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# Derrida and the End of the World

Sean Gaston

He advanced his course  
Far past the blazing bulwarks of the world, and roamed the whole  
Immeasurable Cosmos in his mind.

—Lucretius<sup>1</sup>

THE WORLD (*HAOLAM, TEVEL*) AND THE WORLD to come (*haolam haba*) are often cited in texts from the Tanakh, but in the Torah there are only three references to something like a concept of world. Two of these occur in Genesis in the descriptions of the great flood at the time of Noah. In Everett Fox's remarkable translation, inspired by the work of Martin Buber, God announces to Noah, "I . . . will blot out all existing things (*et col hayehkum*)."<sup>2</sup> This concept of the world is not created at the moment of creation—at the start of Genesis, there are only "the heavens and the earth"—but at the moment of destruction.<sup>3</sup> I will blot out all existing things. This is only the first gesture in a long tradition. Imagine there is no world, no *kosmos*, no *mundus*, *orbis*, or *universitas*. Imagine there is no world, if you can. From René Descartes to Edmund Husserl and perhaps to Jacques Derrida, the disappearance of the world has become a persistent trope in Western philosophy.

Derrida insists on a certain "end of the world" in his later work, but one should not confuse this with either more traditional apocalyptic narratives or with the Cartesian or Husserlian erasure and annihilation of the world in the name of the cogito or the phenomenological reduction as the possibility of transcendental consciousness. According to Derrida, the end of the world is the only possible response to the death of the other. It is part of the task of marking death *as* other, of challenging the tradition of harnessing "the tremendous power of the negative" from G. W. F. Hegel to Martin Heidegger.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, this announcement of the unavoidable end of the world also assumes that there is a world that must end. Derrida was very attentive to the fictions that arise from announcing the closure or the opening of a world and, particularly in his reading of Immanuel Kant, he attempted to counteract a programmatic fictionality linked to the concept of world.

However, the most significant aspect of this work on the fictions and ends of the world arises from Derrida's fifty-year engagement with the thought of Husserl. In his earliest work, Derrida questioned Husserl's notion of the lifeworld and later resisted the removal of the relation between space and time in the phenomenological reduction. As his reference to the work of Eugen Fink and his readings of Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, Derrida also retains a phenomenological difference to mark the world. There is a concept—or rather a difference—of world in Derrida's work.

### The Whole World

In the left-hand column of Derrida's *Glas* (1974), the concept of the world does not appear until he retraces Hegel's account of the flood. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that he describes the philosophical tradition of analyzing the biblical flood as the construction of a fiction. When it comes to the end of the world, we are always dealing with a certain relation to the fictional and the virtual. Derrida writes: "Like Condillac, like Rousseau, Kant and some others, Hegel resorts to a kind of theoretical fiction: the recital of a catastrophic event reconstitutes the ideal-historic origin of human society."<sup>5</sup> Glossing Hegel's account of Deucalion and Pyrrha and the Greek myth of a global flood, Derrida observes: "After the flood they invited men to renew their friendship with the world, with nature" (*G* 39a).

What is striking about this first use of world in the reading of Hegel is that Derrida is clearly paraphrasing Hegel: this is a Hegelian *Welt*. The question of whether there is a concept of world in Derrida's thought in this period is even more acute when the next instance of world in *Glas* is explicitly put in the voice of others. In a dialogue between Hegel and "the doctors of castration" (which may stand for Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan), "Hegel" responds to their call to recognize "the truly feigned" castration by remarking: "If we are not concerned with a real event, all of you must talk at great length, even spin tales, in order to describe or fulfil the conceptual structure of what you call castration; you must recount a legend, make a whole network of significations intervene; frankly speaking, you must make the whole world [*tout le monde*] of signification intervene, beginning with the relief [*Aufhebung*], truth, being, law and so on" (*G* 43a; 53a). On the following page, Derrida will formally quote Hegel using the always slightly tautological phrase, "the whole world (*monde tout entier*)" (*G* 44a; 54a).

According to Derrida's "Hegel," the legitimation of the "truly feigned" (*le vraiment feint*) requires the evocation or the construction of "the

whole world.” Speaking *as* Hegel, Derrida suggests at the very least that one can read the “whole world” as a phrase in quotation marks, as a phrase placed in parentheses, as a suspension of the “world.” In his reading, Derrida takes care not to speak of the “world” or of the “whole world” in his own name. This caution around one of the oldest of metaphysical props is compounded by his emphasis on the traps and ruses of the fictionality of creating—or ending—a world. Derrida attempts to displace the “truly feigned” fiction of the concept of world within the philosophical tradition.

