

THE SEMINARS OF JACQUES DERRIDA
Edited by Geoffrey Bennington & Peggy Kamuf

The Beast & the Sovereign

VOLUME II



Jacques Derrida

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I am alone. Says he or says she. I am alone. Let's hear this sentence all alone,

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followed by a silence without appeal, or a final period. I am alone. Not: I am alone in being able to do this or that, to say this or that, to experience this or that, but "I am alone," absolutely. "I am alone" does moreover mean "I am" absolute, that is absolved, detached or delivered from all bond, *absolutus*, safe from any bond, exceptional, even sovereign. Taken on its own, this declaration: "I am alone" can, successively or simultaneously, in a given pragmatic situation, with a given intonation, signify sadness or joy, deploration or triumph: "I am alone," alas, or "I am alone," thank God, alone at last, etc.

I know a sentence that is still more terrifying, more terribly ambiguous than "I am alone," and it is, isolated from any other determining context, the sentence that would say to the other: "I am alone with you." Meditate on the abyss of such a sentence: I am alone with you, with you I am alone, alone in all the world. Because we're always talking about the world, when we talk about solitude. And the relation of the world to solitude will be our subject this year. I am alone with you in the world. That could be either the most beautiful declaration of love or the most discouraging despair-inducing testimony, the gravest attestation or protestation of detestation, stifling, suffocation itself: it would be all right to be alone, if at least I could be alone without you. Being alone with myself.

I am alone with myself.

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Am I for all that *bored*? What does "I'm bored" mean? The French expression "je m'ennuie" is difficult to translate into many languages, with the exception of German where one can say *sich langweilen*. And *die Lang(e)weile* will even, no doubt, be at the center of our seminar this year, especially *das Sichlangweilen* that Heidegger talks about in a seminar from 1929–30.¹

1. Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit*, in *Gesamtausgabe. II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923–1944*, vol. 29/30, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm

But what does “s’ennuyer” mean? What does the relation to self of the “s’ennuyer” signify? To be bored [*s’ennuyer*] does not necessarily mean to bore oneself [*s’ennuyer soi-même*]. To bore oneself is something quite different from simply being bored, contrary to what [French] grammar might lead you to believe.

Can beasts be bored?

Can the sovereign be bored? Can he *not* be bored? “The King is amused [*le roi s’amuse*],”² they say sometimes, but also “The King is bored.” Is one always bored because one is alone or else can one be bored as a group, with others, intersubjectively, as the other guy would say, or else do people bore each other, which is something else, or again, which is something still quite different and almost the contrary, do people sometimes miss each other [*s’ennuie-t-on parfois l’un de l’autre*]? Was Robinson Crusoe bored? Was he even alone, this man, because this man is a man, a human and a male human (not a woman), let’s never forget it; nothing equivalent or similar, analogous, was ever, to my knowledge (but I may be wrong) written about a woman alone: like an island in an island. Was Robinson Crusoe bored? Was he even alone: when, how, to what extent, up until what moment? For the moment I’ll abandon these questions on the high seas, we’ll see where they come ashore, but you can sense that they are not simple questions of language or one particular language, of semantics or translation.

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And I come back to my first words:

“I am alone.” Says he or says she. “I am alone.”

Could someone (male or female) be alone who could not say or feel an “I am alone”? Could he be alone? Could she be alone? Could one say of him or her that he or she is alone? And could one say of whomever can neither feel nor speak this solitude that he or she is not alone, meaning—meaning

von Hermann (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992 [1983]). This course was given at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau during the 1929–30 winter semester. [Translator’s note: Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); references will henceforth be given in the text in the form “(H, German page number/English page number).” I have very occasionally made some slight modifications to the translation for the sake of consistency with the translation Derrida uses or improvises.]

2. [Translator’s note:] This common saying in French gives its title to a play by Victor Hugo (*Le roi s’amuse*, 1832), which is the basis for Verdi’s opera *Regolotto*. The play is variously translated into English as *The King’s Diversion* or *The King Amuses Himself*.

what? Is not alone in a given social bond or else, which is something quite different, is not alone in the sense that there is not even a social bond yet, no being with the other, no community allowing, precisely, the experience or even the manifestation of solitude? So many formidable questions.

