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## The Secret, the Sovereign, and the Lie: Reading Derrida's Last Seminar

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**Abstract:** This paper takes up the question of secrecy and sovereignty in Derrida's final seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Focusing primarily on Derrida's readings of Lacan and Celan in *Volume I*, it argues that, for Derrida, we should distinguish between the lie (or what Lacan calls 'trickery' or 'feigning feint'), and the secret (or what Celan calls 'the secret of an encounter'), and understand the sense in which the former implies an intentional and sovereign human subject, while the latter represents a limit to such a thing, and, arguably, to the concept of sovereignty as such. This explains, or helps explain, why, in his discussions of sovereignty, Derrida spends so much time examining the animal, on the one hand, and poetry, on the other. For, on his account, these both configure secrecy, and specifically what I refer to as the absolute secret.

**Keywords:** secrecy; sovereignty; lies; Derrida; Lacan; Celan; psychoanalysis; poetics; animals; Agamben

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### 1. Introduction

The publication of a thinker's literary remains always brings the anticipation that secrets will be revealed—not only that something will emerge that topples established readings or canonical interpretations, but also that, oddly after their death, we will somehow get to know them better or get a look into a personal life that, in life, they kept hidden or concealed. No doubt this is true of the publication and translation of Derrida's annual seminars at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris—a massive project that has begun with the seminar Derrida conducted over the final two years of his life on *La bête et le souverain*, or, in English, *The Beast and the Sovereign*. But in this sense Derrida appears to have anticipated our anticipation, for not only does his last seminar reveal

secrets about his thought and personality, it also makes an explicit theme of secrecy itself, and explores the concept of the secret from any number of directions. Thus, and like so much of Derrida's writing, *The Beast and the Sovereign* compels us to think about what we are doing when we are reading it. Or, to put it differently, it seems to reads us—to provide a running commentary on our activity or engagement with it—even as we read and comment on it.

In this paper, instead of attempting to reveal some heretofore secret aspect of Derrida's thought<sup>1</sup>, I want to consider the way in which Derrida discusses the concept of the secret in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. I am limiting my interpretation to *Volume I*, and more precisely to a handful of sessions from *Volume I*, because I want to look closely at some of the details of Derrida's arguments, or rather his readings. In particular, I want to examine and compare what Derrida says about Jacques Lacan in the 'Fourth Session' of *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, and what he says about Paul Celan in the 'Eighth Session' and the 'Tenth Session' of the same. In the simplest terms possible, my argument will be that, for Derrida, it is necessary to distinguish between the lie and the secret. A little more precisely, I will argue that, on Derrida's account, while a lie is always an intentional act, and thus implies a sovereign subject with the capacity or power to conceal, a secret is not—or, at least, not necessarily. And even though it might appear banal at first glance, I think this suggests that, for Derrida, there is a secrecy that exceeds the sovereign.

This paper, then, unfolds in two sections. In the first, and as mentioned, I address Derrida's reading of Lacan in the 'Fourth Session'. In this session, Derrida takes up one of the central themes of the seminar, namely the relationship between the human and the animal, and the astonishingly long and consistent tradition of philosophers who insist on an absolute distinction between the two. According to Derrida, despite his radical reputation, Lacan is clearly within this anthropocentric tradition. Lacan, like so many others, proposes that what separates the human from the animal is language—or, more accurately, a certain kind of language, namely a language that can be used, not only to communicate, but also to deceive. Put differently, Lacan suggests that what separates the human from the animal is the capacity to lie. For his part, and as I shall explain in more detail below, Derrida argues, not only that this is an untenable distinction, but also that, in spite of Lacan's insistence in this regard, it is precisely psychoanalysis that shows us that what Lacan says cannot be the case. For, as noted a

