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The Time of Sacrifice: Derrida contra Agamben / Scott Cutler Shershow

Abstract: Why does the figure of sacrifice remain central in the discourse of American national and military commemoration? This essay approaches this familiar question in two ways: first via some examples of American public discourse about the war in Iraq, and then by briefly contrasting the differing approaches to the question of sacrifice in the work of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida.



I begin by bringing together a few *disjecta membra* from the Presidential campaign of 2008 in which both candidates briefly entertain the possibility that the lives of American soldiers might have been “wasted” in Iraq, only to correct themselves and insist that these lives had been, on the contrary, “sacrificed.” The discourse of American military commemoration, as I suggest with a series of further examples (including the dying words of Nathan Hale), is similarly marked by a strange economy of calculation and incalculability: the sacrifices of past and present wars are envisioned as, so to speak, mortgaging the future to an endless fatal debt. I conclude by considering Agamben’s attempt to think “the definitive elimination of the sacrificial mythologeme” through the paradoxical figure of *homo sacer*, the “sacred man” who can be killed but not sacrificed. For Derrida, by contrast, there could be no “beyond” of the sacrifice. However much this figure remains in service of a techno-military calculation, it also remains the site where one must think an incalculable negativity: death as absolute loss beyond all sacrificial recuperation (the very thing that, in Derrida’s reading of Bataille, always eludes the Hegelian project of absolute knowledge).

Keywords: Peace Studies, Philosophy, Poststructuralism

For as long as individuals are sacrificed,
for as long as the sacrifice contains the
antithesis between collective and
individual, deception is objectively
implicit in it.

– Max Horkheimer and Theodor W.
Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (40-1)

I don't want to belittle Jesus, but ...
like, a lot of people died, for a lot of
people's sins, you know what I mean?

– Sarah Silverman, Hoboken, 2002

<1> On February 22, 2007, Senator Barak Obama, shortly after announcing his campaign for president of the United States, spoke at a campaign rally in Iowa about the ongoing war in Iraq. He described the war as one that

should have never been authorized, and should have never been waged – and to which [sic] we've now spent \$400 billion, and have seen over 3,000 lives of the bravest young Americans wasted. (Kornblut and Balz)

Although his remarks were applauded by their original audience, right-wing commentators, both online and in the traditional media, objected strongly to the idea that American lives might have been “wasted” in the war. Obama quickly apologized for what he called his “slip of the tongue,” telling an interviewer, “I was actually upset with myself when I said that, because I never use that term. Their sacrifices are never wasted” (Bellantoni). Then, on April 30, 2007, Senator John McCain, who would become Obama's opponent in the November Presidential election, said of the war that Americans “are very frustrated ... and they have every right to be. We've wasted a lot of our most precious treasure, which is American lives, over there” (Nagourney). This time pundits and operatives on the Left, sensing an opportunity for retaliation, denounced McCain. For example, the Democratic National Committee declared in a press statement that McCain's remarks had been “insulting [to] our brave troops ... who are making the ultimate sacrifice.” McCain too was quick to apologize, agreeing in a written statement that “I should have used the word 'sacrificed'” (Nagourney). Then, two weeks after that, as Congress began to debate the possibility of ending the war, National Security advisor Steven Hadley asserted that “to leave with the job undone, to withdraw without victory, would waste the sacrifice of those who have died” (Feller).

<2> It would be easy to multiply such examples from public discourse about the two American wars that continue at the time of this writing. But what, after all, is finally at stake in this repeated affirmation of national, political and military sacrifice? Why does sacrifice remain the most familiar of ideological figures, to the point that even those who died in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as David Simpson observes, were commonly claimed to be “sacrificial victims?” (51). Even in the wake of multiple traditions of thought in which, for more than a century, the logics and economies of the sacrifice have been unfolded at length, this figure has apparently lost none of its potency in the political imaginary of our times. It may perhaps be objected that my opening examples are merely instances of what one calls today “talking points” or “spin:” that is, a manufactured discourse in which key terms or phrases, chosen as a result of polling data and focus-group research, are

recited like mantras by multiple speakers and in multiple contexts. In such discourse, those terms and phrases function almost as a kind of secondary meta-linguistic or ideological code: for example, the way the phrase "supporting the troops" is commonly used to mean "supporting the war." Yet what is remarkable in these examples is precisely that little semantic stutter or "slip of the tongue" that sets the figure of *sacrifice* against the rather different figure of *waste*, and so leaves open the very questions that the speakers themselves try so hard to shut down.