Before even proposing to you a sort of protocol for this year’s seminar, let’s now, by way of an exercise, try out a few sentences, try them out like warm-up notes for one’s voice or vocal chords. You will see that these sentences already have a consonance, a resonance with the first of my sentences today: “I am alone” and if I add the complement that often rounds off the “I am alone,” i.e. “I am alone in the world,” we’ll be even closer to what will be the protocol of this year’s seminar. In it we shall be speaking of the world, of world in every sense, of every world, no less.

Three or four sentences, then, to seek a first accord between us.

First, a sentence in question form: “What is an island?” [*Qu’est-ce qu’une île?*]

What is an island? [*Qu’est une île?*]

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If you hear [*entendez*] this sentence, or these sentences come to you borne by the wind or an echo: “Qu’est-ce qu’une île? Qu’est une île,”³ if you hear them in French, if you hear them without reading them, you think you understand them, but you are not sure.

So long as you do not read them, so long as you do not have access to how they are spelled (*une île*: how do you write “*il(le)*”?), you cannot be sure, without context, almost totally isolated as you are, as though on an island, or a peninsula [*presqu’île*], you cannot be sure of hearing what you hear, i.e. of understanding what comes to your ears. An “*il*” [*Une “il”*] can designate that insular thing one calls an island [*une île*], the island of beauty,⁴ Treasure Island, Belle-Isle or the Ile de Groix. Or *The Island of Despair*, as Robinson Crusoe nicknames it on the very opening page of his journal. You remember, of course, that first page of *The Journal*, dated September 30, 1659:

I poor miserable *Robinson Crusoe*, being shipwreck’d during a dreadful Storm, in the offing, came on Shore on the dismal unfortunate Island, which I call’d *the Island of Despair*, all the rest of the Ship’s Company being

3. [Translator’s note:] Both of these are standard question forms in French (the second a little dated and more formal), both would be translated as “What is an island?”

4. [Translator’s note:] “*L’île de beauté*” is a standard French way of referring to the island of Corsica.

drown'd, and my self almost dead. All the rest of that Day I spent in afflict-ing myself at the dismal Circumstances I was brought to, viz I had neither Food, House, Clothes, Weapon, or Place to fly to, and in Despair of any Relief, saw nothing but Death before me, either that I should be devoured by wild Beasts, murder'd by Savages, or starv'd to Death for Want of Food. At the Approach of Night, I slept in a Tree for fear of wild Creatures; but slept soundly tho' it rained all Night.⁵

25 You already sense that in this single quotation, in this paragraph that opens Robinson's *Journal*, we have all the material we need for our seminar: the reference to wild beasts, to human "Savages" or "wild Creatures," the reduction of the narrator to a state of savage nature, almost that of a beast, since he has no house, clothes or weapon.⁶ And he is scared (he sleeps in a tree, having no house, "for fear of wild Creatures"); he <is> scared, that is his basic feeling, like Hobbes's man for whom fear is the primary passion, the one that originally leads to the foundation of the state and to that alliance, that "covenant" that, as we were recalling last year, can be signed only among men, according to Hobbes, and with neither God nor beasts.⁷ Daniel Defoe, we know, was a reader of Hobbes, among others.

26 But "Qu'est-ce qu'une île?" "Qu'est une île?" can also be a play on words artificially misusing homophony: "une 'i,'" feminine conjoined with masculine, the conjunction of an indefinite feminine article (*une*) and the masculine personal pronoun (*il*), *une* which is *il*. *La bête* and *le souverain*, a beast that is a sovereign, for example. Last year we insisted a good deal on the sexual difference between the beast and the sovereign⁸ but also on a certain analogy between the beast and⁹ the sovereign, the beast that sometimes seems to be the sovereign, like the beast that is outside or above the law.

5. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, introduction by Virginia Woolf (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 65. [Translator's note: Subsequent references to this edition of *Robinson Crusoe* will be given in the text in the form "(RC, page number)."]