How does one approach the *world* of Derrida’s world? The use of world here to denote a body or genre or corpus of thought of the world as an umbrella term to coordinate or demarcate a distinctive collection is particularly problematic. Derrida uses *monde* in this sense in his reading of Kant in “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” (1983). In writing of “numerology, mystic illumination, theophanic vision—all that indeed belongs to the apocalyptic world,” he refers to “the vast and overabundant corpus of the apocalyptic ‘genre.’”<sup>6</sup> The “genre” or “world” of world, Derrida suggests, cannot be gathered into a retrospective unity and, most of all, when it comes to announcing “the end of the world” (*OA* 24, 28). As Kant had suggested in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), to take a vantage point on the world in its entirety—on the whole world of the world in Derrida’s thought—presupposes a theological fiction. In such circumstances, one would need to act “*as if* this experience constituted an absolute unity,” “*as if* the sum total of all appearances (the world of sense itself) had a single supreme and all-sufficient ground outside its range.”<sup>7</sup>

### Le jeu du monde

Derrida’s association of world with a “theoretical fiction” and an “ideal-historic origin” in *Glas* evokes his earliest work on Husserl, and this is where we need to begin to understand his relation to the world and its end. In *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* (1954), Derrida is preoccupied with Husserl’s problematic notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). For Derrida, there is “a serious ambiguity in the concept of ‘world’” in Husserl’s later thought because it accounts for both an “antepredicative” reality and the “predicative” possibility of judgments.<sup>8</sup> He writes:

On the one hand, the world is the antepredicative in its actual “reality.” Always already there, in its primitive ontological structure, it is the preconstituted sub-

strate of all meaning. But on the other hand, it is the idea of an infinite totality of possible foundations of every judgement. In it are opposed the actuality of existence as substrate and the infinite possibility of transcendental experiences. Which makes the problem of genesis take a new turn. The world as infinite horizon of possible experiences cannot itself be a predicate or a modalization of the “real” antepredicative world. It is originally an infinite horizon of the possible, as a great many texts indicate. (PG 110)

The “lifeworld” marks a formal contradiction in Husserl’s thought: it claims to be at once the real *and* the possible. The world is a real origin or the origin of the real and also “an infinite horizon of the possible.” The phenomenological world registers an impasse. As Derrida observes, “a formal *a priori* possibility” cannot produce “an antepredicative moment of the existent or of an actual, that is to say, ‘finite,’ totality of existents” (PG 110).

On the one hand, if one begins with world as possibility, consciousness has no origin in concrete existence, and it will invent and fabricate its world and terminate in a psychological and subjective cul-de-sac (PG 110–11). This is not only a question of hermetic fictional worlds worthy of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, but also of reality being described through the “idealization” of logical concepts. In such a case, the real world and concrete existence would disappear. On the other hand, Derrida observes, Husserl still “presents the antepredicative world . . . as the always present actuality of the given,” insisting that there is also “the world of experience, in the most concrete and most everyday sense of the word.” The phenomenological world leaves us with two incompatible assertions: there is no world, there are only my fictional worlds, *and* there are no fictional worlds, there is only the one and everyday world (PG 111–12).

Thirteen years later in *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida gives us a glimpse of a concept or trope of world in his own work. Encountering the inheritance of the suspension of the world in transcendental phenomenology and its intricate connection to *Dasein* in Heidegger’s thought, Derrida can neither adhere to a clear denial nor to a persistent affirmation of world. Certainly, there are worlds that are quoted from the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Descartes, Karl Jaspers, Franz Kafka, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, which often carry the heavy resonance of a quotation that should be placed in double quotation marks. For example, when Derrida quotes Lévi-Strauss’s description of “the lost world” (*le monde perdu*) of the Nambikwara, who are called a people “without writing.”<sup>9</sup>

However, there are also passages where Derrida appears to use a concept of world in his own name. What kind of world is a stake when he writes of “the ineluctable world of the future” in the Exergue

(OG 5)? Though in this case, it is precisely a question of a “future world” or “*monde à venir*,” a world to come, a world “which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity” (OG 5). But why evoke the world at all? Why retain a concept of world, even of a world to come? If Derrida cannot entirely dispense with the concept of world, how are we to read his insistence that “our entire world [*tout notre monde*] and language would collapse” without the exteriority of writing in general (OG 14)? Does writing, as trace and *différance*, then *save* the world for us? Does it preserve that which it can also destroy?

On the first page of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida refers to a concept of writing that is “in a world where the phoneticization of writing must dissimulate its own history as it is produced” (OG 3). What does it mean to have a concept of writing that is “in a world” (*dans une monde*)? Must writing always be *in a world*? A few pages later, Derrida gestures to one of the key problems in addressing the concept of the world:

The system of “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak” [*s’entendre-parler*] through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, non-mundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the wordly and the non-wordly, the outside and the inside, ideality and non-ideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc. (OG 7–8)

The phonocentric tradition casts language not *in* the world (the exterior, mundane, empirical, and contingent), but as the origin *of* the world. Language is the transcendental possibility of the world. It is itself entirely free of the world: intelligible, necessary, and universal. Without the ideality of the *phonē* and the logos, there would be no “idea of the world.”

According to Derrida, despite the careful construction of a transcendental internal time consciousness, Husserl cannot avoid “the time of the world” (OG 67). And despite his evocation of being-in-the world, Heidegger succumbs to a notion of language “which does not borrow from outside itself, in the world” (OG 20). We are left with what Derrida calls “the *game of the world*” (*le jeu du monde*) (OG 50). The challenge of *le jeu du monde*, Derrida argues, is to think of a writing “which is neither *in* the world nor in ‘another world,’” of a writing that marks “the absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendent present, of *another* origin of the world” (OG 65; 47).

