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To Die a Living Death: Phantasms of Burial and Cremation in Derrida's Final Seminar

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Abstract: In the Third Session of his seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume 2, Jacques Derrida turns from a close reading of Heidegger's 1929–1930 seminar on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—the two books at the center of the seminar—to the question of what it means for a large and growing number of people in the Western world to have to decide, in a seemingly sovereign fashion, about how their bodies are to be treated after their deaths, that is, whether they are to be buried or cremated. This question marks a rather surprising turn to the present—even the autobiographical—in the seminar. This essay follows Derrida's treatment of the question in the rest of the seminar. It considers, first, what Derrida calls the *phantasms* attendant upon all speculations regarding this supposedly binary *alternative* between inhumation and creation and then what this alternative might tell us about Greco-European modernity and certain modern conceptions of the subject and the subject's putative autonomy and sovereignty over its life, its body, and its remains.

Keywords: Derrida; deconstruction; burial; cremation; onto-theology; Heidegger; Robinson Crusoe; mourning

1. Introduction: Odd Choices

The second year of *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminar is full of surprises and unexpected turns, beginning with the number and choice of texts to be studied, just two works in this second year rather than the many of the previous year, Heidegger's seminar of 1929–1930, a seminar Derrida had already treated in some detail elsewhere, and then *Robinson Crusoe*, an eighteenth century English novel that one is more apt to read in a US high school than in an advanced philosophy seminar at the École des

Hautes Études in Paris [1]. But among all the unexpected elements and moments of the seminar, none is more surprising, I would like to argue, than the emergence of the question of the relative advantages and disadvantages of being buried or cremated and Derrida's subsequent treatment of this supposed *choice* on the part of a large and growing number of people in the world. It is this odd and unexpected theme that I would like to follow throughout Derrida's seminar, from its unanticipated emergence in the third of the seminar's ten sessions to its repeated deferral in the subsequent two sessions to its ultimate treatment in the Sixth Session and its eventual disappearance in the penultimate session. It is an odd theme that thus interrupts, scans, and ultimately gets buried here on one of the margins of Derrida's extraordinary archive.

It's 22 January 2003; we are about a third of the way through a seminar that has continued to circle around Heidegger on world, solitude, and finitude, and around *Robinson Crusoe* on everything from sovereignty to prayer to, especially, Robinson Crusoe's obsession with being buried alive by an earthquake or swallowed alive by wild beasts or cannibals, his constant fear not just of death but of "dying a living death." Derrida had argued earlier in this Third Session:

He is afraid of dying a living death [*mourir vivant*] by being swallowed or devoured into the deep belly of the earth or the sea or some living creature, some living animal. That is the great phantasm, the fundamental phantasm or the phantasm of the fundamental: he can think only of being eaten and drunk by the other, he thinks of it as a threat but with such compulsion that one wonders if the threat is not also nurtured like a promise, and therefore a desire. (*BSII* 77/122–123)

Having thus raised the question of dying a living death and of the *phantasms* associated with it in *Robinson Crusoe*, Derrida begins to ask at the very end of the Third Session not just about Robinson Crusoe's speculations regarding death but about *our own*, a turn to the present or to the personal that is surely not unprecedented in Derrida but that emerges in a rather unanticipated way. This theme, as we will see, will come to haunt the rest of the seminar, as Derrida at the end of the session and then in just about every session thereafter asks and sometimes considers at some length the question of what it means for a large and growing number of people in the Western or developed world to be given the *choice*, to be allowed or made to choose, to have to *decide*, between *two* ways of having their corpses disposed of: burial or cremation.

There is much to say about this aspect of the seminar, about the *phantasmatic* nature of these speculations concerning death, about the concepts of sovereignty and decision that Derrida thinks he can approach in an exemplary way through this question, about the apparently binary nature of this decision, even though other options are today and were already then available, and, finally, about the fact that this decision appears to coincide with a certain moment in European modernity. I will try to address all of these questions in what follows, but let us look first at how Derrida introduces the question of this alternative between inhumation and cremation at the very end of this Third Session. Derrida has been continuing to talk about Robinson Crusoe's fears of dying a living death there on his island. He then continues:

We shall also come back to everything that is at stake, as to the island, in these terrified desires or desiring terrors of being swallowed alive or buried alive—in their relation to insularity, of course, but also to the maternal womb, and also to the alternative of mournings and phantasms of mourning: between inhumation and cremation. (*BSII* 92/143)

The theme thus surely does not come completely out of nowhere; it is obviously related to Robinson Crusoe's fear of being buried alive, to the themes of the phantasm, of death, mourning, solitude, and the end of the world that Derrida will have been following throughout the seminar. But the *alternative* per se—and the question of an alternative—is rather surprising and unexpected. While bodies have been burned, buried, mummified, and so on, for millennia, Derrida will argue that ours is the first age in which so many people have been given or are now being faced with the *choice* or *decision* of how their corpses are to be treated, that is, whether they are to be inhumed or cremated. Without addressing the psychological or even biographical reasons for the emergence of this theme in January of 2003, we need to ask how this alternative fits into the logic of the seminar and into the rest of Derrida's work. One obvious sign that the question of the alternative between inhumation and cremation was nourished by questions or concerns that are only tangentially related to a reading of Heidegger and *Robinson Crusoe* is that this alternative is really only *ours*; it was not exactly Robinson Crusoe's and I assume it was not really Heidegger's, though it had certainly become an alternative for many in 2003 and it is an alternative for even more of us today.