<3> To assess these strange polemical and commemorative figures will require a certain confrontation between two well-known attempts to theorize the entwined questions of sovereignty and sacrifice: on the one hand, that of Giorgio Agamben, whose post-Foucauldian analysis of sovereign power has so influenced recent debates on the subject; and, on the other hand, that of Jacques Derrida, who approaches the question of sacrifice in part through readings of Hegel and of Georges Bataille's "Hegelianism without reserve." I will tip my hand at the outset and acknowledge that Derrida's approach to such questions seems to me at once more theoretically compelling and more useful as a way to break through the fatal nexus of violence and sovereign power of which the war in Iraq is but one of many recent examples. Even my opening citations perhaps suggest a starting point for the analysis of sovereignty rather different from Agamben's, whose paradigmatic examples of *homo sacer*, the "sacred man" who can be killed but *not* sacrificed, are the detainee, the refugee, the inmate, and so forth. But here, we are concerned, by contrast, with the soldier: an object and an agent of sovereign power who, at least as envisioned in our public discourse, can *only* be sacrificed, and whose death, regardless of its circumstances, is *always* to be recuperated as an enduring and incalculable value. Indeed, our public discourse commonly envisions the soldier as one who has freely and willingly offered himself – however badly such a vision may in fact apply to the men and women sometimes forced by need or circumstance to "volunteer" for military service, and who all too often perish as a result of incompetence, command failures, or so-called "friendly fire." Perhaps Agamben himself would point to such evident facts as but further indication that my tentative contrast is an illusory one; and that, beyond and beneath the stirring rhetoric of military commemoration, the soldier and the citizen alike remain suspended today at the threshold of what he famously calls "bare life." I suggest, on the contrary, that despite the seriousness of the questions at issue and the limitless compassion with which we must approach them, such questions are more clearly illuminated by the sovereign laughter with which Bataille, in Derrida's account, makes light of the sacrifice itself [1]. As even these brief opening examples already indicate, the sacrifice "recaptures with one hand what it gives with the other" (Derrida, *Glas* 259). It refuses the very thing (death) that it always demands; and then has nothing better to give us in return than the endless prospect of more of the same.

<4> To begin with, consider how, even in these opening examples, there is already a redoubling of the two key terms at issue, so that, as waste is opposed to sacrifice, so the

idea of a "wasted sacrifice" is opposed to ... well, to something that is difficult to name. What is the opposite of a wasted sacrifice? For that matter, what does it mean to waste a sacrifice? Is such a thing even possible? To consider this question is immediately to encounter not only Derrida's well-known analysis of the gift as the very figure of the impossible, something whose own presentation as such annuls itself (see especially *Given Time*), but also, a little more specifically, what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as the "sublation" or "spiritualization" of sacrifice that "runs through Christianity, Hegel, Bataille, and Girard" (*Finite Thinking* 61). As Nancy suggests, the history of sacrifice in the West, either as practice or as idea, is punctuated by constantly repeated ruptures, attempts to re-purify the sacrificial economy from a kind of economistic reduction denoted by the formula of *do ut des* ("I give that you may give"). Western thought seeks to position the sacrifice between, on the one side, pure loss or waste (what Bataille calls "unproductive expenditure"), and, on the other side, a pure transactional economism in which (like the gift in the so-called "gift economy") the sacrifice becomes no more than a calculable price to be paid for whatever it is we receive from it. As Derrida writes, "The sacrifice proposes an offering but only in the form of a destruction against which it exchanges, hopes for, or counts on a benefit, namely a surplus-value or at least an amortization, a protection, and a security" (*Given Time* 137)

<5> The idea of a wasted sacrifice would thus locate itself at the very frontier of that process of sublation or sublimation of which Nancy speaks. In the case of a ritual practice, it might perhaps be said that one wastes a sacrifice by performing it incorrectly or in bad faith. One might say this, for example, about Cain, who in the most common reading of the Biblical story (*Genesis* 4:3-16) is understood to have presented God with a less generous or less valuable offering than his brother Abel. Since Cain does in fact give or expend some value (his "first fruits") but nevertheless fails in his aim (to propitiate God), one might say that he wasted that value – and therefore, by extension, that he wasted his sacrifice as well. But does not such a summary itself risk an annulment of the sacrifice by portraying the rejection of Cain as the result of a certain calculation on God's part, a calculation that would, as such, merely replicate Cain's original fault? Such speculations seem, in any case, to bring us no closer to the question of the national, political and military sacrifice. In this new context, the very word is at once subject to a kind of displacement or attenuation in which the concept of sacrifice is wrenched largely free from its connection to any specific ritual or religion, and yet also, as it were, thrown back onto its semantic origins, so that it now refers quite literally once again to the deliberate, calculable and violent expenditure of life in the name of some greater agency or ideal like "God and country." But precisely as such, my initial question – what is the opposite of a wasted sacrifice? – remains all the more open. In the biblical story, what is at stake is the favor of God; and therefore, if Cain's sacrifice can be said to be "wasted," one might then say that Abel's sacrifice was "accepted" or "received."

