

Janus Head

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Notes from the Editor

I would like to thank David Wolf, our new literary editor, for his hard work and willingness to help at each and every turn and mishap.

This issue would not be possible without our new Assistant Editor, Kathrin DePue. She helped us through a bit of a crisis.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Oscar Preis, a website wizard.

John Pauley, Editor

Indianola, Iowa

Table of Contents

Special Issue on Evil

Eric Boynton	<i>Introduction</i>	7
John D. Caputo	<i>Praying for an Earthier Jesus: A Theology of Flesh</i>	11
Eric Severson	<i>Hope, Evil and Creatio ex Nihilo</i>	33
Keith Putt	<i>The Existence of Evil and the Insistence of God: Caputo's Poetics of the Event as a Discourse on Divine Intervention</i>	45
Anthony T. Larson	<i>Empowering Evil, or, Good Evil is Hard to Find</i>	77
John Pauley	<i>Evil is Business as Usual: An Essay on Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men</i>	101
Bruce Ellis Benson	<i>Chrétien on the Call that Wounds</i>	125
Eric Boynton	<i>Ivan's Rebellion: Love and the Excess of Evil</i>	143
Victor E. Taylor	<i>"Jean-François Lyotard, Evil, and the Turn to 'Para/Ethics'"</i>	153
Rosa Slegers	<i>Forebodings: Uncanny Approaches to Evil</i>	177

Poems

Alison Swan	<i>Catalogue</i>	193
	<i>The Ecology of Art</i>	196
Philip Barron	<i>The problem of history</i>	197
	<i>The problem of identity</i>	198
David Wolf	<i>From Sablier, (The Objectivist in the Land of the Fauves)</i>	199
	<i>From Sablier, (Time Coming 'Round)</i>	202
	Notes on Contributors	207

Introduction

“When I came to men I found them sitting on an old conceit: the conceit that they have long known what is good and evil. . . . and whoever wanted to sleep well talked of good and evil before going to sleep.”

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In 1945, in one of her first essays following the end of the war in Europe, the renowned philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life.”¹ In many ways she was prescient. In recent years the concept of evil has reemerged as a significant trope in common parlance, in political discourse,² and in the work of philosophers, as well as political scientists, psychologists, and cultural critics.³ A phenomenon with a lingering enigmatic quality, evil has, it seems, been “re-discovered” as a highly suggestive phenomenon today.

The resurgence of the concept of evil ought to strike moderns, particularly modern philosophers, as an oddity, since it remains a theologically-laden term for wrong-doing involving the illusion of dark forces. The problem of evil, in modernity, has become putatively demystified. Evil is a problem, it seems, only in so far as we remain obsessed with a worn-out intellectual horizon that understands evil as deeply contrary to the cosmic order. By tying the problem of evil to an all too human cause, the problem not only dissolves, but evil itself becomes an anachronism, a term for wrongdoing in a sacramental universe that in an age of enlightenment can be mitigated. For people for whom there is no such religion or god, there is no problem that needs to be solved. And there is no need to maintain in pious humility that there is no solution because the “ought not be” uttered in response to evil no longer stands in relation to the order generated by power and goodness; it *merely* stands in relation to the vicious capacity of humans.

Yet against this “naturalizing” task arises a second set of issues, especially after the Second World War. In the face of a “century that has known two world wars, the totalitarianism of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia”⁴

some philosophers have argued that despite our desperate attempts at comprehending such events we are ultimately unable to reconcile ourselves to these modern occurrences of evil. So, long after the problem of evil as transcendent of thought and management was set aside, long after the death of the Being that necessitated such an evil was proclaimed, recent events have revived its transcendence.⁵ Evil's source once again appears too deep, its orbit too wide. In the face of the excessive character of evil, in Hannah Arendt's words "we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know"⁶ rendering all usual and historical moral systems obsolete.

Evil's resurgence, then, might be particularly relevant, highlighting lacunae in predominant tendencies of modern thought, specifically in our moral vocabulary. Although betraying assumptions that for most contemporary thinkers are long out of fashion, evil generates an intellectually irresistible promise of allowing privileged access to murky yet potent revelations about who we are as moral beings. Yet exactly how evil remains a "problem" in the contemporary world is not always so clear for many politicians, political scientists, and philosophers who employ the word, especially when it has been ripped from its religious moorings. Arendt, for one, does not wish to reassert the traditional analytic problem involving the question of the reconcilability of evil and God. She declared "that the way God had been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing: if anything is dead . . . not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become 'meaningless,' but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility."⁷ How then does this theological problem, that has come to be narrowly defined, find broad relevance for addressing the challenges of our genocidal age?

Through multiple approaches and analyses of various texts and media, the authors included in this special issue of *Janus Head* take up Arendt's insight: the problem of evil remains a fundamental intellectual problem. Evil, to say the least, has become a polysemic term. It is the work of these authors to describe various kinds of phenomena and events as evil—each in their own way thinking anew the perennial problem of evil in the contemporary setting.

Eric Boynton, Guest Editor
Meadville, Pennsylvania

Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1945), reprinted in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn (Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 133–135.
- 2 See for instance President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002," at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/release/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.
- 3 See for instance Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: a Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Jennifer Geddes, *Evil After Postmodernism* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001); Ruth W. Grant, *Naming Evil, Judging Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); María Pía Lara, *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Martin Beck Matustík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope: Postsecular Meditations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Alan Schrift, *Modernity and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Robin May Schott, *Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 162.
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).
- 6 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 459.
- 7 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1971), 10.

Praying for an Earthier Jesus: A Theology of Flesh

John D. Caputo

At a recent meeting of Wesleyan philosophers and theologians, Craig Keen raised a significant objection to *The Weakness of God*.¹ Going back to the work of William Herzog, Keen made a convincing comparison of the “slumdogs” portrayed in the Academy Award winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* with the short and miserable lives of the people to whom Jesus preached. If the poor with whom Jesus associated were sinners, they were first sinned against, not unlike the slumdog children who were intentionally blinded in order to render them more effective because pitiable beggars.² Both were regarded as unclean, expendable, and having nothing to sell but their bodies:

They were the “slumdogs” of his time and place... These are simply people—people who have no reason to expect a way out, who have no reason to expect more than a short and miserable life. Do they need magic? No. Magic has been co-opted by the powers, too, the powers that weigh them down. Do they need resurrection? Yes, that is what they need. But what kind of resurrection would be good news to the poor? It is here that we must ask if *The Weakness of God* provides good news.³

But what is resurrection? Keen responds:

I say now that I do not know. I believe no more than does *The Weakness of God* in a resuscitation of bodies long dead, molecules and atoms dispersed throughout this planet. I do hope for resurrection, however; but unlike *The Weakness of God* I hope for a resurrection in which bodies long dead come to be saturated by a new life that has no contrast in and no competition with death. I do not know what that is... I hope that the extant order of things will pass away, that fire will fall from the sky, and new heavens and a new earth will come to shine—without *exclusion* or *inclusion* or *conclusion*—in the New Jerusalem. And that is why we need an earthier Jesus than I think makes his way

through the airy pages of *The Weakness of God*. It is because our bodies are being beaten down that the body of a God strong to deliver must be beaten down with us—really, not in charade—and with us raised... I am not so sure that the brilliant text before us longs the way I do for the present evil age to pass away. I am not so sure that it remembers vividly enough that we don't *have* bodies, but rather *are* bodies. I am not so sure that in the end what this text has is good news for the vast majority of those who live and have lived in this world.⁴

It is a tribute to the acuteness of Craig Keen's analysis of *The Weakness of God* that he has, I am sure without realizing it, identified my current project, the follow up to *The Weakness of God* which I have tentatively entitled *The Weakness of Flesh*. My task here is to give an account of an earthier Jesus and perhaps, as I suspect, an earthier resurrection as well. I am extremely grateful to have the gift of such insightful commentary. What follows is a digest of such good news as I can offer about an earthier Jesus, a meek offering indeed compared to the mountain of misery upon which Keen is so resolutely fixed in his own work for which I am deeply indebted.

Doing Evil

In *The Weakness of God* I think of God in terms of an event of provocation. The provocation of God is not to be imagined as something that God does, as if God were an agent in the sky, but something that takes place in and under the name of God, which is the philosophical wisdom behind the adage "God helps those who help themselves." That requires actual, mundane, and identifiable agents, whom no one should confuse with God and who, above all, should not confuse themselves with God. There is no more salutary offspring of the theology of events than the recognition that it is not God but human beings who do things in the name of God, which is why the history of religion is also a history of violence. God is not well described as an agent with mysterious powers to do things that for all the world seem to be the doings of more mundane powers. In a theology of the event God is not a powerful but mysterious agent but the powerless power of the event. God does not do, undo, or fail to do anything, but certain things get themselves done in or under the name of God, in response to the event that is harbored there. That is why it is futile to blame God for doing us wrong and unnecessary to exonerate God's ways before human courts. It is human beings who

belong in human courts. The name of God is not the name of somebody doing or not doing something, but the name of an event. Events break open the present, for better or for worse, like life and death, pleasure and pain, joy and sadness, good and evil, constituting beings both aggressive and sympathetic, which is why we are capable both of attacking and defending the weak. In the ambiguity of this unstable middle the proportionately ambiguous power of freedom makes its wary way. The hoary, theological “problem of evil” thus has nothing to do with all the choices that a sovereign, omnipotent, and omniscient God could have but failed to make, leaving us in our present sorry state. The problem of evil has to do with ambient play of ambiguous beings, an ambience beyond mere ambiguity, since our choices rarely boil down to two. The weakness of the flesh is at bottom its ambience, and its ambience is its greatest, if riskiest, resource.

In a theology of the event, there is no question of healing the wounds of time with the salve of eternity, but of returning time to its own resources, of recovering the events by which time, or what happens in time, is nourished, of allowing the extremes of dislocation and disjunction to unsettle the settled flow of the present. Imaginative and metaphysically inclined beings that we are, we can hardly resist envisioning an eternal and immaterial sphere outside time and space or hardly be blamed for picturing some immaterial super agent capable of the most daring and astonishing feats, for it is always necessary to give figure and form to events. But in the end the name of God is a trace of an event nestled deep within time which forces time outside itself in an ecstatic exposure to time immemorial and to an unforeseeable time to come.⁵ The meditation upon this event, which drives time and language and desire to their extreme limits, driving us to God, driving us to being driven by God, forcing us to ask what we love when we love our God, exposing us to the provocation of God, is what I mean by theology.

That is why I speak of the weakness of God. For events do not do things, and the name of God is the name of an event. Events are not causal factors or agents but the condition of restlessness within things within which causal lines of force are set in motion, which make for movers and doers, both provoked and restless. The event itself, if it had a self, is a provocation, a solicitation, an invitation, an interrogation, a memory, or a promise, whatever it is that unsettles the settled present, whatever disturbs, interrupts, disjoins, opens, exposes. The eventiveness of the event is the deconstructive energy or restlessness in things, but it does not, of itself, do something. We do things with words and we do things

with things, but we do not do things with events; events are conditions under which things get said and done. That does not set us up as autonomous agents, for our actions are always the action of the other in me, my response to a provocation from I know not where.

The “tangle” of events, to borrow an excellent image from Craig Keen, makes for an anonymous quasitranscendental field. The name of God harbors the weak force of an event, the power of powerlessness, the powerlessness of the “perhaps,” not the omni-power of a *prima causa*. We might say, following the dizzying exchange between Cixous and Derrida,⁶ that the weakness of God turns on the undecidable play of the “might,” the suggestive slippage from the powerful “might” of God, the power of God almighty, to the powerless power of the “might” as in “might be” or “might have been,” the power of a suggestiveness or subjunctiveness, of a possibility or a perhaps, of an invitation or solicitation. The theology of the event depends upon the grammatological slippage from the indicative mood to the subjunctive mood and deconstruction is written in the subjunctive, about subjunctives, from the ontological to the deontological or meontological. What is disjunctive about the event appears grammatically in the subjunctive, which subverts the settled conjunctions of the present. That is why, pace Heidegger’s famous analysis of the Anaximander fragment, Derrida locates justice in the disjunction or dislocation of a call, a solicitation, a promise. Disjoining is the work of the event, which does not mean what the event “does,” but the way the event provides the conditions under which things get themselves done.

How Earthy Do You Want to Be?

Let us begin the pursuit of an earthier Jesus by taking Christianity at its word, at its Word made Flesh, embracing the claim made in Christianity that it is a religion of the flesh (*sarx, caro, chair, Fleisch*). Let us take our point of departure from the Christian affirmation of the flesh, from the task to adapt a turn of phrase from Deleuze that I think felicitous of “becoming flesh,” a phrase that almost perfectly translates John 1:14 (*sarke egeneto*), even as the Germans say *Fleischwerden* as a way to translate “incarnation.” I am distinguishing “flesh” as the site of pleasure and pain, suffering and *jouissance*, passivity and mortality, from the “body” as agent, as the site of action and movement. The body tends to mean the body subject, the subject of activity and agency. The body is the “organon” of the soul, intimately conjoined to the soul, its right hand, so to speak.

The body is an ensemble of organic functions. The body is the standard subject of Husserlian “phenomenology,” even as it appears everywhere without being named by Heidegger in *Being and Time* as being-in-the-world, as the user of tools and the being that knows its way around the world. The body on the whole tends to be hale and whole, male and muscular, white and western, even a bit of an able-bodied athlete, sexual and otherwise.

Flesh by contrast is a seat of passivity and affectivity, of feeling, self-feeling, and feeling itself felt; flesh is the sight of pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, glory and misery. I would identify flesh as the seat *par excellence* of earthiness. We tend to pass our days in the functioning body tuned to the world, but it does not take much to be drawn back into the flesh. The “reduction” to the flesh, to borrow a term from phenomenology, occurs when we are driven to the extremes of pleasure and pain, pushed to a point where the world itself is suspended and we are reduced to sighing and moaning. Flesh aches with hunger but (*Fleisch*) is also eaten, flesh is meat, flesh is corpulence, flesh is inseparable from blood, flesh is voluptuous, and when we die it is flesh that rots (first) and stinks (our bones take longer to rot and who knows when our ceramic hip and knee replacements and dental crowns will rot). Because the “body” is the principle of agency, it is also capable of becoming utterly inert; at death, there is a “body,” a *corpus*/corpse, which must be lifted, removed, disposed of, but the flesh has melted away, withdrawn. Dead bodies are bodies without flesh, the body become a dead weight.

If I am being indelicate it is not because I am against delicacy, but because I am emphasizing that the indelicacy, the earthiness that attends the flesh is a function of its delicacy. People with a “foul mouth” use words that are “dirty” and are told to “wash their mouth out.” To speak of the human being as a whole as “flesh” is a metonym that takes its point of departure from a humble and even an embarrassing part of (our) nature. Flesh is not for the squeamish. When people decide to really write about the flesh and not resort to circumlocutions, it leaves everyone shocked and cannot be repeated in polite society.⁷ To be sure, nothing is gained by inciting a war between body and flesh or instituting a new form of dualism. My point is exactly the opposite: all flesh is embodied, all the living bodies we have ever run into are en fleshed, and we would sometimes find it hard to sort out one from the other. What I am analyzing here is the almost irresistible lure or dream of a “body without flesh,” a living one, not a corpse, and what event is harbored in that figure.

According to Paul's theology of the Incarnation, Christ Jesus, not thinking fleshlessness something to exploit and hold on to (Philippians 2:6), assumes flesh and blood and bone. That is what Paul says just after having decided that on the whole, unless he is needed here on earth, he would rather have a body without flesh. More baldly put, he is saying he would rather be dead and that life in the flesh is nothing to hold on to either. That raises the question of the status of this bond with flesh, its *ana*-status, given a belief in *anastasis*. Is there, as Jean-Luc Nancy suspects, a deep dissatisfaction with our earthy carnality concealed in Incarnation, a "real and secret horror of bodies" lodged there?⁸ Might a horror at the prospect of carnal corruption go hand in hand with affirming the advent of the Incorruptible into our "corruptible bodies?" What would it be like to affirm a theology of carnality itself, before or without *In*-carnation, so that carnality is not, need not, be visited from on high? A theology where God does not need to visit or assume flesh but would be always already there? A theology where the divine is characterized not by an advent into flesh but by the event of flesh itself, not a theology of advent but a theology of the event? Is a genuine theology of the flesh (*caro, carnis*) compromised, betrayed in advance, by a theology of *In*-carnation? What is the effect of this prefix "in-"? Is its force actually privative, "in-carnation," as in in-corporeal, in-valid, in-carnal?

Even if we move beyond the classic notion of "atonement," which these days has come under fire and been subjected to radical reinterpretation, even if we move on to say that Incarnation represents the advent of grace and glory beyond nature, raising flesh up to hitherto unsuspected glory, lifted beyond its own natural resources, does this not come too late? Why not say that flesh itself, in all its misery, is already glorious, is glory enough? Why this fear and trembling about flesh itself, without or before Incarnation? Is this not a fear and trembling before death itself? When Paul says he prefers to live with Christ instead of in the flesh, he does not mean what Plato meant in the *Phaedo* where an incorruptible soul survives the corruption of the body and lives on with the purity of a separate soul. Paul does not distinguish body from soul but body from flesh. He says we will live on in bodily form, but with a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*, I Cor. 15: 44), light as air. Paul is describing a life without getting sick or dying, without the need to eat and digest food (or the fear of starving or being eaten), without getting tired and in need of a rest and a cold drink, without falling and breaking our necks or worrying about bleeding, freezing or starving to death, without the need

to reproduce, in short, without everything that we associate with the life, with the earthiness of life.

The Risen Body

The body of which Incarnational theology is dreaming is signaled clearly by a revealing episode in Luke. After his appearance on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to the disciples assembled in Jerusalem seemingly out of the blue, who were startled and “thought that they were seeing a ghost (*pneuma*).” He reassured them and urged them to look at the wounds in his risen body and urged them to touch him: “for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” This flatly contradicts the words of Paul in I Cor. 15:50, which expressly disallows “flesh and blood” into the kingdom of God. Then, as a *pièce de resistance*, Jesus took a piece of broiled fish and ate it to allay their doubts (Luke 24:36-43), after which he led them out to Bethany, blessed them, and “was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50). Left to stand as it is, this narrative would overwhelm any attempt to account for the risen body. It would imply a functioning digestive tract and consequently the production of waste products, a heavenly food industry, requiring farms, a favorable climate, and a waste management industry, to put it all rather circumspectly.⁹ Giorgio Agamben, who is less concerned with being circumspect, puts it bluntly: what must be excluded from the risen body is defecation.¹⁰ Defecation marks the difference between this side and the other side. There’s nothing more earthy. The line between immanence and transcendence is drawn by defecation. What is foolish, ridiculous, or amusing about this need for a heavenly plumbing industry, of course, is that we have literalized and reified an event, conflated an event with some sort of heavenly or otherworldly fact of the matter. That would be the equivalent of taking seriously what sort of housing, food supply, and waste management system would be required to accommodate Alice’s surprising change of size in Wonderland, or where the Mad Hatter purchases his tea, or whether he preferred Earl Grey. Can this be how to think about these stories?

Thomas Aquinas proposed a way out of this dilemma by offering a typically ingenious metaphysical gloss on this amazing episode in which he relied upon an analogy adopted from the Venerable Bede about the contrasting ways the earth and the sun consume water.¹¹ The earth is “thirsty” for water, meaning that it consumes water by absorbing it from defect or need, while the sun is higher than or in excess of water

and does not “need” water, and so it consumes water by burning it up or evaporating it. The mortal body is like the earth, it needs food, but the risen body is like the sun, it does not need food, but consumes it by evaporating or burning it up. The food is not transformed into the risen body of Christ (which would create the need for heavenly plumbers) but evaporated, reduced from an actual object to its primal potency.

From the point of view of a historical-critical view of the Scriptures, Aquinas actually is not all that far off! But with this difference: the resurrected body is not analogous to a heavenly body; it *is* a heavenly body, of the same stuff. Of course, one large problem here is that, as Dale Martin says, there is “no fixed tradition as to the exact nature of the resurrected body of Jesus” in the New Testament.¹² Luke and John make a point of emphasizing that resurrection is a resurrection of the flesh, that the hands of Thomas could feel the soft tissues of Jesus’s wounded side, that Jesus could eat broiled fish, have breakfast of fish with the disciples on the shores of the Lake Tiberias, share bread with the disciples in the inn at Emmaus and that he was no “ghost” (*pneuma*). Paul, who is defending resurrection against its learned despisers at Corinth, explicitly rejects that possibility in advance, almost verbatim, regarding it as just the sort of thing to bring down ridicule upon the whole idea of resurrection as patently mythical and magical, and about that I think Paul is right. If one took Luke and John literally, one would then face the problem of coming up with something to avoid the paradoxes of heavenly waste disposal.

To avoid such ridiculous consequences, while not giving up on the idea of the resurrection of the body completely, as Martin shows in a close analysis of I Cor. 15, Paul took pains to distinguish the features of corruptible and incorruptible bodies. Corruptible bodies are strictly earthly post-lapsarian bodies, made of earthly dirt and water, while heavenly bodies are made of a purer, finer astral material of fire and air, a point which invites comparison with contemporary, electronic, post-biological bodies. Paul does not distinguish between body and soul (Plato) or body and mind (Descartes), but between gross bodies and refined bodies. Human bodies are composed of elements of both, which is why they are so earthy. As descendants of Adam, we are possessed of the lower elements, which Paul characterizes as *sarx*, flesh, the soft tissues of the body responsible for feeling and *psyche*, a “soul” or in Latin an “*anima*” which is responsible for its animate vegetative and sentient life, which it shares with the animals on land, sea (fish) and air (birds). Finally it has the element of *pneuma*, spirit, which is responsible

for the higher acts of cognitive and intelligent life, which is nothing “immaterial” in the modern sense, but consists of the finest, most refined and ethereal of material substances, out of which the sun, the moon and the stars are made (as is also, perhaps, a modern digitalized computer). So the natural place of *pneuma* is not the earth but the heavens; these are heavenly bodies *somata epourania*. The first two elements, *sarx* and *psyche*, are earth-bound and belong to the sphere of *hyle*, which is commonly translated as “matter,” but signifies the grosser heavier side of matter, while *pneuma* means ether, fire, and air, more refined and lighter materialities, as opposed to the grosser earthier ones.

The resurrected body sheds everything hyletic and animate, effectively shedding its grosser materiality and animality and earthiness, while what remains is entirely pneumatic. Thus while we today would say that fire and air belong to the “material” world, they were not in Paul’s vocabulary hyletic (*hyle*) or “material” (in the “gross” or narrow sense) like wood or dirt. In other words, what Paul is precisely excluding is the hyletic or *earthy* body. In Incarnational theology, the hope for an earthier Jesus goes hand in hand with the hope of an unearthly resurrection. In the resurrected body, it is *pneuma* that survives, but not *sarx* or *psyche*. Death for Paul is not the separation of body and soul, but the separation of body and flesh. The resurrected body is still a body (*soma*), not a gross-hyletic body (an animal body) but a “pneumatic body,” one that sheds its grossness and is resurrected in a highly refined ethereal body whose function is one of higher intelligent life, but not lower biological or zoological life. This invites comparison with contemporary debates among theoretical physicists who point out that in the sphere of particle physics, one is no longer dealing with “matter” (in the gross sense) because of the minuteness of these particles, by which the physicists do not mean to say that they are studying angels or spiritual substances.

When one compares Paul’s account with that of Luke and John, it is clear that in the Synoptic gospels, where earlier sayings are cast into narratives and made to tell a story, a more mythic and magical view of the risen body is struck. The narrative structure permits the implausible notion of palpably risen flesh with risen but incorruptible and quite useless bodily functions like eating and drinking. The authors of these gospels ignore, if indeed they even knew, the way Paul had forestalled those problems in advance and explicitly ruled out risen flesh from the kingdom of God (I Cor. 15: 51). Paul was not trying to tell a story but to undo one. He was worried about how resurrection was held up to ridicule by the Greek philosophers at Corinth. The *hoi polloi* at Corinth would swallow

almost anything, but Paul was hearing objections from the educated class. Accordingly, he disallows all such magical concoctions and cleans up the account of the resurrected body by defining it as a body without flesh, effectively without organs, a body made not of earthy but of an astral stuff that even the learned members of the ancient world would agree is incorruptible.¹³

No one today can fail to notice the connection between the eschatological risen body and technological body, between these spectacular scenes in the New Testament and the literature of science fiction, between the miracles of the New Testament and the miracles of techno-science, which is increasingly becoming a techno-eschatology. Has not science long dreamt of transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension, and does it not do so even more today when certain impossible things have become possible? We today cannot avoid observing how much of the theological imagination is being progressively realized by medical science and contemporary bionics and bio-technology; the possibility of moving through the air in flight, “miracle” drugs to cure disease, straightening even replacing limbs and organs, sending instant messages across vast spaces, travel guided by digital global positioning devices, etc. As Michel Serres has shown, advanced information technology is gradually taking over the classical functions of angelology.¹⁴ We even find a high-tech equivalent of the way the risen body of Jesus was able to appear and disappear instantly, behind closed doors, in the famous “Beam me up, Scottie,” scenes in the TV series *Star Trek*, which project the technological possibility of instant bodily relocation. On the horizon of this technobody is the ancient dream of the elimination of death. Is this a dream or a nightmare? Is it an ideal limit to be approached asymptotically? Right now we would all settle for an average lifespan of a hundred plus years and maybe even on a transformed earth, cleaned up and protected from the right wing. There is moreover a fascinating parallel between these astral bodies of the first century and contemporary particle physics, where the lines between the material and the immaterial get fuzzy, where we are no longer dealing with gross-hyletic matter but something quite different.

Theology and robotology make a common cause centered on the common foe they find in biology. The robotologists are no less resolved than St. Paul to provide us with light, fast, airy, magical bodies, even if such bodies come at the cost of flesh, of the *bios* of life and its biology, of the *zoe* of life and its zoology. The latest, most up to date version of the I Corinthians 15 is being written by contemporary robotologists. They are as prepared and desirous as any Christian to put off corruptibility

and to put on incorruptibility, and just as ready to leave this earth for some elsewhere in the skies where they will live on and on in very un-earthly bodies that are shiny, hot, fast, light, and incorruptible. The one by science no less than the other by Spirit is anxious to refit disabled bodies with shiny new able bodies¹⁵ and then to fit themselves out with bodies that can survive the trip and thrive in the atmosphere of that heavenly city. Robotology and biotechnology are no less than theology in the business of eschatology. They are all assiduously preparing a transfiguration, a resurrection, an ascension. The robotologists are as serious about this as any Bible thumper in Kansas railing against Darwin or any ravished character in *Left Behind*. Both show the same anxiety about dying before the rapture arrives.¹⁶ A theologian equally at home in particle physics offers us a new theory of resurrection. The unholy alliance of John Polkinghorne and Hans Moravec is written in the stars. Seen thus, both robots and risen bodies, both iPhones and angels, all so many bodies without flesh, announce a future that both excites and terrifies us, the future concealed in the fate of our flesh.

Weak Theology and the Weakness of Flesh

How then can theology explain its difference from robotology? What is the difference between the bodies to come of theology and the bodies to come of robotology? What are we to make of these speculative forays into what Paul himself calls a *mysterion*, a secret? Are we on the right track?

In order to respond to this, let us go back to *The Weakness of God* where the “power” of the God of the New Testament is portrayed as the power of a weak force, a power without power, like the power of forgiveness, which answers one’s enemies with a kiss. The problem with this hypothesis is that the New Testament narratives also portray a very real power, a strong force, emanating from the body of Jesus, a power of healing so great that one need only touch his garment to experience it. Does not Jesus command evil spirits or raise Lazarus by the sheer power of his word? While it is true that Jesus does not deliver a mighty blow to his enemies, does he not use all his power, expend every resource at his considerable command, on behalf of the least among us, multiplying loaves, raising the dead? It is to slumdogs everywhere—in addition to the slumdog children of Mumbai one might also think of teenagers in American slums driven to drugs and the easy money of drug dealing by a system that keeps them systemically poor, this time portrayed in the

stunning HBO series *The Wire*—that Jesus announces that he has come to bring good news. Among those bodies his own sacred body mixes and circulates.

Now is not the ultimate good news which Jesus announces, the eschatology par excellence, precisely that the slumdogs will finally be raised incorruptible, when they will put their misery behind them in the most decisive of all imaginable ways, for which we require the might of God Almighty? Here I recommend we proceed with some caution. The temptation to turn to the strong God of a strong theology is never stronger than at this precise moment. What we desire, what we want to believe, which means what we are “lief” (from the German *lieben*) to think, what we would love to think, is that one sent by God comes and stretches out his hand and says “be gone,” and the evil ones scatter, and a reign of justice is established. I do not deny the importance of constructive narratives like that. *Slumdog Millionaire* is something like that, but the larger tale told, more implicitly to be sure, is that for the most part these people do not win a million dollars, are not rescued from their desperate plight and end their lives in misery, destitution, and a degrading death. The harshness of reality in fact intruded into this film when the young actors, chosen from among “real” slumdogs, after picking up their Academy Awards were about to be returned to these very shanty town from whence they were plucked, at which point the Indian government, overwhelmed with embarrassment, intervened.

The slumdogs, the real, concrete, earthy, and incarnate ones, lead ruined lives, damaged beyond repair, irreparably; by the time help arrives, if it ever arrives, they are already blind or dead. For the melancholy truth overhanging mortal life is that if there is death at all, then there will also be untimely and unjust death; if there is suffering at all, then there will also be needless and unjustified suffering. That is part and parcel of the weakness of flesh and of the ambience of evil. There is nothing we can do to help the dead. There remains only the twofold opening of the present, of the immemorial, and the promise. There remains only the cultivation of the “dangerous memory” of their suffering (Metz), keeping their death alive in our lives, dreaming of ways in which they might have been lifted up, allowing ourselves to be solicited by their death. That means doing the name of God, for the name of God is the name of God is the name of a deed, of a solicitation, doing what is to be done in the name of God, making the truth happen in the lives of the living. The might contained in this name is the might of the subjunctive, meditating how they might have been saved and how all this injustice might be avoided in the future,

not the might of a power mighty enough to reach back into the past and change it, which was the dream of Peter Damian for whom the name of “God almighty” meant the power to alter the past. This “might” is the power of the subjunctive opened up by the weak messianic power of the memory of the dead, the *revenants*, and the hope of something to come, the *arrivants*. In weak theology, divine might has become the divine “might” (in the subjunctive). The dead possess the might of the might have been, the future has the might of the maybe. But in actuality these bodies are not going to come back to life.

Unless they do, as indeed they do in strong theology. For the theology of resurrection is the strong stuff of an exceedingly strong and anastatic theology, which intends to come to the rescue of weak and shattered flesh. Not, alas, in the nick of time, but too late, after time, after it is too late for time. Too late, much too late, does resurrection love the living body. Just as Jesus was too late (intentionally, it seems) to arrive in Bethany, which allowed Lazarus to die, which in turn allowed the author of this gospel to have Jesus put on a display of divine power.¹⁷ In some ways the show of strength of the strong God in the resurrection of the body is more impressive, even stronger, than the show of omnipotence exercised in originally creating the world in the first place. For however much shock and awe are on display in the creation of the cosmos with a word of his mouth, which is considerable, the spectacular scene of creation still remains at a certain remove, like a vast cosmic spectacle of time long past, before which we are minute and belated spectators. But in the resurrection, we are not spectators but very much on stage. We could not be more intimately and personally involved in the power deployed in the resurrection of the body, where all this divine might is brought home, zoomed in and brought to bear upon our bodies, upon our weak and weary and worn out flesh. It is clear that *creation ex nihilo* and resurrection go hand in hand, and that as far as we ourselves are concerned re-creation packs every bit as much a punch as *creatio ex nihilo*.

My contention is that it is precisely at this point of resurrection we must take care not to take our eye off the event, to be distracted by the figure, slipping from the “might” of the subjunctive into the might of the almighty. It is precisely at this point that we must not lose our nerve and part company with flesh, with the weakness and earthiness of flesh, turn our face away from flesh, no longer able or willing to traffic in the slums of the world, whose earthiness will have proven too much to bear, especially if it is an earthy Jesus we have in mind. My contention is that strong theology lacks the heart to cope with the weakness of the

flesh. Do not mistake my intentions. I am not trying to drum the resurrection out of theology. Far from it. I am trying to redescribe it in terms of the earthiness of Jesus. I am trying to describe re-surrection in terms of the re-petition of the event, to preserve the force of the “re“ wherever possible, which sees in these speculative forays, including Paul’s, a category mistake: fiery airy bodies is not what this is about. If it is, the robotologists may well win the race with the second coming.

The profundity of Christian theology is that it means to be a theology of incarnation, where everything turns on the entrance of God into the world, announced by angels, in humble circumstance in an obscure corner of the world. The stroke of genius of Christian theology is that it means to be a theology of the becomingflesh of God, of the hallowing of flesh, from a humble birth to death most grievous and unjust. The complexity of Christian theology is the way it would entangle God with the tangle of flesh that we are, as Craig Keen has put it so felicitously. Its answer to the great Nietzschean critique is that it is a theology of the Incarnation. But at a certain point the high theology of Christian orthodoxy loses the thread of this entanglement and backs off from the earthy import of what it is saying. Having started from an eternal logos already disentangled from flesh, it then disentangles our bodies from our flesh and has recourse thereafter to spiritual bodies, mystical bodies, hot, fast, and bright transfigured and resurrected bodies, to mystical, mystified, and mystifying bodies of all kinds. These are nothing less than bodies without flesh, magical bodies that have washed themselves clean of flesh. They no longer get weary and sweaty, bloodied and buried, no longer suffocate or defecate and have replaced our more unpleasant body odors with the odors of sanctity. Compare Agamben’s earthy observation that defecation is the crucial dividing line between bodies of flesh and resurrected bodies with the “slumdog” Jamal plunging into the cesspool, into a sea of defecation, which constitutes a powerful figure of flesh, a pungent representation of one side of flesh.