2. The Choice of the Other

Derrida thus raises this alternative between inhumation and cremation at the end of the Third Session and we expect him to return to it in greater detail in the next session. But that is not exactly what happens. He begins the Fourth Session by evoking once again Robinson Crusoe's fear—his fantasy or desire—of being buried alive, of dying a living death (*BSII* 93–94/146). But instead of then turning to the question of the alternative between inhumation and cremation, Derrida addresses the more general question of the *phantasm* associated with *imagining* one's own death, of imagining oneself as dead-alive, imagining what happens to one *after* death, as surviving one's own death, the phantasm, therefore, of *living one's death* or *dying a living death* (*BSII* 117/176). He writes—and I cite at some length:

This suffices all the less to distinguish clearly between death as such and life as such because all our thoughts of death, our death—even before all the help that religious imagery can bring us—our thoughts of our death are always, structurally, thoughts of survival. To see oneself or to think oneself dead is to see oneself surviving, present at one's death, present or represented *in absentia* at one's death even in all the signs, traces, images, memories, even the body, the corpse or the ashes, literal or metaphorical, that we leave behind, in more or less organized and deliberate fashion, to the survivors, the other survivors, the others as survivors delegated to our own survival.

All of which is banal and well known...But the logic of this banality of survival that begins even before our death is that of a survival of the remainder, the remains, that does not even wait for death to make life and death indissociable, and thus the *unheimlich* and fantasmatic experience of the spectrality of the living dead. Life and death as such are not separable as such... (*BSII* 117/176)

Life and death as such are not separable as such: One could spend years trying to think through the meaning and implications of this claim. As Derrida suggests, any *thought* of my death is always a kind of phantasm, always already bound up in life and in images of a living death. But it is here that things begin getting personal, as Derrida switches from the third person singular—"one's death"—to the first,

“my dead body”, “my corpse”, “my death”. After evoking yet again Robinson Crusoe’s fear of dying a living death, he continues:

What will one do, what will the *other*, the other *alone*, do with me as living dead, given that I can only *think* my dead body, or rather *imagine* my corpse, if anything else is to happen to it, as living dead in the hands of the other? The other alone. I have just said *think* my death or rather *imagine* my corpse. Well, perhaps the supposed difference between thinking and imagining finds here its ultimate root, and perhaps thinking death as such, in the sense Heidegger wants to give it, is still only imagination. *Fantasia*, fantastic phantasmatism.

Whence, on the basis of this phantasmatism, the immense variety, among all living beings, human or not, of the cultures of the corpse, the gestures or rites of burial or cremation, *etc.* (BSII 117/176)

Derrida thus ends the session by speaking once again, very briefly, of what he believes to be the noteworthy *hesitation* in our culture between wanting to be buried and wanting to be cremated. Actually, he ends the session by evoking what seems to be a hesitation of his own:

I was hoping, and I had promised you, I had promised myself to talk today about this and in the direction of this phantasmatism of dying alive or dying dead, of what happens when people among us, in the West, as they say, still hesitate, more and more, or else decide between burial and cremation, whereas in other cultures they have opted, in massive and stable, still broadly durable fashion, for one or the other. I was hoping, I had promised myself to return too, in the wake of *Walten*, to the origin of the difference of Being and beings, which organizes, as you have seen, this whole problematic. I did not have time; I hope and promise that I’ll do it next time, at the very start of the session. (BSII 117–118/177)

For a second time, then, Derrida raises at the end of a session but then defers to later a discussion that appears to be motivating much of the seminar but that seems to want to remain just below the surface.

In the Fifth Session, then, Derrida returns yet again, after a brief detour through Heidegger’s *Das Ding* and the question of whether a cadaver is a thing, to the question of the choice, the seemingly *sovereign* choice, of how our bodies are to be treated after our death, that is, for many of us in the West, whether we are to be buried or cremated. It is at this point, however, that Derrida suggests that this supposedly sovereign choice is perhaps *not* ours after all but always the *other’s*, always the other’s decision and responsibility.

What is the other—or what are the others—at the moment when it is a matter of responding to the necessity of making *something of me* [faire quelque chose de moi], of making of me some thing or their thing from the moment I will be, as people say, *departed*, *i.e.* deceased, passed, passed away..., when I will be, to all appearances, absolutely without defense, disarmed, in their hands, *i.e.*, as they say, so to speak, dead? (BSII 126/187–188)

Derrida had spoken earlier of a decision, a choice, but now the emphasis shifts from the self to the other, from the self as sovereign decider to the self divested of self in the corpse, the self that now finds itself in the hands of the other. The famous or infamous other (whether *autre* or *Autrui*) of contemporary French philosophy would thus have to be rethought in light of this passage. The other would be not so much the one for whom I have an infinite responsibility but the one into whose hands I will be delivered at death. Derrida continues:

And however little I know about what the alterity of the other or the others means, I have to have presupposed that the other, the others, are precisely those who always might die after me, survive me, and have at their disposal what remains of me, my remains... The other appears to me as the other as such, *qua* he, she, or they who might survive me, survive my decease and then proceed as they wish, sovereignly, and sovereignly have at their disposal the future of my remains, if there are any. That's what is meant, has always been meant, by "other". (BSII 126–127/188–189)