But in the sense at issue here, who receives the sacrifice? Who or what is propitiated by this offering?

<6> Correspondingly, in the discourse we're considering, the evocation of wasted sacrifice seems to mean something different from moment to moment and from speaker to speaker. To put it more precisely, these statements about the war, whether intended as opposition or support, seem alike posed in terms of a certain relation of two implicit economic and temporal logics: on the one hand, a rational economism of means and ends, and on the other hand, an ideal of incalculable value. Senator Obama begins by criticizing the specific goals and conduct of the war in Iraq; but when he subsequently stipulates that the sacrifices of American soldiers are "never wasted," he is no longer making any such determination but rather, asserting an absolute principle by which *all* who die for the nation are *always* to be regarded as sacrifices. Yet Obama articulates this point in terms of a recuperative logic by which expenditures are inevitably productive and waste therefore inconceivable (emphasizing that "I *never* use that term;" and that "their sacrifices are *never* wasted"). Similarly, when National Security advisor Hadley claims that a withdrawal of American soldiers from Iraq "would waste the sacrifice of those who have died," he seems to be using the figure of sacrifice to express a strategic calculation about this war in particular. He argues that, having *already* sacrificed, we must now sacrifice more in order to protect our initial investment. Hadley still unmistakably grounds his argument in what is claimed to be the incalculable value of American lives. After all, he could hardly make the same argument while simply replacing the word sacrifice with a more literal term such as "casualty," because to do so – that is, to baldly acknowledge that the lives of American soldiers are no more than an expendable resource – would dilute or even destroy his polemical point, which is precisely that the ongoing prosecution of this war is part of an interminable debt we owe to those who have already sacrificed themselves in that war (and in all previous wars). So Obama's principle of incalculable sacrificial value proves to rest on an implicit economism, while Hadley's apparent calculation about military strategy presents itself in the form of sacrificial responsibility.

<7> Throughout a pervasive American discourse of military commemoration, these two economies remain locked in an uneasy equilibrium. On the Right, a familiar iconography of yellow ribbons and American flags accompanies a discourse emphasizing above all that "freedom isn't free," and that, as President Bush put it on Veteran's Day 2006, the "sacrifice" of our soldiers "creates a debt that America can never really fully – fully repay" (Bush, "Veteran's") [2]. Yet one of President Bush's favorite rhetorical figures, one used in speech after speech, was that "freedom ... is a gift from an Almighty to every man, woman and child on the face of the Earth" ("Remarks") [3]. To combine the two figures is to see unmistakably that, in the explicit logic of this ideology, freedom is a gift that is anything but free, a gift that comes only *with obligation*. On the other hand, this whole conservative political theology, with its rhetoric of debt and sacrifice, was during the first half of the Bush presidency underwritten by a technocratic approach to the

military that became known as the "Rumsfeld doctrine." Borrowing techniques and strategies developed for private corporations, the Department of Defense under Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sought to develop a "smart, lean, rapid 21st century military force" to achieve American strategic objectives while minimizing the expenditure of (American) lives and money ("Digital War"). This economic logic was sometimes even applied to the conduct of military commemoration itself. In 2006, for example, President Bush responded to objections that he had "yet to attend a service member's funeral" by asking:

which funeral do you go to? In my judgment, I think if I go to one I should go to all. How do you honor one person but not another? (Schogol)

In May 2007, similarly, military authorities at Fort Lewis, Washington announced "a change in how it would honor its dead: instead of units holding services after each death, they would be held collectively once a month," a decision denounced by some military families and veterans' groups "as cold and logistics-driven" (Yardley). By the end of Bush's presidency the Rumsfeld doctrine had been discredited, and military funerals were no longer subject to such penny-pinching. But these brief examples will serve to illuminate the contradictory *ideological* logic by which, for the Right, national and military sacrifice is something to be affirmed, encouraged, celebrated – and economized.