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<sup>1</sup> It is always tempting, when writing about Derrida, to get a little too clever. Among other extremely helpful suggestions, I owe to all three of the anonymous peer reviewers of this paper's proposals for how to resist—or roll back—this temptation. But I will, in this note, preserve something of what I cut from the earlier version and point out that, while they appear in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, both the reading of Lacan and the reading of Celan that I address here were previously published and translated into English, and have been available for some time. Thus—and as the editors of *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* point out in their footnotes—part of the reading of Lacan in the 'Fourth Session' repeats a lecture Derrida gave in 1997 under the title '*L'animal autobiographique*', which was at the time of the seminar still unpublished, but then published separately as '*Et si l'animal répondait?*' and translated into English as 'And Say the Animal Responded' ([1], p. 111n19). Similarly, an edited and abridged version of Derrida's reading of Celan's 'The Meridian' in the 'Eighth Session' and 'Tenth Session' was translated into English by Outi Pasanen and published under the title 'Majesties' in a book called *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* ([1], p. 216n20). So, while in both cases the genealogy is rather complex, my reading of *The Beast and the Sovereign* quite genuinely does not reveal any secrets, or expose anything that was not in the open before the seminars appeared in print.

moment ago, a lie is ultimately an intentional act, and therefore requires a sovereign subject—the same kind of subject that the most basic psychoanalytic concept, namely the unconscious, dismantles or destroys.

In the second section I turn to Derrida's reading of Celan, and with it, his consideration of the secret as opposed to the lie. Here matters become quite complex, and split off in a number of directions. However, I essentially try to show that, through his reading of Celan, Derrida points to two kinds or aspects of secrets—what we might call a limited secrecy, in which something is hidden and thus can potentially be revealed, and an absolute secrecy, in which what is hidden cannot possibly be revealed, but remains, as it were, impenetrable, inscrutable, and unknown. For Derrida, I think, and for Celan as well, all language involves both kinds of secrecy. But poetic language—insofar as it is uniquely detached from the intention of an author—has a particular relationship with the latter. That is to say, on Derrida's and Celan's account, poetry is conditioned by an absolute secrecy, which is also why, no matter how much evidence we might collect, or how many interpretations we might complete, each encounter with a piece of poetry is in some sense entirely new, and it is always possible to say more.

While it might not seem so initially, these claims do have a relationship with the more overtly political aspects of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, and particularly Derrida's theory of sovereignty. The issue is perhaps best approached by way of a consideration of Derrida's more critical references to yet another author in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, namely Giorgio Agamben. This is not the place to try to examine the details and full implications of Derrida's treatment of Agamben and Agamben's, by now, well-known analysis of sovereignty and the sovereign exception [2,3]. However, it is worth noting that in the 'Third Session', Derrida takes aim at—indeed makes fun of—what he characterizes as Agamben's 'most irrepressible gesture' or characteristic conceit—namely his claim to have discovered, in this or that text, the key to a heretofore secret history of Western metaphysics, Western politics, or Western history as such. 'I point this out with a smile', Derrida says, 'only to recall that this is the very definition, vocation, or essential claim of sovereignty' ([1], p. 92). That is to say, on Derrida's account, the sovereign is precisely the one who behaves like Agamben—who claims to be the first to know, or pretends to reveal secrets on the one hand, and jealously guards them on the other. Sovereignty, in other words, is not only—as in Hobbes or Weber—a monopoly on violence. It is also a monopoly, or an attempt to establish a monopoly, on secrets.

In this sense, the possibility of absolute secrecy is also the possibility of a space or a place outside of the sovereign order. The secret, as I said a moment ago, exceeds the concept of the sovereign, even and especially because the sovereign wants to contain, control, or box it in. Maybe this is the reason, or part of the reason, why, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida spends so much time discussing animals on the one hand, and poetry on the other. On his account, both the animal and the poem entail a kind of absolute secrecy—an opacity or unknowability that, in the final analysis, sovereignty cannot master or subject. In any case, it is certainly something worth keeping in mind as we begin to study and examine Derrida's literary remains. While the temptation will be to think that, in accessing such material, we are peering into a secret world, and thus claiming sovereignty over his thought, in fact our peering—our looking—will not be so clear. As much as anything else, we will be looking into an abyss—one that, strange as it seems, looks back at us, or reads and provides its commentary on us even as we imagine we are reading and providing ours on it.