In strong theology, the slumdogs become millionaires after all. The earthy bodies of the slumdogs are but seeds of the bodies of glory. Fleishy life is a seed, a larval caterpillar that undergoes a glorious metamorphosis into a beautiful butterfly, wings and all. Flesh is an investment in life without flesh, even as the earthy body of Jesus, the body of the earthy Jesus, metamorphosizes into a glorified, heavenly one. In weak theology, the commitment to the earthy Jesus is stronger and more earth bound. The “becoming flesh” of God emblemized in Christianity resists an economy of saving flesh from itself, into a strategy for abandoning flesh

when the going gets tough. If we cannot be saved from the weakness of the flesh, that is, from flesh itself, St. Paul says, our faith is in vain. That would make the hallowing of flesh in Christianity into a strictly provisional and economic operation. The redemption of flesh would then become a redemption from flesh. The God comes into flesh precisely in order to make it possible for us to leave flesh behind, to live once again, this time around in bodies without flesh, whose corruptibility causes us so much trouble. This burst of divine power burns off our frail and mortal flesh and turns us into fiery, airy beings, all light and velocity meeting Jesus on a cloud. If this does not transpire, St. Paul assures us, we are the most pitiable of creatures, that is to say, earthy beings, beings of flesh all the way down. Strong theology offers relief, sublation, redemption, an escape from flesh, displacing our bodies of flesh with magical fleshless ones. Otherwise it is all in vain. In weak theology, on the other hand, we set out to be more faithful lovers of the flesh, more faithful partners of a pact with flesh that affirms flesh to the end, till death do us part, that embraces the weakness of flesh, that pursues the affirmation of flesh all the way down. Weak theology is a more patient reader of stories about bodies of light and air eating fish, where metamorphosis is a passage from earth to earth.

What do these stories affirm? Theological thinking, like all thinking worthy of the name, begins and ends, if indeed it ever ends, in affirmation, and if it is not affirmation we are about, then we are about nothing. Thinking means saying yes, amen, *oui, oui*. A theology of the flesh is constituted by a double yes, the repeated affirmation of the flesh made in weak theology, the twofold axiomatic of a theology of the flesh. First of all, flesh itself is what we are, not what we have but what we are, yes, all the way down, so that if flesh is burned off then all that is left of us is ash and cinder. That is the anomaly of attributing eternal life to those rotting in their graves. What death and eternal life have in common is a common lack of flesh, which means the affirmation of eternal life requires the negation of flesh. Secondly, flesh itself is of itself something saving, yes, not something needing to be saved; flesh itself is of itself hallow, not in need of being hallowed.¹⁸ Yes, yes. Flesh is healed and hallowed by flesh, as time is healed by time, and space by space, and life by life.

The hypothesis made in weak theology is that we get the best results by facing up to the worst, that the weakness of the flesh is met by embracing this very weakness, affirming it, not relieving or replacing, metamorphosizing or transcending it by rendering it *aufgehoben* in hot

white fleshless bodies. The hypothesis is that the frailty and mortality of our being is healing of itself. To seek to be healed of our mortality is to seek to be healed of life itself. Mortality is itself a form of life, *vita mortalis*, not of death, and our vitality is not compromised by mortality but constituted or fashioned by it. Our life is sculpted by mortality, the way a statue is etched by and at its limits. The beauty of life includes the patina of our mortality. If flesh, like the flesh of the slumdogs, needs salvation, then such salvation as is available is forthcoming from flesh itself. It does not come from something higher or older or prior to flesh, something odorless and colorless that descends among our smelly, colored bodies, something that comes into flesh to save it but ends up by finally purifying our bodies of flesh.

If, in a more radical theology of flesh, a more radically earthy one, we say the word comes into flesh in order to redeem it, that is a figurative way of portraying what is redemptive, salvific, saving and restorative about flesh itself, a way of placing a halo of divinity around flesh itself. It is a figure not of some actuality prior to carnality by which carnality is saved, but of an archicarnality, the verbum as an anonymous quasitranscendental field, the virtuality of the event, the textuality of the architext whose realization or actualization is what is saving. Flesh is not fallen and then saved; rather, falling and saving are movements taking place within the sphere of carnality, as carnal events, carnalizing events, where the flesh incarnates not some divine being but events taking shape as flesh. It is just when flesh is driven to an extreme by these events that we notice the divine glow flesh gives.

*The Working Church:
Are There Any Slumdog Millionaires?*

There is something undeniably amusing about this discussion of hot fast and fiery bodies. Every such discussion ends by declaring it is all a mystery, but not without first trading jokes about what sort of body we will have, like the medieval hypothesis that we will all be thirty-somethings. We have to do here with figures of the sort only to be found in literature or painting or today a digitalized, animated film. That should be enough to alert us that something is amiss, that we are on the wrong track if we mean to understand what is afoot, if I may say so, in these stories of bodies without flesh. Theology is not, cannot, be about this. Robotology perhaps, not theology. What then is theology about? To address this let us come back to the lead we are following in Craig

Keen's hypothesis about the slumdogs.

Theology must take every precaution neither to be panicked by death nor to allow its salutary indignation at the injustice dealt to the slumdogs to trick it into making a desperate grab for life, so that if life and justice are to be had at the cost of flesh, then so be it. But if that is so, what becomes of the slumdogs in weak theology, all of them, past, present, and to come, the long and countless dead and those who are to come, all those who have and will have lived and died as slumdogs and never become millionaires? If the name of God is the name of an event, of something unconditional but without force, if it is not the name of a super being who can rush to our rescue with a mighty show of strength, but of the things that are done and undone in the name of God, then what then of the grave, of the gravity of death, where death is the fate of all flesh? What of all the nameless and innumerable dead whose lives were short and brutal, whose deaths were cruel and unjust? What justice is there for them?

But where is it written that justice is always served? Justice is a promise not an assurance, a solicitation not always answered, a hope always vulnerable and at risk. Justice too is earthy, like flesh itself. Nothing is guaranteed. *Slumdog Millionaire*, we recall, is about a quiz show turning on the question: how did an uneducated slumdog know the answer to all those questions? The answer is not that he cheated, not that he was lucky, not that he drew the answers from a vast stock of knowledge, not stealth, luck, or knowledge, but "it is written," fate. On that account, of course, the fate of all the others is rather more heartless and unhappy, so why bother? But fate, too, is just more strong theology. In a theology of the event, what is written is the Scriptures, and the Scriptures are not books of fate, but words of promise, words that well up without guarantees. Words are solicitations and what happens depends on the response. Promises are always risky business, and nothing insures that they will be fulfilled.

The name of God harbors the event of a promise (which is no less a risk) of justice, of messianic peace. The hope of peace, the dream of a messianic coming; that is the substance of these figures of resurrection. We might of course say these are figures of the unfigurable, representations of the unrepresentable, ways to imagine the unimaginable, of portraying some kind of life beyond life of which no one, St. Paul included, should be expected to say very much about post-mortal life. These are figures of the impossible. That may well be, and

no one has authorized me to waylay that. I would only say that it is a bit of double dealing to continue to proclaim that hope under the name of flesh inasmuch as it takes leave of flesh in a way that could not be more decisive. We do not know what kind of life this would be, but we do know what kind it would not be. Be careful when you ask for an earthier Jesus; you may get it, along with an earthier resurrection.

In my view these are stories of a promise, a call, a solicitation, a provocation, where it is precisely incumbent upon us to respond, to make the truth come true, to do the truth, to make peace happen, to make the Kingdom of God (the body of God) come true. That we may or may not do. There is no magic coming from the sky to do it for us, no magical bodies into which we will be transformed so that we may live on and on. The miracle of the impossible has nothing to do with magic, but with impossible people who make the impossible happen just because of their faith in the impossible. The key for me lies in what Keen, referring to the works of Alexander Schmemmann, describes as a performative, martyrological church which is very much like what I call, following a Catholic priest who serves the slums of North Philadelphia, the “working church,” the operative one, not the inoperative one!¹⁹ The Scriptures do not map a path to another world, but portrays what it would be like to visit the shock of the Kingdom upon the only world we know, portraying a life of *metanoia*, of forgiveness and healing, which gives us hope and asks for our faith.

It is the performative or working church that I would say marks the difference between theology and robotology. The church is interested in making justice, mercy, and love flow like water over the land, whereas robotology is interested in longevity. Robotology wants *us* to live forever, whereas theology wants *love* to live forever. Theology does not, or ought not, have anything to do with having hot, fast, and fiery bodies—that is robotology not theology—or with investments in celestial funds that pay eternal dividends—that is economics not grace. Theological truth is *theopraxis*: doing the truth. The name of God is the name of a deed. Do justice, make love happen, make the body of Christ happen in the world, make the Incarnation a reality, and where you see death all around, make life. That is all we earthlings know on earth and all we need to know.

We may take such comfort as is available from the consideration that there is in fact a working church, that there actually are such people, that the history of those who make the truth come true, who do the impossible, is as old as history itself. Inside and outside what calls itself

religion and the church? The name of God is fire indeed, inflaming hearts and searing bodies. Religion is a flammable substance and doing theology is playing with fire. It would take a careful and elaborate historical study to decide whether more people have been saved by these sacred names or simply seared, sacrificed, scorched and consumed by their fires. Religion is as likely to reduce the world to ashes as to inflame our hearts with justice. We can no more prune or purify religion of its dangers, than we can purify fire of its heat. Religion is irreducibly a matter of excess, which is why it makes for a volatile mix with politics, for better and for worse, why it might be another name for politics, politics by another name. Try as we might, and I am not saying don't try, we never get to keep "good" religion and jettison the bad, for it is the same extremism, the same being driven to the extreme, the same intensity, the same passion that is found on either side, "religion" serving as a name for the most extreme and radical resources in our natures. Religion is an undecidable (one of many).

So for all the blood spilled in the name of God, it remains the case that there are men and women whose dedication to God translates into the unselfish service of the wretched and the outcast, into a lifelong vocation among the slumdogs. The shakers and doers who work the slums are impossible people who will not be put off; they are the people of the impossible. They incarnate the impossible, allowing the name of God to make its entrance into the world and to pitch its tent among the tents of the slumdogs. There is a long history of such "fools"--whether "for Christ" or for the "great compassion"--and under many others names, people who are mad for justice, who are driven by a passion for the impossible, intent upon making the impossible happen. There is a long history of it happening wherever the fires of religion flare. What needs to be recalled, of course, is that in a theology of the event, this happens inside and outside of "Christianity" or of the biblical faiths, among those who are religious with a religionless faith, inside and outside of what we in the West call in Christian Latin "religion." It happens wherever anyone burns with a passion for the impossible. In a theology of the event, the distinction between what is inside and outside religion is undercut by doing the truth, undercut by the event. That is the greatest strength of weak theology. Whatever you did for the least of mine you did for me; that is all we need to know of "Christianity." There we find Christianity in the flesh. My idea is not to find the essence of Christianity but its flesh.

The acid test of the lovers of the impossible is, as in entirely in order, I

think, the impossible itself. I refer to what is called in classical theology *resignatio ad infernum* (“resignation to hell”), the notion that if the love of God required it, if the service of the slumdogs required it, the people of the impossible (known in religion as “saints”) would prefer *per impossibile*, as we say so tellingly, to be consigned to hell, that is, to be *forever* separated from the love of God, rather than to go to heaven while letting the slumdogs bury the slumdogs. That tradition has a point of departure in the text from the Philippians (1: 23) that I cited above, in which Paul says he would rather defer union with Christ and stay in this body of flesh as long as he is needed (he did not say he preferred the fires of hell). The lives of those who serve the slumdogs are indeed something of a miracle, but this miracle has nothing to do with magical powers; their lives are indeed lives of grace, but this has nothing to do with having supernatural gifts and powers; these people are indeed “saints,” but there is nothing in the power of a church that can sanctify them. It is they who sanctify the church, not the church who sanctifies them. The church does not sanctify flesh, thank you very much, but the service of the flesh lends the church such sanctity as it has. Without them, there is no excuse for the churches and all the trouble the churches cause in our lives. The miracle, the grace, the sanctity lies in doing the impossible, responding to the provocation of the name of God, to the event harbored in this name, in whatever name it is embodied, inside or outside religion or Christianity. The miracle, the grace, the sanctity are invisible and powerless powers, weak powers, too weak to show up among the powers of this world, like the power of forgiveness. That is the subject matter not of high theology, nor of metaphysics, but a certain theo-poetics of the weakness of God.

These people bear witness to the name of God but they do not “verify” some theological proposition about the *Filioque* or the *Homoousios*, which picks out a being bearing the name of God. They do not verify the event of Incarnation; they let it happen in their flesh. They incarnate the name of God, giving it flesh and blood. Nor can they guarantee a successful outcome of their labors, which are all too often thankless, obscure and futile, so when one of them, like Mother Theresa, becomes a celebrity, it is exceedingly odd! They themselves simply answer the solicitation, respond to the prompting of the event, bear witness to the name of God, *incarnate* the name of God, making themselves worthy of the events that happen to them in the name of God. They are not pursuing for themselves, nor can they promise others, hot, fast and fiery bodies or everlasting commerce with the angels after death, when this unjust world will have been burnt away. There is something unseemly about even

bringing any of that up, for it raises the question of whether, if they were not personally assured of being rewarded for their troubles, they would lose all interest in the wounded and humiliated flesh of the slumdogs and would turn their attention to the stock market. In a theology of the event, the whole force of their sanctity lies in putting such considerations out of play. Their lives are expenditures without return, and what they do belongs to the paralogic of the gift, not the logic of an economy, celestial or otherwise. Their aims are for the most part much more carnal and incarnational, more modest and mundane, more earthy, like coming up with enough food to get their people through the week, or with a relatively inexpensive medication that will ward off a disease by which the children of the prosperous are not even threatened.

Such is the weakness of the flesh, such is the horizon of life, such is the earthiness of *vita mortalis*. Such are the straits of the flesh, within which we earthy things, beings born of living dying flesh, must labor, all the while dreaming of how things might be otherwise, of such resurrection as might be possible. Such is the transcendence flesh permits, not transcendence beyond the flesh but the transcendence flesh itself affords; not the magical transcendence effected by an almighty being, but the transcendence of the “might” that stirs impatiently in the event, in the “perhaps” that is restlessly astir in the provocation of God.

Notes

- 1 John Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
- 2 Keen is citing William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 53–73.
- 3 Craig Keen, “Deferral: A Response to John D. Caputo’s *The Weakness of God*,” in Eric Severson, *I More Than Others: Response to Evil and Suffering* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). pp. 28–34.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 See Eric Severson, “Time, Hope, and Slumdogs: Suffering and Creatio ex Nihilo,” in Eric Severson, *I More Than Others: Response to Evil and Suffering* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). pp. 35–47.
- 6 See Hélène Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2, 4, 36; and Jacques Derrida, *H. C.--for Life, That Is to Say...*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21.
- 7 See Charlotte Roche, *Wetlands* (Grove Press, 2009); *Feuchtegebieten*, (Dumont

Buchverlag, 2008), which caused quite a sensation in Germany when it first appeared.
 8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 45.

9 Throughout some 800 pages of exposition and interpretation, N. T. Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) manages to elude this question. After repeating what Luke 24 says, he says approvingly “Luke makes no more effort to explain or justify this extraordinary innovation [the “transphycality” of the risen body] than do any of the others” (661). That is, neither Wright nor Luke (who is supposed to be a physician!) is willing to touch the subject of what a risen body is doing eating bread or broiled fish. 800 pages of insistence that all of this is to be taken in most realistic terms go hand in hand with a resolute refusal to explain what that could really mean. The latter is declared anathema; just the sort of things you hear from the Jesus Seminar (656, n. 21)!

10 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 14, 18.

11 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part III, Question 54, art. 2 (in some editions art.3); cf. I, Q. 51, a. 3, ad 5; online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4054.htm>.

12 Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 124. The paragraph that follows is a summary of ch. 5 of this book.

13 Martin, 128-29.

14 Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1993).

15 Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

16 Ray Kurzweil thinks it will be only a short while; the rapture will come in 2045, and he has gone on a diet to make sure he will live that long, advice St. Paul never thought to pass along to the Colossians who shared their anxiety with him about dying before Jesus returned. See Terry Grossman and Ray Kurzweil, *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever* (Easton, PA: Rodale Press, 2004); and Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 2005).

17 I offered a gloss on the story of the raising of Lazarus in *The Weakness of God*, pp. 236 ff.

18 That is how I would respectfully gloss Craig Keen’s very powerful essay “The Transgression of the Integrity of God: The Trinity and the Hallowing of the Flesh,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 36: 1 (Spring, 2001), 73-102.

19 See Craig Keen, “The Resurrection of the Body: The Liturgy of Martyrdom and the Hallowing of the Flesh,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 40: (Spring, 2005); “Working out the Body and Blood of Christ on the Eight Day of Creation: Toward a Martyr-Ecclesiology,” (unpublished); and John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), ch.6, “The Working Church: Notes on the Future,” pp.117 ff.

Hope, Evil and *Creatio ex Nihilo*

Eric Severson

The Academy Award–winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* develops its plot around a wildly unlikely episode in the life of a young man from the slums of Mumbai, India. In a seemingly impossible series of coincidences, a young “slumdog” finds himself beneath the spotlight of the Indian version of the game show “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire.” Only eighteen years old and orphaned by interreligious violence, Jamal Malik defies all logic by correctly answering a series of obscure trivia questions. The film flashes back to various episodes in his childhood, including close encounters with death, prostitution, child trafficking, and other wrenching experiences. Most human beings are privy to an assortment of odd and trivial facts, and Jamal’s history seems to have prepared him for the questions presented to him on the show. The organizers of the game show suspect him of cheating. How could a child from the slums know so many obscure facts? During an overnight break in the taping of the show, and just as Jamal nears the staggering prize of twenty million rupees, the producers of the show have him tortured to discover his method of cheating. Jamal has no secrets to unveil; he just happens to know a remarkably unlikely collection of the right facts. An extraordinary and disturbing film, *Slumdog Millionaire* clearly depicts the deep suffering of the slum and how the odds are stacked against slumdogs. The exuberant triumph of Jamal is soaring and heart-warming, even as it is *fictional* and improbable.

Slumdog Millionaire has been widely lauded for its careful and accurate depictions of the suffering that occurs within the cardboard communities of Indian slums. Our theological and philosophical reflections on suffering are worth very little if they must fall silent on the muddy streets of Mumbai. The story of Jamal does more than warm the heart; it stunningly underscores the unlikely nature of his success. In the real world, we cannot help but realize that these sorts of successes rarely, if ever, happen. The odds are overwhelming that slumdogs will stay slumdogs and that rupees will stay in the hands of the rich, far from the poor, the hungry, and the suffering. Nobody makes movies about *real* slumdogs, whose range of reasonable possibilities simply do not include the kind of happy ending required by Hollywood.¹ But the film does

show how some people rise above the misery of the slums: by exploiting other slumdogs. To be lord of the slums, one must become adept at exploitation, whether by scams, prostitution, slavery, or violence. There appears to be no honest road out of poverty. Jamal's story is remarkable because it defies the logic of the possible. This is the stuff of fantasy.

If the slums of Mumbai epitomize our discussion of suffering, we are wise to wonder if there is any *real* hope for slumdogs. For my part, I wish to raise questions about the nature and origin of *hope* for people who suffer. If there is some kind of hope that is relevant for the residents of Mumbai's slums, from whence does it come? In this essay I will specifically interrogate the role of *time* in the arrival of hope. Does hope come from *within* history? Is hope a product of history? Or does hope for slumdogs arise from beyond history, from before or after the universal structures of sequential time and its possibilities? I will address these questions by considering the theological doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* precisely because the hope for the slums must come "out of nothing." *Creatio ex nihilo* has received a great deal of attention in recent years, for a variety of reasons. Here I will evaluate this doctrine for the relationship it forges between hope and history. I will suggest that the doctrine of *ex nihilo* is critical as a doctrine of impossible hope. Hope for the slumdog, I will argue, must arise *ex nihilo*, as an eschatological hope whose ground is otherwise than the brand of hope engendered within being.

John Caputo will serve as a principle interlocutor in the following discussion. In his book *The Weakness of God*, Caputo discusses and dismisses the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in part because of his concern for the way the unilateral "act" of creation seems too forceful and powerful for the weak God of Caputo's "event."² A God who creates in this fashion, reasons Caputo, is too omnipotent and too external to the world and its events. He instead proposes a "theology of the event" in which God is to be understood as "weak power." Caputo proposes that we rethink the Christian God outside of the power-driven models that have given rise to patriarchy, hierarchy, and ontological structures which prize muscle and might.

Caputo's rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* aligns his work with that of Catherine Keller, whose remarkable book *Face of the Deep* attacks this traditional doctrine for similar reasons.³ Caputo and Keller agree that a God of *ex nihilo* is produced by the patriarchal preferences of Western philosophy and that *ex nihilo* remains a doctrine that reinforces divine omnipotence. Still, the partnership between Caputo and Keller seems

mostly coincidental. At the surface, both thinkers confidently reject the doctrine for its connections to patriarchy and power-hungry, domineering theologies that prize a God of muscle and might, but beneath the surface lies a set of fundamental, glaring disagreements.

There are at least two distinct ways that theologians and philosophers can take up the question of *creatio ex nihilo*; this doctrine can answer a historical and onto-theological question about origins and primacy, or it can answer a question about God's relationship to time and being. As an onto-theological puzzle, this doctrine is an adventure in cosmo-archaeology. *Ex nihilo* becomes the trump card for divine dominance, laying claim to the oldest moment in history and the first tick of the universal clock. At times in the history of the doctrine, *ex nihilo* has been used in this fashion, safeguarding God's high, domineering power and God's claim to muscle-bound primacy in the messy struggles of being. To the doctrine as offered in this pitch, Keller's attack on *ex nihilo* and power is stunning and effective. Caputo nods approvingly toward Keller's deconstruction of this power-hungry version of *ex nihilo* and the way this doctrine can repeat and perpetuate the patriarchal subordination and defeat of the unruly alterity of the feminine other.

Keller traces the questionable moorings in Biblical texts and points to the highly paternal reasoning that led to the adoption and defense of this doctrine within Christian orthodoxy. She points to the disgust for chaos that drove Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and particularly Augustine in their embrace of this doctrine. *Ex nihilo* defeats "chaotic multiples" providing strong and powerful beginnings to replace the watery, chaotic, and feminine images of a "matrilineal creation."⁴ Keller instead argues for the maternal image of creation *from* matter rather than the creation *of* matter.

In the treatments of *ex nihilo* by Keller and Caputo, there is a correlation between the concepts of power and priority. For Keller, the need to be *first* and to create with the raw force of *ex nihilo* is shamed by the realization that these are masculine impulses connected to a fear of dependence and an aversion to the fundamental intimacy of the watery deep. Keller coins the term *tehomophobic* to describe this negative and fearful attitude toward the *tehom* (deep), summarizing her argument against *ex nihilo* in the following formula: "Genesis 1 + omnipotence + ontology = *creatio ex nihilo*."⁵ But Keller realizes that not every break in this formula results in a rejection of *ex nihilo*. Karl Barth, she realizes, admits that Genesis 1 does not provide any obvious support for *ex nihilo*,⁶ yet Barth continues to affirm the traditional doctrine of creation out

of nothing for reasons relating to the stark “difference” between God and the world. Barth loathes the *tehom*, which is worse than “nothing.” The watery deep is, for Barth, an opponent for the “absolute superiority and lordship” of God. For Barth, the deep and chaotic waters are a “monstrous sphere”; they are barren, empty, and “shoreless.”⁷ And devoid of all creative capacity, the “waters of the deep” must be without inertia, without movement, without hope, without evolution or potential. The deep seethes with sterile hopelessness. All movement in the deep comes from the creative movement about to begin, the movement that begins with the “Spirit of Elohim” hovering over the waters that have neither a past nor a future.⁸

For Keller, Barth has escaped from the efforts to establish *ex nihilo* through exegesis, but he remains bound to the logic of omnipotent beginnings and absolute difference. Barth’s “anti-tehom” theology refuses reciprocity, insisting on a “qualitative difference” between God and the world. He rejects contorted readings of Genesis 1 that might verify *ex nihilo* in a historical sense, but he also rejects any notion of a world of chaotic matter that preexists the creative movement of God. This double rejection calls for a “third possibility,” a possibility toward which Barth only gestures.⁹ How might we think about this third option?

Keller suggests a form of Whiteheadian philosophy, a theology of becoming, as a third way to think about creation. In “process” cosmology, the work of God has no beginning, but it has eternally related to the chaotic material of the deep from time immemorial. The watery God of the *tehom* molds and makes and forms matter into more harmonious and loving configurations, giving way to organisms and creatures and societies, each demonstrating both marks of the God of becoming and the agency of the material. Tehomic theology, as Keller calls it, is a theology of “multidimensional attraction.”¹⁰ The universe is self-organizing, for Keller, but God serves to attract and lure chaos toward harmony, hate toward love, brokenness toward healing. Such a configuration solves a number of thorny problems for theology. Keller points out how tehomic theology undermines theologies of power-hungry dominance and patriarchal sexism. Her theology of becoming emphasizes cooperation, coordination, co-creativity, and the intimacy of God who is fundamentally reciprocity and love.

This is a notable and unforgettable contribution to the feminist critique of traditional Christian theology. I share Caputo’s admiration for Keller’s deconstruction of the traditional dependence on the language of power

and dominance. In addition, the time has certainly come for theologians to admit what biblical exegetes have long declared: the Bible does not provide overt support for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Like Barth, we must seek a third way to think about the relationship between God and creation. Barth's third way looks, for Keller, far too much like the first way of dominance, too much like one-sided "penetration" and masculine heterophobia. Thus, Keller offers a third way that is thoroughly and unabashedly metaphysical. She proposes a metaphysics of becoming, a way to think about the relationship between God and the world that affirms the goodness of the deep and retains ample room for distance and difference. Keller's third way elevates the creatures of the deep, certainly including humans, to the level of co-creator and co-redeemer.

There are obvious benefits to Keller's theomic theology in the face of evil, suffering, and extreme poverty. She has *something* to say about the slumdogs and their plight. What is an Indian slum if not painful chaos over which the loving, birdlike spirit of Elohim drifts and hovers? Who can look at the pain of the slumdogs and not wonder how a God of love and omnipotence could coexist with this suffering? It is this question, in particular, that draws Caputo to Keller's work and to her treatment of the doctrine of creation.

Caputo seeks to undermine the moves and motivations of "strong" theology by pointing to a more beneficial and ultimately more Christian way of thinking about God as "weak" power. Caputo orchestrates a multi-faceted critique of patriarchy, hierarchy, and onto-theological structures that prize muscle and might. God does not bring about the Kingdom of God by shock and awe but by whisper, by the sacred anarchy of a crucified Jesus. Caputo claims that most Christian theology is bipolar, that it gives lip service to weakness and crucifixion but only in a manner that thinly conceals an obsession for power.¹¹ These moves are refreshing in many respects. Caputo's God cannot be pinned down to a past "present," cannot be made another cause among many causes within "being." God as event is evasive, a part of happenings but never quite riveted to that which has happened. The liberation of God from the clutches of onto-theology provides a refreshing opportunity to consider the Christian God outside the Nietzschean struggle for power that dominates being. These are promising moves.

Caputo's alignment with Keller is sensible; his rejection of *ex nihilo* follows the same trajectory as Keller's. The doctrine of creation has, as these thinkers suggest, supported and reinforced power structures

and patriarchal oppression. But oddly enough, Caputo does not question, at any point, the “metaphysics of presence” presumed in Keller’s metaphysical account of creation and origins. And this puts his discussion of *ex nihilo* at odds with his discussions of time in the later portions of *The Weakness of God*. My concern arises from what appears to be a fundamental incongruence between the philosophy of time that Caputo embraces in the later chapters and his conversations about *creatio ex nihilo* in Part One. This doctrine need not be a doctrine of power and dominance. Whatever the manner in which *creatio ex nihilo* has been abused, it can also be a doctrine of *difference* and a doctrine that permanently undermines the encroachment of the “metaphysics of presence” on theology and philosophy.

The Caputo who writes the second half (Part Two) of *The Weakness of God* thinks of time outside of Aristotle’s “eternal now,” a noble struggle that underscores Heidegger’s early career and remains a vital consideration in the work of Levinas and Derrida. Strong theology prefers the doctrine of the eternal “now,” which reduces the alterity of the past and future to the metaphysics of presence. In Part Two, Caputo sides routinely against the metaphysics of presence. But in his discussion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is a major feature of Part One, he makes surprisingly onto-theological claims.

In siding with Keller, Caputo has found a powerful partner to support his attack on the *ex nihilo* doctrine. But Keller’s critique depends directly on an Aristotelian understanding of time and temporal progression. We have strong reason to believe that Keller is doing far more than deconstructing a distorted doctrine. She never considers the doctrine of *ex nihilo* outside an Aristotelian understanding of time. Keller flips the tables on power theology but offers in its place another form of metaphysical theology. We can, I think, be grateful for her deconstruction without embracing the reconstruction of origins she offers. She provides an alternative to Aristotle’s “first mover” argument, but she still allows Aristotle’s preference for the present to control her reflections on time and becoming. Keller turns to the doctrine of *ex nihilo* with questions about the role of God *in being*. God is a player in the metaphysical game, a feature of the *present*, an aspect of every event. Her questions about origins *presume* a metaphysics of presence; her discussion of the origin of the universe seeks a chronological answer. Time, for Keller, is not ecstatic; the past is not Caputo’s “forgiveness,” and the future is not Caputo’s “impossible.”¹² These disagreements are not trivial to the discussion of origins or slumdogs.

Given Caputo's stated objectives in *The Weakness of God*, we should not be surprised to find a sympathetic reading of Keller's deconstructive moves, but we may be surprised to find Caputo embracing her blatantly metaphysical answer to the theological question of time. For Keller, God functions as a fixed, limited, and predictable force within being. This domestication of divine time and influence to a function of the *present* seems diametrically opposed to Caputo's dealings with time in the later chapters of *The Weakness of God*. Caputo joins Keller, speaking against *ex nihilo* because it denies the eternity of the "inoriginate desert and watery deep."¹³ At every past-present-moment, Caputo points out, there must have been a created other to receive God as *gift* and *event*.

My puzzlement arises from this double use of time. One half of *The Weakness of God* treats time in the traditional sense, and the other half decisively undermines such treatments. Caputo deserves a great deal of credit for helping contemporary philosophy understand and incorporate Heidegger's critique of Aristotelian time. Caputo has worked in several publications to unsettle the metaphysics of presence that thinks of time as a collection of past "nows" and future "nows." His sometimes-overlooked book *Demythologizing Heidegger* is extraordinarily helpful in this regard. And for the Caputo who writes the second half of *The Weakness of God*, the past is indeed rattled free from the constraining Aristotelian understanding of the eternal "now."

Emmanuel Levinas, who struggled throughout his career to rethink time in the wake of Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy, found in the Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo* a stunning articulation of the alterity of God, time, and the other. In *ex nihilo*, claims Levinas, we find a kind of multiplicity that does not yield to totality. Levinas writes, "The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is creation *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing of matter, but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from [God], but is absolutely other than [God]."¹⁴ For Levinas, this doctrine has played a more important and central role for philosophy and theology, a role that seems to support Caputo's concern for "natality": "grateful for being born."¹⁵

Caputo seems to have sided in the later part of his book with a Levinasian understanding of the past as anarchic and unrecoverable. Keller, for

her part, applauds Levinas for embracing a “depth” to the other that is impenetrable and beyond the colonizing reach of the self. But she rejects Levinas’s notion of absolute exteriority because it renders God too different and distinct from the metaphysical milieu of being.¹⁶ This break with Levinasian alterity is a telling point in Keller’s reconstructive efforts. Levinas offers a “face” that has depth beyond the chaotic depths of the mythical and primordial waters. The depth toward which Levinas gestures is too deep for Keller because it is an infinite depth; Levinas’s version of *ex nihilo* takes things too far, allowing the chaotic other to remain uncompromisingly anterior.

Creatio ex nihilo, by accident or by the intention of the church fathers, is a brilliant doctrine inasmuch as it forces *alterity* into the heart of theology and into the heart of the world. An irresolvable difference arises from that which is *being* and that which is *otherwise than being*. This doctrine prevents the creator from merging with the created, the otherness of God from being domesticated into a feature of being. God arises from nowhere, from no-time, as prior to the world in a more ancient sense than any past moment. God summons from a past that is unrecoverable, from a time that cannot be recuperated as a feature of the present.¹⁷ But this recovery is exactly what Keller’s weak theology attempts to perform, or at least to approximate. She wants to recast the primitive past in the onto-theological framework of process metaphysics. This move reduces God to a feature of being and chains the past to an iron calendar of fixed, former, episodic “nows.” *Ex nihilo* insists that God’s call to the world is always “before” the world, always from a time-before-time. This is the way Caputo discusses the past in his later chapters, so it is surprising to find him joining Keller in rejecting *ex nihilo* in order to support an alternative but equally onto-theological speculation concerning the origins of the universe.

Might the call of God, the arrival of the Messiah, arise from a depth deeper than the deeps, from a beyond that defies distance and can only be considered as radically and infinitely distinct from being? This would make the movements of messianic hope external to the logic of being and its inherent possibilities. In this sense, *ex nihilo* is a doctrine that cares very little about the physics or metaphysics of the early universe, which are explorations of what might have been or what might be. This is not a doctrine about some recoverable past where the moment of creation began. God is continually creating *ex nihilo*, always calling the world from time before time and toward a future that is not a latent feature of

the present.

Philosophers should hesitate before giving advice to people who live in slums, but it seems to be of some importance to investigate *where* and *when* slumdogs should focus their hopes. The perilous and chaotic world of the slums and the evil and exploitation that thrives there are not filled with reasons for hope. One may justifiably worry that a film like *Slumdog Millionaire* might engender false hope; Jamal Malik's story, after all, is beyond fantastical. Hope for the slumdogs is hard to find.