<8> The contemporary "Left" finds itself similarly suspended between economies of calculability and incalculability. First and foremost, any principled opposition to the war in Iraq should compel the painful but inevitable conclusion that everything expended in that war, *including* soldiers' lives, was expended unnecessarily and therefore, in some sense of the word, "wasted." Or at least, one can think otherwise only within a Hegelian spiritual economy in which even the sacrifice expended by "the last man to die for a mistake" (to echo John Kerry's famous phrase from the Vietnam war), can still be recuperated for its sacrificial contribution to some larger whole such as "America." In any case, as we saw in our opening examples, the figure of waste, of death as pure loss, remains in practice unspeakable – even, or *especially*, for those opposed to the war. During the Bush years, the eagerness of progressives to avoid any perceived failure to "support the troops" became as obvious as the collapse of the neo-liberal fantasy that America might conquer *without* sacrifice. Progressive voices also commonly accused the war's instigators of failing both to provide adequate equipment (such as body armor) for American soldiers, and to embrace sufficient personal sacrifice of their own. In previous American wars, writes columnist Paul Krugman, "the wealthy shared the financial burden through higher taxes and many members of the elite fought for their own country;" but today "only the little people make sacrifices" (Krugman). Columnist David Broder, similarly, claims that "the greatest moral failing of the Bush presidency" was "his refusal to ask any sacrifice from most of the American people when he put the nation on a wartime footing after the Sept. 11 attacks" (Broder). Such accusations, however persuasive in themselves, also suggest how an invisible contradiction troubles the case

of an anti-war Left which always seems, at one and the same time, to demand both *less* and *more* sacrifice: arguing *both* that the war should have never been fought at all, and that more lives and resources should be devoted to fighting it. This implicit contradiction perhaps explains why fundamental questions about the justice and necessity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been almost wholly eclipsed by debates about the strategic success or failure of our troops in the field.

<9> To consider briefly one final example from the Left, on May 29, 2007, the prominent anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan issued a public statement declaring her retirement as the public face for opposition to the war in Iraq. As is well known, Sheehan's own son Casey was killed in that war; and she describes here, as she had frequently done elsewhere, how her activism was motivated by a refusal to allow Casey's death to be wasted. As she writes,

I have tried every [sic] since he died to make his sacrifice meaningful. ... I have invested everything I have into trying to bring peace with justice ... I have spent every available cent I got from the money a "grateful" country gave me when they killed my son and every penny that I have received in speaking or book fees since then. I have sacrificed a 29 year marriage ... I have used all my energy.

Despite these myriad investments and sacrifices, she has now come to the

devastating conclusion ... that Casey did indeed die for nothing. ... I bought into this system for so many years and Casey paid the price for that allegiance. ... Good-bye America ... you are not the country that I love and I finally realized no matter how much I sacrifice, I can't make you be that country. (Sheehan)

What else can be offered in response to such words but unreserved compassion? Still, one must also observe that Sheehan's account is wholly determined by a sacrificial logic. Indeed, Sheehan presents us with a narrative of two sacrifices doubly wasted. Her son died, she says, for "lies, misrepresentations, and political expediency;" yet her own political activism was powered by an initial conviction that his sacrifice was merely deferred, that it remained capable of being reinvested with new meaning. On her own account, this is precisely what she tried to do: to re-consecrate his sacrifice by adding her own to it; or, as it were, to offer his life anew to redress the injustice of its waste. But doesn't this narrative of bad bargains and unpaid debts echo, somewhat uncomfortably, and even if only by inversion, the most familiar modes of American military commemoration? Doesn't Sheehan's rhetoric merely reverse the familiar pro-war "talking point" that to end the war prematurely would "waste the sacrifice" of those who have died? On the one side, a wasted sacrifice is understood to remain capable of subsequent re-sacralization; on the other side, a sacrifice already given and commemorated is claimed to remain vulnerable to subsequent de-sacralization and waste.