## 2. Feint Trace

Derrida's discussion of Lacan in the 'Fourth Session' of *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* forms part of a more extensive, lifelong engagement with psychoanalysis—one that extends back at least as far as 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' [4], to which he refers. At the same time, it is also a decidedly partial interpretation. Derrida explicitly focuses on the early Lacan, or the Lacan of the *Écrits*, and brushes aside a whole array of debates over whether and how Lacan's project develops in the seminars that follow. Acknowledging this limitation, the issue here is less whether or not Derrida's reading is complete, or how Lacan might have responded, than what Derrida's discussion of Lacan allows him to say about the relationship between the human and the animal on the one hand, and the concept of mendacity, or the lie, on the other. As we will see, Derrida essentially maintains that, on Lacan's model, the robust difference between the human and the animal is the capacity to lie, and that, against his own explicit intentions, this compels Lacan to reinscribe a sovereign conception of human subjectivity—one that Freud's notion of the unconscious, and more precisely what Freud and Derrida call 'the trace', effectively destroys.

As Derrida explains, Lacan begins by describing the difference between the animal and the human in terms of a fairly classical distinction between 'reacting' and 'responding'. While the animal can only react to external stimuli or to the other in general, the human can effectively respond, or engage the other in a spontaneous and unpredictable conversation or exchange. To put it differently, while animal language is generally reducible to signification in the simplest possible sense, with each signifier designating a clearly defined signified, human language entails a gap between the signifier and the signified, and thus the possibility of both misunderstanding and understanding. To react is to know immediately what something means, and thus not to have any real sense of 'meaning' as humans experience it. To respond, on the other hand, is not to know immediately, and thus to be afflicted by the desire for meaning that human language sets in motion.

In Lacanian terms, and again as Derrida explains, this means that the animal remains 'captured' within the 'imaginary' stage, wherein they relate to themselves and not to the other. The human, however, is able to graduate, as it were, into the 'symbolic' realm, or the realm of what Lacan calls 'Speech' and 'Truth'—the realm, that is to say, of language and of relations to others. Thus, as Lacan puts it, while the animal might use some rudimentary form of signification, only the human is 'the subject of the signifier'. To be slightly more precise, while certain animals—from bees to apes—clearly use something like language to communicate, and thus relate to one another, only humans use language in a way that is ambiguous, uncertain, or impossible to pin down, and thus to relate to what Lacan calls 'the Other'.

But the trick here has to do with trickery itself. Lacan's point is not only that animals live in a meaningless world while humans live in one with meaning, but that the world of meaning in which humans live is first opened up by the possibility of deception, or of a fundamental lack inscribed in every human relation that is not there in animal ones. More accurately (and this qualification is crucial to the whole discussion), on Lacan's account, only the human experiences meaning, or enters into the symbolic realm of language, Speech, and Truth, because only the human can lie.

Lacan elaborates on this odd paradox by way of a distinction between what he calls 'feint' and 'trickery'. While the animal can 'feign', he says, or deceive in any number of ways, it cannot, like the

human, ‘feign feigning’, or deceive by pretending to deceive. On this account, the animal can, for example, use camouflage to avoid being detected by either predators or prey, or it can exaggerate one feature or another in order to attract a mate. It can even seek to elude a pursuer by first moving in one direction and then suddenly bolting in another. But it cannot do these things in such a way as to make the other believe that it is *trying* or *intending* to deceive them so as to deceive them, as it were, from another direction or on another level. It cannot engage in what, parsing Lacan, Derrida calls ‘second degree feint’ ([1], p. 122). To put it differently again, while animal ‘feint’ involves hiding an objective truth behind a false display, human ‘trickery’ entails playing a game of truth, or toying, as it were, with *both* the other’s expectation that I will tell the truth *and* their knowledge that I might not.

Here it is perhaps helpful to elaborate a little on the concept of the lie. For it is at the core of Lacan’s understanding of the difference between the human and the animal; and it is the concept that will allow Derrida to challenge him. The animal, then, hides an objective truth behind a false display. However, as everyone since at least the time of Saint Augustine has agreed, a lie is not the same thing as a falsehood. ‘Not everyone who says a false thing lies’, Augustine says in the opening paragraph of his treatise ‘On Lying’, so long as they ‘believe’ or ‘opine’ that what they say is true ([5], p. 457). The liar, in other words, does not simply say something that is objectively false, although they often do that as well. Rather, what characterizes a lie, and what distinguishes it from an error or mistake, is that the liar says something that they do not *believe*—something that is, we might say, subjectively false. More accurately (and this is another important qualification), what characterizes a lie is that the liar *tries* or *intends* to make another believe that they believe something other than what they genuinely believe. A lie, in other words, is not necessarily objectively false, nor is it only subjectively false. It is, if we can put it this way, inter-subjectively false.