In the second half of *The Weakness of God*, Caputo proposes that we think about the suffering of the past, present, and future as anarchically related to the Kingdom of God. "By trusting in God's rule," Caputo tells us, "one breaks the chain of time and frees up the day...tearing up the chain of time, freeing it from the circulation of debts and anxieties, letting the day be a 'gift.'"¹⁸ Hope in the slum must be hope in the defeat of time and its economies. But Keller's hope is a hope *in time* and a hope in a God who is bound to the constraining chain that Caputo's hope "breaks." Hope, for the Caputo who writes the second half of *The Weakness of God*, is for a healing and forgiveness that cannot be inscribed into the metaphysics of the present. For the slumdog, the future is without meaningful "hope." But Caputo follows Levinas, who "shows the way to alter the past...without driving under the influence of the idea of divine omnipotence."¹⁹ However, this perspective on time and the past is a poor partner for Keller's rendering of creation's past. Keller's rejection of *ex nihilo* is driven by a desire to contain God's power within the concept of time and its irrevocability, whereas Caputo wants to liberate hope from this "chain." The hope for the slumdogs, for the Caputo who writes the chapter "Forgiven Time," is a hope that this suffering will be forgiven by a future that is not in the cards of the present. The hope is that the present will be forgiven for its evils, remade in a "new creation" that has loosened the rivets of time that bind the poor to their poverty.

Caputo and Keller can share a commitment to living toward this future, this "forgiven time," in which every resource can be directed toward the acts of compassion that God cannot perform. But when Caputo jettisons the doctrine of *ex nihilo*, he is rejecting more than just the patriarchy of power: he is rejecting an understanding of time that supports his hope that time will be forgiven. *Creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine of priority; the priority of the other, the priority of grace, the priority of God. *Ex nihilo* declares that creation has a "prior," a hope that is older than the clock time that marks normal beginnings and ends. God-as-event is

anarchically prior to the world. *Ex nihilo* makes sense not as a doctrine of separation or distinction, and certainly not as the matricide of chaos pointedly identified by Keller.

This is a soteriological doctrine, a doctrine whose purpose is to safeguard the external source of salvation in God. Salvation is not a nostalgia for a lost past, or a hope for some teleological fulfillment of metaphysical progress. Salvation, Caputo tells us, moves from the outside and the before into the present as *gift* and *event*, as the arrival of a future that is related only impossibly to the present and to the past. It would seem that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* resists the domestication of the divine alterity that reaches the world from the depths beyond deep. *Ex nihilo* situates God externally, undermining and crippling efforts to fold God into being as a being. As such, *ex nihilo* is about God *as event*. To hope in the slums is to hope in a “happening” that defies the logic of the present, that reaches back to a hope that is both older and newer than any that the present can produce. The hope for *real* Jamals of Mumbai is not a hope that things will gradually get moderately better but that the miracle of *forgiven* time will irrupt even in the midst of the slum. This is a foolish hope, to be sure, but it does appear that Caputo has caught wind of this hope and appropriately named it *Christian*.

Notes

1 The film is loosely based on a novel by Indian author Vikas Swarup, *Q & A* (India: Black Swan, 2005). The novel was itself loosely inspired by some historical events, none of them nearly as unlikely as the events depicted in the film.

2 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 75-83.

3 Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

4 Keller, 53.

5 Keller, 64.

6 Keller, 84.

7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 3, Part 1: The Doctrine of Creation* (T&T Clarke: London and New York, 1958), 107.

8 Ibid.

9 Barth, 104. Keller discusses these themes in *Face of the Deep*, pages 84 and 99, among other places.

10 Keller, 196.

11 Caputo writes, “...theology is bipolar—beneath all its talk about weakness it conceals a love for power...” *Weakness of God*, 15.

12 Caputo's fifth chapter is even named "The Poetics of the Impossible," 101-112.

13 Caputo, 85.

14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 63. I have edited Levinas's text for the sake of gender inclusion.

15 Caputo, 65.

16 Keller, 242: "While I cannot appropriate Levinas' own insistence upon the exteriority of the Other as infinitely Other—which leads him to his own postulation of the ex nihilo dogma—nor his accompanying anthropocentrism, I will similarly argue for a depth not found already in a contained 'within' the subject. Nor, however, will it be contained in a relation of 'absolute exteriority.'"

17 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 14: "To the diachronic past, which cannot be recuperated by the representation effected by memory or history, that is, incommensurable with the present, corresponds or answers the unassumable passivity of the self."

18 Caputo, 175.

19 *Ibid.*, 196.

The Existence of Evil and the Insistence of God: Caputo's Poetics of the Event as a Discourse on Divine Intervention

Keith Putt

In a previous life, I led something of a Janus-Head existence. On the one hand, I taught Philosophy of Religion at a graduate institution, where I daily faced looking into all of the traditional abstract intellectual topics pertinent to an academic investigation of religion and theology. On the other hand, I periodically engaged in brief episodes of serving local churches where I came face to face with the more concrete existential issues that characterize practical Christian ministry. During one such episode, I found myself in a church in Austin, Texas auditing a Sunday morning conversation on the subject of prayer and divine intervention. Several faithful members of the church were basically agreeing with the orthodox view that God does, indeed, answer prayers of petition, that quite often God answers those prayers in precisely the desired manner the petitioner expects, and that one may always assume that God hears and responds to those who call upon God's name in faith. One older, saintly Texas Baptist stood there silently during the discussion until a lull in the dialogue prompted him to remark quite laconically: "You know the cemeteries are full of people who were prayed for." He stood there for a moment, then turned and walked away, leaving those of us who remained sharing in a subdued silence.

That episode occurred in 1998, and it has haunted me since. We all knew his situation. His beloved wife, who was a pillar of the church and the epitome of the godly Christian woman, had contracted cancer some years earlier and battled it valiantly, until being defeated by it mere months before the conversation. We could easily imagine what thoughts flooded his mind as he stood and listened to the somewhat esoteric theological discourse on how God is loving, attentive, powerful, and always yearning to bring healing and hope to the afflicted. He was wondering why God had not answered the numerous prayers he had offered up for

his wife. He was wondering why God appeared to have acknowledged the prayers of others in the church during their experiences of suffering and need. He was wondering how his faith could withstand what seemed to be divine arbitrariness, or divine neglect, or, perhaps worst of all, divine favoritism. In point of fact, he actually confirmed to me later that the loss of his wife provoked a crisis of faith that he had never anticipated, a crisis that controverted a piety that he concluded had previously been naive and conventional. The whole affair had impugned his simplistic trust that God would and/or could enter human existence and be a “very present help in times of trouble.”

Now in the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that I have been wondering all of the above since that Sunday morning. More specifically, I should say that the event reinforced a struggle with what had long intrigued and troubled me but not only me. The *soi-disant* “problem of evil and suffering,” with its traditional Promethean task of developing a theodicy, that Miltonian temerity of believing that one can and should justify God’s ways to human expectations, has long disquieted, both academically and existentially, the human passion for cosmic meaning. For theists who reject both the final option of atheism and the notion that God ever acts as *prima causa* of evil, the problem of pain and suffering often distills down to one issue: divine intervention. That distillate confounded the grieving Texas saint who believed that prayer often solicited God’s intervention and that God had, indeed, on occasion, intervened therapeutically in response to pain and suffering. But why had God not done so with his wife? Why had God not done so in the countless other circumstances in which suffering and death operated unabated? Why had God supposedly done so on other occasions?

The routine justifications return: God could but chooses not to; God desires to but cannot. Or, perhaps, the problem ensues from an inappropriate language game, a basic category mistake whereby the concepts of intervention and nonintervention are forced into service through some analogy of proportionality allowing for talk about God (*theo*-logy) to mimic the subjective and agential idioms of personal language. What if one spoke of God not as a divine person acting otherwise than human agents, but as otherwise than a person? What if questions about God’s intervention or nonintervention are simply *flatus vocis*, given that God has no entitative referent, not as a version of atheism but as an aversion to a reductionistic objectifying of God? Could the individual convinced that she or he has experienced the intervening presence of a comforting God find any spiritual sustenance in such a theological reinterpretation?

I raise the above questions primarily under the compelling influence of one of the most creative and provocative contemporary reappraisals of theology, specifically John Caputo's postsecular theopassionism of the event. By fusing Derridean deconstruction, Levinasian ethics, Jewish prophetic traditions, Jesus' kerygma of the kingdom of God, and Pauline perspectives on the weakness of God and the logic of the cross, Caputo has developed a quasi-systematic, not-so-quasi-biblical theology of the name of God as a cipher for the event of a disruptive and transforming call to justice, forgiveness, hospitality, healing, and love. He writes a theology from below that seeks to avoid the hyperboles of classical metaphysical theism, seeks to affirm the non-origin original goodness in existence without diminishing the reality of irredeemable evil and intractable suffering, and seeks to keep hope alive as a weak messianic expectancy of an impossible to come, an absolute future of promise and affirmation that shatters every horizon of expectation. By directing his radical devilish and spectral hermeneutics expressly to theology,¹ Caputo proclaims the name of God as containing the uncontainable event of promise and call that can never be reduced to an entity, to Being Itself, or to any exclusive transcendental signified. He insists that although there is no entitative God to intervene in reality in any literal manner, there is the hyper-realism of the summons from the event harbored in the name of God animating us to instantiate the love of God in actual acts of mercy and justice.

But how can Caputo's theology of a non-interventional, non-personal God affect those for whom God remains a possible agent in the process of addressing evil and suffering, one who, under various rubrics, promises some type of salvation from their effects? That is precisely the question that drives this essay. Once again I find myself in a Janus-Head moment. I want to face up to the saintly Texas Baptist who still expects God to be involved in the lives of human beings; however, I also want to face up to the devilish post-secular poet of the kingdom of God who translates the grace of God otherwise. By gazing in both directions simultaneously, I intend to explain Caputo's theology of the event as a response to evil and suffering and, thereafter, to suggest a way whereby that theology could be translated at least paraphrased into a confessional faith in divine providence as God's genuine participation in confronting suffering.

Caputo has overtly addressed the issue of evil and suffering through his radical hermeneutics, distinguishing it as a necessary topic for both religion and ethics. Initially, he identifies the reality of suffering as

provoking two opposed interpretations of existence: the religious attitude of faith and hope in a loving and healing presence and the anti-religious, tragic, conclusion that suffering is never evil but merely another expression of the innocent play of cosmic forces.² He admits to being seduced by the second interpretation as it is given classical articulation in Nietzsche's hermeneutics of suspicion. He confesses that the traditional Cartesian certainty established by the ersatz supremacy of Enlightenment rationality has been exposed as a naked emperor; the prince of reason, with all of its inviolate principles, has been dethroned, ripping open again the closed metaphysical systems that pretend to supply absolute knowledge and certainty. All of the grandiose structures of thought that have offered truth, beauty, and the good may well only be the fragile and tentative grammatical creations of self-pitying, weak, and resentful creatures who deceive themselves into thinking that they are special in the universe. Nietzsche suggests that a time may well come when the creatures will become extinct and the cosmos will take no note of their ever having been. All of their petty concepts of good and evil, truth and knowledge will leave no trace on the play of forces that characterizes the innocence of becoming.³

Although Caputo never becomes deaf to the siren call of the tragic, he, nonetheless, admits that he refuses to sail his ship in that direction. He considers the view to be ethically bankrupt, an irresponsible postmodernism that fails to affirm the worth of those who suffer, who are oppressed, violated, excommunicated, and exterminated. According to Nietzsche's cosmology, the Nazis were but one more example of the will to power that always elicits critique from the weak. Caputo rejects the scandalous interpretation that Auschwitz was an expression of cosmic innocence. He opts, instead, for the religious attitude, the interpretation that depends upon a faith that in the midst of all the suffering and evil rampant in reality, there is the chance that a loving hand and a healing touch may also characterize existence. This faith leads to moral outrage against gratuitous suffering; it believes that a God hears the cries of the exploited and sides with wounded flesh. Such a hermeneutic (and that is what faith is, a hermeneutic) is not a metaphysical certainty *redivivus* that trusts that God intervenes on behalf of the sufferer. God, therefore, becomes the motivation for the protest against suffering and violence. Caputo considers the religious attitude to be both Catholic and Protestant: Catholic in that it responds to all who suffer universally and Protestant because it remains defiant against all sources of evil and oppression.⁴

Whereas Nietzsche desires to get beyond good and evil, Caputo con-

cludes that we can never extricate ourselves from the factual tension of being stuck between (*zwischen*) them.⁵ He reads the human condition as one of having been thrown into the flux of an existence in which our flesh is exposed both to the warm affirmation of the heterogeneous joys of life and to the cold violence of disasters in all of their homogeneous virulence. And disasters are, indeed, virulent. Caputo concedes that pain and suffering often have instrumental value, that they are part of our pact with life and are unavoidable when striving for certain, greater goods.⁶ Yet, such is not the case with what he terms disasters. These are those destructive and irredeemable excesses of evil and suffering that never follow a sane economy. Instead of no pain, no gain, disasters are all pain, no gain. For example, he insists that a child with congenital AIDS or an innocent victim of random violence is disaster personified.⁷ Disasters remind us of our finite and fragile lives in the flux of reality, a flux that cannot be domesticated or diverted by ethical meta-narratives, which, in their attempt to absolve the absurdity of evil, aggravate it with facile rationalizations.

Caputo brazenly declares himself to be against ethics, if ethics means any speculative attempt to systematize abstract principles that ground or guide concrete morality. Disasters demand that we respond to the summons of obligation, not that we relax in the security of philosophical opinions. We live, think, and act from below, where obligations just happen, there is, *il y a* obligation.⁸ The weak and singular cries of the oppressed, the wounded, the violated, those widows and orphans ground under by grounding principles or perpetually exploited by the extreme arrogance and narcissism of the Powers-That-Be provoke the event of obligation, the coming (*venir*) out or forth of unique necessities to respond, to console, and to protest against all evil and suffering. He holds tenaciously to the hyperbolic heteronomy implicit in the tenuous events of obligation; he listens responsibly to the poetics of obligation, which, avoiding any explanation as to *why* one should respond to the summons of the suffering other, is content to dictate *that* one should respond; Here I am, (*me voici*) *ohne warum*, without why.⁹ Consequently, evil and suffering must be confronted by an ethics *sans* Ethics, motivated by the power of the powerless cries of those trapped within the abyss of disasters.

Even in his heteronomic reduction, by which he brackets the religious and examines suffering through a poetics of obligation, Caputo cannot avoid slipping in something of the hermeneutic of faith. He delineates obligation in the mode of the as if, as if it were a fact, or the trace of the Good, or *the whisper of the will of God in our ear* (emphasis added).¹⁰ He

includes in his collection of lyrical-philosophical discourses several by Magdalena de la Cruz, who cannot deliberate on confronting disasters and healing wounded flesh without explicit references to Yeshua, Jesus, a certain Hebraic (not quite Christian) poet of obligation.¹¹ Here is the *mysterium tremendum* of a sacred anarchy that detests disasters and protests against dehumanizing suffering. Not surprisingly, therefore, Caputo cannot prop up the brackets of his impious *epoché* of faith for long and must reprise his earlier genealogy of religion in which the rebellion against suffering possibly signals a divine opposition and suggests the potential of a loving hand that reaches out to restore and comfort abused flesh.

When Caputo repeats his initial symbiosis of religion and suffering, he does so under what he terms a simple and old-fashioned rubric, the love of God, a rubric that becomes his working definition of religion.¹² The love of God, Augustine's *cor inquietum*, is the restless desire beyond desire for what confounds and disrupts the *status quo*, for what bestows the excessive grace of gift and forgiveness, of hospitality and transformation, for whatever impels one to do the truth (*facere veritatem*) by motivating those who love God to say *me voici* when the cries of others in distress are heard.¹³ To be sure, the love of God cannot be less than the obsession to acknowledge the least among us: the ones who suffer needlessly.¹⁴ If God privileges those victimized by disasters and judges those disasters as objects of the divine "no," then how can loving God not include loving the ones whom Jesus called the least of these, the widow, the orphan, the leper, the blind, the lame, all the ones ignored and/or ill-treated by those who bow before the gods of worldly prestige, power, and privilege? And if this language sounds a bit too Christian, it does so by design, for, indeed, Caputo joins Magdalena de la Cruz as a disciple of Jesus. He considers Jesus to be not only a poet of obligation but a prophet of the impossible proclaiming the poetics of the kingdom of God, where love of God, love of neighbor, love of enemy, love of the loveless, and the radical uncertainty and ineffability of *metanoia*, that "miraculous" transformation of heart and mind that the "world" considers to be madness, define the hyper-reality of God's influence in existence.¹⁵

Yet once again, Caputo finds himself in a Janus-Head dilemma. He cannot resist looking both in the direction of Jesus' complaint against suffering and Dionysus' consent to an innocent cosmos. In the radical uncertainty of the flux, is there a loving presence, albeit one often withdrawn, that points to a balm in Gilead? Or is there only the anonymity of the forces, the uncaring and impersonal *il y a* that promises no grace,

no mercy, no love, that does not, nor cannot, even make a promise, has no intentionality whatsoever, leaving us to fend for ourselves in what Camus would call the absurdity of our relationship to the universe?¹⁶ Since Caputo cannot ignore Nietzsche and the tragic hermeneutic of the flux, he cannot avoid asking another religious question, one he steals from Derrida, who, in turn, appropriates it from Augustine: What do I love when I love my God? Caputo again refuses to embrace Nietzsche and to capitulate to existing beyond good and evil. He cannot convince himself that we do not remain between those two concepts, that we do not remain haunted by the specter of something good, something loving, something therapeutic, something(one?) that we desire beyond all desire, that we love with a passion for the impossible and that, perhaps, loves us in return. But what is that? Is that love a love for God? Does that love denote a belief in God? Could the object of the love go under a different name? Could one who intellectually denies the existence of a deity, that is, rightly passes for an atheist, also possess a love of God that provokes justice, forgiveness, mercy, and the doing of truth through response to suffering?¹⁷

All of the above, wrapped up in the legislating question, What do I love when I love my God?, obliges Caputo to address his perspectives on evil and suffering as an honest-to-God, quasi-systematic, biblical theologian! Caputo divulges that he has a weakness for theology and that the issue of God has been a life-long task.¹⁸ He concedes that no matter what topic captures his attention, inevitably he, directly or indirectly, ends up talking about God.¹⁹ Yet, as stated above, he acquires his lexicon for comprehending and communicating his own personal answer to the theological question of what he loves when he loves his God from the Christian Scriptures. He makes no apology for the fact that his theology is confessedly Christian, declaring that he intentionally strives to reinscribe, or reinvent, or reaffirm (his) Christian beginnings within a framework (of) a Christianity of a certain sort, focused on the image of weakness in the New Testament and the death of Jesus on the Cross.²⁰ To be sure, he testifies that he is a philosophical theologian who is feeling about for the event that stirs within biblical religion, seeking what is unconditional in the conditional and historical actuality of Christianity.²¹

Of course, Caputo admits that his adoption of biblical paradigms should be interpreted as only an existential exclusivism and not as a religious, philosophical, or theological one. He recognizes that his Christianity is a particular, historical, and cultural construction, that it did not spring forth from the head of Yahweh fully-formed like some Hebraic Athena.

Furthermore, he recognizes that his adherence to the constructed traditions of Christianity cannot claim the authority of any special revelation he received at a burning bush or of any spiritual *phronesis* he inherited from a prophetic mantle. His Christian faith does not release him from the flux, does not transcend human language, culture, or the uncertainties of history. It is as intertwined within the textuality of existence as any other human endeavor. Consequently, if his Christian tradition(s) has been *constructed*, it most certainly can, and must, be *deconstructed*, which is why he professes that he desires to reinscribe it, reinvent it, or reaffirm it.

Caputo deconstructs Christian theology by decontaminating it, as much as possible, from the contagion of metaphysics, that is, by de-Hellenizing it, by reducing the influences of Athens on Jerusalem.²² He insists that the Being of Father Parmenides should not have been so easily fused (*confused*) with the God of Father Abraham, that the I AM spoken through Moses' burning bush was not the *logos* of Being-Itself, Self-Subsisting Being, the Ground of Being, the *prima causa* of Being, or the *causa finalis* of Being.²³ Such metaphysical translations of the name of God dissemble the theological poetics of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and depreciate the value of the divine alterity by confining God within the constricted conceptuality of abstract principles of reason and pretentious systems of totalized meaning. Such a metaphysical mistranslation results in the unholy matrimony of ontology and theology, into an ontotheology whereby talk of God cannot escape the homogeneity of conceptual idolatry, that is, the tendency to subsume God under the same vocabulary used to explain and define the world.

Of course, Caputo's censure of ontotheology microcosmically reveals his macrocosmic suspicion of metaphysics *per se*. It is a natural theological extension of his radical hermeneutics as an indictment of the deluded belief that reason can rise above the facticity of existence and imitate or participate in the Platonic Forms, or that some cosmic *logos* or divine revelation can reach down and pull us up out of the flux of reality by the miraculous hook of absolute knowledge or absolute certainty.²⁴ The security of First Principles, the satisfaction of Cartesian Certainties, and the power of comprehending those logical and ontological *Archai* that putatively establish the monarchy of Reason are all quite seductive. He insists, however, that they are simulacra at best and dissimulacra at worst. In lieu of the clear and distinct ideas of reason, we are condemned to interpretation, restricted to limping along uncertain paths, constantly discovering aporia that remind us of our destinerrance, our wandering in the

desert of non-knowing in which we cannot be sure who we are or where we are going for example, the aporia of evil and suffering!²⁵

One could consider the more humble rationality of Caputo's radical hermeneutics to be his gloss on Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. "There is nothing outside the text" is no aphorism of linguistic idealism, not some pithy precept postulating that there is no other to language. On the contrary, the idiom presumes that there *is* an objective reality beyond language but that no one can access that reality *without* the mediation of textuality.²⁶ In other words, no one can escape the contextuality of history, culture, language, and tradition all of which affect and limit every interpretation of reality. Consequently, metaphysical speculations on Being, or the Infinite, or the Absolute Spirit, or the *Causa Sui* may well promise an Archimidean point outside the flux from which we can survey the totality of meaning from Alpha to Omega and grasp the lever of the *Logos* with which we can move heaven and earth by the power of the intellect. All of these absolute metaphysical claims, however, emerge from within the relativity of our limited historical, linguistic, and cultural milieus. Simply put, no one can escape the reflexivity that haunts any claim to have transcended the restrictions of finite existence, since any such claim must be made by finite individuals, in finite circumstances, speaking a finite language, from within the limitations of finite traditions! Still, Caputo knows that he cannot totally quarantine his reinvented Christian theology away from metaphysics, because no one can wholly escape metaphysical speculation. In a manner of speaking, it is, as Derrida contends, one of the only language games in town.²⁷ Accordingly, Caputo sharpens Ockham's razor and whittles metaphysics down to a more minimal size.²⁸

Caputo's de-Hellenizing of Christian theology definitely expresses a version of the death-of-God theology, explicitly the death of the ontotheological God of classical theism.²⁹ The God of metaphysics has traditionally been characterized more as a version of Parmenidean Being than the God of Abraham. This God is Eternal, Simple, One, Immutable, Impassible, Omnipresent, Omniscient, and, most troubling for Caputo, Omnipotent. This God is the essence of Perfection, as in Aristotle's *nous noetikos*, the perfectly rational divine intellect that is so perfectly rational it can only contemplate itself, since everything else is deficient. This God can micro-manage both nature and history or predetermine every event, which, as we shall see, would prevent the advent of any genuine event and can never be surprised, take a risk, or display any semblance of weakness unless, of course, as a self-limiting subterfuge in order to exercise the

divine power in a more powerful manner! Caputo joins Meister Eckhart in praying for God to rid him of this God, since *this* God of omnipotence and domination raises serious epistemological and ethical issues and, furthermore, is actually called into question by various theological perspectives in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.³⁰

Caputo affirms that the classical model of an omnipotent deity explicitly provokes the traditional problems of theodicy, the presumptuous proposition that human beings can and should justify God in the face of evil and suffering. The fundamental reason why one should attempt to get God off the hook for the desolation of disasters and the dissipation of suffering is predominately because of omnipotence.³¹ If God is the omnipotent creator *ex nihilo*, then ultimately God is responsible for evil, and no logical attempt to diminish or exculpate that responsibility removes the scandal. Of course, Caputo discredits theodicy for reasons other than purely theological. His denunciation of theodicy relies primarily on his rejection of the onto-theological paradigm of an omnipotent deity who causes evil, and/or allows evil, and/or fails to intervene and remove evil from human existence. This last issue, the issue of divine intervention, figures as a pre-eminent theme in his alternative minimal theological metaphysics, given the priorities of faith, of the love of God, and of the religious *hermeneusis* as they relate to the event of obligation and to the necessity of protest and rebellion against oppression and violence. If faith believes that a loving God stands with the sufferer and provokes the human responsibility to alleviate suffering whenever possible, then does faith not expect no less from God? Does the believer not look for those moments of divine intervention when God directly involves the divine self in redemptive events of consolation and restoration? Does Caputo's religious paradigm, in contradistinction to Nietzsche's tragic one, not demand the reality of divine intervention and the exercise of some type of divine therapeutic power? Or, as Caputo frames the question: In the name of God, cannot God help us?³²

Here again, Caputo's Janus-Head posture re-emerges with a good dialectical response: Well, yes and no! Caputo answers no, if by divine help one means the intervention of some big guy in the sky, who insinuates himself (an appropriate divine pronoun for a strong classical theism!) into nature and history as an omnipotent *deus ex machina* in order change the course of mighty rivers and bend steel with his bare hands. Caputo rejects any detention of God within the limiting concepts of ontology, any attempt to comprehend God as a transcendent entity or personal agent who arbitrarily decides to fix the flux through miraculous acts of divine despotism.

This strong theology of God as a *being* bears all of the epistemological difficulties of any metaphysical genuflection before the golden calf of a presumptive unity, any claim that somewhere up there is someone who can reach down and pull us out of the fiery furnace of contingency and calamity.³³ He insists that we most assuredly should not continue to embrace an ontotheology of omnipotence, because “God is not a cosmic force, a worldly power, a physical or metaphysical energy or power source that supplies energy to the world . . . and who occasionally intervenes here and there with strategic course corrections, a tsunami averted here, a cancerous tumor there, a bloody war quieted over there.”³⁴ In other words, he determines that when it comes to the issue of evil and suffering, one must not talk about God as a metaphysical mechanic occasionally re-calibrating the machinery of reality. To do so perverts the authenticity of genuine faith and profanes the name of God.

In offering his alternative theology of the event and of divine weakness (a theology that, as stated above, depends so intimately on biblical paradigms of vocation, transformation, forgiveness, and the messianic), Caputo renounces any reduction of faith to magic or superstition. Believing in God does not remove one from the scientific and historical probabilities of the flux, nor does it establish the influx of some over-powering divine presence that enters the sensible world from some super-sensible, supernatural realm. Adopting a poetics of Scripture somewhat reminiscent of Bultmann’s demythologizing hermeneutic, Caputo re-interprets miracles as creative symbols for the impossible possibility of regenerated hearts and renovated lives.³⁵ There is a hyper-reality to the effects of God’s gracious call to justice; however, that hyper-reality does not entail the supernatural suspension or manipulation of natural laws nor the divine intrusion into history.³⁶ Graceless, unliturgical, and literalist orthodox metaphysical apologists and obscurantist fundamentalists may well objectify God, collapse primary and secondary causality, and consider God to be the ultimate laser show at Disneyland, parting rivers, raising the dead, and removing leprosy.³⁷ But in doing so, they profane and pervert genuine faith; they yield to the seduction of a strong theology, a theology of thaumaturgic power in which God could put an end to pornography, obesity, junk TV, computer spam, crime in the streets, and the ruining of the environment if God so chose to do so.³⁸ Caputo considers all of this, at best, nonsensical naïveté and, at worst, a self-aggrandizing perspective on divine sovereignty. He scorns both a supernatural pseudo-physics, which has God magically intervening in nature, and a metaphysics of omnipotence, which has God abrogating physics altogether.³⁹

The deadening literalism of a superstitious faith in the magical intervention of God simply cannot be a proper hermeneutic for deciphering God's protest against evil and suffering, since it is both insulting to God and pragmatically untenable. On the one hand, it is theologically insulting, because it demeans the love of God by reducing it to an economy of benefit, that is, as Meister Eckhart critically noted, one loves God for the same reason a farmer loves his milk cow.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the belief in God's miraculous interventions into situations of suffering, violence, and death are pragmatically problematic given their apparent arbitrariness and suspicious absence. As a result, Caputo questions the disconnect between the metaphysics of an *omnipotens deus* with its doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the proliferation of evil and disasters.

The strong theology of divine power sounds good, but functionally makes little if any genuine difference. Since the omnipotent God does seem to be neither too quick nor too consistent in interrupting natural and moral processes that destroy, damage, and dehumanize wounded individuals, strong theologies must preoccupy themselves with theodicies, those efforts to account for why God *can* magically intrude and alleviate suffering but *does not*. Additionally, Caputo refuses to evade the pragmatic problematic even when it manifests itself in Scripture. He contends that one does not need to wait until the development of ontotheology before encountering the mystery of divine disregard for suffering. The almighty God of the Hebrew Scriptures can smite the wicked, part the waters, and come to the aid of just causes, while simultaneously turning a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed and the abused. Indeed, in multiple biblical narratives, the downtrodden are regularly trodden down and their cries ignored.⁴¹ In point of fact, the biblical record of God's responding magically to those in need is so poor, Caputo actually wonders why the issue is raised at all. Obviously at this point, the Pennsylvania Catholic echoes the Texas Baptist and cites the counterfactual to divine thaumaturgy: the cemeteries are full of people presumably denied the magic of divine intervention.

Now, one last decisive impediment to accepting divine intervention remains for Caputo, an impediment that, in effect, raises troubling moral questions about the issue of divine favoritism. Why do some individuals who pray for divine aid ostensibly receive it? Why do some people not end up in the cemeteries, because, they believe, God heals their cancer or cures their heart disease? Or why would God re-direct a hurricane away from Pat Robertson's Virginia compound, only to allow it to damage other people's property along the new track? Why does God hearken to

the prayers for one child and respond with healing and not to another, especially when both sets of parents pray earnestly and faithfully for divine intervention? These questions haunt Caputo and lead him to confront a rather straightforward dilemma: either an intervening God plays favorites with people's lives, privileging one person or group over another, transforming grace into caprice, *or* there is no intervening God who loves some people more than others, who gives some people preferential revelation and guidance but not others, and who cherry-picks the beneficiaries of divine magic.⁴² Without hesitation, Caputo grabs the second horn. He quite frankly cannot accept that God would show partiality and ration out divine deliverance. Such a God is not only not a loving presence siding with the sufferer but is also not the source for the call, heard by those who live out a *hermeneusis* of faith, to protest against oppression and evil. Consequently, Caputo concludes that he can only love a God who intervenes in every instance of disaster or in none. Either God can and does effect mercy in every incident of misery, or God cannot/does not in any. Accordingly, the love of God must be non-interventive or else it is un-ethical by even the minimal human standards.

Yet, the potential immorality inherent in a strong metaphysical and magical theology of divine intervention not only indicts God's character as discriminatory and inequitable, but it also establishes the grounds for oppressive and violent acts to be perpetrated by humans against other humans. If God selectively intercedes in the lives of individuals or communities, then those individuals and communities can infer that they are special, chosen, the elect ones, whom God favors over others. They have the secret, the special revelation that gives them a certain status and prestige. They have God's ear and know God's thoughts; they are the insiders who have a dominating eminence. God speaks their language, enters their history, baptizes their culture, in other words, God loves them best! In this context, the outsiders are subordinate, of less worth, or, perhaps even more insidiously, they are the enemy, a threat, an obstacle or contagion to the will of God known and realized by the chosen few. One may then easily rationalize using violence against them, bringing whatever force necessary to bear on protecting God's word and truth from their heresies or infidelities. In other words, such a theology of divine intervention not only fails to protest against evil, it actually results in promoting it; Hebrews killing Canaanites, Christians killing Muslims, Shiites killing Sunnis, Irish Catholics killing Protestants. Caputo finds all of this to be convincing evidence that the classical notions of the mystery of an intervening God reflects our own very unmysterious and all too human ethnocentrism and egocentrism, our own sexism, racism, and self-love

writ large, in short, a gross human weakness that is being passed off as a Great Divine Attribute.⁴³

Caputo advocates replacing the traditional rouged metaphysical theology of divine omnipotence and magical intervention with a more minimal and, for him, more biblical theology of the weakness of God.⁴⁴ He confirms that Christian theology has always been intellectually bipolar, obsessed on the one hand with the idea of divine authority and power, with God as the omnipotent impassible Being Itself who can out-think, out-achieve, and out-last all of creation, while unable, on the other hand, to dismiss the significant biblical expressions of a suffering God who accepts the risks of love and who protests against the injustice and violence of human persecution.⁴⁵ For him, the latter polarity compels modifying theology from words (*logos*) about God (*theos*) to words about the name of God, reflections on the semiotic dynamics at work in the word God. For him, those dynamics center on the notion of event, specifically that the name of God harbors an event, designates a simmering potency, an interruptive and subversive but likewise possibly therapeutic and salvific perhaps, a perhaps that reveals the risk inherent in experience, that functions messianically and vocatively to call individuals into an affirmative but unexpected absolute future.⁴⁶ The event signals something that is always to come, the invention (*in-venire*), the in-coming, or the advent (*ad-venire*), the coming-to, of an absolute future that will never be present.⁴⁷ This messianic structure of the event places a demand on every present, issues an unconditional summons or call to humility and openness; that is to say, the messianic prohibits premature closure or the dogmatism of a Cartesian certainty, especially with reference to the event of God.⁴⁸

Of course, Caputo emphasizes that the event always transcends any attempt to confine it conceptually within the strictures of a definition. To denominate is often to dominate, and the event cannot be so easily restrained by language. He argues that the event refers neither to an actual being or entity nor to being itself, but to an impulse or aspiration simmering within both the names of entities and the name of being. The uncontainable event contained in the name of God, for example, does not rest easily within the confines of the name of an entity, but stirs restlessly, endlessly, like an invitation or a call, and invocation (come) or a provocation, a solicitation or a promise, a praise or benediction.⁴⁹ As a result, Caputo's theology of the event proposes God as a task or a deed, not as an entity or a metaphysical principle. God is the divine event that shatters every human construction that summons, demands, lures, and promises.