<10> I've been trying to draw out, from these *disjecta membra* of public discourse about the war, a sort of discursive knot that is at once economic and temporal. The two logics at play may call to mind Bataille's opposition between a "restricted" economy of calculation and investment, and a "general" economy of incalculable excess and loss. But in the figure of sacrifice at issue here, one finally sees only a fatal distortion of Bataille's schema. Bataille calls the economy of scarcity "restricted" because it pertains to singular beings who, as he says, are "eternally needy," and who are therefore bound to an economy of deferral and anticipation, always constrained to sow so they may reap. He calls the economy of excess and waste "general" because it, by contrast, pertains to the whole, to the "world" or even the "universe" grasped in their greatest possible generality, where the universal flow of energy and value is potentially limitless [4]. But our public discourse, on both the Right and the Left, invites us, by contrast, to grasp the singular being as the source of an incalculable value, and the whole – the community, nation, or world – as bound to fatal scarcity, endlessly mortgaged to an endless debt.

<11> It might clarify or at least vivify what I'm driving at to invoke briefly another famous bit of American military rhetoric: the dying words of Nathan Hale during the revolutionary war, as he was about to be hanged by the British as a spy (or what we might call today an "illegal combatant"). On the scaffold, Hale is of course supposed to have said: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country" [5]. If one allows oneself to hear these famous lines a little differently, they may provoke something like what Derrida memorably calls a "burst of laughter from Bataille" ("Restricted" 255-6). This famous figure, that seems to express an exorbitant sacrifice, a willingness to give everything and more than everything, could also suggest, as a ghostly second meaning in excess of the first, an economistic qualm: the regret of a gamester who wants to venture and yet hold something in reserve, as though one should say "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country, because if I had more than one I could give one and still live one." The bravura performance constituted by Hale's dying words absolutely depends upon this submerged second meaning which it evokes, necessarily, by inverting and rejecting it. The irreplaceable singularity of finite being – the very thing that constitutes its incalculable (sacrificial) value – is thus at once celebrated and made a source of reproach.

<12> The figure, as commonly recorded, also has a kind of built-in semantic stutter, an expression of double limitation or double unicity by which the imagined speaker says both that he "only regrets" and that he has "but one life to lose." The line would say the same thing without such doubling: for example, Hale's words have sometimes been given as "I am sorry I have but one life to give for my country" ("Honor"). This alternate version, by changing the third verb (the signifier of sacrifice itself) also indicates a further figural tension or hesitation between the related but distinct ideas of loss and gift; for the imagined speaker sometimes speaks of losing his life and sometimes of giving

or offering it. Once again, an ineluctable laughter threatens to interpose itself, and prompts us to ask: is the grandeur of Hale's sacrifice to be found simply in the giving of a necessarily limited life or, rather, in the willingness to give (and thus lose) that life with only a limited amount of regret? If there had been more regret, would there have been less sacrifice? Another surviving account of Hale's execution quotes him as saying: "if I had ten thousand lives, I would lay them all down, if called to do it, in defence of my injured, bleeding Country" (Phelps 192). This time, in the imagined passage from "one" to "ten thousand" lives, the possibility of bargaining and negotiation forces itself on our attention with derisive force. For if one did possess ten thousand lives, would giving them all be any more of a sacrifice than giving one if one has only one? Or, for that matter, would giving anything less than the full ten thousand still be a (sufficient) sacrifice?

<13> Across the various iterations of this famous utterance, we thus find economies of calculation and incalculability forced into so difficult a relation that a triumphant act of self-sacrifice can only express itself in terms of the self-reproach of finite being as measured against the transcendence of "god and country." This is the state, the nation, and the community itself being obviously understood, in Nancy's words, as the fatal "transcendence of an immanence," a community for which "the fully realized person ... is the dead person" (*Inoperative* 13). To further hint as to why all this is something more than a quibble, consider the words of Edward Everett Hale, great-grand nephew of Nathan (and otherwise best known as the author of the short-story "The Man Without a Country"), who declared, at the dedication of a monument to Hale in 1893: "because that boy said those words, and because he died, thousands of other young men have given their lives to his country" ("Honor," emphasis added). Note that he says "his" country, not "their" country": that tiny pronominal shift contains my point in miniature [6].

<14> I would thus tentatively summarize that the sacrifice I have been considering here – that is, the imagined military or national sacrifice as it figures in American public discourse – is a kind of remainder existing in the form of a deferral. It is always already past and yet never finished; presenting itself in its very essence as a subject of commemoration, it sets its spell on the present and its claim on the future by creating "a debt that America can never really fully – fully repay." But the sacrifice is thus a productive remainder, that presents itself, or that is knowable at all, only in the form of an implacable demand for more sacrifice. Because one boy speaks and dies a thousand others perish. This is the fulcrum of the problem I'm trying to sketch, and on which I'll now briefly indicate how the thought of Agamben and Derrida might be brought to bear.