Thus, and to explain, it is more than possible to lie while saying something that is objectively true—for example, when I am trying to deceive another concerning something about which I myself am mistaken. Moreover, it is even possible to lie while saying something subjectively true, or what I genuinely believe—for example, when I know that the one I want to deceive is likely not to believe me, or when I am operating in a context in which I know I will be perceived as a liar or a fool. The lie, then, is not merely about concealing the truth, whether objective or subjective. It can only take shape in a symbolic realm or inter-subjective world where truth is the effect of an illimitable set of expectations, conventions, presuppositions, background assumptions, prior arrangements, and so on—the vast majority, if not all, of which are unspoken and unconscious. And this, overall, is the experience that Lacan wants to deny the animal. It is, for him, the essential human experience. For Lacan, in other words, we are capable of Truth because we are capable of lying.

Now, as though matters were not complex enough, Derrida’s response (or reaction) to Lacan’s line of thought is more suggestive than definitive. He moves like a wolf, tracking back and forth across the texts he is reading, almost eternally preparing—as he says early on in the seminar, ‘à pas de loup’ ([1], p. 9). However, if we had to cut to the chase and articulate his claims directly, we could do worse than to say that Derrida asks two questions: First, can we be so certain that the animal, or rather all animals (and throughout *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* Derrida is always keen to remind us that ‘the’ animal does not exist, and that the concept of ‘the animal’ is almost absurdly totalizing), do not engage in something like trickery? And second, can we be so certain that the human does?

In the first instance, Derrida refers us to an earlier work on psychoanalysis, namely 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' [4]. There Derrida reads Freud's metapsychology through the lens of his brief 'Note Upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"', in which Freud depicts memory in terms of a children's toy made up of a carbon block covered by translucent plastic, thus allowing one to write on the plastic with any blunt object and to erase what is written by lifting the plastic up, while at the same time leaving traces of what was written on the block underneath. In this early work, Derrida recalls, he therefore 'substituted the concept of trace for that of signifier' ([1], p. 130). He also did so, he suggests, because, while we can at least conceive of the signifier in terms of an immediate relation to a signified, 'the concept of the trace presupposes that *to trace* comes down to *effacing a trace* as much as imprinting it'. We cannot think about 'the trace', in other words, without thinking about 'the effacing of the trace' ([1], p. 130). For Derrida, this suggests that even the most rudimentary signs, or the most rudimentary acts of 'feigning', whether they are those of animals or humans, are already acts of 'trickery' or 'feigning feint'.

In the second instance, or the question of whether we can be so certain that, in contradistinction to animals, humans *can* 'feign feigning' (or lie), Derrida reminds us of what we might call the basic psychoanalytic or Freudian insight—namely that the ego is not the master of the self. Thus, while it is certainly possible to lie in the conventional sense, or to conceal my thoughts behind the veil of my expressions, it is not entirely clear that anyone can do so in a *fully* intentional, wilful, or conscious manner. It is not entirely clear, that is to say (indeed from a psychoanalytic perspective it is entirely unlikely), that one can do so without leaving behind all kinds of symptomatic traces of not only what one is hiding, but of one's conscious *and* unconscious reasons for trying to hide it. In Derrida's terms, 'this does not come down to saying that the trace cannot be effaced'. Rather, '[i]t is in the nature of the trace that it always effaces itself'. This, Derrida concludes, means that nobody, be it 'God, man, or beast, is its master or sovereign subject' or has 'the power to efface *it* at its disposal. On the contrary, in this respect man has no more sovereign *power* to efface his traces than the so-called "animal"' ([1], p. 131).

We can try to put these points in more formulaic terms: For Derrida, before any individual subject wills or intends it to be so, and before any inter-subjective community or symbolic order of human language and exchange opens up the possibility for it to be so, the trace (or, if we must stay with the more familiar language, the sign) is itself tricky, or entails a kind of trickery. To repeat Derrida's words, 'the trace ... always effaces itself'. Yes, both individuals and collectives or groups can trick one another—they can intentionally and wilfully keep all kinds of secrets and tell all kinds of lies. However, no individual, and no collective—not even the collective known as humanity—can contain or control trickery as such. No sovereign can master it, or surrounded it with a wall so as to limit its motion. It is always already operative on a level that precedes every sovereign authority, as soon as there is any trace (or any sign) whatsoever. Before there is an 'I' or 'we', I or we might say, there is the possibility of trickery. This, finally, is the insight that Derrida derives from the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious, and the one that, inasmuch as he insists on the distinction between the animal and the human, reaction and response, eludes Lacan.