In “Structure, Sign and Play” (1966), Derrida had associated *le jeu du monde* with Friedrich Nietzsche’s “joyous affirmation of the play of

the world and the innocence of becoming.”<sup>10</sup> Derrida refers here to Nietzsche’s description of the world as a “game” or “play of forces,” a continual becoming, passing away and destruction that Heraclitus had compared to the innocent play (*paidiá*) of a child.<sup>11</sup> Derrida was also inspired by the work of Eugen Fink.<sup>12</sup> In *Nietzsche’s Philosophy* (1960), Fink had written: “The cosmos plays. . . . It plays joining and separating, weaving death and life into one beyond good and evil and beyond all value because any value only appears within the play.”<sup>13</sup> From his reading of both Nietzsche and Husserl, Fink argued that one should not take the measure of the world through things or beings *in* the world but think *of* the world—from “the *origin of the world*.”<sup>14</sup>

For Derrida, the play of the world suggests that one can avoid thinking of world within the traditional Aristotelian structure of container and contained. As he remarks in a discussion from 1979: “On the basis of thinking such as Nietzsche’s (as interpreted by Fink), the concept of play, understood as the play of the world, is no longer play *in* the world. That is, it is no longer determined and contained by something, by the space that would comprehend it.”<sup>15</sup> Twenty years after *Of Grammatology*, Derrida described Heidegger’s notion of “the play of the world” in *Of Spirit* (1987) as a concentric “becoming-world of world” that always tends toward “collecting together” (*Versammlung*).<sup>16</sup> Derrida also implies that Heidegger’s use of world remained tied to the assumption of a “clear difference between the open and the closed” (*OS* 54). How does one open or close a world?

Derrida suggests in *Of Grammatology* that language may relieve us of unrelenting reality, writing may evoke times long gone or even create wondrous fictional narratives, but it cannot engender another world, a clear escape or unbroken repose that is *always* elsewhere. If there is a world in *Of Grammatology*, it is a world that provides neither ground nor pure possibility but is also a world that cannot be avoided or circumvented. We never stop passing through, finding ourselves in the midst of that which we are neither truly in nor truly above.

### What Can the World Do?

It is at this point that we need to return to Derrida’s reading of Husserl and his lifelong fascination with the phenomenological reduction.<sup>17</sup> In “Et Cetera . . .” (2000), written some forty-six years after *The Problem of Genesis*, Derrida was still emphasizing the importance of the phenomenological reduction for his work, as a putting in parenthesis or placing in quotations that marks a relation to “a heterogrammatic

writing.” He also described the phenomenological reduction as a series of multiplying reductions that leaves language polyphonic and reinforces “the *impossibility* of an absolute metalanguage.”<sup>18</sup> Derrida’s reaction to the phenomenological reduction can be described as both a profound resistance to an attempt to put aside the world as an index of space and time and the evocation of the world as the chance of a total destruction. Derrida resists the disappearance of the world *and* imagines its end.

In *The Problem of Genesis* he implies—perhaps under the influence of Jean Hyppolite—that Husserl’s phenomenological reduction should be understood as a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. As he writes of Husserl: “More and more, he insists on the difference that separates neutralization from pure and simple negation. Reduction is not skeptical doubt or ascetic retreat into immanence as lived experience. It conserves what it suspends. It maintains the ‘sense’ of the object whose existence it ‘neutralizes’” (PG 71). Derrida goes on to highlight that Husserl’s reduction of “the ‘thesis’ of the natural attitude” begins with the world, with the “spatio-temporal world” as “a total world,” or “the whole of being in its infinity and its incompleteness” (PG 72). It is important to point out here, as Geoffrey Bennington has often done, that for Derrida the concept of incompleteness remains within the teleology of the phenomenological analysis.<sup>19</sup>

As Maurice Blanchot observed in *The Space of Literature* (1955), commenting on Paul Valéry’s celebration of the “infinite quality” of the literary work: “That the work is infinite means, for him, that the artist, though unable to finish it, can nevertheless make it the delimited site of an endless task whose incompleteness develops the mastery of the mind, expresses this mastery, expresses it by developing it into the form of power.”<sup>20</sup> Infinite, incomplete, defined, as Derrida writes, by a time and space that are “indistinctly mixed,” the world according to Husserl constitutes “my natural environment.” It is this natural world that Husserl submits to the uplifting, the negation and conservation, of the phenomenological reduction.

In his attempt to distinguish the perception of physical things from mental processes in *Ideas I* (1913), Husserl insists that while the positing of the pure Ego is always necessary, the positing of the world is always contingent.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to write: “No conceivable proofs gathered from experiential consideration of the world could make the existence of the world certain for us with an absolute assurance . . . the possibility of the non-being of the world is never excluded. The absolute being of mental processes is in no respect altered thereby; in fact, they always remain presupposed by all of that” (I 103). In his 1962 introduction to Husserl’s *The Origin of Geometry*, Derrida attempts to register the con-



tingency of the “world” without subscribing to what Husserl calls “the essential detachableness of the whole natural world from the domains of consciousness” (I 104).