<15> The general question of sacrifice would clearly be a kind of limit concept, for either of these thinkers in their respective attempts to think the problem of ethics and politics, and the possibility of what both call the messianic. Agamben announces the centrality of sacrifice to his thought in the very title of his influential study of

sovereignty, *Homo Sacer*; and Derrida, as he himself observes, has "written so much on the subject [of sacrifice] that a whole page of references would not suffice" (Derrida, *Rogues* 173 n. 12). Any attempt to summarize their respective positions is further complicated by the constant necessity to distinguish (as I have tried to do here) between the idea of sacrifice as it has been deployed in western philosophy, theology and politics, and the idea of sacrifice as it might be rethought. I do not say "deconstructed," because for Derrida the idea of sacrifice would be a kind of "quasi-transcendental" (like the gift, or justice, or "the democracy-to-come"), that cannot be deconstructed (see, e.g. *Specters* 59, 90); and because, for Agamben, the messianic project as he conceives it is anything but a deconstructive one. "Deconstruction is thwarted messianism" (*Remains* 103), Agamben writes, thus making unmistakably clear his own contrary intention to foster a messianism that might, as it were, be encountered head-on and, as he often puts it, grasped. Whereas Derrida argues that we live in a time that is always "out of joint," a time whose horizon of (political and ethical) expectation takes the form of what he calls a "messianicity without messianism" (*Specters* 59 and passim), for Agamben, "the messianic world" is simply "the secular world itself with a slight adjustment ...which results from my having grasped my disjointedness with regard to chronological time" (*Remains*, 69, emphases added; cf. Johnson 276-7).

<16> Although many of Agamben's signature arguments have proven prescient in the aftermath of 9/11, his analysis of the problems that attend sovereign power and the state form are perhaps more useful than his attempts to think a messianic future, a "coming community," in which the problem of sovereignty is entirely overcome. Indeed, what is sometimes ignored by some of the many recent writers referencing Agamben's work is that homo sacer (the figure whose death cannot be recuperated as a sacrificial value) is at once the distinctive object of sovereign power and the subject (or at least the prefiguration) of a "redeemed" humanity. All of humanity is for Agamben now homo sacer; this is at once the decisive event of modernity and the very "threshold" of what he characteristically calls "redemption." One might thus venture to suggest that Agamben's thought (as Derrida says of Heidegger), "often consists ... in repeating on an ontological level Christian themes and texts that have been 'de-Christianized'" (*Gift of Death* 23). Correspondingly, Agamben's messianic vision (to appropriate Derrida's description of the "original duplicity" of Abrahamic religion itself) "both requires and excludes" the sacrifice ("Faith" 88).

<17> Indeed, for Agamben, "all *facere* is *sacrum facere*" (all making is a making-sacred; "Se" 135); the sacrifice is how humanity responds to its essential groundlessness by giving itself a fiction of foundation. This argument might well seem to suggest the influence of Bataille (who, for example, elaborates a broadly similar one in his essay "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice"); yet Agamben repeatedly dismisses Bataille, with a surprising and finally inexplicable violence, as a crypto-fascist whose work is "useless to us" (*Homo Sacer* 113; *Means Without End* 7). Agamben then envisions a "messianic time" in which, as he writes, "the complete loss' of man

coincides with his complete redemption" (*Remains* 31), and which will make possible, above all, "the definitive elimination of the sacrificial mythologeme" ("Se" 137). Thus homo sacer, stripped of all rights and all sacrificial value, and wholly defined by this irreparable loss, finally becomes himself, precisely as such, absolutely sovereign: the bearer of a paradoxical but absolute freedom that is, as the song goes, just another name for nothing left to lose. But this redeemed humanity that emerges beyond the sacrifice is, therefore, itself the residual product or remainder of a sacrifice. For it will have been homo sacer's sacrifice of "self" (that is, the whole constellation of rights and "sacred" meanings that define his transcendence of "bare life") that shall allow humanity as a whole to redeem – to buy back and regain – what Agamben calls the "simply human life" that begins "after the last day" (*Coming Community* 7). Agamben's project is thus a veritable eschatology: a narrative of paradise lost and regained via a kind of "fortunate fall" in which the implacable exercise of sovereign power in modern bio-politics finally produces an absolutely immanent life "liberat[ed] ... from all sacredness" ("Kommerell," 85).