This passage is not in contradiction with but certainly puts a different face on a certain philosophical understanding of death, mourning, and the other. For dying now means not first and foremost being-towards-death, not confronting a death that is each time my own, but being given over to the hands of the other, delivered over to the other—unable to respond, without defense, as Derrida says referencing Levinas. As for the other, he or she is the one—they are the ones—who must *faire quelque chose de moi*, who must do something with me, make something of me, do something with my body. The other is thus not first and foremost the one for whom I am responsible, the one who appeals to me to feed or clothe him or her, but the one who will in principle if not in fact survive me, and so the one who will be left to mourn and to bury me *in one way or another*.

Derrida thus displaces the site of this decision when he defines the other as the one who will have to decide what to do with my body, my corpse and my corpus. As he phrases it in *Adieu*, “could it not be argued [that]... decision and responsibility are always of the other? They always come back or come down to the other, from the other, even if it is the other in me?” [2] The other is the one who will survive me, and I can only *imagine* what this other will do with my remains, since the moment I begin to predict or envision any future or propose any hypothesis about how the other will respond, I already begin to take the place of the other and so am already in the realm of the phantasm.

3. The Choice of Modernity

In the middle of this Fifth Session, Derrida raises yet again to the question of the supposed *choice* that a growing number of people living today in Western or Westernized societies now have, or think they have, between inhumation and cremation, and he explicitly links this choice to the “modernity of a Greco-Abrahamic Europe”. We thus move from a seemingly *universal* question of the other and general definition of the other to the question of death and burial in *our time* and for *our culture*.

One must be able to wonder what is happening today to a culture like ours, I mean in the present modernity of a Greco-Abrahamic Europe, wonder what is happening to us that is very specific, very acute and unique in the procedural organization of death as survivance, as treatment, by the family and / or the State, of the so-called dead body. (BSII 132/195–196)

These references to Europe and to the state suggest that Derrida is engaged in his own comparative analysis of death, mourning, and funerary culture. While arguing that *Robinson Crusoe* is itself, in addition to everything else, a kind of “comparative anthropology” or ethnography that betrays a certain Ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism (BSII 134–135/197–199), Derrida is beginning to sketch out his own “comparative analysis of the two ways of managing the corpse that are available to us in the West at this precise moment in the history of burial” (BSII 144/210), a comparative analysis of burial and

cremation and an at least virtual comparative analysis of European modernity with other epochs of funerary culture in Europe and beyond.

Now the first thing to note about this contemporary choice, this apparent choice, in our society between burial and cremation is that, as Derrida puts it, “the alternative remains very strict: *inhume* or *cremate*, following procedures that can be monitored by civil society, by the state or its police, by professional corporations registered by the state, *etc.*” (BSII 145/211) In other words, the choice or apparent choice for the individual is always determined and restricted in advance by certain structures and institutions of the state and civil society. Because “the departed must on no account disappear without leaving a trace”, the state or the family through the state must manage these remains (BSII 145/211). “We have long known,” writes Derrida, “that the *polis*, the city, the law of the city, politics, are never constituted... without a central administration of funerals” (BSII 145/211). There is thus a politics of mourning, to be sure, but it seems that there is no politics at all before or without this management or administration of mourning. Derrida argues something very similar in various places in *The Work of Mourning* and *Aporias*. He writes in the latter, for example:

In an economic, elliptic, hence dogmatic way, I would say that there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolitology of the sepulcher, without an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost, without an open hospitality to the guest as *ghost*, whom one holds, just as he holds us, hostage [3].

In short, funeral rites aim to ensure or assure us. They are “designed by the survivors, our people, the family, society, the state, to ensure that the dead one really is dead, and will not return” (BSII 145/212), and they are meant to assure the living that the death of the citizen has some meaning, that, for example, he or she will have died for the state or for the polis, that he or she rests in peace in the name of a polis that is then actually constituted or reconstituted around those who will have died for it—its forefathers, its martyrs, its fallen heroes.

All this helps explain, perhaps, why the worst kind of destruction for Robinson Crusoe, the kind he feared more than anything else, was being “devoured” by beasts or, worse still, savages or cannibals and thus not having a proper burial (BSII 139/204). Robinson Crusoe is afraid of dying without a funeral, like a beast, without any of the assurances of family, society, or state (BSII 145/211–212). Derrida is thus suggesting here that this fear is just Robinson Crusoe’s but our own, that our own funerary culture aims in the end to assuage these same fears, and that “behind or in the unconscious of funerary culture...the savagery of the unconscious...continue[s] to operate with the cruelty that Robinson seems to fear when he is afraid of dying a living death like a beast” (BSII 145/212).