In §49—which from his first to last works Derrida referred to as the “famous” or “celebrated” section of *Ideas*—Husserl insists that “a veritable abyss yawns between consciousness and reality.” He writes: “*While the being of consciousness, of any stream of mental processes whatever, would indeed be necessarily modified by an annihilation of the world of physical things its own existence would not be touched*” (I 110). This end of the world, or this *fiction* of the end of the world as Derrida emphasizes, registers a pure consciousness “to which nothing is spatiotemporally external and which cannot be within any spatiotemporally complex” (I 112, PG 79, OG 95–96).

One can imagine *différance* and all its contextual reformations in Derrida’s work as a sustained reaction to this profound exclusion of the spatiotemporal—of spacing and temporalization—in the name of the disappearance of the world. As he observed in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967): “The going-forth [*la sortie*] ‘into the world’ is also primordially implied in the movement of temporalization. ‘Time’ cannot be an ‘absolutely subjectivity’ precisely because it cannot be conceived on the basis of a present and the self-presence of a present being. Like everything thought under this heading, and like all that is excluded by the most rigorous transcendental reduction, the ‘world’ is primordially implied in the movement of temporalization.”<sup>22</sup> If the annihilation or nullifying (*Vernichtung*) of the world, to use Husserl’s phrase, leads to a grand *Aufhebung* of a relation between space and time (of *différance* as space becoming time and time becoming space), one can also see Derrida attempting to work out the possibility of the “end” of the world, or rather the threat of its destruction, in which contingency does not merely confirm the necessary.

If the inseparability of the relation between time and space cannot be excluded from the possibility of consciousness nor reduced to a matrix of external reality, what does the “world” then do? Husserl entitled §49 “Absolute Consciousness as the Residuum After the Annihilation of the World” (I 109). In the wake of what Derrida called “a certain dissidence” in his relation to phenomenology, one could begin to think of the “world” as the *residuum*, the remainder that resists, that accounts for the chance or risk of a destruction that interlaces the Husserlian division between the “external” world and “a complex of *absolute being* into which nothing can penetrate and out of which nothing can slip” (I 112).<sup>23</sup>

Derrida opens his introduction to *The Origin of Geometry* with the familiar problem of the lifeworld as both “sensible” and “the unity of

ground and horizon" (*EHO* 25–26). At the same time, he is more interested in the world as the "infinite horizon of every possible experience" (*EHO* 82–83), of a world in which all objects can be taken as theorems. He argues that the phenomenological world is part of the ideality of language and of the problem of writing, which is also "in the world." In other words, writing *catches* on the junction between the world as an ideal possibility and as an empirical and historical reality. In the later *Speech and Phenomena*, as is well known, Derrida will contrast this to the voice as a unique auto-affection that is both untouched by the world and the possibility or unity of any world (*SP* 6, 79).

This tells us what writing can do, but not what the world can do. What can the world do? As Derrida remarks, "Factual destruction does not interest Husserl at all," and he brings to his reading of the origin of geometry the recognition that writing is part of "the factual worldliness of inscription" (*EHO* 94). Writing is an aspect of the constant danger of "worldly accident," of a contingent chance, destruction, and death that differs from the ideality of the truth, of the historicity of ideal objects that remains "absolutely independent of the whole world" (*EHO* 94–96). Husserl cannot think of the destruction of all existing things.

In contrast, within the context of the vulnerability and contingency of all inscriptions, of something less than the uninterrupted transmission of the history of the truth, Derrida can *imagine* "a world-wide burning of libraries" (*EHO* 94). As the Torah first suggested, the concept of world registers at once the reality, the possibility, and the fiction of the destruction of the world. Derrida's early response to Husserl raises a lingering question: is the concept of world as *residuum* only announced by imagining a total destruction, a "catastrophe of monuments," that destroys *all* existing things—including this work, this name (*EHO* 94)?

### As if . . . the world

In August 2002, Derrida delivered the paper "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come," placing *le monde* in the title in quotation marks. As far as I am aware, this is the only work by Derrida before 2003 that has *le monde* in the title. Placing the world in quotation marks, of course, evokes the phenomenological reduction. But Derrida was also thinking of Kant here, and of a particular idea in the Kantian sense that reconfigures the world as a legitimated or programmatic fiction and sustains a persistent self-evidence or presence.<sup>24</sup> Derrida's interest in the Kantian idea of the world also raises the question of the relation between fiction, the world, and death in his late work.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that the transcendental ideas of the self, the world, and God are not constitutive but regulative principles. There is no direct object from experience that refers us to these ideas. As regulative principles, the ideas of the self, the world, and God are discerned through an indirect schema that is ordered by “the systematic unity of the manifold of empirical cognition” (CPRA670–71/B698–99). As Derrida noted, Kant includes within the regulative unity of these transcendental ideas an indispensable “as if.” The regulative unity of the ideas of self, world, and God both facilitate and rely on a fiction of the suspended reality of the self, the world, and God. As Derrida remarks in the 1999 paper “The University Without Condition,” Kantian reflective judgment operates “as if” (*als ob*) an understanding contained or comprehended the unity of the variety of empirical laws.<sup>25</sup> One must act *as if* there could be a fictional systematic worldlike unity of an empirical unity. At the same time, as Friedrich Schelling suggested, following Kant one could both act as if there is a world and as if there is no world.<sup>26</sup>

In “The Reason of the Strongest” (2002), Derrida recalls, “the idea of *world* remains a *regulative idea* for Kant.”<sup>27</sup> We can only grasp the idea of the world *as if* it is the world, if we take “nature in general” as a pure systematic unity that has no relation to an object of experience (CPR A685/B713). The Kantian logic is wonderful here: we take an idea and treat it *as if* it gives us the object of experience which gives us the true gift: a pure transcendental idea. For Kant, this not only gives us the freedom to make use of nature as an idea of world, but it also reinforces that the world is an idea that “opens up new paths into the infinite” (CPR A680/B708).