For Caputo, then, theology is always responsive, always an answer to the summons and the demands coming from the event harbored in the name of God, always motivated by the transcendent other, the unknowable, the subversive and disruptive impossible possibility always to come.⁵⁰

Caputo does not equivocate when he testifies that the event astir in the name of God should not be considered as revelatory of a cosmic potentate micromanaging and manipulating reality, or as a transcendent warrior god casting lightning bolts like Zeus or killing babies in Jericho like Yahweh. Instead, the impossible God of love is a God who disrupts such grandiose theories of power, prestige, and brutality. The name of God harbors the power of a weak force, a force that does not plot but promises, that does not exploit but entices, that does not violate human freedom but vitiates destructive structures of power and oppression through the power of powerlessness and the seduction of divine suffering. Given his deconstructive interpretation of event as the incoming of the Other (*l'invention de l'autre*) out of a future that cannot be anticipated, programmed, or determined by the present, as what he also names the impossible shattering every horizon of expectation, it is not surprising that Caputo's theology of the event interprets God by seeking to bypass the usual categories of power and control. He eludes any strong theology in order to think of God as a weak force, a God who opens the divine self to the risks and uncertainties of existence by manifesting Godself as a call that can be ignored, as a promise that may be rejected, and as a lover that may be scorned. God, as a loving event, cannot coerce love but cajoles and lures others to respond with reciprocal love and desire.⁵¹ God remains open to the possibility that God's love and desire will not be requited; consequently, the love of God remains excessive, unconditional, and without the certainty of a return on the divine investment.

Notwithstanding his renunciation of an entitative and interventive God, Caputo confesses that the more personal, agential, and interceding theological paradigms found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures offer a better poetic expression of his phenomenology of the event as a theology of the weakness of God. The narratives of the covenant God of Israel and of the Father of Jesus of Nazareth should not be read as literal historical accounts but should be taken as a theopoetics of the powerless call to obligation, transformation, and the power of a sacred anarchical protest against evil and suffering. He finds no better biblical commentaries on an almost non-metaphysical, non-ontotheological theology of the eventful name of God than in Jesus' proclamation and personification of the

Kingdom of God, in the Apostle Paul's theology of the weakness of God, and in that same apostle's subversive logic of the word of the cross (*logos tou staurou*).

Caputo considers Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God to be an instance of deconstruction, a prophetic indictment of the *status quo* for the redemptive and affirmative purpose of maintaining a genuine expectation of something new to come, of a new truth that can ensure justice, gift, forgiveness, hospitality and love, a new truth that can have actual socio-political implications for responding to widows and orphans, to the oppressed and disenfranchised, to those marginalized individuals who struggle with regressive tax laws, sexism, the violence of war, homosexual bigotry, or the traumas of abortion.⁵² Such a kingdom contradicts the world, deconstructs its institutional arrogance, and articulates the divine "no" against its violence and its domination. Jesus reveals a non-sovereign divine kingdom that prophetically protests the profane order of the real world.⁵³ For that world, everything turns on power, on brute strength and coercion. Yet, the kingdom's powerful protest against the violence of the world precipitates from a position of weakness. According to Jesus, God's kingdom has no army; it owns no weapons cache; it does not seek to establish itself through force; it refuses to compromise and instrumentalize suffering and violence. He differentiates it from the world both by noting its unconditionality, that is, its un-economic nature regarding love, forgiveness, and obligation, and also by revealing its non-sovereign sovereignty, that is, that God's reign is not one of control, manipulation, and coercion. Divine power must be radically reinterpreted in the kingdom as the powerless power of risk, rejection, and violation. Here Caputo thinks that St. Paul's motif of the weakness of God properly glosses Jesus' poetics of the kingdom. Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians that, according to the worldly criteria of rationality and dominion, the kingdom of God appears to be foolish and weak. Indeed, he states it even more forcefully: God, Godself is foolish and weak!

St. Paul further clarifies the full extent of the idea of the weakness of God by epitomizing it in the centrality of the cross event. The violent death of the innocent Jesus evokes a different logic for Paul, requires a new language, or *logos*, for articulating the seditiously redemptive love of God. He calls this *logos* of the weak and foolish God, the *logos tou staurou* (1 Cor. 1:18), the mad logic, word, or message of the Cross which crosses out the world and in the process gets done in by the world.⁵⁴ St. Paul's *stauro-лого-сentrism*, his *theologia crucis*, explicitly functions as a Christology, a *logos* about the *Logos*, about Jesus, whose poetics of the

Kingdom of God and whose willingness to suffer death reveal the full depth of God's love and forgiveness.⁵⁵ Caputo endorses this Pauline logic of the cross and construes it as revealing a God whose redemptive prowess depends upon the power of powerlessness, the unconditional call of grace without sovereignty, without mandate and intimidation, the powerless potency of the name of a God who can be strong-armed by the aggression of the world, denied, ignored, and even murdered, yet who in that weakness displays the power of forgiveness. The cross mediates a *non-coercive heteronomy*, a promise, address, or invitation from God as the Wholly Other whom human beings have the power to ignore.⁵⁶

Caputo claims that the revelation of the name of the promising and beckoning God on the cross is the perverse core of Christianity. The crucifixion is that singular occurrence where the weak force of the event, the uncertainty and impossibility of an undecidable faith in the transformative dynamic of the divine promise of peace, perverts the world's profane specifications for power, sovereignty, and divine authority. That divine provocation of peace and pardon is unconditional, given excessively and unilaterally regardless of human response and even to the point of death; however, given that the call may be ignored, silenced, and distorted by human evil, it is an unconditional call without sovereignty, without the absolute warrant that God can compel and constrain human obedience.⁵⁷ Consequently, for Caputo, the weakness of God is the potency of the divine tenacity in relentlessly disrupting, soliciting, subverting, contradicting, and perverting the world's esteem for the economy of retribution, intolerance, and dominion. The cross event incarnates not an interventive God who causes magical phenomena, but an inviting God who calls for justice, mercy, and compassion. When one names God as the source of this call, then one names God as the source of an unconditional promise, a promise made without the sovereign power to coerce it,⁵⁸ not of an unlimited power. Caputo chooses not to think of God as an omnipotent onto-theo-cosmo-logical power source for the universe, but as the unconditioned demand for beneficence that shocks the world with a promise that is not kept, as the heart of a heartless world.⁵⁹ This means, of course, that God's call comes as a weak force, as a vocative power, not power pure and simple but the powerless power of a provocation or a summons, a soliciting, seductive power; it comes as a call that may go ignored and unheeded by those to whom it is addressed. The weak force of God's call and promise, of the divine lure of creation toward justice and grace, reveals no *omnipotens deus* but an ironically divine and spiritual event of love and *pathos*.

Thus far in this essay, I have attempted to document that the problem of evil and suffering has been a primary motif throughout Caputo's radical hermeneutics. For the past twenty-five years, the issue has stimulated both his more general philosophical investigations into the tension between the religious and the tragic interpretations of the flux and also his more particular theological perspectives on how a postsecular, biblical poetics of the event impinges upon a hermeneutic of the name of God. Consequently, I have intended to establish the validity, if not the persuasiveness, of the argument that the essence, *s'il y en a*, of Caputo's radical, spectral, devilish hermeneutics includes an overt and covert concession to the philosophico-theologico-ethical inevitability of addressing the realities of evil, suffering, and disasters. My primary referent has been to trace the influence of these issues on his minimal metaphysical, maximal poetics of the theology of the weakness of God and how these issues conspire with certain rational and historical presuppositions to inform his hyper-realism of the divine as a non-personal, non-entitative, and non-interventive God.

I now want to turn to a critical attempt to revise Caputo's revisionist reading of the call of obligation, to re-examine that messianic summons of justice, Jesus' kingdom proclamation of love and forgiveness, and the Pauline theology of the cross as they relate to the faithful protest against every structure that promotes oppression and de-humanization and every act that violates and destroys individual lives. I aspire to repeat a classic confession of faith in an interventive God but to do so within the constraints of Caputo's convincing limitations. In other words, while I agree with his contentions that (1) too much of traditional theology has been a Hellenistic perversion of divine power and dominion, (2) too much strong theology has been conveniently adopted as divine vindication of human brutality, and (3) a magical reading of divine sovereignty results in God's having an extremely poor track record regarding responding to the cries of the oppressed, I am not as sanguine as Caputo that one can so easily endorse biblical idioms for God while eliminating a more theologically-realistic belief in God as personal but not a person and as genuinely engaged in human existence but not as a coercive force. In other words, I ponder whether one can rightfully pass as a Caputoan Christian theist who believes that God does actively stand on the side of the sufferer, does intervene in some manner in human lives to offer healing and hope to those devastated by disasters, and who does all of this as a weak force who risks, who confronts limitations, and who cannot always achieve the divine redemptive intent, e.g., keep the cemeteries empty! That is to say, I wish to meditate on whether one can re-paraphrase Caputo's poetics of

the event into a discourse on divine intervention.

Critically assessing Caputo's thought can often be frustrating since he inevitably anticipates potential objections and endeavors to mitigate them in advance. Not surprisingly, therefore, one finds another Janus Head aspect to his thought with respect to divine intervention. From one perspective, he identifies his rejection of an entitative, interventive God to be a methodological procedure through which to engage in a phenomenology of the event of the call. In his brief, but substantial, chapter on hermeneutical technique in *The Weakness of God*, Caputo admits to making a phenomenological reduction of the call away from inquiries about possible ontic or ontological foundations in order to remain open to the principle of principles whereby the event presents itself as itself in order to be described without any contaminating concerns about authority or causality.⁶⁰ Indeed, he considers the Kingdom of God, as a theological cipher of the event of the call, to present a phenomenal field within which to engage in imaginative variations on the name of God. The kingdom is not magic, nor is it an expression of some supersaturated phenomena. Instead, the ontological implications of the kingdom are placed within an *epoché* in order to allow the poetics of the kingdom to focus on its eventiveness, to allow it to function as a semantics of the love of God. Consequently, God is not considered to be a cause but a call, not a power-monger but a promise-maker, not a micro-managing sovereign but a messianic summons to the advent of the unexpected, *l'invention de l'autre*, the in-coming of the impossible Other beyond human ingenuity and control. In fine, Caputo terms this his *promissory reduction* and leaves the question of Being to confessional faiths, metaphysics, or psychology.

While facing in the direction of his *epoché* of the event, he concomitantly looks in the direction of a confessional faith in God as entity. He professes a love for determinate faiths, admits that they cannot, nor should not, be avoided, and acknowledges that such faiths are expressions of the flux, reminders that human beings do not subsist in a vacuum but live out of particular and different traditions.⁶¹ He humbly allocutes to his own immersion in the uncertainty of the flux. He has no special insight into or no miraculous revelation of the ontological nature of God, whether God is an entity or not, personal or not, interventive or not. He leaves that decision within the context of undecidability, that is, as a choice to be made by each existing individual *in actu exercitu*.⁶² He offers his promissory reduction only as a prolegomenon aimed at keeping that decision within the restless heart of non-knowing, disturbed by the risks of the flux, always a matter of the *hermeneusis* of faith not the result of a strong

theology of absolute knowledge.⁶³

Yet, at times, Caputo minimizes his magnanimity toward a tolerance of confessional theologies of divine intervention. On the one hand, he undeniably classifies such interpretations as examples of strong theology, other instances of the rouged and robust, magical and metaphysical misreadings of the name of God ensuing from the diverse doctrines of classical theism. Those who advance such misreadings merely trade in powerful and prestigious entities in the power corridors of being for the purpose of competing for the Big Money of the Templeton Prize!⁶⁴ They prostitute the name of God for the coin of coercion and constraint, making certain that they receive their thirty pieces of silver from the principalities and powers that demonize and dominate the widows and the orphans. But of course, given Caputo's extended and fervent critique of strong ontotheology, the very fact that he considers any idea of an entitative and interventive God to be just such a theology implicitly reduces it to the naive, the fundamentalistic, or the superstitious. The idea of an interventive God apparently occupies the same cognitive space as alien abductions!⁶⁵ Consequently, Caputo seems to claim that you can, indeed, hold such a view, but you should be ashamed of yourself if you do!

On the other hand, Caputo occasionally struggles with a bit of hypocrisy concerning his own commitment to undecidability and the impossible. Now admittedly, I am wary here, primarily because I do not wish to dismiss Caputo's thought by indicting him as two-faced through a *tu quoque* charge of performative contradiction. He acknowledges that this latter fallacy is how philosophers say, "Gotcha!" a rather simplistic disregard to be sure.⁶⁶ Even Derrida heaps disdain upon it by calling it a puerile weapon.⁶⁷ Most emphatically, I intend neither a smug gotcha nor a violent blow aimed at piercing the heart of Caputo's poetics of the kingdom. I simply, but not simplistically, want to hold Caputo's feet to the fires of the flux and undecidability in order to soften his stance against the belief that God may genuinely intervene against evil and suffering. He unceasingly reminds us that we cannot escape the flux, that all of our decisions remain anchored in undecidability, that we never terminate the endless translatability and substitutability of our idioms, that we must remain vigilant for the unexpected, the absolute future that cannot be programmed, and that we should never allow our horizons of expectations to foreclose the impossibility of the absolute surprise.⁶⁸ Yet, Caputo presupposes from the perspective of the horizons of his expectations that God cannot be an entity and cannot intimately engage in human existence. In prescribing his rejection of metaphysical theism, he proscribes

the advent of a God who may relate to the world as a weak force, yet in some tangibly spiritual mode. Although he cloisters himself within the priory of his promissory reduction, he cannot fight the urge to peer over the brackets and come face to face with the world of ontological claims albeit *me*ontological claims of an apophatic nature. That is to say, in his minimal theological metaphysics, he confesses that God *is not* an entity, that God *is not* involved in reality, that God *is not* personally at work striving to rebel against evil and suffering.

Again, I do not wish my critique here to be misunderstood. It is nothing profound and nothing prohibitive. I am neither trying to convert Caputo, nor am I necessarily depreciating his interpretation. He has made a decision about these theological issues (undecidability demands that); he has chosen a particular *hermeneusis* of faith that I admittedly find valid and persuasive at multiple points; and he has respectfully and passionately re-interpreted a Christian, biblical call to obligation, healing, and love. I find nothing problematic about these moves—well, almost nothing! My critique, therefore, is actually quite unpretentious. Caputo writes, “Resolution is not the same as rigidity.”⁶⁹ I suggest only that he follow his wise apothegm and loosen up a bit. He should allow his resolved poetics of the event to be disturbed, haunted, interrupted, subverted, left a little unresolved with reference to a theology of an entitative, interventive God who is less like the *omnipotens deus* of strong theology and more like the weak force of the event, the unconditional but non-sovereign summons to protest oppression proclaimed by God within the interstices of the flux. At times, Caputo tends toward a rigidity in his theology of weakness, a rigidity driven by his commendable passion to redeem the Kingdom of God from the corruption of traditional ontotheology. One can assuredly attenuate the quasi-apodictic character of his interpretations by noting that they result from rhetorical flourishes employed as a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness making him something of a postsecular John the Baptist (Catholic)! Still, his prescriptions are not solely rhetorical hyperboles. He does, indeed, adopt a functional epistemological exclusivism regarding the non-entitative, non-interventive nature of God, an exclusivism I contend to be inconsistent with his radical hermeneutics of contingency.

In point of fact, Caputo’s own theological vocabulary establishes the possibility of maintaining a more modest faith in a God who enters reality in order to respond to evil and suffering. Caputo readily subscribes to the interventive language of the Christian Scriptures and considers Jesus’ God, who notes every fallen sparrow and counts every individual’s hair,

to be far superior to Aristotle's apathetic *nous noetikos* eternally thinking only itself. In addition, he also continues the poetic imagery of divine intervention in his own personal commentaries on the Scriptures.⁷⁰ He considers the Kingdom of God to be a kingdom of singularities, an affirmation of the intimacy between God and all of the little nobodies (*ta meonta*) that populate the world.⁷¹ He echoes Jesus' exhortation to all who seek the kingdom to be sensitive to the spirit of a loving God who offers the tender mercies of grace and comfort, who establishes the savioric "yes" of the perhaps, the open future of chance and renewal.⁷² He exalts the classical language of theology, in which God is an inspiring spirit, like the spirit of Elohim who broods over the primordial deep before creation.⁷³ He positions himself with the Bible-thumpers who believe that God cannot simply create the world and then throw the tools on the truck and drive off for a long weekend. Instead, God must be that sustaining spirit that continually desires to make all things new, to have things born again and again.⁷⁴ He considers this divine intent to be the subversive and anarchic weak force of God, the *Aagens movens* of the penumbra power of the powerless divine summons.⁷⁵

Caputo characterizes the interruptive and gratuitous spirit of God as an expression of divine transcendence, not, of course, as the metaphysical paleonym denoting a supernatural beyond being that offers a magical solution to suffering and uncertainty. On the contrary, he decides to replace the paleonym with a neologism of his own, arguing that the essence of God's transcendence lies in God's insistence. God in-sists in the world, stands (*stare, stans*) in (*in*) the midst of reality as one withdrawn from the world's order of presence, prestige, and sovereignty in order to settle into those pockets of protest and contradiction to the world.⁷⁶ God is no *hyperousios*, beyond or above Being, but is, instead, *mesoousios*, in the middle of being, present as an absent companion to all those who suffer, are oppressed, ignored, alienated, violated, and despised.⁷⁷ That means that God is an interested God, a God of *inter-esse*, between being, in the middle (*inter*) of being (*esse*), intimately involved in the world as a gentle and easily-scorned call to obligation and healing. God enters the world as withdrawn, as the powerless power leaving the world *etsi Deus non daretur*. Whereas suffering and disasters continue to occur as if God were not in the world protesting, as if talk of God were exhausted in a poetics projecting human ideals,⁷⁸ as if the tension between the religious and the tragic is functionally a distinction without a difference, Caputo's terminology of faith suggests that the weak and non-coercive spirit of God may be prowling the streets as a *vojou*, a redemptive rogue in-sisting uncondi-

tionally without sovereignty within the contingencies and limitations of the flux.⁷⁹ Since evil exists, stands (*sistere, stare*) out (*ex*) in the world, not poetically or hyper-realistically, but in the facticity of torn flesh, diseased bodies, and violated psyches, then perhaps God in-sists in the world in some personal and productive manner, protesting, confronting, assaulting, and consoling disasters.

Of course, Caputo would classify the facticity of divine in-sistence as another bit of superstition, of magic, of fundamentalistically literal-minded naiveté. And it may well be. I remain faithful to undecidability and affirm that my decision is fragile and potentially fallacious. I only want to believe that Caputo feels the same about his translations of the name of God. Again, at times his rhetorical enthusiasm leads one to think that his theology is, at worst, methodological atheism and, at best, more a theory of God as voyeur than as *voyou*. The resulting options insinuate that either Nietzsche and Felix are correct and there is no one that gives a damn for the suffering of humanity, or there is someone there who merely observes from a distance, perhaps recording the events of evil much like the angels in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, who cannot interfere in the world and magically manipulate events, but whose task is to serve as cosmic *Extraskrivers*, sacred stenographers taking minutes of existence. In actuality, Caputo does distinguish the act of recording experiences of evil and suffering, specifically those phenomena of irreparable disasters that repudiate any possible redemption or restoration, as a divine operation, an expression of a radical salvation history, and properly identifies it as the only possible response to irreparable and senseless evil.⁸⁰ He christens that salvation history the "dangerous memory of suffering."⁸¹

Yet, Damiel and Cassiel, Wenders' angels in the film, do have the weak power to intervene with sympathy and consolation. Unable to change the reality of suffering and death, they, nonetheless, do have the capacity of compassion to touch the wounded and to call them to a gentle solace. So, too, could God, even according to Caputo's own theological vernacular. God could in-sist in the world as the spirit of consolation and motivation, one who can, through the powerless power of love and mercy, extend the weak messianic invocation to individuals to do unto the least of these who suffer (Matt. 25:40). Admittedly, Caputo discredits speaking about God as being there in the world as just more strong theology. That ontotheological dialect confuses God and the world, reduces God to another object in the world, as a *da-sein*, a powerful supernatural entity being there alongside all other existing things, as the there where the

magical force of Being Itself manifests itself.⁸² Yet, once again, his own terminology betrays a creative polysemy to the word there. He attests to the belief that in the face of disasters, we become aware of something out there, over there, in the place of the other that confronts us and overwhelms our own subjectivity.⁸³ He does not know with certainty if it is God, or the Good, or the Great Pumpkin. It may be nothing more than a poetic projection of the altruism gene. But, perhaps, it *is* God there, which is the only place a compassionate, suffering, loving, and merciful God could be. By his own admission, a healer is a healing presence, a help, someone who is *there* because being-there means being there for the other, for someone who calls out for help.⁸⁴ Likewise, he repeats the prophetic announcement of Levinas and asserts that the vow to be with you through this long night, to stay by your side, the promise, absolute and unconditional, “to be *there* [emphasis added] when you awake: *c’est le Messie ou salut*. . . That is the weak force of God, not the strong force of magician [*sic*].”⁸⁵ Subsequently, why could the in-sisting, inter-ested God of love, forgiveness, justice, and comfort not be there in some manner as a healing solicitation? Why could God not be solicited to come and be there wherever suffering and pain torment the oppressed?

I reiterate my gentle rebuke of Caputo: he should not fraternize so closely with the false dilemma fallacy. He writes as if one must either interpret God as an entity within the massive structures of metaphysical speculation *or* one must not interpret God as an entity at all. He concludes that either God intervenes in the world with the force and domination of Spielbergian special effects *or* God does not intervene in the world at all. He determines that God prohibits, impedes, or consoles *every* instance of evil and suffering *or* God does so in *none*. No necessity obtains, however, for such servility to the law of the excluded middle. There is a third to be sure. *Pace* Caputo, one need not reduce existing to exhausting; that is, to posit the existence of an entity is not simultaneously to offer a totaled account of that existence.⁸⁶ To posit such a divine entity may require a minimal metaphysics; however, even metaphysical speculation has long noted surely with disquieting chagrin that *individuum est ineffabile*, the singular, unique, particular individual can never be exhaustively subsumed under general and universal principles. One may talk about the individual, but one cannot capture in language the individual *in toto*. An alterity and ambiguity constantly obtain regarding the singular existent. Why should the divine singularity be any different? One can interpret the name of God as denominating a someone without dominating that someone through conceptual constraints. After all, Caputo allows for a minimal metaphysics, which, in turn, should allow for the possibility of a

minimal faith in an entitative God without having that faith labeled with the epithet strong theology.

Furthermore, one need not reduce divine intervention to magic or nothing. One can certainly believe that God comes into the contingent, fragile structures of the flux with an intent to redeem evil and suffering, with a desire to interdict and innovate instances of disasters, and as a loving presence that is there as a source of strength, consolation, and motivation to the good *without* assuming that such intervention results in magical demonstrations of overwhelming revocations of natural law and consistent history. Caputo almost identifies divine encounter with Sinaitic flamboyance the fearsome climatological phenomena of Yahweh riding the storms, the concussive consternation of earthquakes shattering the ersatz stability of grounded human perspectives, and the basso profundo of the *bath kol*, that heavenly voice of God accusing, demanding, and terrorizing people into submission. He seems to think that if God walks with an individual through the valley of the shadow of death, God must always be walking on water! But what about God's still, small voice? What about Jesus' imagery of the brooding mother hen? What about the ephemeral wind of the Spirit blowing gently from who knows where to who knows where a Spirit that can be grieved and wounded by human indifference?

Not surprisingly, Caputo allows for translating divine intervention into the idiom of the Spirit. He boldly declares that the event of the call astir in the name of God is not that of a fist that smashes, but of a Spirit who breathes, who inspires, and whose gentle breath urges us on.⁸⁷ He comments that the summons that beckons from the crucified Jesus demands that we make the weak call stronger than the power of the world by moving mountains through the love of neighbor and of enemy.⁸⁸ That is to say, we have the responsibility to breathe with the spirit of Jesus, to implement, to invent, to convert the poetics into a praxis.⁸⁹ There it is; that is precisely how Caputo's poetics of the event can remain a discourse on divine intervention. God intervenes in the world as the Spirit of motivation and encouragement. The still, small voice of God lures us and cajoles us with the promise of the impossible to come.⁹⁰ The call can be ignored; the promise can be rejected; the exhortation to love, forgive, and achieve justice can be disobeyed. That is the weak force inherent in an in-sisting God, whose intervention consists of the *parole soufflée*, the "inspired" word, the inspiring word, the word of the *souffleur*, the prompter, the other voice that provokes us, invites us, pleads with us, beseeches us to respond to the widow and the orphan, to the lame and the blind, to

the diseased and the oppressed.⁹¹ That is how God intervenes to respond to evil and suffering: God's Spirit seduces us to embody the powerless power of the good and of love. The Spirit of God prompts us to *facere veritatem*, to "doing the truth" as a response to the call of obligation, to embodying the weak force of divine intervention through the transformative power of loving God, loving neighbor, and loving enemies. God can only effect salvation as we heed the call, speak a *me voici* to the Other, decide to accept the obligation to re-create the world east of Eden. But we exist, and God in-sists, east of Eden presumably because the event of the call is weak, God's promissory "yes" to life has constantly been rejected by our "no," and, consequently, even God does not have the cosmic command and control to enforce a paradise.

To substitute divine intervention as *parole soufflée*, the event of the intervening word of God as a vocative, provocative, and evocative motivation to contravene the power of evil and suffering whenever possible, for the ontotheological slang of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and impassibility advances an alternative to the third bifurcation in Caputo's poetics of event. If an entitative and interventive God risks dependence upon the limitations of reality and humanity (predominately because God is incapable of being the *prima causa* for every attempt at abating oppression, violence, and the irreparable, since even God is entangled in the secondary causality of uncoerced response), then one should not be surprised that God does not heal every illness, restore every loss, control every weather pattern, impede every act of savagery, or resurrect every cemetery occupant. The risk of a reciprocal "no" to and rejection of the therapeutic call of God's Spirit constitutes the inability of God to repair all evil.

As I have argued in another essay, Caputo's propensity to mistake the fact that God does not intervene successfully in *every* instance of suffering as validation that God does not successfully intervene in *some* actually runs contrary to his own deconstructive hermeneutical tradition.⁹² Derrida himself supplies a rebuttal to that bifurcation in *The Gift of Death*, where he discusses the sacrifice of Isaac as a symbol of the ethical inevitability of violence inherent in any act of kindness. He interprets Kierkegaard's interpretation of that Abrahamic narrative in *Fear and Trembling* as a literary expression of the ethical limitations and ironies under which all humans operate. Whenever I respond to the call of obligation and seek to show benevolence to someone in need, I cannot avoid ignoring the calls of obligation issued by others in distress and, therefore, neglecting to benefit them as well. Derrida captures this ethical irony in the phrase "*tout autre est tout autre* [*Every other (one) is every (bit) other*]"; every one

else is completely or wholly other.⁹³ He concedes that each time I act to alleviate suffering for one person, I am simultaneously *not* acting to alleviate suffering for someone else. Someone else suffers because I am addressing the suffering of another; consequently, I am complicit, albeit with the best of intentions, in the continuation of another person's misfortune. But since I cannot feed every hungry person, should I not feed those I can? Since I cannot fight every act of oppression, does that mean I should sit passively by while oppression rages? Should the realization that each time I assist another in need, I abrogate my responsibilities to another other in need paralyze me from any ethical intervention?

Of course not! Nor should God. By his own admission, Caputo considers God to be the name of a weak force, a limited, vulnerable event of promise and hope that cannot escape the contingencies of embodied situations. The call of God is a non-coercive lure, an appeal that implores not an authority that impels; as a result, one should not anticipate the will of such a God to be fulfilled in every case. God cannot heal every wound, but that does not necessarily mean that God cannot heal some or, at least, be involved in the curative process as a prompter impelling individuals to do the healing work of the Kingdom. Obviously, that would mean that God, too, is complicit in the inherent violence of intervention and that some minimal metaphysics of power to act must be presumed. Yet, Caputo surrenders to that inevitability regarding human responses to the poetics of obligation. He confirms that one cannot totally escape systems of power and violence when acting to reduce the brutality of those systems. One must exercise some semblance of power in the very act of responding, since every response is woven into the texture of the world (*polis*) and implicated in worldly power.⁹⁴ Likewise, one uses that power to limit the beneficiary of the response, as per Derrida's *tout autre*. Resources I use to help one individual reduce the resources available to help another; consequently, I sacrifice one for the other. Still, Caputo defends the limitations of such action and capitulates to its potential conspiracy with evil. He claims that the conspiracy is no excuse not to act, not to do whatever we can.⁹⁵

What prevents the same perspective on the *tout autre* and the conspiracy of obligation from being applied theologically to the weak force in the name of God? Given Caputo's profound commentary on the event as the inviting, luring, and promising dynamic of a messianic call, given his decision to translate the divine name into a sacred, inspiring word of justice, forgiveness, and love that subverts the world unconditionally but without sovereignty, without an army of angels to coerce cooperation,

or a supernatural compulsion to subdue consent, one should not expect an interventive God to escape similar constraints to what can and cannot be accomplished. In other words, one would only interpret God's poor record of intervening as evidence that God does not intervene at all only if one assumed a strong theology of divine power. Only if one presupposes that God can enter the flux of existence and preempt being restrained by the radical limitations of that flux would one be convinced that the continuation of evil and suffering signifies the non-intervention of God. One might say, then, that Caputo's third dilemma discloses the remnants of a tenacious ontotheology. But, if one gives up the latter, one can overcome the former Caputo's creative poetics of the event allows for a third, and better, way.

I conclude by repeating my *mea culpa* in anticipation of Caputo's rebuttal. My suggestion that God insists in the world, in a personal relationship with human beings, but not as a person protesting against and subverting evil in a theologically-realistic manner, not as an *omnipotens deus* is a stronger, more robust theology, and, perhaps, not quite as minimally metaphysical as what Caputo espouses in his poetics of the event astir in the name of God. We both seem to love a similar God pragmatically; it is just that I am not as content in my faith to limit the divine intentionality to sabotage evil to the semantics of the middle voice, *und nichts ausserdem!* The call of justice or the sacred event of obligation encoded in the name of God is no quasi-Aristotelian "call calling itself," or "event eventing itself." On the contrary, they may both originate from the absent presence of a healing God, which Caputo allows but not really! Consequently, I will allocute to the charge of removing the brackets from the promissory reduction and re-importing a little divine being into the discussion of evil and suffering. In doing so, I will risk being called, to use one of Caputo's technical terms, a "wacko!" Nevertheless, in my defense, I offer this essay as my deposition, written in a Caputoan nomenclature, intended to be a possible paraphrasing of a weak, limited, interventive God, who may not be omnipotent but is not impotent, who may not be capable of wiping away every tear but is not so incompetent as not to dry some—a God who, like Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, weeps at cemeteries.

Notes

1 John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 249. Hereafter cited as MRH; John D. Caputo

and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 47. Hereafter cited as AD.

2 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 272. Hereafter cited as RH.

3 Ibid., pp. 283-85; John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 16, 64. Hereafter cited as AE; D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), pp. 1, 74. Hereafter cited as PT.

4 RH, p. 280.

5 AE, p. 33.

6 Ibid., p. 29.

7 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 243. Hereafter cited as WG.

8 AE, pp. 237-38.

9 See Ibid., pp. 53-62.

10 Ibid., p. 19.

11 Ibid., pp. 146-50.

12 John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-2. Hereafter cited as OR.

13 John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 134. Hereafter cited WWJD?; WG, p. 118.

14 OR, p. 123.

15 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 223. Hereafter cited as P&T; AD, pp. 61-62; WG, pp. 141-46.

16 P&T, pp. 167-69.

17 Ibid., pp. 265-66.

18 WG, p. 1; John D. Caputo, "In Search of a Sacred Anarchy: An Experiment in Danish Deconstruction," in *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity*, eds. Martin Beck Matušík and William L. McBride (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 230. Hereafter cited as SA.

19 AD, p. 143.

20 Ibid., p. 73.

21 Ibid., p. 143.

22 WG, p. 94.

23 P&T, p. 334.

24 Ibid., pp. 291, 334; WWJD?, p. 40; OR, p. 11; MRH, p. 193.

25 See WWJD?, pp. 37-56.

26 MRH, p. 236.

27 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 280-81. Hereafter cited as WD.

- 28 AE, p. 220.
29 AD, p. 147.
30 MRH, p. 257.
31 WG, p. 92.
32 Ibid., p. 88.
33 MRH, p. 257.
34 AD, p. 65.
35 P&T, pp. 187-88.
36 WG, pp. 11-12.
37 Ibid., p. 16.
38 Ibid., p. 40.
39 Ibid., p. 112.
40 WG, p. 79.
41 Ibid., p. 77.
42 P&T, p. 246; OR, p. 113; MRH, p. 240; AD, pp. 52-53, 130.
43 OR, p. 114.
44 WG, p. 33. Caputo adopts Kierkegaard's image of "rouged theology," the result of Christian theology's lust after social prestige, influence, and affirmation. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 32.
45 WG, pp. 7-8.
46 WWJD?, p. 59; WG, p. 13; P&T, p. 95.
47OR, pp. 7-8.
48 John D. Caputo, "Temporal Transcendence: The Very Idea of à venir in Derrida," in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 199.
49 WG, p. 5.
50 SA, p. 235; WG, pp. 6-7, 90.
51 WG, p. 88.
52 WWJD?, pp. 63-80, 90-116.
53 WG, pp. 13-17; WWJD?, p. 86.
54 SA, p. 240.
55 Cf. B. Keith Putt, "A What Do I Love When I Love My God? An Interview with John D. Caputo," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 167.
56 MRH, p. 186.
57 WG, pp. 17, 26; WWJD?, p. 82; SA, pp. 227-28; PT, p. 124.
58 WG, p. 90.
59 Ibid., p. 13.
60 WG, pp. 113-24.
61 P&T, p. 68; WWJD?, pp. 55-56.
62 WG, p. 10.