It is thus a question of fear and of sovereignty, not just the sovereignty of the state over the individual but also the individual’s sovereignty over him or herself. Derrida continues, still in this Fifth Session: “I am now finally coming to the two autoimmune double binds that constitute the only two choices left to us today to respond to the fantasy of dying alive: inhumation and cremation. This is first, and again, a problem of sovereignty” (BSII 143/209). What interests Derrida is indeed the seemingly *sovereign* decision, open to more and more of us in the West, between inhumation and cremation: “whereas in other cultures”, writes Derrida, “people have opted massively and in a stable, still largely durable fashion, for one *or* the other, for one to the intransigent exclusion of the other” (BSII 132–133/196), the West has introduced—indeed the West might even be defined by—the

necessity of choosing between these two alternatives. This is, Derrida affirms, “a recent thing, rare on the surface and in the history of the human earth” (*BSII* 132/196). What seems to characterize Greco-Abrahamic modernity is thus the apparent freedom to decide between *two* possibilities, a binary alternative (see *BSII* 139/204), “the great and ultimate question of the choice between cremation and inhumation, at the hands of the other” (*BSII* 140/205).

As in so much of Derrida’s works of the last couple of decades, it is a question of sovereignty, and first of all a question of one’s sovereignty or authority over one’s own body. Derrida develops this point by evoking, expanding, and transforming the juridical notion of *habeas corpus*. A Latin phrase meaning “you shall have the body”, the writ of *habeas corpus*, as we know, orders those holding a prisoner to produce the body, that is, the prisoner, before a judge or court so that it can be determined whether he or she has been illegally detained. Derrida recasts this notion of *habeas corpus* in terms of “a sort of proprietorial sovereignty over one’s own living body”: *Habeas corpus* would thus mean you shall have your body, your own body, the body that is yours (*BSII* 143/209). Leaving aside all the contemporary questions regarding this supposed sovereignty when it is put to the test by birth, birth control, medicine, experimentation, organ transplants, DNA research, autopsies, and so on, Derrida says he wishes to focus on “the decision, the choice, the alternative between *bury* and *cremate*, and its relation to the fantasy of the living dead” (*BSII* 143/209).

Questions of life, death, sovereignty, the self and the other, the phantasm, Robinson Crusoe’s fears of being buried alive: All these come together in the question of the decision, the seemingly *sovereign* decision—one that can be made, obviously, only before one’s death—to be buried or burned, inhumed or incinerated, entombed or cremated, buried in the ground or reduced to ash. While it may *seem* that one has such sovereign control over one’s own body, that one may leave behind a last will and testament to instruct the survivors on how to proceed with one’s corpse, Derrida reminds us that “this testament will have force of law only if a third party, the State or a force of institutional coercion, guarantees it and can oblige the inheritors to obey its instructions” (*BSII* 143/210). In order for one’s putatively sovereign decision to be *carried out*, in order for one to *exercise* one’s sovereignty, one must yield to the sovereignty of the other, that is, give up one’s sovereignty by giving oneself over into the hands of the other. Hence Derrida speaks of “the autoimmune contradiction or aporia in which this last will is fatally caught, at the moment it is trying to choose sovereignly, and to dictate sovereignly, dictatorially, their conduct to survivors who for their part become the real sovereigns” (*BSII* 144/210).

It is here that sovereignty is reestablished—or established in the first place—by means of an appeal to the phantasm, that is, only in *imagination*, since, as we all know, “a dead person is one who cannot him or herself put into operation any decision concerning the future of his or her corpse” (*BSII* 144/210). In other words, “the dead person no longer has the corpse at his or her disposal, there is no longer any—*habeas corpus*”—“supposing”, adds Derrida, “there ever were such a thing”. It is with this little addition that Derrida suggests that what seems to be an exception to one’s sovereignty over oneself is in fact the structural condition for it or for any phantasm with regard to it. In short, we will have been delivered over to the hands of the other from the very beginning—not just at our deaths but from the day we are born. From ashes to ashes, to be sure, but also from the hands of others into the hands of others. As Leopold Bloom succinctly puts this law of the other in *Ulysses*, “Washing child, washing corpse” [4]. In other words, our lives are but the interval between two washings at the hands of the other.

All this suggests that *habeas corpus*, the sovereign control over one's own body, will have been, like all other kinds of sovereignty, a sort of phantasm. Despite the legal notion of *habeas corpus*, we will have *never* had a sovereign power over our own body. Hence Derrida can argue that, in the end, "this *habeas corpus* never existed and that its legal emergence, however important it may be, designates merely a way of taking into account or managing the effects of heteronomy and an irreducible *non habeas corpus*" (BSII 144/210). *Habeas corpus*—"you shall have the body", "you shall have your body"—would thus be but a *reactive* formation, a reaction to a more originary *non-habeas corpus*. To be cremated or inhumed: Despite the appearance of choice and an entire legal apparatus that aims to protect it, this alternative will have never simply been ours.

4. The Phantasm of Choice

Finally, then, at the end of the Fifth Session, Derrida turns—or at least that is what it seems—to the question of the advantages and disadvantages, the pros and cons, so to speak, of being buried or burned. He begins with inhumation, which is statistically the most frequent in the West (BSII 146/212). With a view to what, he asks, would one choose inhumation over cremation? In other words, what kind of phantasies or phantasms are involved in this seemingly sovereign choice? But just after beginning to go down this path, Derrida ends the session by deferring *yet again* a full discussion of the perceived or imagined advantages or disadvantages, that is, the phantasmatic advantages or disadvantages, of being buried or burned. Having briefly sketched out "the form of the question [he] would like now to articulate, both for inhumation and for cremation", Derrida declares that, much to his own relief, there is not enough time in the session to carry out the analysis:

There is no point telling you, to our common relief, that these questions are always questions one can keep waiting. As long as possible. But at least until next week. (BSII 146/213)

Alas, the next week, the sixth of the seminar's ten sessions, comes soon enough, and Derrida can no longer put off the discussion he has been deferring for the previous three sessions, a discussion, finally, of the apparent reasons one might have for choosing to be inhumed rather than cremated, or *vice versa*. It is 12 February 2003, and Derrida begins the session with a single French word: "*Courage*"—a word that wavers here between a noun and an imperative—"courage", "bravery", but also "Have courage", "Be brave": One must have courage or be brave, Derrida seems to be suggesting, to think a living death, to think death while living, even if any thinking of death by the living will always entail a certain *phantasm* of death, the *phantasm* of being present at one's own death and so surviving oneself in death (BSII 148/215). It is at this point that Derrida gives us one of the best definitions of the phantasm in all his work:

What I called "phantasm" in this context is indeed the inconceivable, the contradictory, the unthinkable, the impossible. But I insisted on the zone in which the impossible is named, desired, apprehended. Where it affects us. I did this for methodological reasons, namely in order clearly to delimit the field we were going to explore in wondering why *today*, in *our* European cultural area—and thus in its law, its language, its civil and political organization—a decision must be taken by the still living mortal or the still living dying person, or by his or her still living relatives, by the survivors, as to the ritual of burial or cremation. (BSII 148/217) [5]

The phantasm is indeed this inconceivable, contradictory, impossible, unthinkable thing—a natural law, an immaculate conception, a living death. That the phantasm is impossible does not mean, however, that it cannot be named or desired; that the phantasm *is not* does not mean that it has no power. On the contrary, argues Derrida, a phantasmatic content can overcome or disarm the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Indeed what happens in imagination, what happens virtually or in literature, can have the *effect* of what has actually happened (*BSII* 128–129/191).

Uncertain, he says, to what degree his sense of *phantasm* coincides with a philosophical or psychoanalytic understanding of it, Derrida justifies here his choice of terms. While everything suggests to us that with death comes the radical and irreversible interruption of “that power to be affected that is called life,” we are unable to accept the “invincible authority” of this evidence and so resort to the phantasm of a living death. It is, says Derrida, “because this certainty is terrifying and literally intolerable, just as unthinkable, just as unpreventable and unrepresentable as the contradiction of the living dead, that what I call this obscure word ‘phantasm’ imposed itself upon me” (*BSII* 149/218). The phantasm is thus the result of an internal aporia or contradiction that both masks and signals an intolerable situation. The phantasm is unthinkable, unbearable, always in contradiction with itself, even though it is also, it seems, precisely what makes a certain form of life tolerable. It is because death is unthinkable, unrepresentable, that we resort to this contradictory thing called the phantasm. Derrida thus cites Freud’s claim that our death is unbelievable, that “the relation to our own death is not representable” (*BSII* 157/227), in order to contest Heidegger’s claim that Dasein, unlike the animal, has a certain access to death as such [6].

We are alive enough to see ourselves and imagine ourselves dead, and therefore, I would add, buried or swallowed up or cremated alive. This is another way of saying, against Heidegger, that we never have any access to our own death *as such*, that we are incapable of it. Our death is impossible. Whence Freud concludes, and I quote: “Hence the psycho—analytic school could venture the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (*BSII* 157/228) [7].

5. The Choice between Burial and Cremation

After thus asking about the nature of this phantasm of death and of the phantasm in general, we come, *finally*, here in the middle of the Sixth Session (*BSII* 159/231), to the question of the alternative between inhumation and cremation. As if he had been deferring a question that so many of us indefinitely put off—what is to be done with our estate, our possessions, our bodies after our deaths—Derrida begins a long consideration of our shared phantasms and phantasmatic investments with regard to burial and incineration. Derrida’s speculations here are not hard to follow, indeed they are almost commonplace, the sort of speculations many people have these days—and this is precisely the point—either alone or with family members, as they consider the advantages and disadvantages of these two means of having their bodies disposed of. Derrida proceeds to consider these two possibilities in relation to both the *time* and *space* of our corpse or our cadaver, that is, the time and space we *imagine* will continue to be attached to our corpse after our death (*BSII* 160–161/232–233).

The first, temporal advantage of burial or inhumation would thus be that it is not immediate or irreversible; burial assures the cadaver a bit more time on the earth or in the earth (*BSII* 161/234). And

assuming that the body is not immediately embalmed, the one who opts for burial can console himself with the thought that, given the uncertainty regarding the medical definition of death, a brief window remains open for a falsely declared death to be revealed (*BSII* 162/234). Hence burial allows a body that is not already dead but only appears to be so to be revived or resurrected—the only really imaginable resurrection for a seemingly secular age.

Of course, on the other side of the ledger, this same logic can lead to visions of being put into the earth before one is really dead and thus to nightmarish phantasms à la Edgar Allan Poe of waking up in a casket six feet under the earth (*BSII* 164/237). Moreover, because burial subjects the body to decomposition over time, one cannot but entertain images of the decaying body in the tomb, images that cremation, of course, will spare us (*BSII* 166/235).

