Say the Ram Survived: Altering the Binding of Isaac in Jacques Derrida’s “Rams” and J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

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In “Rams,” Derrida writes, “For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of the world” (140). This chapter considers the consequence of Derrida’s enigmatic maxim for the practice of animal sacrifice. In closing the world of one animal, can sacrifice affirm the continuity of lineages, boundaries, traditions, oaths – indeed of the entire human world? Bringing Derrida into conversation with Coetzee’s Disgrace and with passages from Genesis, this chapter interrogates an investment in sacrifice as a cut that creates the world.

J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace ends with an obscure decision regarding the life of an animal. With the words, “Yes, I am giving him up,” an assistant in an animal shelter, David Lurie, delivers a crippled dog to Bev Shaw, a veterinarian who performs euthanasia (220). In David’s statement, the “yes” is followed by a partial cogito (“I am”). David also employs a prepositional verb phrase implying completion (“give up”), and for the first time refers to the dog not as “it,” but as “him.” And yet, no statement could be more undecidable from an interpretative point of view. Does this final sentence – this spontaneous and solemn sentence of death, this rendering of the beloved and unique animal – announce an animal sacrifice, or does it constitute an “ethical” pledge to carry and support the animal in putting it down, even if this means imperiling or sacrificing the “I”?

In his essay “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” Jacques Derrida raises the question of sacrifice in relation to the end of the entire world. In an enigmatic refrain, he states that the death of each being – “human, animal or divine” – signifies “the absolute end of the one and only world” (140). But when confronting the inevitability of surviving certain friends and loved ones, Derrida determines that he must “carry” the other, and the world of the other, beyond the end of the entire world. He affirms, “I must then carry [the world], carry you, there where the world gives way: that is my responsibility” (161). But in carrying the other beyond the other’s death, one must impossibly endure through the end of the world. Carrying the other, one must inevitably sacrifice the other’s singularity and reduce the fullness of the other’s world, at least to some extent. Derrida
therefore insists, “It’s a question of carrying without appropriating to oneself.” He writes,

To carry now no longer has the meaning of “to comprise” [comporter], to include, to comprehend in the self, but rather to carry oneself or bear oneself toward [se porter vers] the infinite inappropriability of the other […]. (161)

Derrida grants that carrying the other, though it entails a certain risk of sacrifice, is the only way to carry or sustain oneself. Quoting Paul Celan, he writes, “For no one bears this life alone” (163). But the work of “countersignature,” of bearing oneself toward the other’s enunciation, and offering an inflected, interpolating response, may moderate the risk of sacrifice by obliging one to risk the speech and signature of the self. In the term’s legal acceptation, to “countersign” is to add one’s signature to a document that has already been signed – usually by someone else, but occasionally by oneself (for example, in a consulate, when one is required to reproduce one’s signature in order to prove one’s identity). When Derrida adopts the term, he affirms and embraces the activity of signing, while troubling the notion that the repetition of our signature – like the repetition of sacrifice – can permit us to prove or sustain our identities time after time. In responding to the other’s enunciation or to a signature as complex as a literary corpus, we find our own signatures, idioms, and worldviews inevitably altered and signed.

In Disgrace, the last dog to be euthanized is a dog that nearly “sings” (215), inviting David into a strange form of call and response that could resemble the “uninterrupted dialogue” mentioned, and longed for, in the title of Derrida’s essay. Of course, within “Rams,” Derrida qualifies even the best of dialogues as virtually uninterrupted and nearly continuous (139). Incessantly, he considers the melancholy interruptions in our sustained and sustaining conversations with the other, interruptions ranging from shifts and lapses in the self, to irresolvable misunderstandings between friends, to the ultimate interruption of an interlocutor’s death. In Disgrace, David does confront the ultimate finitude of self and other, but he glosses over faults, lapses, and complications, both in the other and in himself, when he “consigns” the singing dog to the flames (144). Beginning with “I,” saying “I am,” David bears the other – up. The novel ends when David signs, “Yes, I am giving him up” (220). But David’s “yes,” like Derrida’s “virtually,” hints at the existence of an implicit and unbounded dialogue whenever the “I” is announced. Saying “yes,” David concedes to a vague sense that someone is approving his performance in the “theatre” of euthanasia (142). With some irony, he has already named this grand Other, calling it “the universe and its all-seeing eye” (195).