- 63 Ibid., p. 40.
- 64 Ibid., p. 122.
- 65 OR, pp. 8-9.
- 66 Ibid., p. 128.
- 67 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1998), p. 68; Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 4.
- 68 P&T, pp. 76, 115, 338.
- 69 WWJD?, p. 54.
- 70 WG, p. 254.
- 71 P&T, p. 140. Caputo has long loved this Pauline phrase, *ta me onta*, the “non-beings” that, according to a theology of weakness, God uses to confound the wise, the powerful, and those who have some ontological status and prestige. Cf. AE, pp. 55, 237; SA, p. 239; MRH, p. 218; OR, p. 124; John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 7, 183.
- 72 WG, p. 180.
- 73 Ibid., pp. 93-94.
- 74 OR, p. 16.
- 75 SA, p. 232. I borrow the phrase Apenumbra of power from Caputo’s reading of Foucault and acknowledge taking the phrase out of its original context in order to make a theological point (AE, p. 214)!
- 76 WG, p. 45.
- 77 SA, p. 238.
- 78 OR, pp. 8-9.
- 79 WG, p. 33.
- 80 Ibid., pp. 253-54.
- 81 P&T, p. 123.
- 82 WG, p. 39.
- 83 AE, p. 32.
- 84 Ibid., p. 244.
- 85 WG, p. 251.
- 86 AD, p. 56.
- 87 WG, p. 38.
- 88 WWJD?, p. 88.
- 89 Ibid., p. 95.
- 90 WG, pp. 88, 91.
- 91 Ibid., p. 13; AD, pp. 54-55; cf. also WD, p. 176.
- 92 See my “Risking Love and the Divine Perhaps: Postmodern Poetics of a Vulnerable God,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (Summer 2007): 193-214.
- 93 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 68.

76 Janus Head

94 AE, pp. 173-74.

95 *ibid.*, p. 174.

Empowering Evil, or, Good Evil is Hard to Find

Anthony T. Larson

When confronted with texts that deal with evil or violence, students often react rather predictably, asking why one has to read such texts. What is the point in reading these texts? What is their value? While experienced hands in the classroom might dismiss such reactions as typical resistance to difficult reading, these are important questions, for they point to the heart of the question of evil in aesthetics. A complementary interrogation underlies such objections: the *use* of evil and its *abuse*. This is a practical question: what can one do with evil and what can evil do to the reader (for in this paper it will be a question of literature and textuality)? From the point of view of many students (and readers in general), evil can do very little for the reader except repulse. At its best, evil in literature tends to depress the reader. In terms of practicality, evil appears only to weaken the reader and render one sad (or repulsed, or frustrated, or any other number of negative emotions). However, might this reading of evil not be mistaken? What if evil could empower the reader? If this were the case, then mistaken readings of evil that see it as debilitating and weakening are *abuses* of evil, turning an empowering concept around on itself and weakening it. How can this be the case? How might one's reading of evil, which appears so easily recognizable and repulsive, be erroneous? As the Nietzschean play on terms of this reading of evil implies, questions concerning evil in aesthetics and literature turn around the problem of judgment.

One of Nietzsche's foremost interpreters, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, made judgment and its misuse the target of his writings. From the early study of illusions of the subject in Hume's empiricism, the image of thought in *Difference and Repetition*, the illusions of psychoanalysis in his collaborations with Félix Guattari to his final work on immanence and a "transcendental empiricism," a recurring target was the illusions of judgment that install themselves behind a transcendental tribunal in thought and aesthetics. There are many ways to read Deleuze's work, but one of the most fruitful is in the practical application of a vision of life in which one seeks out empowering encounters in order to see the immanence of life itself and avoid the errors of judgment. This approach, as many have noted, owes much to his reading of Nietzsche, Bergson and,

above all, Spinoza.

Deleuze wrote his complementary doctoral dissertation on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (published in English in 1990 and in 1968 in French); but it is a shorter and more accessible practical guide to Spinoza, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (published in English in 1988 and in French in 1970 and revised in 1981), that will offer some clues on the practical use of evil, specifically in literature. Before exploring this path in Deleuze, I would like to draw a distinction between this approach and one of the other more well-known readings of evil in literature—again from a French perspective: Georges Bataille and his *Literature and Evil*. Exploring the a-subjective experience of evil in literature, Bataille offers a fascinating and compelling reading of literature and evil as a quasi-mystical experience. However, the negativity such a reading introduces is exactly what Deleuze seeks to avoid. Bataille will then offer an introduction to the problems of evil in literature as well as take us along part of the path of our reading before turning to Deleuze. In the final section of this paper, I will put these interpretations to the test of the text and explore a work that often elicits the reaction described above from students and general readers alike: Flannery O'Connor's well-known short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Bataille and the Experience of Literature

While stingingly criticized by Deleuze, Georges Bataille has perhaps greater affinities with Deleuze and his thought than might first be imagined. In order to understand how this might be the case, I would like to explore his reading of evil and the larger reading of life on which it is based. Author of a wide range of essays and novels and the editor of a number of revolutionary and influential journals in the twentieth century, Bataille is perhaps best known for his general theory of life in the three-volume work, *The Accursed Share*. The general thesis of this work is the universe is made up of a play of energy that exceeds any attempt to calculate or regulate it:

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or

catastrophically (21).

That is, this excess of energy (called the “accursed share”) must be consumed in either extravagant consumption (sacrifice or monumental expenditures) or destruction (war). Influenced by Marcel Mauss and his theory of the gift¹, Bataille thus makes the distinction between an effort to limit and control energy and spending (a restrictive economy) and the larger play of energy at hand (a general economy)² (25). Much of his work is focused around the “Copernican revolution” involved in turning one’s sense of economy around to take the excessive part of the accursed share into account (if such accounting is indeed possible).

This theory can be found in his reading of literature and evil and, in particular, what he terms literature’s excessive nature. How can literature be “excessive?” Much like our above thesis on evil and its abuse, in *Literature and Evil*, Bataille makes a distinction between morality and hypermorality when reading literature. For Bataille, the limitations one places on oneself, thus enclosing oneself in a restrictive economy, should be understood as an *abuse* of morality because what is defined as “moral” turns on *use* value. Reducing oneself to the limits and laws of reason, one establishes a morality based on what is profitable and what is wasteful. That is, it is good to apply one’s energy to work and study and then “invest” one’s gains in income and knowledge in further development of work and study, while it is bad to “waste” one’s time and energy on frivolous activities because this leads only to loss of wealth and knowledge. For Bataille, this is erroneous because it fails to take into account the excessive nature of life itself. Limiting life into calculable terms of profit and waste it erects a system of judgment and morality. Thus, what is “good” is profitable and what is “bad” is wasteful. While this might seem rather infantile and supportive of a simple reversal of good or bad actions, Bataille is much more radical. He even goes so far as to consider evil itself in terms of calculation. If one commits an evil act in order to gain something (murder for an inheritance or even simple vengeance) then one is in the domain of morality and its inherent calculations. A truly evil act is committed for no calculable reason at all (evil for evil’s sake) (*Literature and Evil*, 17-18).

In contrast to morality and its calculating judgment, Bataille proposes the term hypermorality. What does this mean? If the traditional morality of society seeks to wall off life in limited and calculable terms, distorting it and abusing it, then hypermorality means to live life in accordance with its natural and excessive disposition. Hypermorality requires one to go

beyond the boundaries of morality and access those forbidden sites where the excessive share of life is to be found. In morality, at the bottom of all calculations one makes in life concerning “preserving” one’s wealth, knowledge, and accomplishments there is life itself (or more precisely, a certain vision of life as preserving one’s own existence). Thus, it is no surprise Bataille situates his hypermorality in the extreme experience of death and overturning the use value of life in terms of morality. While the limit experience of death is central in Bataille’s philosophy, he nonetheless sets up a corollary in sexuality, because sexual reproduction implies death (in the long term because one is normally expected to be outlived by one’s offspring and in the short term because reproduction involves a “doubling” of oneself and one never can go back to who one was before this doubling, thus creating a certain “death” to what one once was³) (*Literature and Evil*, 16). Thus, a secret link exists between pure love and death because both involve pure expenditure: “Whether it is a matter of pure eroticism (love-passion) or of bodily sensuality, the intensity increases to the point where destruction, the death of the being, becomes apparent” (*Literature and Evil*, 17). Where morality forbids access to life’s excessive expenditure, hypermorality requires a *transgressing* of morality’s false limits. The act of transgression is important for Bataille, for it situates itself along the fracture between morality and hypermorality. On the one hand, it involves the suffering that comes with transgressing the law⁴ and thus has a punitive function; on the other hand, it is atonement for transgressing the more original laws of nature. Of course, this double reading of transgression as punishment and atonement has clear religious undertones, and it is in the theological sense Bataille uses the term “atonement” as both suffering and reconciliation. Death is thus the suffering one is condemned to endure for transgressing morality but also reconciliation with nature’s more fundamental disposition. Indeed, as is well-known in questions of postmodern theology, the sacred plays a central role in Bataille’s thought, and it is this aspect of “reconciliation” with life as the “accursed share” he links together the themes of death, sexuality, and the sacred⁵. Bataille draws a link between the limits erected by morality and Greek tragedy (which he situates on the side of morality because the playwright, in the end, comes down on the side of morality even though his sympathies lie with the tragic hero). He thus declares reason or the law of tragedy protect a sacred space: “The lesson of *Wuthering Heights*, of Greek tragedy and, ultimately, of all religions, is there is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear” (*Literature and Evil*, 22).

In the above quote, Bataille speaks of Emily Brontë’s novel, and his essay

on this novel serves as the opening one in his collection on literature. While the elements above help to form Bataille's theory on morality and its link to his greater theory of life, we have yet to see how all of this fits in with literature. In his reading of *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille finds Brontë's novel to be exemplary in terms of hypermorality because it ties together the themes of eroticism (Heathcliff and Catherine's love) and death (Heathcliff's revenge). Even more importantly, there is the suffering both Heathcliff and Catherine endure for their love, which, for Bataille, is their atonement for leaving behind the time of their childhood love. Interestingly, he notes how the time of childhood, in general, has ties to the hypermoral because children refuse to reason or "economize" for the future, preferring an endless present of expenditure to a future-facing rationalization: "Divine intoxication, to which the instincts of childhood are so closely related, is entirely in the present. In the education of children preference for the present moment is the common definition of Evil" (22). Nonetheless, these elements (love, death, and childhood) correspond to themes in the text, and while the coincidence of such themes and a literary text may help demonstrate Bataille's thesis, they do not show *how* literature can be better understood in terms of evil.

Bataille's response is both simple and complex for he declares rather straightforwardly, "Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous" (25). He is able to make such a statement because his analysis turns around a socio-historical analysis of literature. The works he chooses for his analysis of literature and evil can roughly be situated in the Romantic period (extending from as early to Sade and Michelet to as late as Proust, although one can arguably situate the latter in high Modernism). The very act of turning to a periodization of literature forces Bataille to enter a narrative in which literature "breaks" with a preceding tradition⁶. Not surprisingly, Bataille's theory of literature as dangerous (and hence, evil) hews closely to the counter-enlightenment narrative of Romanticism and, later, in a more complicated fashion, of Modernism, for in a post-Enlightenment world, the function of literature becomes more and more "useless." Slipping away from its early-modern and "organic" function, Romantic and modern literature "stand alone" and address an increasingly isolated and alienated reading subject. Thus, Bataille declares, "Being inorganic, it is irresponsible. Nothing rests on it ... Though the immediate impression of rebellion may obscure this fact, the task of authentic literature is nevertheless only conceivable in terms of a desire for a fundamental communication with the reader [...]" (25). Although one would hesitate to use the term "autonomy," it is nonetheless this increasingly splintered, alienated, and modern

world of isolated literature and alienated readers that allows Bataille to declare literature dangerous because it no longer plays a collective role in creating order or moral values. And it is, above all, the social or moral use of literature at question here. Thus, while Bataille never makes such an explicit argument in *Literature and Evil*, it is the social and historical conditions of early, modern capitalism that allow literature to de-couple itself from society and assume a paradoxical place where its function is the most powerful and the most use-less. Tracing the line opened with his discussion of death as “atonement” for turning away from the excessive quality of life, Bataille draws a parallel between the “isolated” case of literature and the intense and highly individual experience of mystical ecstasy. In a tight dialectic that recalls the complicated relationship between the later modernist and autonomous work of art and the individual, Bataille underlines how it is the “use-less” quality of literature that loses its functionality as a thing (becoming no-thing), which powerfully communicates with the individual:

Death alone – or, at least, the ruin of the isolated individual in search of happiness in time – introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy. And what we thereby regain is always both innocence and the intoxication of existence. The isolated being *loses himself* in something other than himself. What the ‘other thing’ represents is of no importance. It is still a reality that transcends the common limitations. So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing; it is *nothing* (26).

For Bataille, then, the “evil” of literature is to be found in its profound affinity with the larger themes of the accursed share, or, life in its fundamentally excessive posture. Because literature no longer exercises a moral function in society, existing independently of a larger economic structure of use, its essence is of the hypermoral. Good and evil from a “traditional” and moral standpoint no longer hold. Quoting Breton, Bataille asserts:

‘Everything leads us to believe,’ wrote André Breton, ‘that there is a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are no longer perceived in contradiction to one another.’ I shall add Good and Evil, pain and joy. This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters (28).

In a certain sense, this short detour through Bataille’s un-spoken

historicization of literature has given us an answer to our above question concerning how literature can be understood in terms of evil, but there is still a certain amount of frustration that comes with this reading. To return again to the questions that opened this article, one can easily imagine the reactions of students and general readers when one informs them reading a text that turns around evil or violence is a sacred experience in which one is at last in communication with the fundamental nature of life itself. The work of Deleuze might help make, at this point, this experience much more practical (even if the term “practical” with its pragmaticist undertones flies in the face of Bataille’s criticism of morality and “use” value).

Before making this turn more fully to Deleuze, it is perhaps helpful to revisit his short but biting criticism of Bataille. As noted above, in *Dialogues II*, Deleuze treats Bataille as the worst example of the French writer hiding a “dirty little secret:” “He made the little secret the essence of literature, with a mother within, a priest beneath, an eye above. It is impossible to overemphasize the harm that the phantasm has done to writing... in sustaining the signifier, and the interpretation of one by the other, of one with the other” (35). While it is clear Deleuze is attacking certain novels by Bataille in this quote, he is also aiming at a much larger problem of interpretation and, above all, what he calls “sustaining the signifier.” What does this mean? True to his post-structuralist roots (although he never considered himself part of this movement), Deleuze is aiming at any position “outside of the text” that allows one to assume what appears to be a neutral and all-encompassing point of view (one might also say, a point of view that “sustains” a certain “signification”). While Deleuze’s criticism takes aim at Bataille’s own literary works, the larger and more general criticism against interpretation catches the underlying theory in which Bataille tries to situate his own literature and literature in general. In other words, Deleuze is taking direct aim at the historicizing narrative underpinning Bataille’s theory of evil in literature, specifically, the “use-less-ness” of literature in modernity as a simultaneous product and reaction to the rise of an increasingly productivist and industrialized culture. The advantage of such a well-known narrative of Romantic reaction against reason is it allows the reader to rather easily and quickly grasp the essential (literature as evil) as part of a larger narrative or evolution (the rise of reason and capitalism and the havoc a certain version of the former and most versions of the latter cause for Western civilization). However, it is obvious such a structuring narrative goes against Bataille’s argument, for the narrative allows for the *consumption* of literature’s role rather than its *consummation*.

This is a curious blind spot for Bataille, given the relentlessness with which he tracks down such “extra-textual” positions that allow morality to slip back into literature and cloud one’s vision. It is an even more curious criticism from Deleuze because he seems to ignore the implications of Bataille’s theory of the accursed share and how closely they relate to Deleuze’s own project. Perhaps the problem to Bataille’s blind spot and to Deleuze’s reading past Bataille is to be found in the manner in which Bataille remains enclosed in a thematic reading of literature as evil. Above we noted Bataille’s declaration that literature as evil touches on a point similar to that of mysticism: “This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters” (28). Perhaps Bataille would be better served here if he did not speak so much of violent literature that reaches this point (as in “literature with a violent theme”) as quite simply literature *as violence*. Indeed, it is violence (the violence of death, sacrifice, or war) that allows one to have access to what Bataille calls, in an early collection of reflections, communication:

What you are is tied to the activity that links together the infinite number of elements that compose you, to the intense communication of these elements between themselves. Contagions of energy, of movement, of heat, or transfers of elements constitute the interior life of your organic being. Life is never situated in one particular point: it moves rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to multiple points), like a current or as a sort of electric flow. Thus, there where you would like to seize your timeless substance, you find only a sliding, the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements (*L’Expérience intérieure*, 111, my translation).

The violence here, in this play of communication between an infinite number of elements, is directed against the illusion of one’s timeless substance. Literature deploys violence against the fiction of one’s subjectivity: of one’s standing “outside” of the text. This seemingly obscure excerpt is extremely important for it points the way out of Bataille’s historicizing narrative of literature as violent (and evil) and towards a violence of literature, out of an abuse of literature as violent and towards a use of the violence of literature to empower.

Now, while Deleuze's criticism of Bataille makes sense as it fits into the larger question of interpretation and extra-textual transcendence, it is nonetheless curious Deleuze does not manage to see the extent to which his project parallels that of Bataille. In order to understand how Deleuze and Bataille intersect and arrive at a more practical reading of evil from a Deleuzian perspective, it will be necessary to first situate the general orientation of his philosophy. This is fraught with difficulty, as Deleuze himself underlines, because attempting a beginning at anything and especially in philosophy means eliminating all presuppositions (*Difference and Repetition*, 129). We are not attempting a new beginning in philosophy but rather beginning a reading of Deleuze.

In the third chapter of this work, Deleuze levels his sights on what he calls the history of a long error in philosophy, which he terms "the image of thought" (129). This error is the fundamental orientation of thought toward *truth* so deeply buried in the manner of thinking one barely gives any reflection to it before one begins thinking (for example, in philosophy, with the difference between subject and object, or between Being and being) (131). That is, before one goes about arguing whether one should situate the problem of thought in the subject or the object, or anything of that nature, one has already made the important decision to adhere to an image of thought in which thinking will seek the Truth and thought is *good* (131-132). As Deleuze notes, speaking of this image:

In the realm of the implicit, [this image] nevertheless holds fast, even if the philosopher specifies that truth is not, after all, 'an easy thing to achieve and within reach at all'. For this reason, we do not speak of this or that image of thought, variable according to the philosophy in question, but of a single Image in general which constitutes the subjective presupposition of philosophy as a whole. When Nietzsche questions the most general presuppositions of philosophy, he says that these are essentially moral, since Morality alone is capable of persuading us that thought has a good nature and the thinker a good will, and that only the good can ground the supposed affinity between thought and the True. Who else, in effect, but Morality and this Good which gives thought to the true, and the true to thought (132)?

This fundamental orientation of thinking then sets philosophy down the path of error for the work of thought is always brought back to this implicit orientation of moral value, the Good and Truth. For Deleuze, the whole history of Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle, through Descartes and Kant to phenomenology, can be understood in

terms of the “good” and “harmonious” use of the faculties, what can colloquially be called “recognition” (133). By bringing thought back to this “re-” of re-cognition, it returns to “the reasonable” or “Good” of Greek thought, the thinking subject of Descartes *cogito*, the harmonious and ordered use of Kant’s faculties or the images of phenomenology’s “world.” In every case, thought returns to a home that gives it a foundation in which what was sought (thought) is always found in a Truth of “the Good,” “the reasonable,” the “I think,” the “law” of the faculties or the “world” of phenomenology.

Now, all of this seems quite complicated and rather far from the discussion of literature and evil that was the reason for this diversion in the first place. The important point in Deleuze’s philosophy is, however, already visible. By tethering thought to a moral orientation, thinking participates in what Deleuze calls a “tribunal of judgment.” The very act of thinking is always already submitted to an implicitly pre-supposed position against which it is then judged. Extending his analysis of re-cognition, Deleuze sees thinking in this manner as whittling down Being so it becomes simply a re-presentation of the Good or Moral position to be found in any of the instances mentioned above (137-138). Like Bataille’s “narrative” of evil, the problem here is a familiar one for post-structuralist philosophy because Deleuze’s investigation into the origins of philosophy uncovers an un-thought ground or space from which thought works. By bringing being back to this ground, one loses the fabulous difference of being itself. This is why Deleuze (like others of his post-structuralist generation) asserts he is a philosopher of difference and not being (in the sense of the larger Western metaphysical tradition).

For Deleuze, the implications are extremely important. Going beyond re-cognition and re-presentation, difference implies a radical new that “news” itself endlessly, avoiding the traps of the “re-”: “For the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*” (136). In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari give a veritable manifesto for this model in philosophy as well as in science and the arts. Each of these broad disciplines encounter what Deleuze calls the force of thought in different manners: philosophy creates concepts, science creates functions and art creates affect and percept. The key word in each of these fields is creation and because the question at hand (for the moment) is one of philosophy, understanding why Deleuze and Guattari speak of the creation of concepts will allow us to further understand thinking with

Deleuze.

In everyday life, one tends to think of a concept as a shorthand reference for independent reality: the concept of “flower” refers to the concrete reality of things growing in the garden one generally cultivates for aesthetic pleasure. However, taking a cue from Nietzsche and his genealogical method, Deleuze and Guattari assert “flower” is simply an abstraction for a multitude of different plants and, furthermore, it subsumes a number of differences: the difference between animal and vegetal, the difference between flowering and non-flowering plants, the difference between desirable and non-desirable flowering plants (weeds), etc. In everyday thinking, the extreme ontological richness of what has gone into this concept is lost, “whittled down” as it were for a transparent image that appears to refer to an independent reality “out there” in the garden that is immediately re-cognized and re-presented. This is what we referred to above as the “image of thought.”

The creation of concepts allows us to reverse this erroneous image. In philosophy, this takes place through the confrontation with a problem in which the vast web of differences inherent to the problem is brought to the surface, and then a solution or concept is created which keeps those differences “in play.” Once again, this sounds extremely complicated, but let us return to the everyday problem and “concept” of the flower. To put this in Deleuzian terms, one might say the concept of the flower is “created” in response to a certain aesthetic problem (in everyday terms, one wants to have a pleasing garden, so one grows flowers instead of weeds) and the differences in that problem include the difference between plants that flower or do not, the difference between flowers that invade the garden (weeds) and those that do not, the difference between strong and weak-scented blooms, and so on and so forth. The concept changes, however, when one sows flowers in a fallow field (clover, for instance) because the underlying problem (soil erosion) is completely different from that of growing flowers for aesthetic pleasure. The concept of “flower” might appear to be the same, but behind it there is a different problem to which the concept responds. For Deleuze, philosophical concepts reveal what he will also call a *virtual* plane of differences that are *unthought* in the concept itself. Virtual does not mean they do not exist but they are simply unactualized for the problem at hand.⁷ The task of philosophy is to “excavate” the difference that goes into the creation of each concept.

For science, the inverse is at play, and scientific functions whittle

down virtual differences to their actual state (one might think of sets of differential equations as applications of this “whittling down” for example) for practical applications. This is the framework of thought as it is applied to everyday thinking and the dominant archetype of thinking. Art is curious because, for Deleuze and Guattari, the task of the artist is to isolate affect and percept (the visceral and body-centered sensation of difference itself) in what they call a “monument” (*What is Philosophy?* 148). By giving art a “monumental” definition, Deleuze and Guattari underline the importance of art in communicating difference in a field that “precedes” (although one would perhaps be better suited to say “exceeds”) subjectivity and objectivity. The power of art is to allow one to “glimpse” the virtual field or plane of difference in its pre-subjective and objective deployment (again, the term is difficult because any “glimpsing” already implies a subject, and perhaps it would be better to simply speak, as does Deleuze, of a “force” of difference). For Deleuze, each art accomplishes this in its own manner. For example, in his two works devoted to cinema, Deleuze examines how the camera reorganizes the presentation of space and time, not according to a human perspective but in multiple perspectives: the movement of the camera eye over movement itself offers a glimpse of movement as movement that is not tied to any one particular perspective of subject or object.

Although this might appear to be a quite long detour through Deleuze’s thought, we are at last able to return to some of the questions we left un-answered above concerning Bataille and the violence of literature. When examining Bataille, we noted it seemed odd for Deleuze to not acknowledge the importance of Bataille’s thought, for what we have sketched here is something remarkably similar to Bataille’s notion of “communication” and the “contagions of energy, of movement... or transfers of elements” that constitute it. Let us consider how Deleuze, at the end of his life, brings together the image of thought, difference, and the intensities they imply. Returning to the very beginning of his philosophical career and his study of David Hume (and the illusions of the “self” empiricism uncovers)⁸, Deleuze defines the field of difference as a “transcendental field:”

It can be distinguished from experience in that it doesn’t refer to an object or belong to a subject (empirical representation). It appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self. It may seem curious that the transcendental be defined by such immediate givens: we will speak of a transcendental empiricism in contrast to

everything that makes up the world of the subject and the object. There is something wild and powerful in this transcendental empiricism that is of course not the element of sensation (simple empiricism), for sensation is only a break within the flow of absolute consciousness. It is, rather, however close two sensations may be, the passage from one to the other as becoming, as increase or decrease in power (virtual quantity). Must we then define the transcendental field by a pure immediate consciousness with neither object nor self, as a movement that neither begins nor ends? (*Pure Immanence*, 25-26).

As this passage makes clear, the moment the “image” of a fixed and “timeless substance,” to use Bataille’s terms, appears, one has slipped out this field of difference and into the errors of the image of thought. Where the two thinkers differ is obvious enough: Bataille’s response is a theory of transgression that allows one to *accede to* “communication” while, for Deleuze, the entire narrative of “breaking out” of one’s false images is erroneous because all of life is *already* this movement. To “transgress” the limits of thought means one has already “fallen” out of thought and into its image: “Consciousness becomes a fact only when a subject is produced at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as ‘transcendents’” (*Pure Immanence*, 26). This difference in orientation is important and is the crux of Deleuze’s argument with Bataille because for Deleuze, everything is part of this overwhelming flow of difference; even the illusions of thought and the subjects and objects that result are simply *creations* of difference, not to be overcome but seen as *part* of the flow of difference and becoming.

Empowering Thought

How does all of this fit together with evil? A preliminary response is in Deleuze’s reading of difference as a “force:” when morality or Truth orient thinking, thought inevitably seeks out terms it re-cognizes, as noted above. However, when thinking in terms of pure difference with Deleuze, the re-cognition or re-presentation aspect of thought gives way to thinking as a constraint, as the appearance of the radically new that is impossible to re-cognize or re-present and that, in a certain sense, “precedes” all recognition and representation. To return to the phrase cited above: “For the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable terra incognita” (*Difference and Repetition*, 136). How is

this force transmitted? Through an encounter, responds Deleuze (139). It may be with Socrates, a temple, or a demon, but the encounter is what forces the un-thought to create (139). In terms of art and literature, we have seen this occurs through affect and percept. However, little up to this point allows us to understand how such encounters and the thinking that ensues “empowers” us. In the opening essay on his collection on literature and philosophy, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze treats the writer as a physician (like Nietzsche), diagnosing the symptoms of his life and the world and the manner in which one falls into the traps of the image of thought. Art, and in this case literature, is a form of health because it allows one to overcome one’s symptoms:

Literature then appears as an enterprise of health: not that the writer would necessarily be in good health... but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becomings that a dominant and substantial health would render impossible (3).

The encounter the affect of literature allows one to become stronger, to rise above the illusions of thought and the “dominant and substantial health” that results from it. Here, the echoes of Bataille’s near mystical experience of evil in literature and the dissolution of the subject it entails are not far. Indeed, is this not simply Bataille’s same topography repeated, of thought overcoming its illusions, transcending its errors? If this is the case, the argument made above concerning Deleuze’s reading of difference as an infinite plane of creation that needs no transcending falls flat. The immanence of Deleuze’s project would reveal itself to be in a topography of transcendence with Bataille. Deleuze is resolutely against such a reading: “Transcendence is always a product of immanence” (*Pure Immanence* 31). The question, then, is how to put together the intense encounters of thinking and the transformation: the “passage” of health and the “giving of becomings” of which Deleuze speaks concerning the example of literature.

As noted in the opening of this paper, one of Deleuze’s greatest influences is Spinoza, and it is in the way Deleuze reads him that the “plane” of Deleuze’s thought deploys itself the most fully. For Deleuze, the audacity of Spinoza’s philosophy is not in his first principal of one substance and an infinite number of attributes, but is in the much later principal concerning the body and parallelism. Deleuze is drawn to the manner in which Spinoza de-emphasizes consciousness for the body (*Spinoza*:

Practical Philosophy, 17). This is a simple reversal of a traditional mind-body hierarchy but precisely an effort to draw the foundations for a system of thought in which the force of thought functions in a “plane.” By parallelism, Deleuze reads Spinoza as establishing a link between the body and consciousness where an extremely important dynamic emerges: as the mind or consciousness increases its ideas of what the body can do, the body follows and vice-versa. To put it in terms encountered above, a “newing” of the body occurs. To understand this, one might take a rather common scene at a community swimming pool: a dozen children are on the pool deck imitating a stroke they are learning. From their movements, it is obvious the idea of the stroke is not clear in their mind. However, when the children enter the water, something happens, and through the interaction of their bodies with the water of the swimming pool, they begin to swim. The stroke is perhaps not perfect, but their bodies discover a new power, something the children did not imagine possible until their encounter with the water. With this newly discovered power in their bodies comes the idea of the stroke. More importantly, this bodily encounter with the water transforms their idea of their body and the world in which that body interacts. Thus, their consciousness has been transformed. Two bodies (that of a child’s and that of the “body” of water) have entered into relation with each other and out of this encounter a newer and more capable body has emerged. Bodies thus enter into relation with each other and either increase their power (new ideas are created, new visions are traced and a new knowledge of the world is possible) or diminish it (ideas are destroyed, visions are erased, and knowledge and life diminish).

In a Spinozist system, the effects of these encounters reveal themselves as joy or sadness in the human subject, but these are only the effects of these encounters and not the actual encounters themselves (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 19). Importantly, it is by focusing solely on the effects of these relations that a series of errors takes place: one mistakes effects for causes which then results in consciousness believing it acts on and over the body. Furthermore, where the human subject and consciousness cannot imagine itself as the cause of a relation, it erects an ultimate subject with the same endowments (understanding and volition) as the human subject: God (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 20). This triple illusion is what leads Deleuze to declare, “Consciousness is only a dream with one’s eyes open” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 20). Consciousness is simply the “intersection” of an incalculable number of encounters between different bodies, running from atoms, cells, minds, and bodies to a child jumping into a swimming pool.

Now, as should be clear, this brief reading of Spinoza with Deleuze is important because of how it re-works what we above called the topography of our problem of thought in relation to Bataille. Out of this plane of encounters between bodies come a series of effects felt as joy or sadness in the Spinozist system. What Deleuze and Spinoza do is elaborate a system to explain how errors, such as the image of thought and the transcendence it implies, emerge from such a plane of thought. In other words, by passing through Spinoza, Deleuze explains how thought “produces” its own errors. There is really nothing to escape, transcend, or transgress in Deleuze’s system; there is simply a perspective that must be changed.

Crucially, from this perspective, morality or values of good and evil change radically. It is a short step from the illusion of consciousness to the illusion of value, for if effects are mistaken as causes, what is judged as “good” or “evil” is what increases joy and diminishes sadness. When it is impossible to attribute joy or sadness to an individual subject, “good” and “evil” become transcendent moral values, empty of any “relational” context, simply requiring blind allegiance. When one raises values to a position “outside” of any context, they become what Deleuze, following Spinoza, defines as “morality” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 23). In contrast to morality, Deleuze, with Spinoza, pleads for what he defines as an “ethics” which is closely tied to the immanence of the event itself. An action is “good” or “bad” if it increases or decreases one’s powers and one’s capacity to have adequate ideas of the world around oneself. Thus, following Spinoza’s reading, Deleuze reads the Christian God’s commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit not as a transcendent imperative but rather as an explanation of the nature of reality itself and the dangers of the fruit for Adam’s composition. In this context, the fruit is bad simply because it is poison and will cause Adam’s body to enter relations that do not accord with his nature (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 22). The stakes of ethics are then completely different from the imperatives of a morality. “Good” is what increases one’s capabilities or, as Deleuze puts it, one’s power and “bad” or “evil” is what diminishes one’s power or capacities. “Power” here is used in its Nietzschean sense referring to the will to power, and Deleuze underlines that desiring power to dominate is one of the most reactive manners of living where all of the aspects of what he has above termed “bad” come together in a servile and increasingly weakened life (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, xvii). Far from reinforcing power or domination, this Spinoza/Nietzsche-influenced vision of ethics is, for Deleuze, living life as life: striving to exist according

to life itself and searching out the proper encounters that allow for that to happen.