The world as an idea in the Kantian sense raises a difficult question when we turn to Derrida’s marked emphasis on *la fin du monde*. For Kant, when it comes to the idea of world “one leaves it entirely open what sort of constitution this ground, which eludes our concepts, might have” (CPRA681/B709). As we shall see, *la fin du monde* may not conjure a constituted ground, but it does perhaps rely on the chance of a de-constitution, of an accidental catastrophic destruction or an implacable relation to death. Is it also notable that Derrida did not include the “as if” in his account of the *la fin du monde* in “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem” (2003) or in the *avant-propos* to *Chaque fois unique* (2003)? If we link the death of the other to the end of the world, as Derrida suggests in these late works, can we avoid finding ourselves taking the death of the other *as if* it is the end of the world? What does it mean to *exclude* “some virtualization,” which Derrida argues is always at work when it comes to the trace, in thinking

the death of the other as the end of the world (*UWC* 211)? Derrida is insistent in “Rams”: “Death is nothing less than an end of *the* world.”<sup>28</sup>

In “The University Without Condition,” Derrida distinguishes between a regulative or programmatic “as if,” a domestication through “legitimate fictions,” that can “already be read, decoded, or articulated *as such*” and an irrepressible and nonprogrammable “if” (*UWC* 233–34). For Derrida, such an “if” would not be confined to the categories of the conditional and the possible. He contrasts this “if” without condition to the traditional metaphysical gesture of the “as such” which links Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. The authority of the *as such* founds “every philosophy and justifies every ontology as well as every phenomenology” (*UWC* 234). As Derrida suggests in *La bête et le souverain* (2002–2003), the *as such* is always the privilege of opening and manifesting, of making manifest, of making the other manifest.<sup>29</sup> For Heidegger, Derrida argues in this final seminar, the world is the manifestation of being *as such* for human *Dasein*, a manifestation that the animal cannot access (*LB* 306).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the attempt to put an end to the “as such” coincides with a certain end of the world in Derrida’s reading of Heidegger in his 1992 paper “Aporias.” For *Dasein*, Derrida argues, “the disappearance, the end, the annihilation of the *as such*, of the possibility of the relation to the phenomenon *as such* or to the phenomenon of the ‘as such’ is “nothing less than the end of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Eleven years later in “Rams,” Derrida repeats this phrase with more emphasis: “Death is nothing less than an end of *the* world.” Death is nothing less than the end of the *as if* of the *as such*—*as* the end of the world. But can I think the end of the world without inviting the resurrection or salvation of the world-concepts or world-dreams of the world and its end?

### La fin du monde

Imagine there is no world, if you can. It seems that this is what the world does for Derrida, from his earliest writings on Husserl in 1953 to his final readings of Paul Celan and Heidegger in 2003. In *La bête et le souverain*, in what would be his final seminar session in late March 2003, Derrida argues that one could take world to describe that in which all humans and animals live and die (*LB* 306). Warning against taking this as a simple containment, loss of difference, or privileging of life, he nonetheless evokes the unshakable possibility or risk that *there is no world*, of an islandlike solitude that not only denies a world shared with others but the existence of any world.<sup>31</sup> One of the possible responses to this absence—without salvation—of a present world is to return to Kant

and to act “as if we inhabit the same world,” marking the traces of the coming and going of this “fragile convention” (*LB* 368–70).

*La fin du monde* marks the reality and the possibility or necessary fiction of a destruction that is at once unthinkable total and entirely individual. In meditating in “Rams” on a line from Celan, “*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*,” Derrida once again responds to the question of the death of the other, to death and the other. He writes:

For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of *the* world. Not *only one* end among others, the end of someone or of something *in the world*, the end of a life or of a living being. Death puts an end neither to someone in the world nor to *one* world among others. Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not.

The survivor, then, remains alone. Beyond the world of the other, he is also in some fashion beyond or before the world itself. In the world outside the world and deprived of the world. At the very least, he feels solely responsible, assigned to carry both the other and *his* world, the other and *the* world that have disappeared, responsible without world (*weltlos*), without the ground of any world, thenceforth, in a world without world, as if without earth beyond the end of the world. (*R* 140)

This single and singular death of the other is the end of the world *and*, for a time, I find myself beyond the world, before the world, and without the world. Imagine there is no world, Derrida suggests, *and* there is always a world, the world that I am beyond, before, or without. But why do I, or why does the other, have a world? Why do I need a world or even *the* world or its end?

