understand the fact that while engaged in the task of memory, Celan does not invoke his own dates and his trauma as part of an autobiographical or historical account. He chooses not to employ experience to accredit his word as the truth. Instead, I believe that what Celan offers with poetry is a sovereign insubordination, which does not elevate an identity (personal, national or popular) nor posit a universal law or truth, but remains tied to its historical circumstances, paying homage to the loss of singular others.

Derrida tells us that the majesty of Celan's poetry is sovereignty "in the sense Bataille understands it and wants to give it." A sovereignty that "exceeds classic sovereignty, namely, mastery, supremacy, absolute power, and so forth" ([2], p. 117). If we follow this reference, we find in Bataille an opposition between the master's "classical, recognized sovereignty" and another "virtual sovereignty" [17].

For Bataille, as for Derrida, classical sovereignty is the appearance of sovereignty, which must be acknowledged by others in order to exist at all.

By contrast, the virtual sovereign acts ‘as if’ sovereign independence were a reality by refusing all subordination. Against the master’s fiction of power virtual sovereignty is the assertion of freedom, the capacity to posit an ‘as if’ itself, even if it means risking death at the hands of the strong. Bataille writes that virtual “sovereignty is... the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect in order to ensure, in a general way, the laboriously peaceful life of individuals” [17].

According to this logic, virtual sovereignty cannot be the possession of the self-centered individual, but is instead the freedom that comes with giving up the preservation of self as a supreme good. Thus, Bataille tells us that sovereignty is not the “autonomous” decision of the individual [17]. Derrida takes up Bataille’s thought on sovereignty in detail in ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’ [18]. In that essay, he explains that what is “at stake” in the assertion of virtual sovereignty “is not a self-consciousness, an ability to be near oneself, to maintain and to watch oneself. We are not in the element of phenomenology” ([18], p. 334). It is only the would-be master who “works the ‘putting at stake’” that is performativity or fiction “into an investment...” by which they hope to gain self-possession and dominance ([18], pp. 324–325). Virtual sovereignty does not submit its fictions to purposes in this way.

Bataille thus argues that “we may call sovereign the enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn’t justify” and that “Only sacred, poetic words... have retained the power to manifest full sovereignty” [17,19]. For, “Poetry... is the power of words to evoke effusion... to annihilate the ensemble of signs that is the sphere of [conventional] activity,” while “giving value to fiction to the detriment of the *order of things*” [20].

On these grounds, Bataille finds virtual sovereignty in all moments that have no end beyond themselves; such as having a glass of wine (provided one doesn’t do it to refresh oneself for more work), erotic pleasure and mad laughter. In such cases, the utilitarian or rational needs of the self are put aside without reason. We thereby get a sense that virtual sovereignty may be embodied even as it remains detached from self-interest and self-identity.

To a perhaps greater extent than poetry’s explicit acknowledgment of performativity (which reveals the performativity of any claim to mastery), self-forgetting sets poetic or virtual sovereignty in opposition to the sphere of classic sovereignty. Although a would-be master might seduce the critically minded by acknowledging the performativity and precariousness of his claim to sovereignty, such a would-be master cannot renounce their self-identity and self-interest while remaining master. Classical sovereignty is expressed as autobiography or the wager on the self as one powerful enough to take sovereignty. The master desires to “be recognized as *himself*,” as one “who can say himself to be the (self-) same myself” ([1], pp. 66–67). This logic of the self-same applies whether one refers to the individual sovereign or to a collective sovereignty, such as might be claimed for a nation or a class, which is to act in the name of its own self-defined interests. Virtual or poetic sovereignty does not align with such self-interests.

Simultaneously, poetry or virtual sovereignty undermines the logic of the right of the strongest. Anyone who is caught up in the poetry of forgetting themselves will be uninterested in the would-be master’s threats of violence or offers of protection. Such threats and overtures can only be presented to a self.

## 6. In the Name of the Other

As noted above, Celan wagers that “Perhaps, literature [*Dichtung*; poetry], in the company of the I which has forgotten itself” might pursue a path, which would lead it “to speak... *in the cause of an Other*—who knows, perhaps in the cause of a *wholly Other*” [13]. Thus, his poetry remembers the Shoah and its victims, even as it refuses to offer an authoritative history or an autobiographical story of loss. When Celan declines to claim the Holocaust as his loss and as a crime against his people or to provide the names and dates we all presume inform his writing, he resists the historical ordering that would give that catastrophe an instrumental and self-serving meaning—for example, the sort of meaning assigned the Holocaust by liberal nationalists, who name it to bolster selective ‘humanitarian wars’ and police actions. Celan declines to make the Holocaust an element in the discourse of a master who says what’s what. “No more masters, nothing on the dice” he writes [22].