### 3. Secret Encounters

Another way to express what Derrida says about ‘feigning feint’ and ‘the trace’ in his reading of Lacan, would be to say that the concept of the lie cannot exhaust that of the secret. While the lie requires an intentional subject, language entails a deception, concealment, or secrecy that precedes and makes possible any such subject. We thus must endeavour to get in underneath or behind the concept of the lie—a gesture that would, we can mention in passing, have significant implications for political discourse, which has such frequent recourse to this concept. Derrida’s analysis of secrecy is, I think, designed to do just that—to think about deception and concealment in a manner that does not rely on the fantasy of a thoroughly sovereign human being. As I suggested in my introduction above, Derrida essentially proposes that we think about secrecy in two ways, or that we distinguish between two kinds of secrets: limited secrets on the one hand (or those in which something is variously revealed or concealed to various individuals or collectives, and thus can, in principle at least, be exposed); and absolute secrets on the other (or secrets that mutely gesture towards an unknowable, absolute singularity or solitude). In his readings of Paul Celan in the ‘Eighth Session’ and the ‘Tenth Session’ of *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, Derrida seeks not only to describe these two kinds of secret, but also, in some sense, to perform them, or put them on stage so as to show what cannot really be said.

The text in question is Celan’s ‘The Meridian’, a notoriously hermetic speech that Celan gave on 22 October, 1960 upon receiving the prestigious Georg Büchner prize for literature and, before going any further, the first thing to note about this text is the incredible number of secrets that it conceals, and the immense detective work that, through it, Celan left for future scholars. Indeed, and as anyone who has even an inkling of the meticulously detailed character of contemporary Celan scholarship will attest, especially as it relates to this one speech (witness, as just one example, the crucial 1999 German edition *Der Meridian, Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien*, edited by Bernard Böschstein and Heino Schmall, which was translated into English in 2011 by Pierre Joris under the title *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, and which includes, along with the text of the speech itself, a much larger assemblage of drafts, sketches, documents, and preparatory notes), Celan’s work is completely—we might even go so far as to say singularly—overdetermined by secret references and cryptographic codes.

Some time before his seminar on ‘*La bête et le souverain*’ Derrida had already approached ‘The Meridian’ in his short but dense book *Shibboleth: Pour Paul Celan*, first published in 1986. There, Derrida had taken up—among many other things—the question of dates and dating in Celan’s poetry, paying particular attention to the paradoxical sense in which dates and times, in calendars and clocks, are both unique and repeated, each one coming only once but returning as well—the way we mark singular events like birthdays or weddings with dates that return each year (‘How can one date what does not repeat if dating also calls for some form of return?’ ([6], p. 2). This, he seemed to suggest, is the secret of time, or the secrecy built into time—it is both singular and plural at once. It entails an instant, and event, a here-and-now that is also not presence, or fully self-contained, but that returns, and that is always already marked by its future return. Each instant, then, each discrete moment in time, is also a kind of ‘encounter [*Begegnung*]’, to use the word that Derrida borrows from Celan, with another time—not another time that would be an extension or modification of this time, or that this time would somehow include or anticipate in the form of a potential, for example, but an absolute or

‘wholly other [*ganz Anderen*]’ time, as Celan says as well. Time has the character, then, of an impossible encounter between singularities, solitudes, or absolute differences.

The very title of Celan’s Georg Büchner prize speech—‘The Meridian’—might be said to mark this marking of time, or the sense in which, while also lost forever, every time of day also returns with each turn of the globe. And Derrida notes this along with an incredible array of other things—including some very complicated if not entirely impenetrable things about the phenomenological conception of time in Husserl and Heidegger—in his reading of the text in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. For this reader at least, what stands out in Derrida’s reading of Celan, what catches the eye, and what I would like to dwell on for a moment, is an almost passing confession—an admission even, of ignorance.