Empowering Literature

With this detour through Spinoza and Nietzsche, Deleuze finally allows us to re-phrase the question of evil and its proper use. From the Deleuzian perspective, “evil” has no existence in itself but is simply a mistaken way of seeing and acting in the world that separates one from the plane of becoming. It is in this manner I could suggest at the beginning of this paper evil as something to be avoided in literature or at least tolerated as depressing. Encountering evil in these terms is in fact an extremely impoverished manner of living, a manner based on the image of thought and the tribunal of judgment that accompanies this image. In Nietzschean terms, one operates an active selection (this novel deals with something repulsive) and affirms it reactively (this is evil). This is an abuse of evil. To properly use evil would not be the simple and puerile affirmation of evil for evil’s sake (in a certain manner reminiscent of Bataille), but rather to better understand the immanent conditions that separate one from life. In other words, one can certainly be repulsed or saddened by evil in the way it separates one from life and weakens oneself. In this manner, one gains a more adequate idea of life and leaves the encounter with evil empowered rather than weakened.

Now one can imagine the reaction of readers and students to such a position. If Bataille’s affirmation that evil literature is a quasi-mystical experience elicited a certain amount of resistance, a reading in which evil in general and more specifically is life affirming and empowering in literature can only solicit more disbelief and backlash. It is with Deleuze’s position firmly in mind that a practical turn to literature is appropriate.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the more widely read authors of twentieth century American fiction is Flannery O’Connor. While associated with the sub-genre of Southern Gothic in American letters, O’Connor often took pains to distance herself from a quick and easy reading of her work into “Southern” or “gothic;” she preferred to underline how her fiction aimed at a larger literary problem of “romance” and “realism” that only happened to find itself aided by geography and certain tendencies that one might label “gothic.” Be it “southern” or “gothic” or “grotesque,” almost any fiction writer would agree with her when she claims, speaking of Conrad, the writer “subjected himself at all

times to the limitations that reality imposed, but that reality for him was not simply coextensive with the visible. He was interested in rendering justice to the visible universe because it suggested an invisible one..." (*Mystery and Manners*, 80). O'Connor's preoccupations are those of a writer first and a regionalist second. Yet it is often through a very visible use of violence and evil she attempts to render justice to the invisible universe. As a writer, she offers a test for our thesis of empowering evil.

The plot of her short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is well known: a grandmother, her son and his family travel from Georgia to Florida for a family vacation. The grandmother attempts to convince her son, Bailey, not to take the family to Florida because she wants to go Tennessee to visit relatives. One of her arguments is the fact that an escaped killer, the Misfit, is on the loose and headed to Florida as well. During the trip, the Grandmother recalls a plantation she once visited when she was young and convinces Bailey to turn off the main road to find it. Realizing she was mistaken in her memory of the plantation, the Grandmother accidentally sets the family cat free in the car, causing an accident. On the desolate country road, the Misfit and two other criminals find the family, and when the Grandmother recognizes the killers, she seals the family's fate. One by one, the Misfit kills the Grandmother's family (Bailey and his son and then his wife, daughter and baby) before the Grandmother, in a widely-commented moment, reaches out to touch the Misfit, declaring, "Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!" The Misfit recoils from her and shoots her, ending the story.

The advantage of this text is it invites the reader to judge. Of course, with a character called the Misfit, this is not much of an accomplishment, but it is the character of the Grandmother who comes in for the most scrutiny. O'Connor pushes the reader in this direction, to a certain extent, noting how the Grandmother's fate is particularly tied to a Christian encounter with death (*Mystery and Manners*, 110). But she also is careful about the Grandmother's last act, adding a word of warning to those quick to judge: "It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery" (*Mystery and Manners*, 111). O'Connor here offers an interesting clue on reading that ties in very closely to the structure we have elaborated with Deleuze, in spite of her choosing later to align the "mystery" of her text in a Christian framework. What is this mystery for O'Connor and how does it fit in to our reading of evil with Deleuze?

Let us return to the problem of judgment. There are two ways of judging in this short story. The first and most obvious is built around a simple thematic reading: the Misfit and his cohorts are clearly evil and the Grandmother's self-absorbed satisfaction and smugness come in for a rather severe payback. There is thus a tendency to read the story as a form of extremely severe retribution for sins of pride and selfishness on the Grandmother's part. That the Misfit remains unpunished and free at the end of the story is a source of profound resistance on the part of most readers. Another, more subtle level of judgment at work in O'Connor's fiction in general is that of the very literary genre in which she writes: realism. While the grotesque certainly exaggerates, it remains anchored in the constraints of modern prose in which the text finds a value or meaning in its reflection of reality. Thus, O'Connor famously declares she is a realist but one of distances (*Mystery and Manners*, 44). This is important because it explains the difficult relationship she (and other writers of different "regions") has with her work being defined by the South. When speaking of her "realism of distances" she notes the grotesque and the South's production of particularly grotesque characters is more about the superior role of fiction than it is about any one region. In making this comment, O'Connor is then taking aim at the more fundamental judgment that good fiction reflects the world and presents a believable re-presentation of reality. The grotesque and the violence it often engenders are meant to undo the judging eye of the reader and present something else. When speaking of her realism of distances, O'Connor says something much like Deleuze above when describing the writer as someone who returns from a journey, her eyes pierced and bloodshot from the overwhelming vision she has seen: "In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque" (*Mystery and Manners*, 44).

These two systems of judgment are visible from the first pages of O'Connor's story. Typically, it is O'Connor who sets the reader up by choosing a narrative technique that modulates between direct and indirect presentation of speech and thoughts. Thus, the reader easily slips into a mode of reading that judges the novelist's craft (does the scene adequately re-present reality?) and follows the broad, thematic lines of judgment of the plot itself. Thus, the first paragraph opens with the Grandmother attempting to talk her grandson out of the trip to Florida: "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald

head. “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose [*sic*] from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose [*sic*] in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did” (*The Complete Stories*, 117). In this short quote, the direct presentation of the Grandmother’s speech appears to prop up a neutrality on the part of the narrator, a neutrality immediately undercut by the masterful use of adjectives setting up the confrontation between mother and son: “thin hip,” “bald head” and the verb “rattling.” While this grandmother seems intent on protecting her family, the guilt she invokes by arguing against a trip to Florida and the almost devilish energy she deploys in haranguing her son cast her, from the first lines in, an unflattering light. O’Connor then explicitly reinforces this view on the following page when she describes the scene in the car as it sets out on the road to Florida, foreshadowing the fate of the family:

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children’s mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady (118).

Once again, it is in a tightly controlled use of adjectives that O’Connor reinforces the vanity of the grandmother through the litany of accoutrements described in open comparison with her daughter-in-law: note the chiming of the fricatives in “collars” and “cuffs,” of the liquids of “lace” and “neckline,” of the plosives in “pinned” and “purple,” and the aspirates in “spray” and “sachet.” In three lines, O’Connor offers a quick lesson in the poetic use of sound as she subtly underlines the manners of the Grandmother and the vanity underpinning them, even to her shortly-to-come death. While subtle, O’Connor has nonetheless stepped into the narration to open up a rift between the grandmother and her family, and it is into this opening that the reader jumps, opening up his judgment. It is important to note in these two examples of O’Connor’s narration, the realist pact between the writer and the reader is not broken: language is deployed in a manner that appears to adhere to reality, and thus, the reader is only too eagerly led down the path of judgment by the writer.

O'Connor's story continues in a controlled deployment of direct and indirect (and sometimes free direct) presentation until approximately two-thirds of the story and the family's accident. It is at this point, in the family's encounter with an embodiment of evil that O'Connor's style changes in an important manner and one can detect her "realism of distances." In this final third of the story, direct and indirect presentation are still present, but their veracity is called into question by her style. The use of the conditional mood and conditional phrases suddenly undermine the solidity of her language. Even more importantly, it is in this section of the story O'Connor turns to what is perhaps her trademark phrase: "as if." The structure of this phrase is important because "as" sets up an equivalence, a re-presentation in language based on the un-thought judgment of realism and mimesis. However, at the very instant O'Connor offers this "grounding" of language, she undoes it with the conditional use of the interrogative "if." Thus a strange no-man's land opens up, with re-presentation suddenly caught in a plane of sorts where signifier and signified are brought together in realist narration and then suspended. O'Connor deploys this phrase at crucial moments in the story, such as when the family first encounters the Misfit: "The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was" (126). Importantly, throughout this section, as in this quote, the "as if" appears in combination with the faculties (of vision, of hearing, of speaking, and, in their synthesis, of re-cognition). Suddenly, the characters of the story (and, in particular, the Grandmother) and the reader cannot quite correctly see, hear, or understand. The tribunal that had cleverly been erected by O'Connor's story and narration comes teetering down and the story veers into the deformation of a realism of distances, or, the grotesque: "She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, 'Jesus, Jesus,' meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing" (131). Of course, it is in the crucial scene of the Grandmother's murder the "as if" returns twice: "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake has bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (132).

This ending leaves readers utterly distraught. To a certain extent, the violence of the grandmother's death is to be blamed for this, but more

fundamentally, it is the confusion of judgment that is the true source of trouble. What has occurred is a very literal encounter with evil but one that no longer allows the reader to make the distinction between good and evil. Indeed, the grounds on which this judgment can be made have been erased and one has shifted from a topography of judgment and the transcendence that grounds such a viewpoint to one of immanence. Yes, the evil depicted is reprehensible but encountering it *beyond* the grounds of judgment (in the no-man's land of O'Connor's "as if") allows one to rise above one's reactive judgment and see evil as part of the forces that create one's point of view and Life itself. This is what O'Connor refers to as the "mystery" of the text, but it can also be read with Deleuze as affect and the crossing of a certain threshold of judgment. Above, we noted, for O'Connor, a realism of distances is a kind of prophecy and it allows the writer to see far things close up. For Deleuze, the affect of literature is to make one stronger, which is what he calls literature's "fabulating function," recalling the powers of difference examined above: literature reveals powers and becomings one never thought possible, like the child swimming for the first time or one going *beyond* evil, *through* evil. "The ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life," declares Deleuze (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4).

Deleuze is well aware of possible reactions to such a reading. One desires sure ground in the face of the grandmother's brutal murder. One demands retribution, justice, and judgment. Going beyond evil here provides none of that. As Deleuze notes, "Here again, there is always the risk that a diseased state will interrupt the process or becoming... pushing literature toward a larval fascism, the disease against which it fights – even if this means diagnosing the fascism within itself and fighting against itself" (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4). The stakes of such a practical reading are, however, beyond judgment. Every body, every text, every encounter, carries with it a capacity to change our present situation, and the practical use of literature and evil is to situate ourselves in such a way that active change can be possible. Why read evil and violent texts? To live life fully, to become active and empowered.

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Notes

1 See Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, London: Routledge, 1982.

2 As is well-known, this distinction had a significant influence on the work of Jacques Derrida as well as that of Michel Foucault (the importance of "limit experiences" in his work) and Jacques Lacan.

3 This explains why parenthood is often explained as a life-changing threshold one crosses, never to go back again.

4 Bataille notes primitive taboo is primarily directed against violence and to transgress taboo results, necessarily, in suffering (*Literature and Evil*, 23-24).

5 See, for instance, *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (edited by Graham Ward, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), the "Introduction" to the collection by Graham Ward (xv-xlvii) and equally the "Introduction" to Bataille by Craig James (3-15).

6 Tellingly, in the preface to his collection, Bataille retrospectively situates the texts of his study in relation to his encounter with Surrealism (ix). Again, the argument is not explicit, but this historicization of literature into movements makes possible this narrative of literature breaking with a larger order.

7 At many points, Deleuze makes a similar argument by underlining how two "horses" are completely different from one another, revealing an entire different world of underlying virtual forces at play: a draft horse is closer to an ox and a racehorse is closer to a greyhound, he declares (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 124).

8 See Deleuze's *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, New York:

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9 On this question, see the collection *Mystery and Manners* and more specifically “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction.”

Evil is Business as Usual: An Essay on Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

John Pauley

I: Introduction

McCarthy *seems* to raise “the problem of evil” in a secular fashion and in a relatively direct way in his novel *No Country for Old Men*. The “problem of evil” here means the ongoing human struggle against evil within ourselves and our social world (which are finally inseparable). But, of course, this “problem” never meets with any kind of reasonable solution (in any sense) until we comprehend *the nature of evil*. What is it? How does it form and evolve within ourselves and society? What, finally, can we do to stop it? There are multiple answers out there, especially within philosophical discourse, but most of these answers are highly abstract and general, as it always is with philosophy.

A *great story* about evil embeds and embodies evil within the world and within consciousness. In any great narrative about evil, action *is* consciousness; we cannot, in other words, look for the nature of evil simply within states of consciousness narrowly construed (say, as the “content of mind”). Human acts are inseparable from mental states and they are more than “clues” or “symptoms” of what is happening “on the inside”. As human beings who constantly engage with others (by necessity) we understand the basic point that consciousness and mind are analytically contained in action. We necessarily require this truth of human reality as we make hypotheses about the nature of evil within narratives or we will be reduced to incoherence or absurd mystery.

McCarthy's book is saturated by doom, dread, and palpable fear, ways of being that seem to follow from a pervasive evil. There is no place within the story to escape from the sense of a world falling apart as evil moves ever closer to the center of what constitutes human well-being. It is not that everyone is becoming evil- as in some sort of horror show or movie- but rather the evil in question is surrounding what we might call “culture”: the resources available for all kinds of human improvement. An ever-present background of evil, as if evil threatens the eco-system,

takes hold early in the novel. But our task here is not simply a generalized description or overall feeling that the narrative conveys. Our task is to provide some reasonable hypotheses concerning *how this comes about*. In the real world, with real people, and dealing with the concrete, there is no development from nothing. Something must exist first in order for the evil to evolve or form; hence, we are looking for the causal source of the evil. Secondly, and more importantly, we cannot hypothesize anything about the source of the evil until we know its nature. But, and this is a good thing for the inquiry, the source of the evil reveals its nature. I mean, more plainly, that evil contains its source as part of its nature. We should expect this on strictly empirical grounds. An ecology is caused by its components and also, obviously enough, contains its components. This point is entirely consistent with my above claim that “something must exist first” for the evil to develop. It is consistent because components evolve while remaining components.

Let me push harder at the above inquiry. McCarthy describes a world where there are no straightforward “moral dilemmas in the face of evil” because this world seems to have evolved to the point where moral struggles are no longer even possible. Now, this claim may seem over the line, too far, or even some weird science fiction (in other words, we would not recognize these beings or this world): the point is synonymous with the idea that *our resources for dealing with evil have dwindled to the point of no return and this is another way of describing the evil itself*. And, again, what we need for the story to be about the world and not some futuristic nightmare, are hypotheses or inferences to the best explanation for the nature and existence of this evil that can, in fact, be construed as empirically plausible (as existing in our present world). In other words: what makes this evil possible?

I mention these points by way of introduction because I think they are basic to understanding the problem of evil presented, but also because McCarthy does play close to categorical boundaries. The infamous assassin Anton Chigurh, our main puzzle for the answers we seek, is very nearly unbelievable as a human agent. I do not, however, think this is an imaginative failure of “unrealistic possibilities”; it is instead, an inevitable feature of pushing toward an evolution of human evil and human normative failure. Somehow, this creature emerges and he does not emerge as “the pure embodiment of evil” because this level of abstraction is self-defeating within a narrative and it bears no relationship to reality. To really care about this narrative as a piece of realism (as it certainly is) requires that we stay within the boundary of natural categories while at

the same time pushing them. If this is not the case then lots of things go up in smoke, especially my notion or large hypothesis that “evil” has somehow evolved (from what to what is the hard part). McCarthy is really playing close to imaginative boundaries (and not just natural categories): *the narrative often reads like a well founded and dreaded prediction.*

The ideas I am depending on are an ecological ontology of persons and human circumstance; these ideas strongly resist the atomization of agency/identity and the libertarian construct of “free-will.” The fact that they resist these two pieces of western mythology is going to be crucial as we look at the nature of evil in the narrative. But the content of an ecological ontology of persons as it first relates to Chigurh is relatively simple. An entity, including a human being, cannot be within the world, in multiple ways relating to the world (other people, the environment) and not “belong to the world”: in other words, Chigurh’s origins and ongoing existence depend on many facts about the world and not just himself, even as he may think or other persons may think that he is “outside of everything.” It will be the ongoing idea in this essay, even as it is difficult and somewhat experimental, that the root cause of Chigurh’s evil is his understanding of himself that he does, in fact, stand *outside of everything*. The root cause of evil is then in the endeavor to escape our belonging to the world. It may even be the case, as we push the inquiry, that “free-will” is part of the urge to escape the world (and contingency, dependence on others, etc.). I endeavor, in the following pages to give substantial content to these ideas.

Now before moving on to a microscopic look at Chigurh and his relation to others, I want and need to explain the above idea that the world of *No Country for Old Men* seems to have lost the *conditions for morality*. In anyone who still understands those conditions, this world must provoke dread and fear. Indeed, this is precisely the way Ed Tom, the old moralist and old school sheriff, sees and feels things. Consider a homely analogy. Suppose I move into a new neighborhood and after some days hanging around I notice that it is not neighborly, but I also see reasons for thinking that, with some effort on everyone’s part, the place could become neighborly. Perhaps, in some pathetically simple way, this is an aspect of how we think of evil: as something we can understand and overcome (at least to a great extent) through effort toward the normative and the good. Now consider another scenario and see if it sinks into consciousness or squares with any experience. Suppose the same set up and yet in this case I conclude, with some evidence, that the lack of

neighborliness is *itself sufficient* for the impossibility of neighborliness. What does this mean? And it also looks as if understanding the evidence for the conclusion would be analogous for understanding the nature of evil as it rips away the conditions of morality. The greatest mistake, in my judgment, often existing within the problem of evil, is the ongoing presupposition that the *conditions for morality always somehow hold within persons and the social world.*

One last point is necessary before moving forward. No doubt, when an evil such as the reality of Chigurh is seen and felt, we tend toward a mental and emotional rampage of overt and conscious disassociation. This goes on constantly. Whether it is a serial killer, or a child molester, or even a money manager who steals millions, we tend to distance ourselves in the sense that “the criminal is distinct from me in basically all respects.” And we can do this in a somewhat responsible way. As a law-abiding and honest person, I know at the very least, that I would not ever bilk my neighbor of his money and so on. This is often true enough. But as we move beyond, that is as we move into an understanding of the whole and not just particulars, we must search for ecological principles that allowed for the conditions of those criminals and to think it had nothing to do with what *we all created over time and in relation to what had been created and sustained in the past*, we just become immature and ridiculous. Bernie Madoff, in other words, emerged from a world of gross corruption that is surely related - in some way - to all aspects of the society. Likewise then Chigurh may be some kind of “monster”, a sort of being that emerged from the ooze, but he is our monster and we need to own him and the ooze he formed from. And McCarthy goes farther in the thoughts of Ed Tom: we all should have seen him coming.

II: We Should Have Seen Him Coming

Moss walks into the results of a gunfight, finds two million plus dollars, and decides to take it knowing full well “they” will very probably pursue him. In the middle of nowhere (Texas scrub) he steps into a web of connections made possible by the mix between the legal and illegal economies. The very notion that all this mess, all these dead bodies, is just about crazy Mexican drug dealers is absurd or even contradictory (they are more like victims). For Moss, the issue is really: can he escape detection and so filter himself out of the web of connections? Moss sinks his own ship with an act of compassion, a similar act leads to his death; what he does not understand is that these are connections that do not

allow for the possibility of moral acts (like bringing a gunshot victim a drink of water). And Moss probably thought Vietnam was hell.

The narrative certainly bears out my hypothesis here about the mix between the legal and illegal economy. Such a mix is important because it blurs the boundaries to the point where we might not be able to tell the difference or it could blur the boundaries so far that “the law” or “what is legal” becomes a hoax. Ed Tom, in his litany of fears, knows –for sure –that lawlessness has existed forever. Certainly, there are enough “bad people” out there “who cannot be governed” but they are not all easily detected as criminal socio-paths. Chigurh’s work finally takes him to skyscrapers, all with the appearance of being above board offices. But this “blurring of the lines” is a crucial piece of the puzzle because a law that functions, at least to protect citizens, is the very basic maintenance of social sanity. In this narrative we are totally lost with respect to this bottom line feature of normative human reality as Chigurh and others lay waste to towns, stores, and people in broad daylight.

But then what explains the lawlessness? It seems I can use the lawlessness to give a hypothesis for the bloody mess out in the scrub, but then I am in the difficult circumstance of having to explain how this mixture of the legal and illegal came into being (and claiming it is caused by “bad people” is just circular). We need something drastic because the narrative is drastic and if it is real we then need something plausibly real. “Capitalism” and its residual forms (the inevitable desire to take control over wealth and power and the mechanisms for taking control and power), *which exist anywhere and everywhere in the world*, already contain this mix within their nature. Great “entrepreneurs” can create demands and not just fill them and this is exactly “the drug trade.” And the drug trade is going to interest any number of “legitimate” and “legal” companies and operations; even governments who wage war on drugs and drug dealers have been consistently implicated. We explain the large pieces of lawlessness as having emerged from the complete (and practically necessary) a-morality of all profit making ventures and systems. Chigurh first and foremost emerges out of this deep and broad possibility and reality of human social and cultural corruption where even those meant to defend the laws violate them (almost always for money). The extent of the mayhem, the amount of money, and the consistent supply and demand for drugs in the face of a “war on drugs” confirms this hypothesis. But “corruption” of this sort is very nearly a norm and Chigurh’s evil will never be captured in the slogan that “he is corrupt” or a “lawbreaker.” The fact is he does not care about the law, really has no

apparent antagonism toward it, and so certainly does not come across as “having a problem with authority.” He transcends this banality. In a very early scene we learn that Chigurh allows himself to be “brought in” by a deputy just because he wanted to demonstrate (at least to himself) that he could escape (the scene is quite brutal). He later calls this an act of hubris, but what is clear is that he did not “have it in” for the deputy, nor did he want the attention of the sheriffs as a “bad ass” or something similar. If anything, he crucially desires to be hidden from view (in all respects). The social corruption is the first and very broad condition of Chigurh’s existence but it only expresses an environmental condition: it does not express his essence. The social corruption explains the *gross irrelevance of the law as a crucial aspect of the environment*.

Corruption, as described in the above, does not seem to be enough in order to set down all of the environmental conditions for a Chigurh to emerge. I believe Ed Tom knows this in his very direct but also subtle way. Ed Tom comes to know things in the narrative by articulating those things to himself. At one point in the narrative, his own narrative, he says that all this horror starts with the loss of basic manners, when people stop saying “please,” “thank you,” “sir” and ma’am.” While this may seem corny or even idiotically nostalgic, it captures a fundamental point in how persons develop and sustain themselves. Basic recognition of the other person, for the sake of that recognition, and for the sake of the respect for that recognition, are the beginning of what I call “intersubjectivity” or the most basic recognition of our dependence on one another. Human language and conversation are the core of intersubjectivity as they very nearly define human beings and also create the possibility of human agency and identity. *The manner in which we speak to one another can either open possibilities for the recognition of intersubjectivity or it can erode them.* Chigurh’s utterances, his “conversation,” are never a recognition of the value of conversation and they are never meant as an opening to the other person. At the same time, his utterances are not “hostile” or “angry” which might betray the possibility of reconciliation or it might just type him as the psychopath. Chigurh does not appear to be “hiding anything” in his complete disinterest in what Ed Tom calls “manners.”

Now we have to face my ecological principles for the first time. I think we defeat the possibility of understanding Chigurh’s evil (insofar as will be able to describe it as evil) by taking a defensive position. Ed Tom sometimes begins to go there in places but he always goes back to the position that a history predicted this walking dread. To specifically face the principles in this case is to ask: what aspects of the environment, the

entire environment (however we want to specify that precisely) could generate-in an individual-a form of communication that *entirely closes the recognition of the value of any conversation so that he is entirely self-referential*? And then he has to be entirely self-referential in a strange way because self-reference as egoism is always in play with the recognition of others: this is how it is recognized by anyone as self-reference and this is one reason why Chigurh is opaque. One answer concerns the bloody mayhem at the beginning of the narrative; whatever else this is, it is clearly the complete breakdown of a “negotiation”. We all know the shopworn cliché that the community of criminals is an impossibility (the view seems to originate with Plato) but it may be possible that hastening the disintegration of the “criminal community” by a criminal, and on purpose, would feed into even the empirical impossibility of a criminal community. In this case, the criminal might become necessarily singular, isolated and from the complete denial of intersubjectivity. At the very least it is important to note that the narrative really starts with an episode of Chigurh’s brutality without apparent malice (malice opens up a relationship, as does the desire to inflict pain) and this episode is immediately followed by the mayhem in the scrub. From here on in, *one person, Anton Chigurh, is going to handle all negotiation*. The point is, of course, that “negotiation” has transitioned out of intersubjectivity as it relates to authentic human conversation (even if that conversation is threatening or malicious - which presupposes emotive connections and basic relations to others). Chigurh is what we should expect from out of the radically failed “negotiation”: an agent who can “succeed” at tasks that seem to involve human relations without the *burden* of anything like human relations.

Chigurh’s capacities are, however, still more distinct and subtle. He is not the “solipsistic” individual who believes, in some fashion, that he is the only person with an authentic mental life (a variation on a pathology). He is not some accelerated narcissist with a “grandiosity” complex: these forms are certainly not advances or evolutions of evil. In fact, they ultimately debilitate competent action. Chigurh demonstrates a recognition of the reality of others and a clear understanding of their thinking: this is how he consistently gains advantage. He seems to acquire these capacities or just have them by being “outside of everything.” He seems to have a place to stand that breaks any authentic relation to others, while at the same time knowing what they are doing and thinking. Such an epistemic position is a necessary condition for “control” which I will explain later in the essay.

Now, I believe, we should revisit the concept and existential reality of “corruption.” No doubt, corruption is a necessary element of any human society -given the nature and limitation of human beings -and it helps to sort out the specific and general grounds of right action: this is not due merely to “contrast” but also to dialectic. Insofar as a society handles and overcomes corruption it is decent or moral. Individuals become corrupt as they deny and reject *standards of intersubjectivity* (our overt dependence on each other articulated in words, actions, rules, memory and history- all of which spell out the human attempt at cooperation for well-being). Once the individual denies or rejects these standards he or she conceals that denial or rejection for some kind of self-referential gain. Corruption is then dependent on intersubjectivity as those who are corrupt or in the interesting process of “being corrupted” are always striving to conceal their rejection or denial of intersubjectivity. We should be naturally curious about whether or not there is something that is more generally worse than corruption, and the answer to that question will have to consist in some attempt to transcend corruption. Any grand scale corruption necessarily contains “control” and any grand scale control necessarily contains corruption. An ultimate control would then consist of agency that seeks and gains control over others (and say, more generally, “human reality”) without the corresponding self-seeking vacuum (gross “neediness”) that opens the doors to moral condemnation. Such a person is endeavoring to cancel human limitations by cancelling intersubjectivity. And we can describe the process from the other direction as well: by endeavoring to escape moral condemnation and so human limitations, the agent in question is closing in on an ultimate control. Of course, “ultimate control” is getting close to just cancelling the humanity of the agent in question, but the point is that such an endeavor has to fail.

Now to mention intersubjectivity and give it some bare bones is not enough. At the same time, this concept is a pivot for what follows and so we need to close in on it without having it consume the essay. Intersubjectivity starts with a dispositional recognition of human interdependence and so human individual limitations: we might just state this in Aristotle’s dictum that we are “social beings.” But we need to push much harder. Human identity, being an individual in any authentic sense, is a whole process that necessarily includes others and a thick web of normative relations (a social world). The underlying and essential reason for this claim is that meaning is the only thing that can create and hold together memory (individual and collective) and so identity through time and, as Wittgenstein has argued, meaning is necessarily communal.

Hence, the idea is that we cannot get human identity without meaning and we cannot get meaning apart from a communal, public process (that both creates and presupposes cooperation). *Much of human evil somehow refers back to a rejection of this idea and the reality of a public meaning.*

Unfortunately, I can't do the hard part: I can't offer a simple, direct, hypothesis regarding how our culture has rejected intersubjectivity in such a way as to create Chigurh. I can't do it anymore than anyone else can or could because how the stew mixes is not up to any of us to *finally* say. But if there is anything obvious about this culture it is the relentless emphasis on radical individualism or "atomistic individualism": the ultimate piece of human reality is the fully enclosed and autonomous individual. We can trace the DNA of this idea back to some of the greatest efforts of the western intellectual tradition. For instance, and only for instance, Kant tried to free human beings from the crushing weight of religious and political authority with the idea of the human being as fully autonomous and self-regulating moral agent. This bit of supernaturalism attaches to Kant's division of worlds or aspects of the world into "noumenal" and "phenomenal," and this is an endeavor to reach beyond our clear limits. Of course, because we are human beings, and because we always in some ways see beneath the shabby myths (as they pass from dignified philosophical ideals into things like "the economy"), evil emerges as we endeavor to protect these myths. Chigurh could very well be the human being who transcends the myths rather than hiding behind them: he is, in other words, a new form of consciousness.

III: Chigurh in Detail

Carson Wells, another "hitman" with a plausibly murky background (dark sides of the military) makes two comments that set every agenda for comprehending Chigurh. First, he mentions, right before Chigurh shoots him in the face, that he - [Chigurh] - thinks he is "outside of everything". (177) Secondly, he [Wells] is asked by his employer (who remains nameless) what he knows about Chigurh and his answer is, a "psychopath" but then he also says to Moss "you could even say he has principles." (153) Both of these dark sayings address Chigurh's radical disconnectedness and his entire rejection of intersubjectivity.

That Chigurh thinks he is "outside of everything" is hardly subtle even if Wells does not really understand what he is saying. But we do not know the depth of this statement. It can easily be lost as a slogan for

some of the above ideas. Chigurh must finally be given motives, desires, and some actual goals or he *will fail all imaginative limits and become something like a pure abstraction: in other words, something profoundly unreal and uninteresting*. His goal is success at his task, his principles consistently aid in that success, and the task and the success are finally a total and complete control (he says to his “boss”: “I’m in charge of who is coming and who is not.” (251). A radical disconnectedness in the form of a rejection of intersubjectivity is analytic to control. To stand outside of anything is a necessary condition for the ability to completely control it. Human beings are best capable of controlling mechanical items: we stand outside of them while comprehending them. We are most able at controlling other people as we understand them (including “values”) but have no interest *in them* (apart from what they can get us). All this makes sense as an explanatory hypothesis insofar as it always becomes increasingly more difficult to separate out the “profit making motive” from “control” (of various people and processes) as profit making becomes –seemingly - an end in itself. Marx’s point about the “means of production” becomes starkly psychological. Chigurh has absolutely no interest in money - part of his principles and part of what makes him stand apart - but then he can use and manipulate that need in others for control over them. In this sense he is “a man of principle.” Wells learns this the hard way (an understatement) as he tries to bribe Chigurh with a chunk of change right before Chigurh shoots him in the face. The criminal we all know and love probably would have taken Wells’ money and then shot him in the face, all the while lying about what he is doing and intending: not Chigurh.

Chigurh, in his deep disconnection to intersubjectivity, *gives himself principles*. This scenario is Hegel’s nightmare criticism of the Kantian notion that all human beings give the moral law to themselves from the faculty of practical reason. What if, however, there is no such independent faculty, no objective dictates of conscience to bring to bear? If this is the case, then acting on principle, or even “having integrity” could easily be starkly evil. Hegel, of course, sees morality as a cultural and anthropological process; his moral psychology is essentially developmental and communal. Chigurh is the Kantian without the moral law grounding any principles. But his principles, if they are really principles, cannot be “his alone” or else even he would not understand them; he has to be able to at least explain them to other people and, if he cared to, he could. These principles quickly and smoothly tie up any loose ends, eradicate connections, and place him entirely in control. His principles always serve the telos of control. Such an integrity organizes

the ecology, gives it a procedural content, makes the agent competent, all of which are greatly admired in our *culture of success*.

Kant's own version of "radical evil" - a philosophically and culturally influential and powerful view of evil - drops out of the picture here as irrelevant. On Kant's view (which has been popularized) evil consists in knowing what is right and neglecting our duty to do what is right in favor of selfish motives. This view of evil has been discussed and analyzed in many current texts. It drops out of the picture here as irrelevant because Chigurh does not seem to recognize anything resembling a "moral law" and because he is not selfish in any standard sort of way. One might also say, with complete certainty, that Chigurh does not know any internal struggle with himself over duty. On Kant's view of things, Chigurh is not an agent at all; he would be outside of morality, and so outside of moral success and failure, and so outside the realm of intersubjectivity. And this is, of course, the point. To be "outside of everything" is also to be outside the reach of any standard type moral claim and, more importantly, outside of the internal and external struggles with ourselves and other people that make any broader spiritual qualities possible (joy, longing, redemption, love, friendship).

To follow through on the Kantian line concerning "radical evil" is to consider Chigurh as radically diminished as a "moral agent." This is indeed the case, but the issue becomes difficult at this point for the very simple reason that we might not want to assume anything about what sort of world we actually inhabit: in other words, assuming the cultural norm as moral agency in the Kantian sense is, perhaps, a gross mistake. There is already enough of "a-morality" within the culture to think, reasonably, that thoroughly "a-moral" human beings are an alternative "norm." A final response to the Kantian is that Chigurh is acting out a "success ethic" buried deep in American consciousness; he is reliable and incredibly efficient and ingenious on the job, and that is all he is ever doing: the job (he says to "his boss": "I'd say the purpose of my visit is simply to establish my bonafides. As someone who is an expert in a difficult field. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest. Something like that." (252)) Last, but certainly not least, he aims to be at the very top of the job and alone at the top ("I have no enemies. I don't permit such a thing" 253). I would therefore suggest alternatives to the Kantian picture from the ground up: to be diminished in moral agency might just be a human norm-within limits and a diversity of types-and so we lose the world that Kant presupposed for anything like his "radical evil". From this point of view, "radical evil" loses the basis of

its existence.