With regard to space, inhumation has the advantage of providing a specific site for memory or mourning, a grave or tomb where survivors or loved ones can gather to pray or pay their respects. The cadaver thus has a reserved space and it continues to take up space, to have a place in the world. But the advantage attached to this stability of place can also be seen as a disadvantage (*BSII* 165/238). By burying the body in a cemetery or some other site, it is as if the survivors were not simply giving the dead a proper resting place but isolating and exiling them, placing them *outside* the home and consigning them to some publicly sanctioned and authorized place. Hence the work of mourning for the survivors can always be accompanied by a sentiment of culpability for having exiled the body in this way, for having excluded it from the home as quickly as possible and abandoned it in a cemetery (*BSII* 165–167/239–240).

Before turning to the concomitant advantages and disadvantages of cremation, Derrida poses—more or less in passing—a theological question with regard to inhumation, which has been up until recently by far the most common way of disposing of the corpse. He asks whether Christianity, with its imaginary or phantasmagory of death and resurrection, would have been thinkable if Christ had been cremated rather than entombed (*BSII* 164/238). Could certain conceptions of resurrection or rapture have ever gotten off the ground, so to speak, in a culture where cremation was the norm? Derrida seems to be suggesting that if we want to know about Christianity, perhaps even get to the essence of Christianity, we could do worse than to consider our own phantasmatic attachments to and investments in inhumation as opposed to cremation.

On the side of cremation, then, it offers advantages and disadvantages that are in many respects the opposite of those afforded by burial, with its promise of temporal continuity and spatial stability (*BSII* 167/241) [8]. Cremation destroys the body almost immediately, ends in a radical way the body's time in the world, removing it from the earth and taking away its stability of place, its taking place in any particular place. After cremation, the dead thus becomes “both everywhere and nowhere” (*BSII* 169/243). The reduction of the body to ashes and their collection in a portable urn means that the dead has no proper site beyond that urn, no special site, at least not necessarily, for visitations or prayer or memory. Purified by fire, by the modern day pyre, they no longer have a space of their own, and their time—the time of a slow decay—is itself eclipsed by flame (*BSII* 169/243).

But cremation compensates for the lack of a stable place for memory and mourning by giving mobility to one's remains, allowing them to be scattered or transported from place to place. The memorial urn can be moved and a place of memory established almost anywhere. The ashes can even be spread out in a specific site, in a garden or some location at sea that already has or will take on a

special meaning. The disadvantage of not having a particular site thus becomes the advantage of a site that could be almost anywhere—indeed that could be in multiple places, since the ashes can also be divided up, between spouse and children or siblings or friends, all of whom can keep a trace of the deceased on their mantelpiece.

In relation to both time and space, then, cremation presents advantages and disadvantages that counter and sometimes offset those of inhumation. Since cremation is immediate, one cannot indulge in images of a body decomposing over time; one is not tempted to wonder what the deceased must look like days, months, or years later in the ground. On the other hand, because cremation is immediate and irreversible, there is no possibility for a body that is not in fact dead to be resuscitated once it has been given over to the consuming flames (*BSII* 162/235). The survivors avoid through cremation the potential culpability of having abandoned their beloved to some public place, but they might just as well be besieged by the culpability of having reacted so swiftly to dispose of the loved one, of having taken the first occasion not just to exile the body but to reduce it to ashes so as to be done with it once and for all. And to make matters worse, they will have resorted to a technique that “in the modern and ineffaceable history of humanity, can no longer fail to metonymize, in everyone’s consciousness and unconscious, the crematoria of the camps” (*BSII* 179/255).

All the aporias of mourning that Derrida develops in “*Fors*”, *The Work of Mourning*, and elsewhere need to be rethought here: The aporia of a fidelity that is faithful only by being unfaithful, that mourns by not incorporating the other, that leaves the other’s alterity intact without abandoning the other to indifference, and so on (*BSII* 168/242) [9]. Questions of mourning and melancholia, of incorporation and introjection, all become particularly acute in relationship to these seemingly everyday speculations concerning the phantasms of burial—a sort of incorporation—or cremation.

Now throughout this meditation, Derrida emphasizes—let me say it again—that these two possibilities have become for many a modern *choice*. Hence Derrida will refer somewhat playfully to the partisans of these two options as *inhumants* and *incinerants*, as if they were, precisely, partisans, two political parties vying for our allegiance, two fraternities, clans, or religious groups (*BSII* 163/235; see also 174/250 and 232/324). It is as if our society were today divided up into inhumants and incinerants, buriers and burners, just as it is divided into PC and MAC users, Coke and Pepsi people, McDonalds and Burger King eaters, republicans and democrats.

Derrida devotes several pages to this comparative analysis of burial and cremation, drawing up a rather long list of the pros and cons of each, sorting them out, as it were, into columns on the legal pad of the seminar. But what is essential to underscore here is that, for Derrida, who is still working through Robinson Crusoe’s constant fear of “dying a living death,” these speculations are and must remain *phantasmatic*, images we have of ourselves dead while still living, that is, “as if [*comme si*]... we still had to suffer, worry, torment ourselves as to what will happen when we are no longer there to suffer, to worry, to torment ourselves” (*BSII* 159/231). Derrida recalls yet again the obvious fact that it is only as a *living* human being that we can choose inhumation or cremation, only as a living human being that we can *imagine* our death in any way at all and, thus, imagine how “our” decision will be carried out by those who survive us (*BSII* 160/231–232) [10].