6. During the session, Derrida added, "he has nothing of what is habitually called 'what is proper to man.'"

7. See Jacques Derrida, *La bête et le souverain, I (2001-2)*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Malet, and Ginette Michaud (Paris: Galilée, 2008), session 2, pp. 77-91; trans. Geoffrey Bennington as *The Beast and the Sovereign, I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 46-57.

8. See *La bête et le souverain, I*, session 1.

9. In the typescript, "La bête est le souverain. [The beast is the sovereign.]" [Translator's note: *The Beast and the Sovereign, I*, plays explicitly on the homophony of "est" and "et" in this phrase.]

Qu'est-ce qu'une île?

Qu'est une île?

Let's leave this question isolated, abandon it for a while, leave it floating in the air that is carrying it: we have heard it borne by the wind but we have not yet read it. And let's continue to stroll on the shore where we have just set foot. We would then stumble, *second*, on another sentence, a second sentence, then, as though written on a pebble. This time the sentence is not only audible, like the others, but appears to be legible in that it is written. It appears to be legible, but perhaps it is not so, in the sense we give to "read" and "legible." That sentence would be:

"The beasts are not alone."

Let's act as though the seminar were now starting this way, on an island, in an island, starting with this sententious aphorism: "The beasts are not alone."

We would encounter this sentence too without a context. As though on an island, isolated as though on an island on which we had just come ashore. It would be preceded or followed by no other sentence. It would have the authority and cutting edge of an aphorism, i.e. a sentence that is separated, dissociated, insularized, a verdict, a judgment in the form *S is P*, subject + predicate, a *sententia* inscribed in stone, given over, entrusted to a stone found on the beach, on an island where we would have just come ashore. And we would keep turning over and over this polished stone and its enigmatic sentence ("The beasts are not alone") in order to find the beginning, the end, its hidden meaning, perhaps the signature. "The beasts are not alone." It would look like an encrypted telegram during wartime, or an encoded signal designed to reassure or worry, and that we would be trying to decipher. We would find nothing and spend an infinite amount of time, or at least a very long time, for example a year's seminar, trying to interpret, translate, i.e. project all the possible meanings of this assertion the form of which is as dogmatic as it is negative, the negative grammar of this assertion: "The beasts are not alone."

Start and you'll see that one year might not be enough to make a complete inventory of all the meanings and all the possible implications of these five words of everyday language, which are beginning to look like the title

of a novel we have not yet opened. You would have to read the novel to find out what the title was announcing. The seminar would be that novel. "The beasts are not alone"; *S is P*, proposition, subject, copula and predicate, an assertion, of course, but negative in form: "The beasts are not alone," and we should not forget to emphasize the generic or specific plural: "The beasts are not alone," and not "The beast is not alone." So let's say that it's engraved on a stone, abandoned or placed deliberately on the shore of an island and that we stumbled upon it, that we tripped over it as though it were a stumbling block. Hang onto the stone, it's the example Heidegger takes when, in a seminar that is nowadays quite well known and to which we shall return, he compares the relations to the world of the inanimate, the animal, and man ("The stone has no world," he says, *der Stein ist weltlos*, "The animal is poor in world," *das Tier ist weltarm*, "Man is world-configuring or world-forming," *der Mensch ist weltbildend* [H, 261/176]). The stone is an example of a lifeless thing, and is the only example Heidegger gives in that series. After which, he gives no further example, he says in a general way, with no examples, "the animal" and "man." Why does he take the example of an inanimate thing, why a stone and not a plank or a piece of iron, or water or fire? One of the reasons, no doubt, is that the generality "inanimate," with no example, would have raised the question of life, which Heidegger does not wish to raise here as such, and which would leave hovering the ambiguity of vegetables and plants, which are more animate and living than the stone, and about which one might wonder what Heidegger would have said (the plant, and therefore wood, for example, living wood if not dead wood—but then what is to be said about the dead animal or the dead man, the cadaver?): would Heidegger have said that the plant is *weltlos* like the stone or *weltarm* like the living animal? Let's leave it there for now: the question will catch up with us later. When he takes up again his three questions, Heidegger says at a given moment that the subject of the comparative examination comprises: material things (*materiellen Dinge* (*Stein*) [stone]), animal (*Tier*), man (*Mensch*) (H, 263/177).