At the same time, precisely due to Celan’s refusal to report events, his poetic commemoration makes each reading of his poems a moment in which one may encounter the Shoah. Such an encounter is very different from the one offered by history books—which so often simply reaffirm what we know of past events for which, we tell ourselves, we bear no responsibility. Celan reminds us that witnessing is a performative act which addresses “mankind’s here and now” [13]. Poetic testimony is an act, which is not merely interested in facts and conventional wisdom, but in staging a transformative event. As Shoshanna Felman writes, “Celan’s poetry insisted... on the risky unpredictability of the witness, who does not master...” and will not be mastered by the imperative of recounting facts. The witness who does “not simply come to convey knowledge”, which is firmly mastered and numbered among their possessions, but whose testimony is an event, calling us into relation with what is spoken of [23].

Such sovereign, poetic, commemoration, opposing claims to know what the facts mean and eschewing self-affirmation, is, I believe, called for today, as we live under the sign of the “War on Terror,” and are confronted with discourses that put trauma and loss to work justifying the policing, indefinite detention and destruction of those who, we’re told, threaten our lives and our way of life.

Poetic sovereignty, without mastery, disrupts discourses that assert the needs of oneself or one’s fellows over the needs of the other. Derrida posits that to pursue such poetic sovereignty we must question what he calls, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, the “exorbitant credit” given to the concept of “the fellow,” as in ‘the fellow citizen’ or ‘fellow human,’ and the idea that justice is owed first and foremost to those who are like oneself ([1], p. 107). For, he reminds us, “The worst, the cruelest, the most human violence has been unleashed against living beings, beasts or humans, and humans in particular, who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows” ([1], p. 108).

This qualitative distinction between the fellow and the non-fellow is a matter of law, as in the national laws that ascribe more and better rights to citizens than to non-citizens, yet also, as Derrida writes in ‘Force of Law,’ of the everywhere assumed distinction between man as a rational speaking creature and the other animals understood as “the living thing” which is “living and nothing more” [24].

Reflecting on the role of ‘the beast’ in the classic logic of sovereignty, and concerned with the violence it unleashes on the living, Derrida turns to the question of the animal. In a logic in which mastery and responsibility are matters of auto-biography, of saying ‘I’ and accounting for oneself, the animal, which “cannot say ‘I’”, cannot appear as a fellow subject able to take responsibility for itself.

The ‘bestial’ other, who does not speak or who does not speak in the proper language and idiom, comes to appear only as a threatening other to be controlled or disposed of ([1], p. 103).

This leads to the conclusion that although the “animal can be made to suffer... one would never say, in a sense considered proper, that it is a wronged subject, the victim of a crime, a murder, a rape,” ([24], p. 246) such that there would be no violence or “cruelty in industrial abattoirs, in the most horrific stockbreeding establishments, in bullfights, in dissections, experimentations, breaking and training” ([1], p. 109). This is not only bad for the animals. As Derrida reminds us “[t]here have been, there are still, many ‘subjects’ among mankind who are not recognized as subjects and receive this animal treatment...” ([24], p. 246).

The groundless claim to know how to divide humanity from animals (or the more human from the more animal) is violence itself. It is an assertion of mastery that remains unfounded, because the idea of the fellow is always a fiction of “supposed or fantasized resemblances or similarities: family, nation, race, culture, religion” ([1], p. 109).

For Derrida, all of these fellowships of family, nation, race and so on are analogous to the distinction between the responsible fellow man and the dangerous animal. As Bataille similarly writes, if the human is to be distinguished from the animal, then some humans will be held to be more animal than other humans [17]. This can lead to the “lowest racism,” which for all its stupidity is still concerned with “what gives a meaning, a worth, a *sacred character* to the difference between man and the animals.” [17] Indeed, Bataille writes, “The respect due to man is meaningful only insofar as it remains associated with the impulse that led men of all times to contest the humanity of all others” [19]. Although Bataille opposes the worst violence unleashed by such contestation, he does not appear to oppose contestation as such. He maintains the traditional opposition between the human as free (capable of creating fictions and so entering into a world of laws and values beyond bodily life) over against the animal bound to its mute and instinctive existence [19]. Derrida goes further and bets that, if freedom and fiction exist, then we must be able to rewrite the conventional distinction between humans and animals.

In keeping with his view that language and law are open to reinterpretation, Derrida argues that we may reconsider and overturn the exclusionary definition of the fellow subject that dominates understandings of justice in the West [24]. For Derrida, the belief that such reconsideration is possible is supported by the fact that not long ago, ‘humanity’ was a cognate for “‘we adult white male Europeans, carnivorous and capable of sacrifice’...” ([24], p. 247). He suggests that we are moving through an “unfinished history” in which we work to redress the injustice of our ontological and social categories, even though this process cannot and should not be ‘completed’ [24].

The discussion of this unfinished history enjoys a privileged position within Derrida’s discussion of justice in ‘Force of Law.’ It is at once the only example of what he means by the pursuit of justice and serves to convince us that this pursuit is not vain. As such, the pursuit of justice appears integrally linked to questioning who will count as a fellow subject who may be wronged. Such questioning is faithful to poetry as described by Celan, to sovereignty beyond mastery and to the task of memory as a transformative event staged in opposition to conventional good sense and lazy self-affirmation.