Again, what is important in Derrida’s analysis of the choice between burial and cremation is that it seems to be precisely a *choice*, a *modern* choice for a seemingly sovereign subject (*BSII* 163/236),

a choice that is no doubt influenced by tradition and economy (cremation is usually much less expensive than inhumation) but also by these various phantasms of death. Derrida speaks of

a highly significant and unprecedented—and thus strictly “modern”—phenomenon of liberation with respect to religious prescriptions, which demand inhumation in European, Greco-Latin or pre-Christian, but also Abrahamic, Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions, and cremation in certain Eastern, and particularly Indian or Japanese, cultures. If one seeks to identify modernity (“what is it to be modern?” “what is the essential and specific criterion of modernity?” “where is the distinctive sign of modernity?”), well, we have the mark of it first of all here. (*BSII* 163/236)

Derrida does not really consider the specifically religious prohibition against cremation and what it means for religious faith (whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim) when a growing number of people consider cremation as a “viable” possibility. But *The Beast and the Sovereign* certainly calls out for such a “comparative ethnography” or comparative analysis of what is happening today with regard to death, mourning, and survival [11]. Once again, it is the question of political modernity and the theologico-political that Derrida is raising. Rather than having one’s choice determined in advance, inhumation for most Abrahamic cultures, cremation for certain cultures of the East, modernity might be defined by an apparent freedom or liberation and thus a seeming *choice* between these two alternatives. To the question “What is modernity?” Derrida thus hazards the answer: “It was the opening of the alternative and the choice left by the state, in European and Greco-Abrahamic cultures, between cremation and inhumation” (*BSII* 179/255).

All this helps justify, in part, Derrida’s own choice of *Robinson Crusoe* for one of the two books of his final seminar. The novel was obviously chosen because of its treatment of some of the central themes of the seminar—the human’s relation to the animal, man’s supposed sovereignty over the beast, Robinson Crusoe’s obsession with being buried or eaten alive, and so on. But *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, is also often considered to be the beginning of a certain epoch of modern sovereignty and of the modern, self-reliant individual. To discover “What is modernity?” one could certainly do worse than reread *Robinson Crusoe* and to ask about the origins of modern sovereignty and Robinson Crusoe’s fears of dying a living death.

In the Ninth (and next to last) Session of the seminar, Derrida goes so far as to relate the decision to declare oneself an *inhumant* or *incinerant* to liberal democracy, asking why, in this historical epoch, there are only *two* choices, and what other choices the future has in store that will transform our epoch (*BSII* 232–233/325). As always, Derrida is interested in asking why or how difference or multiplicity has been reduced to a *binary* opposition. The choice is between inhumation *and* cremation, an always binary alternative, as Derrida presents it, even though other, less popular options, such as donating one’s body to science, were surely available in 2002–2003, while others still are available to us today, everything from cryogenic preservation to liquefaction (what is called “resumating”), freeze drying, composting, or what have you. Is there, then, Derrida asks, another epoch of mourning on the horizon, a future epoch where we are not limited to these two choices? What would that mean? What would it change? These are the questions that seem to be motivating Derrida’s meditations, questions of the alternative between inhumation and cremation and the possibility of an epoch that would offer other possibilities beyond this alternative—the end or closure, perhaps, of a certain *theologico-political* determination of death, mourning, survival, sovereignty, and their phantasms. Derrida continues:

People would speak of the cremators and the inhumers... as oddities that were both *unheimlich* and dated, as archaic curiosities for historians or anthropologists of death. I'll let you dream of a death that would no longer leave us in the hands of these itinerant sects of cremators or inhumers, and would definitively put out of a job these arrogant sects that pass for the religions to which they appeal for their authority, or the secularizing laity to which they lay claim... (BSII 233/326)

6. Conclusions: Choice Aporias

Let me conclude this look at Derrida's speculations in *The Beast and the Sovereign* regarding the contemporary alternative between inhumation and cremation by recalling Derrida's parallel reading, some twenty years earlier, in *Aporias* (1992), of Heidegger's analyses of being-towards-death in *Being and Time* and Philippe Ariès's history of Western funeral practices and attitudes toward death in *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen Age à nos jours*. It is as if Derrida in *The Beast and the Sovereign* were following both Heidegger and Ariès so as to locate a fundamental shift in our understanding of death and in our *phantasmatic* investment in the fates of our bodies after death.

But the parallel between *Aporias* and *The Beast and the Sovereign* may go even further than that. Derrida suggests in *Aporias* that one can always read the relationship between Ariès's treatise and Heidegger's *Being and Time* in one of two ways. One can read Ariès's work from a Heideggerian perspective as just another example of an ontic treatment of death, an analysis of death from an existential rather than an existential point of view; one can thus read it as a text that is located squarely *within* Heidegger's treatment in *Being and Time* of the various inauthentic ways in which Dasein treats death. But one might also always read Heidegger's *Being and Time* and its understanding of being-towards-death, conscience, and so on, from Ariès's perspective as one discourse among others in the modern archive and memory of Christian Europe, in which case *it* can be squarely located within Ariès's book, relegated to just a footnote within one of its chapters. In other words, each of these two discourses can be considered bigger than the other; each can be considered to frame or incorporate the other, each can be considered to be buried or encapsulated within the other.