So we stumble on this stone. That's what it is to stumble, to hit against an obstacle, generally a stone that interrupts one's progress and obliges one to lift one's foot. This stumbling block [*pietre d'achoppement*] that speaks to us as if to say "The beasts are not alone" would also set us going and determine the pace of this seminar that, while trying everything in order to get past it, would find itself constantly going round in circles and winding up having to think that in the dry economy of its five words and three functions (subject, copula, attribute), in its negative and plural form, this stumbling block will have become an unavoidable touchstone.

Take note that the point will not merely be to explore the semantics of a discourse, the meaning of each of these words ("beasts," "are," "alone," etc.), but also all the rhetorics and pragmatics, i.e. all the concrete situations, all the contexts, all the gestures that can determine and transform the sense, meaning, or sought-after effect in the inscription of this sentence that one imagines only a human could have written (for example in French) and that only a human could stumble upon while trying to decipher it, like a Robinson Crusoe setting foot for the first time on his Island of Despair.

To give only one example among ten thousand of what I mean here by rhetoric, pragmatics, or discursive gesture, one might imagine (one hypothesizes among a thousand) that the unknown and invisible signatory, perhaps never to be identified, perhaps dead for an indeterminate length of time, might have meant, and said: "I am a friend of the beasts, there are all over the world friends of the beasts, the beasts are not alone. The beasts must not be alone, long live the struggle for the beasts, the struggle goes on."

But you can just as well imagine his adversary meaning: "The beasts are not alone, they do not need us, or else they do not need friends, etc.," or else "there are already enough of them, too many, even, and they have too many allies and hidden accomplices in this war we have had to wage on them all this time, our war against bestiality and the axis of evil." Those are one or two hypotheses among a thousand others as to the interpretation of this petrified statement that we are here abandoning to its solitude (for it is, like this stone, isolated, insularized, forlorn, singularly solitary). This statement is itself like an island. It is an island that for its part is both bounded by the sea and infinite. Shores without shores. One never gets to its shore. And among all the things we do not know, is whether the sentence is signed "he" or "she," by a man or a woman, which would not be without some impact on its meaning.

These sentences are exergues: I have not yet reached the protocol of this seminar. But before even introducing more directly and less elliptically this year's seminar, especially for those who are following it for the first time, you can already sense that it will have to do with island, insularity, loneliness (it will, if you like, be a seminar on solitude: what do "being alone" and "I am alone" mean?). But as being alone also means being singular, unique, exceptional, set off, separated, we shall have also to say that if the beasts are not alone, a sovereign is always alone (that is both his absolute power and his vulnerability, or his infinite inconsistency). The sovereign is alone insofar as he is unique, indivisible and exceptional, he is the being of exception who, as Schmitt says—and this is his definition of the sovereign—decides

on the exception and has the exceptional right to suspend right, thus standing, in his own way, as we were saying last year, like the beasts or the were-wolf, outside the law, above the law.¹⁰ The sovereign is alone in exercising sovereignty. Sovereignty cannot be shared, it is indivisible. The sovereign is alone (sovereign) or is not.

Third. The third sentence will be a question: "What do beasts and men have in common?" Even before attempting to respond to this question, we have to notice that these two plurals (beasts, men) are asymmetrical and problematical. Not only because the questioner (i.e. we ourselves) spontaneously and dogmatically classes him or herself among men who are not beasts, in such a manner that the question is posed only from the point of view and the supposed power, the being-able-to-question of the supposed questioner, so-called man; but above all asymmetrical and problematical in that the two plurals do not correspond to two classes or two species, to two comparable sets. All men are supposed to belong to the same species or the same genus, the human species, the human race, whereas the beasts—even if they belong to the animal realm, the realm of living beings, like man, "the beasts" designates a set with no other unity, any more than that of said animal which has no other supposed unity than a negative one, or one supposed to be negative: namely that of not being a human being. But there is no other positively predicable unity between the ant, the snake, the cat, the dog, the horse, the chimpanzee—or the sperm whale. One can moreover, in all good sense, say at least three different if not incompatible things, according to the chosen angle, about the community or otherwise of the world.