From a similar direction comes the claim - already mentioned in passing - that Chigurh is a “psychopath.” We can say a lot about this so we better limit ourselves to what seems core to the issue. The amount of nonsense in popular culture about psychopathology is very nearly enough to strip our empirical and conceptual gears before we even start. If we consult empirical and clinical psychology we do see that Chigurh certainly has no “conscience” as he shoots people in the face and this is consistent with a psychopathology. But once again, we have to assume the norm as “having a conscience” and I am not sure we can do this within McCarthy’s ecology. It might be more mentally deranged to have a conscience in the world Chigurh travels and works within: at the very least, “having a conscience” would be directly self-defeating in any number of ways. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Chigurh does not simply self-enclose like the psychopath who follows rules only if they are consistent with his wants and desires. Oddly, Chigurh seems capable of completely avoiding anything like self-gratification. He will, in fact, follow his rules whatever the apparent consequences (although his rules are designed for maximum efficiency). And finally, as a way of addressing the popularized version of the psychopath, Chigurh seems to take absolutely no enjoyment from performing “evil acts” for their own sake. I believe, as he commits these acts, he is already in the midst of seeing beyond them to the next procedural step in his plan. But again consider the ecology we are *in fact* -dealing with: what decisions and how many decisions are made in our culture, or perhaps any truly human world, from a purely “a moral” standpoint? I mean, in other words, human beings act with no tug of “conscience” or even interest in “moral issues” in the face of the business that must be handled. I suggest that this culture is saturated with the basic form of Chigurh’s a-morality. Kant’s “moral law within” simply does not exist and the corresponding psychology is empty of any struggle with moral duty. Of course, we then must also cancel out all the rest of the baggage: standard forms of praise and blame, freedom of the will (to choose “good” over “evil” and so forth). This is what Ed Tom sees coming down the pike.

This “a-morality” comes to the forefront before Chigurh kills Carson Wells. Chigurh expresses, without any doubt, a sort of professional disdain for Wells and, at the same time, his horribly violent act is committed without even an appearance of malice. (“It’s not good Carson. You need to compose yourself. If you don’t respect me what must you think of yourself? Look at where you are.” (177)) Wells, for his part,

may very well be kidding himself in believing that Chigurh is crazy; they are, after all, competitors of sorts, and Wells knows the stakes (through plenty of experience). McCarthy also directly states that there is plenty of a-morality in Wells' own sordid and violent past. In fact, one might say from this perspective that Wells is pathetic in hoping for a successful bribe: money is not "the job" and as Wells thinks it is, he still believes in and lives within a moral world. In other words, he makes use of "temptation" and "greed" within his bribe. But all that comes back is an echo because Chigurh has moved beyond that world, out into a sheer a-morality (Chigurh to Wells: "You think I'm like you. That it's just greed. But I'm not like you." (177)) Wells appeals back to the moral world only because his life is at stake otherwise he too would continue to function in a more or less "a-moral" way. If anyone knows this it would be Wells. Years of experience in the military during Vietnam must end in a healthy dose of a-morality or *else nothing would ever get done*. (He saw "the faces of men as they died on their knees in front of him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country." (178))

Schopenhauer, when he came face to face with the Kantian picture of radical evil, discovered and invented another source of evil: "inner torment". Inner torment is not captured in the struggle with "moral duty" but in the innate madness of our own ceaseless desire and willing. Chigurh, in moving into an a-morality, has an adjusted psychology that seems also entirely resilient to Schopenhauer's specific form of inner torment and then any other form of inner torment. "He knows exactly what he wants" but he does not indulge desire enough to be tormented. This, one could say, is a miracle of human evolution, but given the ecology one could also say that it bottoms out in necessity. Chigurh has no "divided self" which seems to be a constant element of the human condition: we both desire something and reject it at the same time. None of this haunts Chigurh. As long as any person "has no business" with him, Chigurh has no working desire to harm or inflict pain from some sort of psychic disturbance (built in or otherwise). Although, we have to examine the "coin-flipping" scene in some detail before we can say for sure that this is the case.

Peter Dews in a recent and philosophically rich book on the problem of evil argues that we can have no "theory of evil" unless we also have responsibility and ownership for that evil. What he is really trying to say is that bad acts without someone being responsible for those acts are not, properly speaking, evil (intent is analytic to evil). If what I have argued in the above is even partly true then we have a new set of problems. If

Chigurh is “missing a morality chip,” if he has literally evolved into a complete “a- morality” he can hardly be held “morally responsible” for his acts: this would be a flat out contradiction. Of course, we could argue that he should feel a moral pull but this is complicated by his environment or what I have been calling his ecology. Morality - and a base level intersubjectivity - become a hindrance for efficient functioning within this environment. But, and this is the crucial piece of it, I see no adequate reason for concluding that Chigurh is then not evil. What has to happen is that we have to condemn the world and the entire ecology, instead of some individual. “Horribly violent acts” done by human beings against other human beings that are not even recognized as “evil” by the agent seem to me to be better candidates for evil than whatever remains tied to responsibility. We don’t own the evil in one sense (namely, Chigurh is missing the morality chip) but we are perhaps deeply implicated in the formation of an a-moral world that created Chigurh. What greater nightmare than facing an evil (a-moral) *world or ecology rather than evil individuals?*

IV: Friendo: More Detail

This scene is not only horrifying it seems nearly beyond belief. It also raises issues we have not yet seen.

To begin with, Chigurh reveals, as he does with Carson Wells, some sense of his inner life. He comments, as he considers the owner, “cracker” (54) and this immediately raises the idea of disdain; he also comments - in a disturbing and inconceivably threatening way - that the man behind the counter “married into” (55) the store (gas station). In other words, he did not attain it on his own. Chigurh’s clear disdain for this state of affairs echoes what I have already said concerning his “success ethic.” Chigurh literally peels away the layers of idiocy from the man by simply denying any room for manners or small talk. He is not just refusing to cut the store owner any slack, he is bearing down on the nature of his existence and, as he does, the man becomes increasingly more uncertain about himself and increasingly more certain that Chigurh is inherently dangerous. His linguistic engagement with the man is an “interrogation” without any context for an interrogation: it ends as ontological condemnation of the man’s existence.

It may very well be the case that Chigurh’s radical a-morality threatens in its mere presence. This man must be wondering, thinking, as he stumbles

for any kind of response to the totally certain Chigurh (regarding the “value” of the man’s existence): “what the hell is this?” A drunken man with a gun is certainly less menacing and would entirely lack Chigurh’s other worldly and ominous stare (that we can only imagine). It is as if some new and strange version of the grim reaper just walked into the store. But Ed Tom is right, and we need to remember this, “manners” and even “small talk” are recognitions of intersubjectivity: the source of Chigurh’s terrifying presence is that he signals, immediately, the end of that recognition. He is not exactly rude, belligerent, or any other way that at the same time depends on intersubjectivity. He literally does not know what manners are, what small talk would really be (for him) and so it amounts to sheer stupidity or incoherence from *his point of view*. At the same time, Chigurh has remarkable insights into “other minds”; he is no solipsist, narcissist, or as I already argued “lunatic.” In this context, Chigurh is able to bury the onset of manners under glaring and penetrating a-morality. In what sense is this man behind the counter useful, industrious, and competent, seem to matter to Chigurh but not in any moral sense. He is once again “standing outside of everything.”

Now, one might claim, with some plausibility I suppose, that Chigurh is “tormenting” the man. But there does not seem to be any enjoyment in this for Chigurh that might explain the purpose of the torment; instead, the man seems to dissolve into a state of terror from Chigurh’s very simple and direct fact finding. What makes him so menacing is a sense that there is no “tolerance” of any sort underneath the fact finding that might be found in someone who is ordinarily rude: at some point the rudeness just goes away, literally drives away. But Chigurh is more like a state of affairs, more like a whole ecology of a distinct sort, settling on the man’s existence and weighing it in relation to the nature of that ecology. The conclusion is not a good one for the man behind the counter.

The coin-flip has to reveal a lack of malice. Disdain, followed by malice, with an already proven homicidal tendency just spells a bullet into the face and not some strange ritual. What we know is that Chigurh will not challenge the coin flip, he won’t shoot the man if “he wins” and, of course, this is what happens: at which point, Chigurh does not indicate the slightest bit of disappointment. Given what I have said about Chigurh’s endeavor for control, this ritual seems contradictory: it invites chance and a lack of control. The answer to this riddle is in the nature of control. First, and foremost, Chigurh has entirely disintegrated the man’s sense of himself just by being Chigurh; standing outside of the man’s world in this way - this essentially a-moral, but success oriented way -

is enough to ground a complete control of the situation. Imagine then being able to *believe oneself to be an agent of fate, which is what Chigurh is up to*. An agent of fate now flips the coin and in that act - in pressing that act from the moment he walked into the store - Chigurh has already entirely controlled the man. Allowing the coin toss to determine the outcome is, of course, a voluntary act even as Chigurh binds himself to the outcome. In other words, it is *Chigurh who is allowing the contingency to occur, he is the one allowing for chance; this is the transcendence of what we would ordinarily consider to be human control, which is the attempt - however haphazard - to manage chance and contingency*.

And it gets better. There is an astonishing, close to inconceivable “self-control” exhibited here by Chigurh: like a great Kantian he has “bound himself” to the rule of the coin toss. He has bound himself to a sheer contingency. Whether or not he “wants” to kill the man is not really the point; it is more important that he very easily could kill the man as long as the coin toss *goes the other way*. Not knowing “what he wants” (in some emotive way) is part of how Chigurh constantly keeps others off guard and uncertain of themselves; his emotive opacity shakes others into revealing and then disintegrating into their own emotions (and uncertainties). This is certainly what happens to Carson Wells right before he dies and it is certainly what is happening to the man behind the counter.

Consider also what happens if Chigurh changes the form of the procedure: imagine, in other words, him asking a question and if the man answers “the right way” he lives and if he answers “the wrong way” he dies. In this case Chigurh would be imposing his agency on the result whereas the coin toss removes his agency from the result and then transforms it into sheer necessity (as the result does not “depend” on anyone and the coin will be heads or tails according to a causal determinism). The process of “externalizing” the event - which more closely resembles the idiotic notion of “fate” - is symmetrical to the way Chigurh conflates himself with “the job.” He becomes, more or less (it does not matter so much because he is on categorical boundaries) a tool or sort of radically efficient machine for end results that eliminate the standard “wants and needs” of the criminal. But the main point here is that in making use of the coin toss, Chigurh *“reinforces necessity” by taking human agency out of the picture*. Of course, the irony being that control is his ultimate purpose and any sort of full interpretation of the “friendo” scene has to acknowledge the manner in which Chigurh *forces the circumstance on the man and also reduces the man to a radical state of*

ontological dread. Literally, the man only knows that something wicked has entered his store and that it has cut down to the roots of his being in a matter of minutes. Chigurh does this by approaching the state of “being outside of everything.” I have analyzed or explained “standing outside of everything” as “cutting all ties with intersubjectivity” but it is also consistent with achieving a God-like status: on any religious view such an attempt is a radical evil. But the other possibility is - in my view - more interesting; the God-like point of view is *inherently wicked because there is no reality standing over and above us*. The reality that we have to truly worry about is the one that we live within and the one that constantly presents us with puzzles and contingencies: the natural world. In suggesting an entity that could cut ties with other things without any consequence to itself (without altering its nature) is itself wicked or evil in that it grossly distorts the nature of human existence.

What happens next is that the scene ends. We should, however, imagine what this scene actually depends on or what makes it possible. For this we only have the threads of an argument and the ineffable combination of words and events (the sheer limits of understanding). I think for Chigurh to make this “impression” and to create the doom described in the above, he must first be a stranger. We should note carefully that Chigurh does not want anyone to know what he looks like: this counts as a loose end on the surface of things. Being faceless serves an unsettling purpose (Wells does know what he looks like and he has to die just for this fact). What exists outside of everything has no appearance. Now, what McCarthy has really done here is quite spooky. He has created a character that we cannot imagine as having a history. Importantly, McCarthy gives us absolutely no background information on Chigurh, while he does for everyone else in the narrative. Again, this is a trump card on human existence and consciousness for Chigurh. And this is precisely what the “friend - scene” depends on. If the man behind the counter even “types him” Chigurh loses the other-worldly, outside of everything status that courts doom at every turn for anyone in his presence. But not having a history is also not to have a memory and here we come face to face with a truly remarkable question: what, precisely, can Chigurh “remember” and how does he remember it?

Why this question about memory? Well, first and foremost, it is demanded by the apparent or weird sense that Chigurh has no history, which is further grounded in the apparent fact that he cannot be “typed” (he stands outside of everything). Ultimately this is all illusion but it is an interesting human project and an interesting attempt as the ecology keeps

going in a certain direction (radical individualism, corruption, as detailed in the first section). *Chigurh cannot remember what he does not have and if he has no history then he cannot remember it.* Perhaps this would make for the perfect tool for the achievement of certain ends. As we get further into this, however, I think we can see that intersubjectivity lays the ground for having a history because it analytically contains the source of meaning and value. If I can't generate a meaning, I can't generate a value of any sort, but then I can't remember anything (in a human way) because I can't tell what is "worth remembering." What makes Chigurh so interesting as a possibility is that he does not simply cancel himself out as an entity. He can still remember what matters for his final end—control—and this will sheer away anything that is irrelevant to that final end. I mean, what difference would it make if Chigurh never remembered anything about the man behind the counter? If this man evaporated from his consciousness entirely, Chigurh would still have the form of control at his disposal. He does not need to recall the specific event; he only needs the technique. He can reduce consciousness to procedure. Do tigers, for instance, recall specific prey? Or do they just know how to hunt? Certainly memories accumulate for knowledge within animals, this is assured to us in empirical study and research. But it is the form of memory that matters here. For the tiger one antelope is just the same as any other (with the exception of the one with the limp) because they have no reason to individuate in any sense distinct from the activity of hunting and killing. And it may be that Chigurh has no reason to individuate in any sense distinct from the activity of controlling and succeeding at his job (which conflate). His memory, in other words, is built from a-morality. What he can't remember is the reality of relations beyond their procedural content and this limit could actually be a strong survival mechanism given certain ends.

On the other hand, to be outside of intersubjectivity also opens up the possibility of a total clarity. The emotive life, broadly speaking, necessarily depends on intersubjectivity. Hence, at the very least, Chigurh is emotively empty. His "disdain" for the man behind the counter is then a form of "pure judgment" from his principles and his disgust with Carson Wells is equally pure: a success ethic without any emotive mess to slow it down. Such a way of being in the world, insofar as it is possible, might allow for a transparently clear and detailed memory of a series of events as they are related *only to the efficiency of the procedure and the end result.* It is our emotive connection to others that consistently allows for the interpretation and reinterpretation of "memories" and so events and persons.

In the above I have compared Chigurh with a God - like point of view and, at the same time, an animal point of view. Aristotle once asked: what can live in complete solitude? And he answered, "either a beast or a God." Chigurh does live in complete solitude. Just as we cannot really imagine him as "having a history" neither can we imagine him with companions of any sort. The a-historical being precludes, in its very nature, anything even like a "friend" (hence Chigurh does not use the term "friend" but "friendo"). The notion of "friend" or even "companion" requires elements of "a history together" and this conflates with a "relationship." Our ecological points now come back in a haunting way. Perhaps the ecology has opened up space for the purely a-historical consciousness because "corruption" itself borders on a-historical terrain. Corruption, as I described it, is most generally the rejection of intersubjectivity, the rejection of relations, and this - as we see in the above -conflates with an a-historical consciousness. To truly and totally "reject" relations does presuppose an agency to do so and this then presupposes already existing relations. This sort of "rejection" is revolt. Chigurh may have gone beyond this point, this criminal point of corruption, to an actual form of consciousness - heavy with intelligence - that is truly a-historical and so will not accommodate relations. Clearly, this form of consciousness is inconceivably efficient because it does not "reject morality" but rather precludes the conditions for morality. So Chigurh has the mental power to "individuate" between persons but not for any moral purposes. He is not bothered by "what should I do?" beyond the procedural aspects of this question. He would not worry about the "meaning of his relations to others" beyond how they mattered for the job.

V: One More Coin Toss

Moss, as I briefly discussed earlier in the essay, is prone to errors just because he has a strong moral sense: he is the least capable of understanding Chigurh. He thinks he is in a competition with Chigurh, a "who is the toughest man standing" competition, and this assumes that Chigurh actually *cares* about *this kind of competition*. The best way to reap the benefits of a competition, whatever it might be, is to stand outside of it and manipulate it. It suits Chigurh's purposes for Moss to want the showdown because Chigurh has nothing invested in such an event; he simply will not allow it to happen. To invest in this competition is a mistake waiting to happen as contingencies surround and infect human relations of any sort and the world is itself a dangerous place for our plans

and goals.

Moss exposes his identity to Chigurh by giving into his compassionate conscience; one of the wounded Mexicans out in the scrub wanted some water but Moss had no water at the time. Moss then reveals his humanity by very probably talking internally to himself about the man with no water, suffering in the heat with a nasty wound; even though he is very probably dead, Moss helps him anyway: intersubjectivity here speaks to Moss in a physical and moral universality. Underneath the tough guy is something like a golden rule, which is nothing more than a transparent recognition of intersubjectivity.

Moss' second fatal mistake is of the same family, as one might expect. On his way down the interstate, fleeing Chigurh and drug gangs, he picks up a hitchhiking teenage girl. He befriends her in multiple ways (all with good intentions), gives her advice, discusses her future, and all for the sake of the acts themselves, the intrinsic value of human relations. He then decides to drink a few beers with her: an act that is paradigmatic of human relations. At this point he and the girl are shot dead by the drug gangs. For Chigurh, this development is as it should be. Moss was going to die as he resisted Chigurh's procedural template for reality. There is no "showdown" between the two men because the clash of wills or the importance of defending a civil society from the criminal deviant *are irrelevant from the start*. Chigurh is now the future ecology and not some deviant.

The last scenes involving Chigurh contain all my explanatory hypotheses that hinge on the idea of his being "outside of everything." Moss's wife, Carla Jean, has the profoundly dreadful experience of being caught up in Chigurh's "principles." At one point earlier in the narrative, Chigurh gives Moss the option of bringing the money "to his feet" and thus saving his wife. Moss's own death is already falling under necessity (he is gone way too far into the business). Moss, however, will never do this and so Chigurh must follow his "principles": he is making all this up, while at the same time trying to convince others of its necessity.

But he does not simply kill Carla Jean. Once more, there is a "discussion" and Chigurh actually compromises his principles to *allow for a coin flip*. Just prior to this scene Chigurh had gone to visit the nameless boss where he says "I have no enemies, I don't permit such a thing." (He has clearly impressed the boss, perhaps to the point where the boss is both afraid of and uncertain about what he is dealing with.) One might say

again that “being outside of everything” is the platform for control and Chigurh now seems on the verge of simply conflating himself and his will to reality. He will not simply handle the task but whatever contingencies that arise from the completion of the task (such as an enemy). This sense of self, insofar as it is any “sense of self,” transcends the pettiness inherent to selfishness.

A person who could achieve this level of self-control and then control of others (these two conflate as well) while who at the same time lacks the pettiness of selfishness is exactly the man business needs. The worry for the boss is, naturally enough, that Chigurh’s fact finding in the pursuit of perfection at the task will lead back to his (the boss’s) own incompetence (“I think what you need to consider, Chigurh said, is how you lost the money in the first place. Who you listened to and what happened when you did.”(252)) What we really need now is corruption and lawlessness—the rejection of intersubjectivity - without the endless mess. Chigurh, with his apparently all encompassing abilities to complete these tasks (according to his principles, a truly “independent operator”) provides the final edge to corruption: it won’t have to conceal itself because Chigurh has already concealed it (from the boss’s point of view). Or, even better, Chigurh could convince all of us that what we call corruption is just a series of necessities. In other words, *his task is to wipe out the consciousness of intersubjectivity.*

And then Chigurh, in his “discussion” with Carla Jean, becomes a metaphysical salesman; even as he is deadly serious (convinced of his product), from a certain distance - without the dread - his sayings and slogans are idiotic. (It would not take much for other characters to generate a cascade of mockery, this is how close he is to the edges of reality). When Chigurh allows for a coin flip and Carla Jean loses, she says “you make it like it was the coin, but you’re the one.”(258) Chigurh then goes back to his nonsense, “I got here the same way the coin did” and some other standard and pathetic lines of reasoning for something like “fatalism.”(258) Finally, he does what he did with “friendo”: he removes his own agency, via the coin flip reasoning and the shabby fatalism (for someone without the brutal menace “everything happens for a reason” would be seen as stupid or ridiculous). What is happening here is what we should have seen all along: the concealment of radical corruption as it is taken up into the nature of things. The point is never to flinch, never to conflate necessity with an excuse or a justification.

If we let Chigurh spin his tale of control and necessity on Carla Jean

- as readers and participants in human reality - we become a-moral ourselves. She is precisely the innocent victim in all the right ways for this corruption to work itself out into an open space. Poor, essentially good-hearted (instinctively moral), now alone, widowed and having just buried her mother, Chigurh shoots her from “necessity!?” Carla Jean has witnessed nothing but in a vague and profound way she has always been involved. The burden of Chigurh (for all of us) ends up resting on her. Symmetrically, the burden of all corruption comes to rest on those without any power and control. Here is where the corruption finally ends this causal strand in its ongoing history: *the death of a person who never really knew what was happening as everything led to her death*. Such a circumstance should not elicit pity but virulent anger for the simple and clear reason that all this was anything but “necessary.” A confusion between *the predictable results of corruption (within obvious limits) and metaphysical necessity is hardly worth discussion*. But Chigurh sells it and he does so from the standpoint of control that is really gained through menace and force.

And so Carson Wells is right, Chigurh is not “outside of everything” because he is not “outside of death” (and then everything else just follows). As his last piece in the narrative perfectly illuminates: he is not outside the most obvious and subtle of all contingencies. It is not “morality” that catches up with Chigurh but the world, and it is the world that takes us back to the very most basic levels of intersubjectivity: human need. Chigurh’s car is T-boned by a truck a few minutes after his “act of necessity” and what could possibly explain the meaning of these series of events? The only covering hypothesis is the one I just discussed. Chigurh is ultimately subject to the most brute and obvious contingencies: everything that comes from the natural world and our own, always underestimated, limits. The full awareness of our strict physical limits is already enough to create the threads of intersubjectivity. After this nasty crash Chigurh is helped by two boys who don’t want his money. I’m sure McCarthy was aware of the cliché he manages to give life: one kid gives Chigurh “the shirt off his back.” He needed the shirt to deal with the compound fracture of his arm, which is just another example of our profound limits in dealing with the world. Our normative evolution only takes place as the limits and needs are recognized, assimilated, and the bonds of intersubjectivity established (as is the case with any biological organism).

And yet a bold and forever fascinating individualism works to conceal the contingencies of our actual existence. Chigurh can evolve *from the*

capacity of consciousness to avoid reality. Corruption is then written into the nature of human agency as a routine and necessary part of reality. But this is more than lying to ourselves because the lie works itself out in the struggle over money, power, and finally control. Even if Chigurh contains his own self-destruction in his belief that he stands outside of everything, there is no prima-facie reason for thinking that human beings will ultimately face up to this delusional state. Instead we may see the shiny allure of the power and control and thereby hasten the decline of (any) culture.

Finally then, evil is the human endeavor to conceal corruption and write it into the nature of agency and reality. This view of evil is strangely related to a familiar religious and philosophical view that human beings are, in fact, “sinners” or are made from “crooked timber.” Kant’s crooked timber includes, I’m afraid, the ability to conceal the crookedness from ourselves, to accept corruption as necessary, and then just to cancel out corruption. Evil is business as usual.

Sources

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Chrétien on the Call that Wounds

Bruce Ellis Benson

Only at the very end of Jean-Louis Chrétien's remarkable essay on prayer do we discover why he thinks of prayer as "wounded":

Why call it "wounded word"? It always has its origin in the wound of joy or distress, it is always a tearing that brings it about that the lips open. And it does so as it is still and otherwise wounded. Wounded by this hearing and this call that have always already preceded it, and that unveil it to itself, in a truth always in suffering, always agonic, struggling like Jacob all night in the dust to wrest God's blessing from him.¹

It is striking to think of prayer in terms of "wounding." After all, prayer is so often depicted as a moment of peace and tranquility—we even sing (at least in many Protestant traditions) of the "Sweet Hour of Prayer." In the words of that treachy hymn, prayer is depicted as act in which consolation is found and, "I view my home and take my flight." On this model, prayer is anything but agonic in nature.

Yet Chrétien would have us think otherwise. Perhaps there is consolation, *too*, but that comes only in the midst—or perhaps at the end—of an agonic struggle. Is Chrétien right that prayer is "always agonic"? How we answer that question will have much to do with what we *mean* by the term "agonic." Much more striking, still, is the way in which this nature of wounding is so central to Chrétien's thought. One could argue, of course, wounding is the central metaphor of the essay on prayer and it again comes to the forefront in his text *Hand to Hand*. To be sure, Chrétien himself claims this wounding and its effect "are the locus of meditations at the heart of *Corps à corps*."² But it is likewise to be found—even if not nearly as clearly or forcefully as in *Hand to Hand*—in his text *The Call and the Response*.³ Indeed, one might argue something like this structure of "wounding" is at the heart not just of Chrétien's own "theological turn" but also of the theological turn in phenomenology in general.⁴

In this paper, though, I limit myself to considering the wound in *The Call*

and the Response, “The Wounded Word,” and *Hand to Hand*. Although the most obvious locus of the wound is in the encounter with the divine, it is clear Chrétien thinks all of our encounters with any others are wounding ones. We must consider exactly what kinds of “wounds” these are, as well as whether speaking of prayer and encounters with the other as “wounding” is the right language to use. In what follows, I trace the notion of the wound in terms of (1) the call that comes to us before we are even aware of it, (2) the agonistic nature of the call and the response, and (3) the surprising way in which the English verb “to bless” ends up being related to the French term “*blesser*” (to wound). Although Chrétien does not simply *bless* “blesser,” he patiently considers how they are so often entangled. Since he constantly uses the metaphor of struggle, it should not be surprising any engagement with his thought means one struggles alongside of him, with him, and with his thought. The end result is *not* that all becomes clear. If anything, Chrétien’s gift may well be that he has a brilliant ability to complexify what might be viewed in much simpler terms and also the sheer unwillingness to settle for those simpler terms or anything like a quick or neat resolution. In that respect, Chrétien’s thought is much like the Socratic dialogues which so often result in no *conclusion* but simply end. The result is a struggle with an issue without feeling the need to reach a point of definite resolution.

Always Already

Central to Martin Heidegger’s early phenomenology is that *Dasein* always finds itself *already* at home in the world, in the midst of language, and with tools ready to hand. The phrase “*immer schon*” (always already) is like a leitmotif in *Being and Time*, and it plays a similar role in Chrétien. After citing Heidegger’s claim that we are able to speak only because we have “always already [*toujours déjà*], listened to speech,”⁵ Chrétien goes on to say: “We are entangled in speech as soon as we exist, before we have ever uttered a word, and in this sense, we have always already listened and obeyed.”⁶ Such is true of speech, but it is likewise true of the call (*l’appel*) in general, which is closely connected to speech itself: “We speak only for having been called, called by what there is to say, and yet we learn and hear what there is to say only in speech itself.”⁷

Whence comes this call? One could say it begins the moment “God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3). God speaks, and suddenly light comes into existence. The response, then, is the very appearance of the light itself. And these calls into existence continue throughout the

creation narrative, in which the phrase “let there be” echoes over and over again. Yet are these truly the first calls? Might there not be ones that preceded even them? The clue that raises at least the possibility comes in the portion of the narrative in which humankind is brought into being. In a dramatic departure from the previous refrain of “let there be” we find a “let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26, italics added). Whether the use of “us” and “our” is itself truly an indication of the Trinity is less important than the doctrine itself. For, if God is not one but three, there is reason to think some sort of “call”—however it might be conceived—and “response” goes back and forth between these three persons. Moreover, if God is eternal, it makes little sense to speak of a “first” call. The relationship of the persons of the trinity has been eloquently described by the fourth-century Eastern fathers Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great in terms of *perichôresis* (pericw^lrhsis, Latin *circum-incedere*), from which we get “circumincession,” which means “to move around in.” *Perichôresis* is the divine dance of the persons of the trinity in which they move around, with, and in each other. But surely *perichôresis* could likewise be conceptualized in terms of a call and response, not a divine dance but a divine discourse of ceaseless calls and responses reverberating and interpenetrating each other. And, should we read the “let us” as simply God speaking of the celestial hierarchy (a common enough reading of this passage, even among Christians), we also find evidence of calls that precede that of the calls of creation. John speaks of the “four living creatures” in the heavenly realm who sing “day and night without ceasing”: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). This is truly a continual call: a call that continues throughout eternity. Moreover, John is echoing something already found in the Hebrew Bible: in responding to Job, God says “that the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). John does not tell us exactly what the “response” of God is to these calls. Perhaps it is already God’s *existence* that is the response, let alone all the things he says. Of course, there has been a call prior to those of the heavenly beings. As their creator, God had already called them into existence.

In either case, by the time the call reaches us, it is never the first call. Yet that feature of not being first also implies every call that comes forth is a composite of all the calls and responses that went before. Chrétien maintains “every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice.”⁸ It is not coincidental—nor due to a stylistic feature so common in French writing—that Chrétien begins

many sentences with the pronoun “we.” For both the call and the response are composed of multiple voices. Chrétien opens *The Call and the Response* with a quotation from Joseph Joubert: “In order for a voice to be beautiful, it must have in it many voices” (CR 1). When we speak, it is never simply “I” who speaks. Rudolf Bernet puts this quite beautifully when he writes: “Only somebody who must hold a lecture discovers that he or she is continually paraphrasing other authors and speaks as well in the name of colleagues and friends.”⁹ Having had Bernet as my doctoral advisor (or, to use the Flemish term, “*promotor*,” the meaning of which is self-explanatory), I have often found myself speaking in his name and paraphrasing from him.

Yet is not this always the case? Perhaps it is not “only somebody who must hold a lecture,” but all of us who reflect even a little on the nature of discourse discover we are constantly speaking by repeating, restating, and paraphrasing. All of language is a kind of improvisation upon that which has been said and re-said. We are always already caught up in the improvisatory movement that makes language possible. To speak is to be part of an ongoing conversation and also to be part of an ever-evolving hybridity of both speech and self (Chrétien speaks of an “altered voice,” CR 44). It is here questions of identity and ownership not merely arise but are stretched to their limits. What exactly of what I say is “mine”? How many times do I have to repeat something said by someone else before it becomes mine in some sense? And how long can I hold on to something as “mine” when it is being said in the mouths of others? We can hardly adjudicate such issues here, though they raise complex questions not just regarding intellectual property (which might be worked out in court) but ontological issues (for which there is neither court nor court of appeal). The “said” may have an identity and perhaps even an ownership, but it is hardly simple or fixed. As someone who speaks with many voices, *I* am not simply my own voice but a polyphony of voices. Thus, the *I* for Chrétien is no “self-contained” or “self-constituted” *I*; Instead, it is composed of multiple voices. But, if the *I* has the polyphonic character, it has always already been *wounded*. “Each new encounter shatters us and reconfigures us,” says Chrétien, citing Hugo von Hofmannsthal.¹⁰ There is no way of receiving the call, of being open to the other, without not merely the possibility but always the probability we will be wounded—that is, changed or reoriented or perhaps rebuked. But one thing is certain: if we truly hear the call, we will not be the same as before we heard it. We will return to the way in which the *I* is wounded by the call in the following section, but it is important to note early on the call always has this quality.

Perhaps polyphony, though, is not quite the right word—or perhaps it is not *enough*. True, it brings out the nature of multiple voices, yet it also at least implies a kind of “blending” in which those voices produce a simply beautiful chorus. But, if we are to be true to the phenomena, we must challenge any such reading. John Milbank is almost right when he speaks of a community in which there is “an infinite differentiation that is also a harmony.”¹¹ In such a community, says Milbank, “the possibility of consonance is stretched to its limits, and yet the path of dissonance is not embarked upon.”¹² Milbank’s work relies upon notions of harmony taken from Augustine’s *De musica*. Although he grants such harmony may be stretched “to its limits,” harmony remains the dominant metaphor. For the ancient Greeks, “polufwnia” (*poluphōnia*) carried the idea of multiple tones and “polufwnos” (*poluphōnos*) the idea of multiple voices. The description of a community comprised of multiple voices is proper. Yet it does not go quite far enough. In juxtaposition to (that is, *in addition to*) the notion of polyphony, we need to set the notion of heterophony—both descriptively and prescriptively. First, whereas polyphony provides the aspect of a *multiplicity* of voices, heterophony emphasizes the *otherness* of those voices. If there is to be true otherness, we cannot—and should not—have a beautifully blended polyphony. Indeed, one can argue this lovely notion of polyphony is all too liberal and modern, for it wishes to smooth over the difficulties and the dissonance. Second, heterophony emphasizes the idea of differing voices that do not simply blend or produce a pleasing harmony but remain distinct and sometimes dissonant, sometimes precisely when we would rather they were not.¹³ This is not to say now dissonance takes center stage; rather, it is to say dissonance—sometimes eventually resolved and sometimes not—is simply part of that conversation. Only if there is true heterophony can there be the expression and existence of otherness. Without such openness to such dissonance, we would not have the late Beethoven quartets or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Harmony may *arrive*, but that arrival may well have to do with a change in *us* as listeners, and perhaps a radical revision of what counts as “harmony” (as in the case of Peter’s vision, in which God says something new).¹⁴

All of this becomes even *more* complicated because for Chrétien the structure of the response is never simply that of answering the call. For one “also calls out in turn and appeals to other calls.”¹⁵ That structure of not simply returning but also furthering the call is for Chrétien simply part of the nature of speech. We are given the gift of speech and, in turn, we both give back and disseminate that speech. Hence

arises the question of the gift. For Chrétien, though, the gift is not a problem to be worked out, but rather a phenomenon to be *lived* out. He assumes, in gift giving, there is a fundamental inequality of gifts that is precisely what makes giving possible. He insists, “no response will ever correspond. The perfection of the answer will lie forever in its deficiency, since what calls us in the call is from the start its very lack of measure, its incommensurability.”¹⁶ Of course, the logic here seems problematic. On the one hand, if gifts were unable to be measured, then the problem of gift exchange would not seem to arise—or at least not with the same force or degree. True, *that* gifts are exchanged would seem to set up a reciprocity. But it is a reciprocity that can never be worked out in terms of measurement, of gifts being equal or unequal to one another. On the other hand, if perfection of the response is found in insufficiency, must there not be some way of “measuring” gifts and thus declaring their insufficiency? While Chrétien does not explicitly work out this problem, what he says about nothingness would seem to provide a kind of answer. He asks: “Where does nothingness find these inexhaustible resources, if not in the fact of possessing nothing except the fact of possessing nothing, and in the fact that this very lack is given to by a request that transfers to it the open fault line of promise?”¹⁷ If the gift comes to my nothingness and I can never possess it—but only respond and pass it on—I can neither “possess” it nor measure it (since I have “nothing” to measure it *with*). And, if everyone else is in this same situation, the gift always remains incommensurable. We can now see how the gift exceeds us even though it cannot be measured. For if we possess only nothingness, anything that comes our way as a gift always already exceeds us.