After his paper on Hans-Georg Gadamer in February 2003, Derrida returned to the end of the world in the *avant-propos* to *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*. The death of the other should be distinguished from the *possibility* of a world that can be encompassed, a world which can appear to and be known in its entirety by a living survivor.<sup>32</sup> The death of the other is rather “*la fin du monde en totalité*,” “the end of the whole possible world” (*CFU* 9). Once again, it is a question of imagining or accepting total destruction. Importantly, Derrida adds that it is also a matter of a total destruction of the entire world each time that there is a death of the other. *Each time* total destruction: an infinite, helpless repetition of the singular. Derrida ends his opening paragraph with an audaciously short sentence of summation that I would read as a knowing joke, as recollection of other worlds and other voices that had been held

in parentheses: “*voilà ce que voudrait dire ‘le monde.’*” That’s it, that’s what “the world” means, or means to say. That’s the whole story.

This impossibly short summation also brings to mind the old but persistent echo of Derrida’s analysis of “the hyperbolic audacity of the Cartesian Cogito” as the common source of both reason and madness, a common source that is announced by Descartes declaring, always excessively, the end of the world. As Derrida had observed forty years earlier, for Descartes, “even if the totality of the world does not exist, even if nonmeaning has invaded the totality of the world, up to and including the very contents of my thought, I still think, I am *while* I think.”<sup>33</sup> As I declare the perfect end of the world in the name of reason, I am also mad. For Derrida, the madness of the cogito also has an echo in the phenomenological reduction, which he describes in “Rams” as “the most necessary, the most logical, but also the most insane experience of a transcendental phenomenology” (R 160).

Having criticized Husserl’s use of the world as the origin of the possible and the possibility of horizon and unity in the *avant-propos* to *Chaque fois unique*, Derrida also retains here—without relying on unity or horizon—the notion of the end of the world as possibility. The end of the world is “the always open possibility, indeed the necessity of the possible non–return”: the end of the world as the *possibility* of an original finitude or total destruction (CFU 11). At the same time, having announced the world and its end in “Rams,” Derrida is interested in the “distancing” and disappearance of the world in Celan’s work (R 153, 158).

It is Celan who imagines that there is no world as the possibility and the necessity of my carrying you and the world after you have died (R 160). Atlaslike, I will carry the world over and over again, after each and after all the deaths. Derrida writes: “No world can any longer support us, serve as mediation, as ground, as earth, as foundation or as alibi” (R 158). The world becomes “an alibi or evasive transcendence,” Derrida had observed elsewhere, when I invoke “an *other world*” (C 57). The irremediable loss of this “*other world*” interrupts good conscience. After the death of the other and the end of the world, one cannot avoid the solitude of the survivor: “The survivor, then, remains alone.” Whether it is Celan or Derrida speaking as “Celan,” this insistence on solitude, and the link between one death and the destruction of the world, was articulated long ago by Talmudic scholars as they too studied Genesis without rest: “The reason Adam was created alone in the world is to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had destroyed the entire world; and whoever keeps alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had preserved the entire world.”<sup>34</sup>

## In/Of the World

In the last pages of his reading of Celan, Derrida turns, once again, to the worlds of Husserl and Heidegger. Like Celan, Husserl and Heidegger also imagine that there can be no world, that the world can disappear to announce the pure ego of transcendental phenomenology or that one can discern a hierarchy of access to the world amongst things and living beings (*R* 160–63). Derrida had noted in *Of Spirit* that Heidegger's concept of world—the world *for Dasein*—consistently relies on the exclusion of stones, plants, and animals (*OS* 48–57).<sup>35</sup> He had also already traced in *Glas* Hegel's association of the Jew with a stone that has no feeling, no spirit—and no world (*G* 47a, 76a–79a). There is a tradition of imagining that there is no world and we should not confuse this with Derrida's work.

But again, why do I need a world or even the world that will disappear or be lost, the world that has ended of the other that I must carry without the world to offer me any support? Why, godlike, do we continue to imagine, *creatio ex nihilo*, that there is an individual world or island or a total world that can be entirely destroyed (*LB* 31)? Is it really, as Derrida suggests in *Chaque fois unique*, only a question of thinking about “death” (*CFU*9)? How far does Derrida remain tied throughout his work to the terms of reference or frameworks of phenomenology? To what extent—and in a manner that is different from his relation to Hegel, Heidegger, and Lévinas—is Derrida the relentless other of Husserl?

In his introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*, Derrida had noted that phenomenology is founded on a clear difference between what appears and “the regulative possibility of appearing.” Husserl links this possibility of appearing to an “idea in the Kantian sense,” which does not itself appear. Not *x* but the possibility of *x*, the Kantian idea secures the unseen origin or pure possibility of phenomenology—which cannot itself undergo a phenomenological analysis. This pure possibility, this untouchable origin coordinates the phenomenological difference between the visible (finite evidence) and seeing (possibility in general). This difference also accounts for the possibility “of the world in general” (*EHO*G 138–41).