The confession in question has to do with the date January 20, which figures prominently in ‘The Meridian’, where Celan points out that it is on this date that the character Lenz from Büchner’s novella of the same name walks through the mountains, wishing he were able to walk on his head (and thus, on Celan’s reading, imagining that he might have the abyss of the sky beneath his feet). At this moment, Celan suggests, inasmuch as he imagines groundlessness, Lenz discovers the singularity and solitude of art—a singularity that Celan both does and does not repeat when he tries to commemorate the date by writing a similar story of his own. In ‘Shibboleth’, Derrida sets this passage up as his principle example of the theory of dates just discussed—each date is both singular and repeated, and each involves both solitude and an encounter with the other. In *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, however, Derrida lets us in on a crucial piece of information—a secret—that he did not know, or of which he had been unaware, the first time he had addressed Celan’s text—namely that 20 January was also the date of the Wannsee Conference in a Berlin suburb in 1942, or the conference at which the Hitler regime first designed and implemented the ‘final solution’.

It would be hard to imagine a bit of information—which Derrida tells us that he first came across in a footnote to a French edition of Celan’s work edited by Jean Launay, which itself was published in early 2002, or about a month before Derrida’s session ([1], p. 226)—that would change the meaning of Celan’s references to the date ‘January 20’, and cast a whole new pattern of light and shadow across both Celan’s text and Derrida’s reading of it in ‘Shibboleth’, more dramatically or completely than this one. Now the date signifies not only the discovery of the singular work of art but also the implementation of the singular crime—although the word ‘crime’, and doubtless every word, diminishes impossibly what is at stake.

What I want to ask here, however, is not how the revelation of this secret might alter the way we read ‘The Meridian’, nor even how Derrida’s confession of his secret in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* might alter the way we read his readings of ‘The Meridian’ in either ‘Shibboleth’ or *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I* (although surely they both must do both), but whether or not the revelation of this secret, or indeed any secret, or indeed—if one could imagine it—all secrets of this sort could exhaust the meaning of a what Celan calls a poem, a poetic utterance, or even something as tiny and apparently insignificant as a single date like ‘20 January’. And I want to reply by saying that, for Derrida and for Celan, the answer is no. On Derrida’s and Celan’s account, beyond all such secrets that might be concealed or revealed, hidden or exposed, there is an absolute and inexhaustible secrecy, singularity, or solitude operative in any poem, and, paradoxical though it may sound, this is also what makes possible an encounter with a poem, or, if you prefer, what makes possible a poem’s encounter with another.

If we had to express this idea directly (noting that we would be doing so only to provide a passageway into a labyrinth), we could say that, for Celan, the instant a poem is finished, or the instant a poetic word is uttered, it becomes detached from the intention of the author, and from all fixed meaning, or, as Celan puts it in a passage that Derrida cites: ‘The poem is alone. It is alone and under way’. For the same reason, Celan continues, the poem can ‘participate in an encounter’ or in what he calls ‘the secret of an encounter [*Geheimnis der Begegnung*]’ ([1], pp. 262–263; [7], p. 8). Put crudely, the solitude of the poem, its absolute secrecy (the fact that it has no fixed meaning, but walks on its head, as it were, with the sky beneath its feet), is what makes possible the encounter with the reader.<sup>2</sup>

However, if this is a helpful point of departure, Celan’s claims—not to mention Derrida’s interest in them—cannot be reduced to a particularly obtuse form of reader response criticism, where the text acquires whatever meaning it might have at the moment of its interpretation. Indeed, one could probably say that both Celan and Derrida are less interested in poetry as such than in what Celan calls ‘the secret of an encounter’, and what they mean by that is something like this: the poem (which by now we must see has little or nothing to do with poetry or literature in the conventional or even the unconventional sense, but convokes instead almost any temporal relation) is the encounter between singularities—the encounter with the stranger.

However, it is not exactly correct to say that the poem is the encounter *between* singularities or *with* the stranger either, rather, the poem is the presence of plurality, of the wholly other, or of the stranger in the singularity of each time—the encounter with the wholly other that splits each time off from itself even as it remains itself. The language that Celan uses here, and that Derrida cites as well, is that of the ‘one, unique, punctual present [*eine, einmalige, punktuelle Gegenwart*]’ ([1], p. 231; [7], p. 9). That is, in a sense, the secret of this secret encounter—how it might be two in one, a divided singularity, a doubled presence.