Of course, one may object that in calling for thought on the animal Derrida simply expands the idea of the fellow to all forms of life and, so, remains beholden to the idea of the fellow which he critiques. Yet, the broadening he performs is poetic in its groundlessness. It is “obviously in breach of everything

everyone has in mind... when they talk about the fellow: fellow means for them, as is undeniably obvious... ‘living being with a human face’” ([1], p. 109). Even Emmanuel Levinas, who believed that we meet in the face of the Other the fundamental command ‘Thou Shalt not Kill,’ was not sure there is a face beyond the human. When asked if the animal has a face he only replied “I don’t know... Would you say that the snake has a face?” ([1], p. 237).

To this “serious, poetic question,” which Levinas leaves hanging, Derrida replies by citing D.H. Lawrence’s poem ‘Snake’ ([1], pp. 237, 238). His reading of this poem forms the ninth session of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, interrupting his reading of Celan’s *Meridian* in the eight and tenth sessions. In ‘Snake,’ the narrator goes to fetch water and finds that he has to wait for a snake that has come to drink before him. Derrida, following Levinas, suggests that this situation of waiting on the other who comes first is an ethical situation; not because some particular other has a factual claim to priority, but because, for Levinas and Derrida, the self is only possible in relation to others, who must therefore always come before us ([1], pp. 238–239).

What is poetic and transgressive in Lawrence’s poem is that the narrator finds himself in a situation of hospitality with a snake. He even feels honoured that this animal has visited him. At the same time, “his education” tells him the snake is poisonous and threatening. He feels a compulsion to kill it. Derrida stresses the lines “If you were a man / You would take a stick and break him now” ([1], p. 240). Here, in this poem, the moral question concerns the limits of ethics and the human. The question is whether one will be a masterful man, who destroys that which convention tells us is threatening, or will rather give the other time to go first.

Insofar as Derrida takes this poem and this question seriously, it seems to me that he bets on the snake having a face. This performative gamble on the snake is itself poetic. Indeed, Derrida wagers that “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry” and that philosophy’s failure or inability to consider the animal “is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking” [25].

## 7. Remembering the Living and the Dead

Alongside his concern for the animal, Derrida also offers what he calls a “second upping the ante,” when he writes that “it is not enough to say that [an] ethical obligation... binds me to the life of any living being” because such an ethical obligation, he wagers, also “binds me... to something nonliving, namely to... those who are not living...*i.e.*,” the dead and those to come ([1], p. 110). The concern for the dead, at least, is consistent with Derrida’s interest in testimony, which, like thought on the animal, he holds to be a matter for poetry [15]. Yet there is a disconcerting gathering here. If poetry testifies to the loss of singular others, and also thinks the animal, this brings the human dead together with animals raised for slaughter. Derrida dramatizes this gathering by inserting Lawrence’s ‘Snake’ between his two reflections on Celan.

Another text in which the gathering of the violently dead with animals is forcefully staged is J.M. Coetzee’s story ‘The Lives of Animals’ presented as the 1997 *Tanner Lecture on Human Values* [26]. Coetzee presents the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello. When invited to give a lecture at a small college, she chooses to talk about animal rights and, so to speak, on a subject beyond her professional authority.

In the course of Costello's lecture, Coetzee has her tell her audience that "it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies" and then goes on to draw a perverse conclusion from the idea that the victims of the Holocaust were slaughtered like animals. Coetzee has Costello say that industrial abattoirs are no less abhorrent than concentration camps. Within the story, this argument leads another character, "the poet" Stern, to protest [26].

"The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way" [26].

Of course, this stern reproach is correct and licit. It is clearly in line with our standards of decency and good sense. Yet, it seems to me there is room to ask how much of its good sense is itself a matter of the trickery of words, which, having been so often repeated, appear simply true. Would we now accept the hierarchy that positions man as "a hyphen between... God and Cattle"? ([1], p. 13). Would we accept the traditional philosophical privileging of the original over the copy, and the claim to be able to tell the copy from the original, which allows one to say Costello 'misunderstands' the nature of likeness?

It seems to me that Stern "the poet" limits poetry. His imagination fails to encompass the possibility of poetry as the transgression of given meaning. If Costello's belief in a relation between the human cruelty of the Holocaust and the omnipresent slaughter of animals exemplifies the easiest testimony to dismiss, might this be because the desire to preserve one's integrity speaks against putting the animals we eat on a level with the human victims whose suffering one wants to deny any responsibility for?

Derrida doesn't leave us much space for such a denial of responsibility. Poetry, justice, sovereignty without mastery; what we designate under these names cannot be appropriated or asserted with the masterful certainty of laws or conventions that would let us foreclose the questions of the animal and the dead. By contrast, taking up these questions where no interpretive rule or law permits seems to me to be what Derrida has in mind when he writes of pursuing "another thinking of life... another relation of the living to their ipseity, and thereby to their supposed sovereignty" ([1], p. 120), one which would make life a matter of "exposing oneself to death and keeping the memory of the mortal and of the dead" in a poetic gesture that resists the assertion of self and corresponding disregard for others, whether human or animal ([27], p. 103).

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