Derrida remained remarkably faithful to this difference as a framework for reading the phenomenological tradition. As one of the voices observes in the dialogue at the outset of *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000), there is a difference between the “*visible* (things or objects in the world)” and “*seeing* (at the origin of the world).”<sup>36</sup> When it comes to the world, there is a difference between *in* the world (*dans le monde*) and *of* the world (*du monde*). It is in marking, or even remarking this

phenomenological difference, that Derrida's work retains something like world, world that cannot simply be called *a* world or *the* world.

As we have seen, Derrida marks this difference in *Of Grammatology* by referring to the work of Eugen Fink. Fink illustrates in many ways the problem of thinking *of* the world that Derrida takes up once again in his reading of Nancy in *On Touching*. By thinking of the world neither in the world nor in another world, Fink's reading of Nietzsche suggests that world is no longer a concept that contains or is contained. It is no longer thought in the old matrix of the universe (the uncontained that contains), the world (the contained that contains), and things and beings (the contained).<sup>37</sup> Thinking *of* the world, one might think of the possibility "in general" of the play of becoming and destruction but also of the uncontained, of "the midst" *as* the uncontained. At the same time, Fink was closely associated with Husserl and his argument for thinking "at the origin of the world" can also be taken as the possibility in general of "the transcendental subject" discovering itself "as the foundation of the world."<sup>38</sup> In his 1979 discussion of Fink and Nietzsche, Derrida emphasizes, "once play is no longer simply play in the world, it is also no longer the play of someone who plays."<sup>39</sup>

In the prefatory note to *On Touching*, Derrida remarks that he has most likely often used such "*gros mots*" as "*le monde*" in his own work in an inexact fashion (*OT* 7). One can take this as a reminder that it is extremely difficult to renounce or reject the concept of world (as Nancy does to some extent) and as a play on Nancy's excessive use of the term exactitude, which Derrida appears to allow both as an excess and as an echo of a phenomenological idealization (*OT* 26, *EHO* 133). Derrida implies that Nancy's evocation of a spacing to dislodge the concept of cosmos reoccupies a phenomenological space.

As Derrida had noted in *Of Spirit*, worlds are somehow always opening and closing; this difference is an index of the metaphysics of world. For Derrida, Nancy's equation of *spacing* with "coming into the world" as "self-touching"—of spacing as "the world of bodies" that produces the world *as* a "rejection or self-expulsion" of the cosmos—still assumes that world is "opened."<sup>40</sup> More tellingly, Derrida reads Nancy's sense of the world (*le sens du monde*) in terms of a phenomenological gesture *of* the world, of possibility in general: it is a "delivery into the world [*la mise au monde*]" as a rejection, but also of the possibility of rejection in general" (*OT* 58). The sense *of* the world describes "the possibility of the world as possibility of 'its own rejection'" (*OT* 56). Nancy ascribes a finitude *to* a possibility in general, leaving us with the *possibility in general* of a finitude, *a* world—at the origin of the world (*OT* 262, *EHO* 141).



In his *avant-propos* to *Chaque fois unique*, Derrida returned to his reading of Nancy. Nancy, he argues, does not accept “the end of *the* world” (*la fin du monde*). He still holds on to “the end of *a* world” (*la fin d’un monde*) and this resistance to total destruction, this retaining of the possibility in general of an individual end, is also a bid for a consolation or resurrection that gestures to something that precedes and exceeds this total destruction (CFU 11). Derrida once again frames this critique of Nancy in terms of the possibility of total destruction. It is a matter of recognizing “the always open possibility, indeed the necessity of the possible non-return, of the end of the world as end of all resurrection” (CFU 11).

In the last pages of *On Touching*, Derrida returns to the difference between the visible and seeing, between *in* and *of* the world. In the midst of a long sentence, which starts with “I believe and accept,” he draws out the differing relations of this difference. On the one hand, he writes: “One cannot see anything in the world . . . without the possibility, at least, of a reflecting surface that makes visible.” Seeing is blind “in the world”: if it is to see it must admit “the possibility” of the visible. Possibility in general “at the origin of the world” (which cannot be seen or touched in phenomenology) must be seen or touched if it is to be registered “in the world.”

On the other hand, Derrida adds a parenthetical comment in the midst of this passage, an observation that is placed in parenthesis as it talks about world. He writes: “One cannot see anything in the world (this is the origin and the possibility of the world that only a world can also give).” Seeing (possibility in general, possibility of the world) is blind without the visible (finite evidence) in the world, but “in the world” is itself also *already* a structure “of the world,” of “the origin and the possibility of the world,” of an unseen possibility in general. One could say that Derrida never stopped touching this clear difference, of disturbing the not *x* but the possibility of *x* as the pure possibility of Husserlian phenomenology. At the same time, he maintains this difference. To assert the end of *the* world, Derrida must also remark the difference *in* and *of* the world. As the other of Husserl—as a differing and never absolute other—Derrida holds on to both the world and its end.

In “Violence and Metaphysics” (1964), countering Lévinas’s reading of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, Derrida had explained that “the other as transcendental other” should be seen as “other absolute origin and other zero point in the orientation of the world.” Husserl, he added, “seeks to recognize the other as Other only in its form as ego, in its form of alterity, which cannot be that of things in the world. If the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter *ego*, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world.”<sup>41</sup> Nearly forty years later

in “Rams,” he again explained, “When the world has retreated [after the phenomenological reduction] . . . the *alter ego* that is constituted in the ego is no longer accessible in an ordinary and purely phenomenological intuition” (R 161).<sup>42</sup> The other *as other* is both the origin and the end of the world.