This then brings us to a crucial passage in Derrida’s reading of Celan in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. Here, after an extended series of detours, Derrida calls us back to the principle theme of the seminar, namely ‘the thought of sovereignty’, which he glosses as ‘the figure of present and self-present ipseity’ or ‘that power to say “I” that, from Descartes to Kant to Heidegger has always been literally, explicitly reserved for the human being’. He then contrasts this ‘thought’ with what, in his words, ‘Celan signals towards’—namely:

an alterity that—within the “I” as punctual living present, as point of the living self-present present, an alterity of the wholly other—comes along not to include and modalize another living present (as in Husserl’s analysis of temporalization, of the protention and retention of another living present in the living present now, the ego holding in itself, in its present, another present), but here, which is quite different, letting the present *of the other* appear. ([1], p. 270).

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned, in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, Derrida’s reading of Celan is divided between the ‘Eighth Session’ and the ‘Tenth Session’. The ‘Ninth Session’ consists of an impromptu reading of D.H. Lawrence’s poem ‘The Snake’—one, as our editors tell us, for which there is no written transcript, only an audio recording ([1], p. 236n1). The details of the reading aside, I want to emphasize the sense in which, in interrupting his discussion of Celan, and his exposition of Celan’s theory that each poem is an encounter between strangers or ‘the secret of an encounter’, with this impromptu reading of ‘The Snake’, Derrida is performing, enacting, or staging the principle at stake. Derrida’s reading of ‘The Snake’ in the ‘Ninth Session’ operates as an example of what he and Celan state.

For Derrida, then, Celan gives us a way of thinking about the wholly other in the ‘I’—in the very singularity, solitude, or punctuality of the ‘I’, and thus before there is anything like an ‘I’ in the sense that this word or concept is given by ‘the thought of sovereignty’. He ‘signals towards’, not another sovereignty, but another experience of our being-with others, and of letting the present of the other appear—even and especially when, as Derrida puts it in another work, ‘every other is every bit other’ ([8], p. 82).

#### 4. Conclusions

My suspicion is that, when they take up *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, most will be drawn to the comments Derrida makes in the ‘Eleventh Session’ on the ‘double bind’ of sovereignty and liberty—the sense in which these two concepts both presuppose and limit one another, and thus in which any effort to confront sovereignty with a claim to liberty is destined to reinscribe the sovereign law on another order or in another way. Perhaps these passages say something essential, or perhaps they schematize matters a little too quickly, and thus cover up as much as they reveal or expose. In any case, my aim here has been to suggest another approach, or another way into Derrida’s last seminar—one that focuses, not on the relationship between sovereignty and liberty, but on that between the sovereign and the secret. As I mentioned at the outset, while a considerable intellectual tradition, from Hobbes to Weber, has trained us to think about sovereignty in terms of a monopoly on violence, or the right to make the law through acts that break it, it is just as much, perhaps more so, a monopoly (or an effort to establish a monopoly) on secrets. As with violence, the sovereign asserts this monopoly and demands this right precisely because she or he cannot accomplish it—because the secret, or some essential aspect of the secret, eludes sovereignty, and cannot be contained by the structures of the law.

Obviously Derrida’s treatment of this issue is extraordinarily sophisticated. In fact, while I am certain that there is a great deal at stake even in the small handful of passages from *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, there is a sense in which this article is premature, as the project of publishing and translating Derrida’s seminars is working its way through them backwards, and Derrida devoted an entire year to the question of the secret in 1991. Without having access to this larger study, I will conclude by suggesting that, if there is a limit to the way Derrida addresses the secret in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, it has to do with the implied valorisation of the aesthetic, or his turn, when discussing what I have called the absolute secret, towards poetry and poetic language. This apparent romanticism, or tendency to oppose the political to the aesthetic, needs to be interrogated, if not exactly guarded against. For, as a slightly different reading of Derrida could establish just as well, the secret, and even the absolute secret, has a bearing, not only on aesthetic experience, but on any engagement or encounter with another whatsoever. It is already there, before us, escaping us, not as something mysterious or divine, but as part of the most mundane world we know.

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