<18> Now, as I've already suggested, Derrida's approach to the sacrifice would be fundamentally different, if one can even speak of an "approach" to describe arguments spread out over so many difficult texts, including the books *Glas*, *Gift of Death*, and *Cinders*, and the essays "From Restricted to General Economy," "Economimesis," "Faith and Knowledge," among many others. Here, I will do no more than sketch three basic points about his treatment of these questions.

<19> First, Derrida suggests above all that the figure of sacrifice, especially in Hegel's reading of Christianity, but also in "Abrahamic" religion and therefore western thought more generally, operates as a kind of *aufhebung*. This famously untranslatable Hegelian term designates, of course, the dialectical operation that negates and conserves at once, and hence functions as an "economic law of absolute reappropriation of ... absolute loss" (*Glas* 133a). Both the crude deployment of the figure of sacrifice in our public discourse, and Agamben's attempt to project the ultimate end of all sacrifice and all sovereignty, remain within the horizon of Derrida's critique. Via his readings of Bataille, Derrida memorably suggests (as we have partly seen) that Hegel's *aufhebung* is "laughable," because "it signifies the busying of a discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself ... as it amortizes absolute expenditure, and ... gives meaning to death" ("Restricted" 257). By the same token, a kind of "absolute comicalness" results when one confronts, by contrast, "a sacrifice without return and without reserves" ("Restricted" 257). In our recent discourse of national commemoration, as we have seen, this absolute sacrifice could only be glimpsed under the rubric of a proscribed and unspeakable figure of waste; and the figure centrally deployed is merely a so-called "sacrifice" frankly envisioned as a mode of investment that seeks (as Marx says of capital itself) to preserve itself by multiplying itself. As for Agamben, consider, for example, his claim that the Derridean trace is "a suspended *Aufhebung* that will never come to know its own *pleroma*" – that is, its

fullness or plenitude (*Remains* 103). Here again, Agamben announces clearly his contrary intention to project a "messianic time" which could become wholly present, and which a redeemed humanity might accordingly "take hold of and achieve" (*Remains* 68).

<20> Second, in contrast to Agamben and all such formulations, Derrida suggests there could be no end to either sacrifice or sovereignty. In *Gift of Death*, Derrida reads Kierkegaard on the Biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac but finally goes beyond either of his sources to suggest that in this story "God" figures the absolute Other, and Abraham's anguished dilemma the aporia of all duty and responsibility. For Abraham's absolute duty to God compels him to sacrifice ethics as well as his only son, and yet, in order to assume this very responsibility, as Derrida writes, "the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights" (66). Were Isaac not irreplaceable in his absolute singularity, no sacrifice could be offered: Abraham must abandon his ethical responsibility to his son in order to affirm his duty to the absolute Other. And, Derrida also insists, we are each of us, every day, every moment, on Mt. Moriah, facing this insupportable and insoluble dilemma. As he writes,

I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. ... As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude. (*Gift* 68)

One might perhaps summarize this terrifying argument as simply as this: if I live in community with others in any sense at all (and which of us does not?), if I am ever capable of anything like communication, compassion, or love (words that I can only use in acute awareness of how Derrida problematizes them), then there is always in principle the possibility of that moment in which the Other's life, or death, becomes inextricably linked to my own, the moment which I am therefore compelled to confront an absolute decision and the possibility of sacrifice or violence. To think the "definitive end" of sacrifice, as Agamben does, is, by contrast, to think a self that is wholly sovereign, unconditionally freed not just from the material neediness of which Bataille speaks but, indeed, of temporality and economy itself, of the need for the "self" to assemble it-self in order to be itself (Johnson 280). To think the end of sacrifice is to think outside of time and beyond Otherness, and hence to strand thinking in a place where no one and nothing ever arrives. By the same token, to think an absolute sovereignty of being (or to think an absolute end of sovereignty, which is finally the same thing) is to imagine a world with no more decisions, and therefore no possibility of justice (cf. Michaelsen and Shershow 300-1).

<21> Finally, this whole question thus always presents a

double challenge because, although the possibility or possible necessity of sacrifice remains inescapable, one must not simply abdicate to it as a fatal inevitability or install its economy as the groundwork of a politics. As Hint de Vries suggests, for Derrida there could be "no beyond of sacrifice," yet the idea, the economy, the structure of sacrifice, must "be treated with the utmost reservation" (205-6). As Derrida observes on more than one occasion, even this very "must" embodies precisely the question and the labor of thought from which we can never be spared. How and when does the "must" of force (*je dois*) become *devoir*, duty or responsibility? What or how much must we give? And what is the force or right that compels us to this duty?