1. Incontestably, 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. 2. Incontestably, animals and humans do not inhabit the same world, for the human world will never be purely and simply identical to the world of animals. 3. In spite of this identity and this difference, neither animals of different species, nor humans of different cultures, nor any animal or human individual inhabit the same world as another, however close and similar these living individuals may be (be they humans or animals), and the difference between one world and another will remain always unbridgeable, because the community of the world is always constructed, simulated by a set of stabilizing apparatuses, more or less stable, then, and never natural, language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living beings, to construct a unity of the world that is always de-

constructible, nowhere and never given in nature. Between my world, the "my world," what I call "my world"—and there is no other for me, as any other world is part of it—between my world and any other world there is first the space and the time of an infinite difference, an interruption that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge, an isthmus, all attempts at communication, translation, trope, and transfer that the desire for a world or the want of a world, the being wanting a world will try to pose, impose, propose, stabilize. There is no world, there are only islands. That is one of the thousand directions in which I would be <tempted> to interpret the last line of a short and great poem by Celan: "Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen,"¹¹ a poem of mourning or birth that I do not have time to read with you: the world has gone, the world has gone away, the world is far off, the world is lost, there is no world any more (to sustain us or ground [*fonder*] the two of us like a ground [*sol*]), I must carry you (either in me as in mourning, or else in me as in birth (for *tragen* is also said of the mother carrying a child, in her arms or in her womb). We are *weltlos*, I can only carry you, I am the only one who can and must carry you, etc.; but are we *weltlos*, without world, as Heidegger says of the stone and the material thing that they are *weltlos*?—clearly not. So how are we to think the absence of world, the non-world? A non-world that is not *immonde* [filthy, revolting]? But scarcely have I said that than I must—it is time to do so since we are going to talk a lot about the world this year—call or recall your attention to this anything but insignificant collusion between at least two senses of the Latin *mundus*, between the adjective *mundus* and two nouns *mundus*, from which the French *monde* clearly comes. The adjective *mundus* (*vs. un*) means proper, clean, elegant (by opposition with *immundus*: *immonde*, dirty, impure, foul, abject); and the noun *immundus* means the absence of ornament; the verb *mundare* means to clean, to purify, as in French *émonder* means to clean, to take away impurities or dead branches, parasites, etc. This, then, in the lineage of the adjective *mundus* (proper). Now there are two masculine nouns, *mundus*, *mundi*, one of which means

10. See *La bête et le souverain*, I, session 1, pp. 37–38 [pp. 16–17].

11. Paul Celan, "Grosse, Glihende Wölbung," in *Aemuernde* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 93. Derrida commented at length on the import of this line, especially in *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 2003); *The Work of Mourning*, ed. and trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and in *Béliers: Le dialogue interrompu. Entre deux infinis, le poème* (Paris: Galilée, 2003); "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue between Two Infinites: The Poem," trans. Thomas Duotit and Philippe Romanski, in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Duotit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

the world, the universal, the globe, or the sky, or the inhabited world, sometimes hell, and later, in Christian culture, the created world, the secular world (we shall go back over all this); the other noun *mundus*, *mundi*, a homonym and quasi-synonym means toiletries (especially women's), ornaments, finery; but these two apparently different meanings or uses are intrinsically linked, as in the Greek *kosmos*, which also means the world, but also arrangement, cosmetic decoration. The world as totality of beings is also an order that is appropriate, proper, a good arrangement, a harmony or a beauty. So that the *immonde*, while not being absence of world, in the sense of *Weltlosigkeit*, is nonetheless not totally foreign to this meaning. Of course these semantic data are Greco-Latin, and I do not believe they are to be found in *Welt* or *worl*.¹² At least to my knowledge, and even if the idea of order or system, or organized whole, is implicitly present in both words (*Welt* and "world": OED: "organised system of the universe.")