In his discussion at Villanova in 1997 with Jean-Luc Marion, Derrida cites this same passage from the *Cartesian Meditations* again and describes it as “a limit of phenomenology that appears within phenomenology.” He goes on to define his own work as an attempt “to check the limits and possibility of phenomenology.”<sup>43</sup> Challenging what he sees as Marion’s attempt at a pure escape from phenomenology that also claims to be a pure phenomenology, Derrida concludes: “I would like to remain phenomenological in what I say against phenomenology.” Always the other of Husserl, the other *as other* becomes for Derrida the possibility, the memory, the fiction, and even the necessity of repeating the difference at the origin and at the end of the world. And one can still ask, after this heritage of the world, this world heritage from Husserl to Derrida, *why world?* Do we still need a concept of world? Do we still need to speak of the world or its end?

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NOTES

- 1 Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (London: Penguin, 2007), 1:72–74. I would like to thank William Watkin for reading an earlier version of this article.
- 2 *The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Everett Fox (London: Harvill, 1995), Genesis 6:4; *The Holy Scriptures*, ed. Harold Fisch (Jerusalem: Koren, 1992), Bereshit 6:4.
- 3 *The Five Books of Moses*, Genesis 1:1.
- 4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), § 32.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Evanston: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), 37a (hereafter cited in text as *G*); *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).
- 6 Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” *Oxford Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1984): 14 (hereafter cited in text as *OA*).
- 7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), A 673 / B 701 (hereafter cited in text as *CPR*).
- 8 Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 105, 110 (hereafter cited in text as *PG*).
- 9 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), 107, 110 (hereafter cited in text as *OG*); *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 157.
- 10 Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 292.
- 11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Greg Whitlock (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), 70–74; *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner,

trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 38; *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 729; Heraclitus, *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Barnes (London: Penguin, 1987), 102. See also Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 250, 333n21.

12 *Of Grammatology*, 326n14. Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928–1938* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 174–223, 370–71, 442–43.

13 Eugen Fink, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, trans. Goetz Richter (1960; London: Continuum, 2003), 172. See also, Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960).

14 Fink, "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism," in *The Phenomenology of Husserl: Selected Critical Readings*, ed. and trans. R. O. Elveton (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), 95–100.

15 Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988), 69. See also Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), 42n31 (hereafter cited in text as *EHOG*); Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2002), 21–22, 28, 226.

16 Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 52 (hereafter cited in text as *OS*).

17 Patrick O'Connor, "There is No World Without End (*Salut*): Derrida's Phenomenology of the Extra-Mundane," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 39, no. 3 (2008): 314–30.

18 Derrida, "Et Cetera . . . (and so on, und so weiter, and so forth, et ainsi de suite, und so überall, etc.)," in *Derrida, Cahiers de l'Herne* 83, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Paris: L'Herne, 2004), 29–30, 27. My translation.

19 Geoffery Bennington, *Deconstruction is not what you think . . . and other short pieces and interviews* (e-book: 2005), 242.

20 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Evanston: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1982), 21–22.

21 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 102 (hereafter cited in text as *I*).

22 Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 86; *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: P. U. F., 1993), 96 (hereafter cited in text as *SP*).

23 Derrida, *Foi et Savoir: suivi de Le Siècle et le Pardon* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 16. My translation.

24 Derrida, "Le 'Monde' des Lumières à venir (Exception, calcul et souveraineté)," in *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 171. My translation.

25 Derrida, "The University Without Condition," in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), 211 (hereafter cited in text as *UWC*).

26 F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. and intro. Bruce Matthews (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 123–24, 147.

27 Derrida, "La raison du plus fort (Y a-t-il des États voyous?)," in *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 125. My translation.

28 Derrida, "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem," in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), 140 (hereafter cited in text as *R*).

- 29 Derrida, *Séminaire: La bête et le souverain*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, vol. 2, 2002–2003 (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 175 (hereafter cited in text as *LB*).
- 30 Derrida, *Aporias: Dying – awaiting (one another at) the “limits of truth,”* trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993), 75.
- 31 J. Hillis Miller, “Don’t Count Me In’: Derrida’s Refraining,” in *For Derrida* (Fordham, NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2009), 174–90.
- 32 Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 9 (hereafter cited in text as *CFU*). My translation.
- 33 Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 56 (hereafter cited in text as *C*).
- 34 Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends—Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), 682 §385.
- 35 See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 23.
- 36 Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 3 (hereafter cited in text as *OT*).
- 37 Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 211b 10–13, 212b 7–12.
- 38 Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2007), 26.
- 39 *The Ear of the Other*, 69.
- 40 *On Touching*, 27–29, 52–59. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (Fordham, NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 102–9; Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3, 9, 155, 158.
- 41 Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 124, 125. See 103–7, 131. See also *Speech and Phenomena*, 37–40.
- 42 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), § 50–54 (108–20).
- 43 Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 71, 75–76.