<22> One will perhaps recall how our public discourse imagines the sacrifices of those who have gone before as offering us only, so to speak, a gift of debt. When President Bush says that the sacrifice of American soldiers "creates a debt that America can never really fully – fully repay," his slip of the tongue, that fibrillation between the "real" and the "full," opens what I will venture to call a "différance" in Derrida's sense: that is, a slippage between a figure of debt that is strictly incalculable and interminable, and a figure of a debt that, by contrast, demands an endless service, a sort of sacrificial usury which plunges us ever deeper in debt the more we labor to pay it off. We indeed touch here on that "point of greatest obscurity" of which Derrida speaks in the essay "Différance": the question of a relation between Bataille's "restricted" and "general" economies, between "différance as the economic detour which ... always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by ... calculation," and "différance as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve" ("Différance" 19). The concept of "waste," which in my opening examples is always proscribed as unspeakable in referring to our violent political calculations of life and limb, only makes sense at all within a recuperative logic and a productive economy. What Derrida calls "the implacable critique of the politics, of all the politics that have, in the distant or immediate past, constituted the premises of this [or any] war" ("Madness" 360), remains urgent and necessary, here, now, and always. But even beyond or before such critiques, it will still be something like this unspeakability that will always remain to be thought: death and sacrifice as absolute loss, for which nothing will ever compensate and from which nothing can ever be redeemed (cf. *Learning* 24).

<23> Nevertheless, we will of course also recall how Derrida too speaks famously of "the state of the debt" in *Specters of Marx*. With this phrase, he refers at once to the literal problem of third-world debt in the age of global capitalism, the figural "debt" we owe today to thinkers of the past such as Marx, and the debt we owe to "those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living" (*Specters* xix). This last debt is the absolute and inescapable condition of all ethics and all politics. But the "reaffirmation of [this] debt" must always be, as Derrida stipulates, "a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation" (*Specters* 91-2). This is what allows me to stipulate, as an final caveat to my remarks in this essay,

that to set ourselves the task of rethinking yet again the figure of sacrifice is in no way to ignore or efface or devalue the myriad concrete sacrifices (if indeed we still should call them that) given by singular beings to one another every moment and on every possible ground, including of course all those who offer, and for whatever reason, the gift of death. But it is to envision a different vigilance and a different responsibility taking its place in those moments when we will also still be trying "to keep the memory, to draw lessons, and to respond better" ("Madness" 360-1) to all that by then shall have arrived.

Endnotes

[1] On Bataille's laughter and Hegel see Derrida, "Restricted." For Bataille on "general economy" and "unproductive expenditure," *The Accursed Share* and *Visions of Excess*, especially, "On Expenditure."

[2] Bush's lines echo one of the primary inscriptions on the National World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. which claims to "honor those twentieth-century Americans who took up the struggle during the Second World War and made the sacrifices to perpetuate the gift our forefather's entrusted to us."

[3] The general prevalence of Christian rhetoric in the Bush administration has been frequently observed; among many other books, see Domke. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that the idea of freedom as a divine "gift" does not seem to be scriptural in origin. Perhaps the closest scriptural reference might be *Galatians* 5:13: "brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another;" though one would be hard pressed to cite this as a source for Bush's figure.

[4] See, e.g. *Accursed Share* 19-21 and *passim*. I have discussed Bataille's general economy at more length in "Of Sinking" and *The Work and the Gift*.

[5] As M. William Phelps documents in a recent study of the Hale legend, the line as commonly cited seems to be a paraphrase of the words reported in the *Independent Chronicle* of May 17, 1781 (whose own authenticity is also open to question): "I am so satisfied with the cause in which I have engaged that my only regret is that I have not more lives than one to offer in its service" (Phelps 192). It also has frequently been suggested that Hale was quoting or paraphrasing Joseph Addison's *Cato*, a play quite popular at the time of the American revolution, in which the titular character says: "What a pity it is that we can die but once to save our country."

[6] The later Hale seems to have had a penchant for economic figures of the kind I have been discussing; for example, the final and perhaps most cited line of "The Man Without a Country" is the self-chosen epitaph of Phillip Nolan, the titular character: "He loved his country as no other man has loved her; but no man deserved less at her hand" (Hale 60). Hale is widely cited, in books of familiar quotations, for the line: "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do

everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I should do and, with the help of God, I will do."

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