Once we have taken this type of precaution, once we have given up on saying anything sensible and acceptable under the general singular concept of "the" beast or "the" animal, one can still assert at least that so-called human living beings and so-called animal living beings, men and beasts, have in common the fact of being living beings (whatever the word "life," *bios* or *zoë*, might mean, and supposing one has the right to exclude from it vegetables, plants and flowers); and whatever the difficulty we have in thinking, conceiving life, the limits of life, becoming-alive or dead, we can believe that these living beings have in common the finitude of their life, and therefore, among other features of finitude, their mortality in the place they inhabit, whether one calls that place world or earth (earth including sky and sea) and these places that they inhabit in common, where they cohabit, and *inhabiting* and *co-habiting* meaning things that are perhaps still problematic, and different from one living being to another, taking into account what one understands by world or earth; similarly all these finite, and therefore mortal, living beings have a certain relation to death, whatever the interpretations we give (huge problems) of their respective relations to death, and even if, following Heidegger, we were to say (which I never do) that animals do not die, properly speaking, and have no relation, *properly speaking*, to death *as such*. Without entering again into this zone of questioning (I have done so elsewhere¹³ and will do so again) no one will deny (even

12. [Translator's note:] Here and in the next sentence, the word "world" is in English in Derrida's text.

13. See among other texts, *Apories: Mourir — s'attendre aux "limites de la vérité"* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 132; trans. Thomas Dutoit as *Aporias* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Uni-

Heidegger does not deny) that all living beings, humans and animals, have a certain experience of what we call death. Indeed Robinson names death three times on the first page of his journal:

... on the dismal unfortunate Island, which I call'd the *Island of Despair*, all the rest of the Ship's Company being drown'd, and myself almost dead.
All the rest of that Day [...], saw nothing but Death before me, either that I should be devour'd by wild Beasts, murder'd by Savages, or starv'd to Death for Want of Food. (RC, 65)

So our seminar will have as its horizon not only the questions of solitude, loneliness, insularity, isolation and therefore exception, including the sovereign exception. It will have as its horizon the questions of what "inhabit," "cohabit," "inhabit the world" mean—and therefore the question of what *worl*d means. The world as a great traditional theme of metaphysics, and of theology, the world as presupposition of what is today called globalization [*mondialisation*], but also the world of phenomenological and ontological meditations, from Husserl to Heidegger, in the knowledge (I'll come back to this in a moment) that Heidegger, precisely, inscribed his treatment of the animal in an analysis of the *worl*d, to which we shall be returning as closely as possible ("this is the famous proposition I was mentioning a moment ago, that of the 1929–30 seminar entitled *Welt*, *Endlichkeit*, *Einamkeit*, currently translated as *World*, *Finitude*, *Solitude*, and the triple proposition, the triple *thesis* (for Heidegger, unusually for him, presents this as theses), the triple thesis around which we shall not cease turning this year ("the stone is without world, the animal is poor in world, man is world-configuring"), this triple "thesis" responds, as it were, to one of the three questions of the book, *worl*d, *finitude* and *loneliness*, *isolation*, *solitude* (*die drei Fragen: Was ist Welt? Was ist Endlichkeit? Was ist Vereinzelung?*).¹⁴ The second chapter of Part II, "The Beginning of Metaphysical Questioning with the Question of World," in §42, which announces the three guiding theses ("the stone is without world," "the animal is poor in world," "man is world-configuring"), opens thus: "We begin with the first of our three questions: *What is worl*d?" ("Wir beginnen mit der ersten der drei Frage: Was ist Welt?") (H, 261/176).

versity Press, 1993), p. 75; *L'animal que donc je suis*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2006), pp. 196ff.; trans. David Willis as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 143ff.

14. This parenthesis does not close in the typescript.

15. Heidegger poses these three questions several times in his seminar, especially in Pt. II, chap. 2.