Now something similar might be said, I would like to suggest, about Derrida's final seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*: Derrida's analyses of the phantasms of burial and cremation can always be considered to be the object or theme of this final seminar, and so can always be considered to be *within* it, contained or buried within it. And one can always, of course, try to read *The Beast and the Sovereign* in relation to Derrida's biography and health concerns in the spring of 2003. However because of what Derrida says in this seminar about what it means to be buried alive, about how a trace is always a kind of living death, we might also always consider *The Beast and the Sovereign* to be not just *about* being buried alive, and not just a reflection of the concerns of its author, but something that is itself a *living dead*, its exemplary discourse about dying a living death no longer merely contained but now *containing*. In this case, we would have the curious example of a trace that will have posed the question of the trace, a seminar—a sort of corpse or corpus—that will have posed in an *explicit* fashion the very question of what it means to die a living death and what it means to survive one's death, not by being immortal, not by being resurrected from the tomb, but by being deposited in the archive, where it can remain forever buried and forgotten, or else consigned to flames and reduced to ashes, or else, as I would wish here to think, reanimated, studied and celebrated, for the time of a reading.

References and Notes

1. Derrida, J. *The Beast and the Sovereign*; Bennington, G., Trans.; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, USA, 2010; Volume 2, Seminar of 2002–2003. *La bête et le souverain, 2002–2003*; Éditions Galilée: Paris, France, 2009; Volume 2. Hereafter abbreviated as *BSII* with the English page number followed by the French.
2. Derrida, J. *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*; Brault, P.-A., Naas, M., Trans.; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 1999; p. 23.
3. Derrida, J. *Aporias*; Dutoit, T., Trans.; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 1993; p. 10.
4. Joyce, J. *Ulysses*; Vintage Books: New York, USA, 1990; p. 373.
5. For more on the “logic of the phantasm”, on a logic that is strictly speaking not a logic, a logic that exceeds or resists the *logos*, that is, on what be understood as the phantasm of the *logos*, see *BSII* 262–263.
6. Derrida also notes that, for Freud, it is in times of war that primitive man is reawakened (*BSII* 158/229). This reference to war is hardly fortuitous; it’s 12 February 2003, just weeks before the American invasion of Iraq.
7. What Derrida says about the phantasm of an *individual* imagining life after death, the individual dying a living death, has a correlate in the phantasm of an apocalypse where humanity itself would be extinguished. Back in 1984 in “No Apocalypse, Not Now” Derrida argued that those who contemplate the possibility of a nuclear war imagine—phantasize—a sacrifice of life in the name of something greater than life, a sacrifice of the living that nonetheless leaves the one who phantasizes this catastrophe intact, surviving, so to speak, over the smoldering ruins of the earth. “Today, in the perspective of a remainderless destruction, without symbolicity, without memory and without mourning, those who contemplate setting off such a catastrophe do so no doubt *in the name* of what is worth more in their eyes than life (‘Better dead than red’)... Nuclear war, at least as a hypothesis, a phantasm, of total self-destruction, can only be waged in the name of what is worth more than life. What gives life its worth is worth more than life” Derrida, J. No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives. In *Psyche 1. Inventions of the Other*, Porter, C., Lewis, P., Trans.; Kamuf, P., Rottenberg, E., Eds.; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 2007; pp. 407–408.
8. As Derrida notes, “Ashes do without the body [*Les cendres font l’économie du cadavre...*]” (*BSII* 168/242). Ashes are, of course, everywhere in Derrida’s work, from *Glas* to *Cinders* to *Of Spirit*, which begins, “I shall speak of ghost, of flame, and of ashes.”
9. The notion of being buried alive, of a living dead that questions the very notions of life and death and the limit between them, is central to Derrida’s reading of Abraham and Torok in “*Fors*.” Derrida there writes, for example, “the cryptic place is also a sepulcher”, “the inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living”. Derrida, J. *Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok*, Johnson, B., Trans.; Preface to Abraham, N.; Torok, M. *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 1986; p. xxi).

10. This theme of the phantasm needs to be thought in relation to the question of the world and of the end of the world, a question that comes to dominate the final sessions of the seminar. As we see Derrida argue in these sessions, the world is itself a *phantasm*, which means that any thinking of the *end* of the world, any apocalyptic vision of the end of the world or of the end of history, will remain a kind of phantasm of or within that phantasm. Moreover, Derrida argues here, as elsewhere, that the end of *a* world or of *a* history, the end of an individual world, is indistinguishable from the end of *the* world or the end of *history itself*. There is thus an interesting slippage in several places of the seminar between *histoire* as *story* and *histoire* as *history* (see *BSII* 161–162/234, 164/237, and 224/312–113).
11. In “Justices,” Derrida evokes the alternative between burning and burying in relationship to writing: “According to a Jewish tradition that Levinas discusses, when a mistake in spelling or transcription of the name of God comes to alter a manuscript, this manuscript must be neither destroyed or burned (for one does not annihilate the name of God) nor preserved (for one does not keep the trace of such a blasphemy). The parchment must in that case be buried. One must hide it and put it in a safe place, but keep it at the same time invisible and illegible” (Derrida, J. *Justices*, Kamuf, P., Trans. *Crit. Inq.* 2005, 31, 710).

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