How do we live out this gift giving? Chrétien responds it is by way of translation. The call always comes to us in need of translation, rather than having been translated in advance. Moreover, the call only is what it is *in* being translated. In other words, “the translation therefore does not refer back to an original language given before it and outside of it. The original is given only in the translation itself.”¹⁸ Translation is thus the possibility condition for the call to have its appeal. Of course, Chrétien realizes this immediately poses a problem, namely immediacy. If I must translate the call, it can only be accessed in a mediated form, which would seem to mean we relate to one another only in a mediated way in which there is distance between us. But here Chrétien counters by citing Fichte, who actually reinforces what we have already seen: “You and I are not separated. Your voice resonates within me and mine echoes it back within you.”¹⁹ In other words, mediation only becomes a problem if we assume a self-contained *I*. If, instead, the self is always intertwined with the other

(my call with the call of the other, or my call intermingled with multiple calls), selves are always already connected. It is not just the child who “is always already caught up in a speech that exceeds him,” but all of us (*CR* 80). To speak is to join in a conversation that has been going long before one and that is made possible precisely because my voice is never truly my own. Understandably, then, “other voices are at once the past and future of my own voice” (*CR* 81). Other voices make my voice possible and keep it sounding.

But how does all this relate to wounding? As already noted, if one’s voice is indebted to all of the other voices, one is already “opened up” to those others. Chrétien puts it as follows: “Someone who takes up speech, by so doing, opens himself to more than himself and to others.”²⁰ Yet the dimension of wounding goes considerably deeper than that since the call and response is always agonic in nature.

Always Agonic

Here we need to return to certain key features of the citation with which this essay began. Chrétien tells us prayer has the effect of “wounding” in the sense of both “tearing” open and “suffering.” Moreover, prayer is “always agonic,” and it will turn out the very structure of the call and response is agonic. Each of these features needs to be considered in turn.

Chrétien begins “The Wounded Word” by saying: “Prayer is the religious phenomenon par excellence, for it is the sole human act that opens the religious dimension and never ceases to underwrite, to support, and to suffer this opening.”²¹ One might first wonder if this is not far too strong a statement—prayer as the *only* way to the “religious dimension”? Yet “prayer” for Chrétien covers a multitude of acts, not simply “prayer” in its narrowest definition. The same could be said for the “wounding” that “opens” and the sense of “suffer” Chrétien assumes. We naturally think of wounding and suffering as “bad” things to be avoided. And, of course, there are many sorts of wounding and suffering that truly *are* bad—not to mention *evil*—and worth avoiding at any cost. However, not all species of either phenomena are necessarily to be avoided if Chrétien is correct.

The wounding that takes place in prayer is essentially a kind of opening of the self to the other. Prayer “exposes him in every sense of the word *expose* and with nothing held back.”²² To pray is to say, “here I am.” In this regard, it is remarkable how similar are the responses of Moses and

Samuel to God's call. God calls out from the burning bush, "Moses, Moses," and Moses responds: "here I am" (Exod. 3:4). This "here I am" is to say "I am at your disposal." And the formula Eli gives to Samuel is: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (I Sam. 3:9). What takes place in these exchanges is a crucial reversal, and Chrétien is certainly not the first to note it. Emmanuel Levinas puts it as follows: "[H]ere I am (*me voici*)! The accusative here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant."²³

Opening oneself to the other is likewise connected to "suffering." While we normally think of suffering in terms of pain or discomfort, the word "suffer" comes from the ancient French "*suffrir*," the basic meaning of which is "to bear up." So its primary meaning (and that of its modern equivalent in French "*souffrir*") is "to submit to" or "to endure."²⁴ It is in *that* sense one "suffers" in prayer, for prayer is a kind of submission to God in which one becomes a "subject" before and to God. "All prayer confesses God as giver by dispossessing us of our egocentricism," writes Chrétien.²⁵ In prayer, we recognize we are not our own; we are subjects in relation to God. Of course, we can find this same movement in Levinas, who thinks such takes place in the relation between myself and an other: I become a "subject" who is "subject" to the other. But this reversal—in which I am no longer at the center—causes suffering of the other sort. It is *painful* to think of myself as not being the center of the universe. Moreover, it is actually quite *difficult* to truly see one as subject to either the human other or to God, for it requires a change in *us*.

It is not surprising, then, in his later work Levinas resorts to increasingly more brutal sorts of metaphors—such as "trauma"—to describe how the other affects me. Given what Chrétien has already said regarding the call and its constitution of the self, the trauma is not so much to break through the shield of protection surrounding the self but the always already *having broken through*. Or, perhaps better yet, there is no need to break through precisely because there is always already an interconnection. In any case, Levinas is not alone in using such strong, even combative language. Chrétien speaks in a similar—if not even stronger—way regarding the call: "In order to constitute, the call destitutes. In order to give, it takes away. In order to create, it deletes all that would boast of self-sufficient being, prior to the call and independently of it."²⁷ The call wounds us, causes us to suffer in multiple ways, and thoroughly upsets our neatly ordered world.

For Chrétien, prayer is the ultimate agonistic struggle. One reason is

prayer is a struggle (*combat*) for and “with the truth.”²⁸ Although speech is already a struggle for and with truth, the speech that addresses itself to God is all the more so; to speak to God is to speak to the author of truth, the ultimate *truth*. To depict that struggle, Chrétien turns to the admittedly strange and difficult passage in which Jacob struggles with a man/an angel/God. On the night before he was to meet with his brother Esau, after having sent his family and everyone away, Jacob curiously encounters someone with whom he struggles throughout the night. It is literally a night of hand-to-hand combat.²⁹ Presumably, Jacob has the upper hand, for the person with whom he wrestles (first identified as a “man” and then identified by Jacob as “God,” though often taken to be an angel) finally asks him to let go, at which point Jacob asks for a blessing in return. We turn to that “blessing” in the following section, but here the concern is for the fact that Jacob’s encounter with God is not one of safety and security but *risk*. Moreover, it is a *violent* encounter, in which the striving continues on until daybreak. One could counter other exchanges between God and humankind in the Hebrew Bible are more benign, such as when Abraham welcomes the three strangers in Genesis 18. Yet, even that passage contains a kind of “struggle,” albeit in the guise of laughter: for Sarah laughs upon hearing she will bear a son at an advanced age. What ensues is an “argument” in which God mentions Sarah’s laughter, she denies it, and God asserts it again (“you did,” “no, I didn’t,” “yes, you did”). But the struggle is also that of whether God can overcome human expectations. As the text has it, “is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14)

Perhaps not all encounters with the divine are agonistic in nature, though it would seem all would have at least been preceded by an agonistic element. If prayer or even simply hearing the word of the Lord that a woman advanced in age can have a child requires that one recognize God is God, then a struggle has already taken place. One certainly doesn’t *begin* thinking of oneself already as a de-centered self, willing and ready to recognize an obligation to an other—whether human or divine. Instead, one begins with a world in which oneself is always already the center. Or such is what one supposes. Yet, if Chrétien is right about the constitution of ourselves being so closely connected to the constitution by others, then it is really more of a question of how we *think* about ourselves than how we truly *are*. To think otherwise is always a struggle, though not the sort of struggle in which one finally *wins*, but rather the sort in which one continually *engages*. In that sense, all of our encounters with the other are struggles in which we are constantly *trying* to love God or our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, let alone to put the neighbor or God *first*.

If Chrétien is right, there is a certain kind of violence that is not merely present but *necessary* in our encounters with the other. Unfortunately, the violence often has to be done *to* us, even done *by* us, precisely for the sake of the relationship with the other. The agonistic aspect of our relations to others, then, may not be the *only* aspect, but it is certainly one that must be present.

Not surprisingly, then, Chrétien does not see all violence as simply gratuitous and thus always to be avoided. In fact, he links the wound of the call with the giving of the gift. In his view, one cannot have one without the other. But, then, what exactly connects them?

Sometimes Amies

Every French teacher who works with English speakers knows one particularly dangerous set of *faux amies* (false friends) is the English verb “to bless” and the French verb *blessier* (to wound). But they turn out to be not just friends at times but even relations. “Blêtsian,” from which comes the verb “to bless,” was an Anglo-Saxon term that meant “to make ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ with blood.” When Christianity arrived in England, it was chosen as the word to translate both the Latin term *benicere* (to pronounce a benediction) and the Greek *euΔologeω* (*eulogeō*, to bless, a word largely used to translate the Hebrew *barak*, which means both “to bless” and “to kneel”).³⁰ But “blêtsian” is most likely also the source of the French *blessier*, which remains more clearly tied to its Anglo-Saxon origins than does the English “bless.”³¹

While there is no reason to think Chrétien has this etymology in mind, there is good reason to think he sees the two words as being connected. In his “Retrospection,” he writes that *Hand to Hand* is concerned with “the fact that the wound [*la blessure*] can bless [*bénir*] and benediction can wound [*la bénédiction blessier*, which could just as easily be translated as “the blessing can wound].”³² Yet how exactly can blessing and *blessier* be related? The reference in this quotation is—once again—to Jacob’s struggle. It is immediately after being wounded—when Jacob’s adversary puts his hip out of joint—that Jacob asks for a blessing. What he receives is a change of name: “Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed’” (Gen. 32:28). While the text goes on to say Jacob received a blessing, it is not clear this change of name *is* that blessing. In any case, Jacob could hardly have been expecting to get what he

received. For what he is given by way of a name is in effect a new self, a different identity. Chrétien writes “the meaning of call and response is radically transformed when the call actually creates the respondent.”³³ Here we have a perfect example of that; Jacob simply asks for a blessing and instead he receives a new identity—Israel. For Chrétien, Jacob is the “eponym” for wounds that bless, for struggles that affect both the body and one’s identity. Such wounds “one must not heal, for they are the source of our loving intimacy.”³⁴ Precisely in the *opening* of the wound one is further *opened* to another. While our natural tendency is to see wounds as necessarily bad and always to be avoided, Chrétien wants to insist the story is more complicated.

Yet this struggle raises a further question: “Who is the victor? Who is the vanquished?”³⁵ Chrétien realizes the interplay between these two figures is striking in many ways—and it also raises many complications. If the one with whom Jacob wrestles is truly God, who really “wins” in this case? God pleads with Jacob for him to let go and goes on to bless him. Who, then, has given in to whom? One can argue the case either way. But, then, that is precisely Chrétien’s point. It is far too simple to speak of “victor” and “vanquished.” Jacob receives a blessing and also a wound. God both inflicts himself upon Jacob—in every sense, God “sets him up” for the fight—but then allows Jacob to “win” the fight. It is here where Chrétien’s point becomes particularly uncomfortable. He claims “we are each new Jacobs, assaulted by God, and his perseverance should be for us a constant source of confidence.”³⁶ “Assaulted by God”—and that is supposed to be good (let alone give us “confidence”)? If that were not enough, Chrétien goes on to say something even *more* difficult to hear:

To unfold its movements, love’s violence has as much need of the faraway as it does the close-up. Love lights up the proximate with the faraway to continue to be love; and love opens the faraway in the proximate to continue to be an approach, and the sudden shock of an approach, an everyday, common miracle.³⁷

“Love’s *violence*”? Could these words possibly be associated with one another, let alone said in the same breath? Anyone suspicious of theodicy—in which it would seem evil is often all too easily explained away or made too “good”—would be apt to read these words with the same suspicion. This suspicion is also engaged when reading James’s exhortation, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (Jas. 1:2) or especially “the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts” (Heb. 12:6). Even if we are

willing to agree with Paul that—somehow, in some way we cannot and, in many cases, *dare not* explain—“all things work together for good, for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28), those things *themselves* may not be good.

Yet here it must be remembered Chrétien is not giving a theodicy but a *phenomenology*. That is easy to forget, given how grounded his thought is in distinctly theological—and, more explicitly, *Christian*—sources. Chrétien tells us very clearly his is an attempt at thinking about

loss, wound, and passivity, as well as forgetting and fatigue, which are phenomena where the trace of the excessive shines through, outside of the idealistic and dialectical language of “negativity” in which everything is as if vanquished and surmounted in advance. There is no philosophical parousia.³⁸

Given this formulation, it would seem Chrétien is trying to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, there is the danger already considered of glossing over evil and loss as if there *were* a philosophical parousia. Thinking through these experiences without thinking them away is what Chrétien attempts. As to exactly what a *theological* parousia would look like, that is a question Chrétien leaves unanswered. On the other hand, there is the danger of thinking of “loss, wound, and passivity, as well as forgetting and fatigue” as wholly unrecompable, irredeemable, and gratuitous. Chrétien is unwilling to go in that direction precisely because he thinks it is *phenomenologically* incorrect. Thus, without simply embracing evil as good or loss as gain, he is willing to attend to the complexities of both. For, without a philosophical parousia, *neither* of these extremes can be embraced. *Either* to assert that all phenomena of loss and wound can be “justified” *or* to assert that they simply cannot be good in any sense would require a philosophical parousia.

Lacking that, we are left in the phenomenological middle, in which there are complexities at every turn—good mingled with evil of various sorts and degrees; evil that somehow manages to produce good of various sorts and degrees and the problem of not always being sure which is truly good and which truly evil. This is why Chrétien insists we need both the “faraway” and “close-up” views to truly *see* the phenomena for what they are. The difficulty, to be sure, is that we are often faced with evil that is dressed up so beautifully, so seductively that we assume it cannot be anything but good. We are likewise faced with good that comes to us so unattractively, so bruised and broken, it hardly looks remotely good.

And we are left with human to human, human to animal, and human to divine encounters that not merely range across a spectrum but also come so freighted with entanglements they are often hard to rate as simply “good” or “evil.” We all know the worn-out examples of what would seem to be truly unadulterated evil or else absolutely radiant good. But most of our lives consist of a struggle somewhere between these extremes in a much more complicated middle ground where goods compete with each other and loss, wounding, and pain are simply part of the package. Looking back, we can sometimes (though certainly not always) see what was perceived at the time as either good or bad turns out to be somewhat different than what we originally thought.

It is with a fitting—though somewhat surprising—twist Chrétien concludes his meditation upon Jacob’s struggle by turning to the struggle of the “nonbelieving painter” Eugène Delacroix.³⁹ Painting *Jacob Wrestling with an Angel* in the Church of Saint Sulpice was a constant battle that occupied him from 1854–1861. The painting has often been cited as emblematic of the very struggle that constitutes his life. He writes repeatedly of the difficulty of the task. Yet it becomes a labor of love. What Delacroix writes about his struggle is so striking it can only be left in his words:

To tell the truth, the painting badgers me and torments me in a thousand ways, like the most demanding mistress . . . what from a distance had seemed easy to surmount presents me with horrible and incessant difficulties. But how is it that this eternal combat, instead of killing me, lifts me up, and instead of discouraging me, consoles me and fills my hours when I have left it.⁴⁰

Delacroix himself experiences the wound that blesses, which he calls the “torment” that “consoles.” Such an experience can only be known *through* experience. It cannot really be told or described—and certainly not “reduced” to an essence, any more than a painting can be reduced to a description. Moreover, Chrétien notes that Delacroix depicts Jacob as stripped to the waist and reads this as Jacob giving up his defenses and entering into the fray unarmed. It is, on Chrétien’s read, precisely this disarmament that enables one to be open to the other. In any case, Delacroix manages to capture the delicate balance of two figures in battle without settling the question of who is the victor and who the vanquished.

Chrétien closes his essay abruptly by saying, “the imminence of a blessing is already a blessing. It is a violent imminence.”⁴¹ Before such a thought, one can only *tremble*.⁴² As Chrétien speaks of the difficulty Delacroix has in painting these hands clasped—in battle and perhaps in love—he says, “let us leave these hands silently vibrating in the imminence of the word.”⁴³ As much as one would like to bring such a discussion to a conclusion, one can only really bring it to an end, not an end that explains the final *telos* of suffering or struggling but simply a breaking off. One could hardly *conclude* a discussion on struggling and suffering, for it would be to go against the very nature of the phenomena themselves. Lacking a philosophical parousia, one simply continues the struggle.

Notes

1 Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 174–75; hereafter cited as WW.

2 Jean-Louis Chrétien, “Retrospection,” in Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); hereafter cited as UU. 122. *Corps à corps* has been translated into English as *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

3 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004); hereafter cited as CR.

4 In his introduction to *Phenomenology and Theology* (published in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*), Jean-François Courtine asserts the guiding question for the essays that comprise that text can be stated as follows: “Is there, in religious experience, a specific form of phenomenality, of appearance, or epiphanic arising, that can affect phenomenology itself in its project, its aim, its fundamental concepts, indeed its methods?” (*Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 122). In effect, Emmanuel Levinas had already given the answer to that question: “*The absolute experience is not disclosure [dévoilement] but revelation [révélation]*” (*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 65–66. Revelation, of course, is what “breaks into” phenomenological intuition and so de-centers the transcendental ego. As such, it is the overturning of the phenomenological “as such.” Phenomenologically speaking, it would be hard to imagine more of a “wounding” experience. Not surprisingly, then, Janicaud zeros in on this quotation in his *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology* (*Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 42). To trace the development of Chrétien’s thought in roughly this same direction, see his *La voix nue: phénoménologie de la promesse* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990).

5 Here Chrétien is citing the French translation of Heidegger’s *Unterwegs zur Sprache*

[*On the Way to Language*] (*Acheminement vers la parole*, trans. Jean Beaufret, Wolfgang Brockmeier, and François Fédiér [Paris: Gallimard, 1976], 241). Interestingly enough, whereas the French *toujours déjà* would translate as “always already,” Heidegger only uses *schon* (rather than *immer schon*) in this passage. However, the “*immer*” can be read as implied.

6 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 28.

7 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 1.

8 Given that the call “provokes” and thus is part of an agonic struggle, an immediate question would be whether there is or could be an agonic dimension to the Trinity. Such a question would take us too far afield to be answered adequately here. Yet at least one possible example of such an agonic aspect to their relationship would be Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42). One can hardly deny there is a struggle going on here. And yet it is heavily qualified. Jesus’ request is inscribed between two phrases in which he explicitly gives up any rights to assert his own will. What would our encounters with the other look like were we to inscribe our requests between deference to the other?

9 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 1.

10 Rudolf Bernet, “The Other in Myself,” in *Tradition and Renewal: The Centennial of Louvain’s Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 85.

11 Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 156.

12 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 427.

13 *Ibid.*, 429. Milbank does go on to say the following: “To say (with Deleuze) that dissonance and atonality are here ‘held back’ or ‘not arrived at,’ would be a mistake of the same order as claiming that nihilism is evidently true in its disclosure of the impossibility of truth. Instead, one should say, it is always possible to place dissonance back in Baroque ‘suspense’; at every turn of a phrase, new, unexpected harmony may still arrive. Between the nihilistic promotion of dissonance, of differences that clash or only accord through conflict, and the Baroque risk of a harmony stretched to the limits—the openness to musical grace—there remains an undecidability.” Open discourses do not *simply* have a harmony “stretched to its limits.” They also have dissonances that may resist harmonization—or at least harmonization in the here and now. While “new, unexpected harmony may still arrive,” there must be the openness and even the promotion of creativity that creates dissonance. Without such openness to such dissonance, we would not have the late Beethoven quartets or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Harmony may *arrive*, but that arrival may well have to do with a change in *us* as listeners, and perhaps a radical revision of what counts as “harmony” (as in the case of Peter’s vision).

14 David Cunningham rightly points out that “polyphony” and “harmony” are *not* synonymous, even though they are often taken to be such. Given that difference, he thinks the notion of polyphony is sufficient, since “polyphony could theoretically be either ‘harmonious’ or ‘dissonant.’” Yet it is precisely because I want to emphasize the existence of (and *need for*) dissonance and difference I think we need the notion of

heterophony. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 128.

15 See my “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Heteronomy, and *Ekklesia*,” in *Resonant Witness*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

16 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 24.

17 *Ibid.*, 23.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 72.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, 82.

22 Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 147.

23 *Ibid.*, 150

24 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 146. Chrétien likewise speaks of the “here I am,” when he says, “the gift to which one is opened without recourse, about being the only one who can say *Me voici*, here I am” (Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, 120).

25 Given that it also means “to support,” it is not surprising there is a connection with the office of “suffragan bishop,” who (in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches) is a subordinate to the main bishop and in effect “supports” the bishop.

26 Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 153.

27 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 22.

28 Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 156.

29 Hand to hand is the English equivalent of the French “*corps à corps*” (literally, body to body), which is why the text in which Chrétien discusses Jacob’s struggle has been translated as *Hand to Hand*.

30 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “bless.”

31 Ernest Weekley notes, “*blêtsian*, in its etym. sense, would explain F. *blessier*, to wound, which has no Rom. cognates.” See Ernest Weekley, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Dutton, 1921), s.v. “bless.”

32 Chrétien, *Unforgettable and Unhoped For*, 122.

33 Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 16.

34 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 2; hereafter cited as HH.

35 *Ibid.*, 4.

36 *Ibid.*, 5.

37 *Ibid.*,

38 *UU*, 126.

39 *HH6*.

40 *UU*, 9.

41 *HH16*.

42 Here it would seem Chrétien has followed the injunction of Georges Bataille “to say everything to a point that makes people tremble.” See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille* (London: Verso, 2002), 479.

43 UU15.

Ivan's Rebellion: Love and the Excess of Evil

Eric Boynton

When distilling Emmanuel Levinas' startling ethical trajectory, commentators often point to Levinas' penchant for Alyosha Karamazov's characterization of ethical responsibility in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*: "We are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others."¹ Yet when turning to his explicit consideration of the excess of evil and the problem of theodicy, Levinas' work² in many ways echoes the thought of a more unlikely character in Dostoevsky's novel.

Scholarship has emphasized the provocation of the Holocaust and the so-called theological problem of evil in Levinas' thought.³ Indeed, Levinas, who spent years in a Nazi prisoner of war camp, and who lost family members at Auschwitz, himself claimed that the "presentment and memory of the Nazi horror"⁴ dominated his experience so that if "there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to Auschwitz."⁵

In an age indelibly marked "after Auschwitz," Levinas developed a notion of evil as "excessive" and his insistence of the "transcendence" of evil introduces debilitating difficulties for any ethical response to the moral lacunae opened up by Auschwitz. "The essential problem is: Can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?"⁶ Levinas' ethical consideration of the disaster of the twentieth century centers on challenging the abiding claim, fundamental to theodical reasoning, that suffering is ultimately "for the best." Levinas challenges theodical reasoning that insists evil will be redeemed ultimately and *even now* through ethical duties motivated anticipatorily by such a happy end: "Consequently, what remains? Either this means that there is no reason for morality and hence it can be concluded that everyone should act like the Nazis, or the moral law maintains its authority. . . . Before the twentieth century, all religion begins with the promise. It begins with the 'Happy End'. It is the promise of heaven. Well then, doesn't a phenomenon like Auschwitz invite you, on the contrary, to think the moral law independently of the Happy End? That is the question."⁷

Dostoevsky's character, Ivan Karamazov, in the chapter titled "Rebellion" of *The Brother's Karamazov*, also expounded a biting criticism of theodicy. Ivan sought to render the problem of evil insoluble by denying the existence of an absolute moral command, denying as Levinas did, a "happy end." A "happy end" or "future harmony," for Levinas and Ivan, is precisely what is called into question by absurdity of irredeemable suffering. Ethical reasoning is therefore "pulled to its ruin"⁸ by theodical reasoning that must cruelly and impossibly justify unjustified suffering in order to have reason to act ethically in the world. Extending Ivan's movement of thought, Levinas, specifically in his essay "Useless Suffering," announces the "end of theodicy," emphasizing the useless and unspeakable evil of the twentieth century epitomized in Auschwitz. In fact, a number of common themes emerge when holding together the thought of Levinas and Ivan on evil: the "intentionality or passivity of evil," the "excess of evil," the "end of theodicy," a prizing of the "suffering of the other," and the "command to respond to evil *as excessive*."

Yet for all the correlations one can uncover, when considering the character of the ethical response to evil, it would be difficult to imagine any greater difference, ethical nihilism (in the case of Ivan) or radical altruism (in the case of Levinas). So the question arises: how is it that such similar analyses of the enigma of evil's excess can lead to such radically different responses? Or to forego impartiality, what is wrong Ivan's argument, that in the face of the senselessness of evil, he can rigorously claim, within the space of his argument, that no ethical response is possible without forsaking the love of humanity that motivates the ethical response—that rebellion and righteous indignation remains solely appropriate? Why doesn't Ivan do the best he can for those children who suffering unjustifiably?

Due in large measure to the resonance of Ivan's thought in Levinas' consideration of evil, Levinas can offer the means of cracking open Ivan's compelling argument by developing an ethics not grounded in a "happy end." Let me turn first to Ivan's diatribe against the justification of evil in "Rebellion" before vexing his thought with the help of Levinas.

Ivan's Love of Children

When considering Ivan's argument in "Rebellion," it is crucial to recognize that the interrogation of evil and the criticism of theodicy begins with the question of how it is possible to love one's neighbor. In order to simplify and focus his argument, Ivan highlights the love we

have for children as a particularly intense form of neighborly love.⁹ For Ivan, we love children unconditionally (dirty, ugly, behaving badly). We love their innocence. Such love is not tied to the conditions of behavior, appearance, or expectation so the suffering of these innocents highlights the absolute senselessness of evil. For if children suffer, we cannot say that they deserve it. We are prevented from easily justifying such suffering in so far as children by nature remain exempt from the standard of good and evil—they have not eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To witness such suffering is to be traumatized by sheer incomprehensible horror. Evil protrudes as senseless.

In this way, Ivan radicalizes the oft-heard complaint, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and instead focuses his analysis on the innocent. (Job’s blameless character can be questioned; his ‘friends’ can reasonably be filled with doubts of Job’s professed righteousness.)¹⁰

In order that Alyosha (and Dostoevsky’s readers) feel the full weight of his argument, Ivan relays a number of graphic and gruesome acts of cruelty directed against children (culled from Russian newspapers). In just a few pages, Ivan brilliantly and successfully allows the problem of suffering and evil to belligerently protrude into thought in heart-wrenching fashion. “How do we come to terms with such evil particularly in a world God had a hand in making?” “How do we fathom this kind of innocent suffering?” It is simply incomprehensible that such suffering would be allowed or made necessary. Evil is a problem that, in the space of Ivan’s argument, resists solution if we are true to our love of children.

Theodical reason takes on the “problem of evil,” as problem of loss or gain and looks for its resolution in some economy of compensation. Theodicy places evil in an economic structure where suffering will ultimately be compensated, where punishment ultimately brings about justice, or where the evil perpetrated becomes an “investment” in a future prosperity or is simply the “price we pay” for our precious freedom in order that we live in the best possible world. To enter into such an economy, it must be admitted that no act of evil is in principle unjustifiable—it is permissible to torture children.

Ivan rebels against this kind of reasoning. There is for Ivan some evil that must remain unjustifiable, that simply cannot be associated with or exchanged for a compensating good. For Ivan, reconciling ourselves to the useless and unbearable suffering of children is impossible. If theodicy maintains that the greater good is purchased by butchering innocent

children, then for Ivan the only way to psychologically admit this cost is the inhumane covering over or forgetting *not the butchery* but the love I have for children in order to make the suffering bearable. When we engage in theodicy we abandon our love of humanity. We must necessarily reject the love we have for innocents who suffer in order to accept the world soaked with tears of unatoned innocent suffering even as this very love is what first motivates theodicy to make sense of the senselessness of innocent suffering.

As Ivan proposes the problem, any theodicy or cosmodycy that would make sense of innocent suffering must cherish a cruelty so intense and morally corrupt that its very task must be seen as impossible.¹¹ And if innocent suffering is sensical, purposive for any reason, woven in the fabric of our world, our only ethical response to such an obscene, irredeemable situation is to return your ticket and exit the situation.

“I don’t want harmony. From love of humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much. And so I give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I give it back as soon as possible.”¹²

Levinasian Resonance

Ivan’s analysis exposes the way in which evil presses upon us in an excessive and oppressive manner that parallels Levinas’ insistence upon the “transcendence” of evil. Extending Ivan’s analysis, evil is encountered as a phenomenon that exceeds our conceptual grasp and thwarts any attempt to render its appearance sensical. Not simply a statement regarding the unendurable and terrible suffering evil deeds can occasion, Levinas wants to underscore the inability to adequately conceive the magnitude and intensity of evil.¹³ For each thinker, the attempt to justify evil is not only an inadequate response to this excess but is “scandalous,” “obscene,” “outrageous.”¹⁴

Yet for Ivan and Levinas the “end” of any theodical response to evil, is not simply expressed as a demand for silence in the face of evil’s excess. The *malum* impinges upon Ivan such that he cries out at one point: “I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some

remote infinite time and space.”¹⁵ Likewise for Levinas, although we can never adequately conceive of and therefore respond to the excess of evil, we *nevertheless* are commanded to respond. For each figure then, any ethical response to evil must be commensurate with evil’s excess (and therefore avoid theodicy that pretends to understand evil in terms of an economic exchange). Indeed, Ivan’s argument is laid bare by Levinas’ statement verging on hyperbole: “For an ethical sensibility, confirming, in the inhumanity of our time, its opposition to this inhumanity, the justification of our neighbor’s pain is certainly the source of all immorality.”¹⁶ Yet, whereas Levinas is propelled by his statement to reimagine responsibility and the character of ethical subjectivity, Ivan, on the other hand, rejects a world where innocents must suffer, where loves are denied, and justice is never at hand.

Limitations of Ivan’s Argument

An exploration of this divergence requires that we take a closer at how Ivan sets up his argument—reflecting on the character of his professed love of humanity. According to Ivan, we are unable to love adults except if we are duty-bound to do so. The wretchedness of those most in need of our love, which becomes all too apparent when we get close, drives a wedge between our love and that particular person. “One can love one’s neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it’s almost impossible” for “as soon as he shows his *face*, love is gone.”¹⁷ What is more, Ivan finds adults “disgusting and unworthy of love,” for he knows them to be implicated in their own suffering. But children, as we have seen, we can love them up close. We love them in *spite* of how ugly they appear, how putrid their breath, how bad their behavior. In so far as they are innocent (that is unaware of good and evil prior to age seven) they are simply lovable.¹⁸

Ivan’s argument, then, maintains that we can love children up close *as if at a distance*. We love what they all share. Innocence as the universal characteristic of children allows us to overlook their unlovable singular and particular traits that would otherwise make them more difficult to love. Our love of children is not linked to their corporeal being, subject to suffering and death—their *Leibhaftigkeit* as vulnerable and destitute. Our love for children is in relation to a smiling face, grimy fingernails, or playful disobedience that evince the *category* of innocence. These are the same attributes that become unlovable peculiarities that drive out neighbor love in adults, who are implicated in their bodily annoyances for

in bodily decrepitude in adults lurk the vicissitudes of a wretched life. According to Ivan's analysis we love children in so far as they participate in or instantiate the idea of innocence. In fact, for Ivan the vulnerability and defenselessness of children is what brings out the worst in their tormentors. The "child that has no refuge and no appeal, that sets the tormentor's vile blood on fire."¹⁹

This is how it must be in order for Ivan's argument to proceed with such brutal honesty leading to such destructive indignation. For only in the face of an irrefragable and disturbingly traumatic exposé of innocent suffering does the issue of justice rise to such perspicacity that it can be argued that any morally upright person must reject the world saturated with the tears of unatoned and *unatonable*, unjustified and *unjustifiable* suffering.²⁰ No one ought to imagine that they are able engage the world so corrupt and evil in an ethical fashion. For Ivan evil must be respected as unjustifiable, incomprehensible, leading to the conclusion of life's absurdity and the breakdown of every sensible ethical system built upon the sacrifice of innocents. We must reject such a world, since there is nothing to be done. Within Ivan's argument, one can not apply oneself ethically to the betterment of the world without a happy end and one can not embrace a happy end without turning one's back on the love of innocents—that is the price we pay to have a ethical system where we can apply ourselves. Children's unjustifiable suffering calls me to respond and yet we must turn our backs on a love that first demanded the ethical response if that response is to be productive in a world that must make moral sense.

Levinas, on the contrary, states: "I don't very much like the word love, which is worn-out and debased. Let us speak instead of the taking upon oneself the fate of the other."²¹ For Levinas, ethical responsibility is borne by singularities, the irreducibly unique situations of daily life and not in the study of cases by which particulars fall under universal categories.²² Whereas Ivan exposes unjustifiable evil by focusing on the category of innocence, Levinas encounters the excess of evil in the suffering and vulnerability of the singular other that defies categorization and ruptures formal synthesis.

Ivan's argument is not motivated by the haunting stories of cruelty unleashed on actual *vulnerable* bodies but rather by scandalous attack on the category of *innocence*. Simone Weil states: "Patience consists in not transforming suffering into crime."²³ Ivan's righteous indignation expresses impatience with a world soaked with the tears of innocents and

thereby denies the vulnerability of suffering children an ethical force. Approaching patiently “my horror of evil” Levinas maintains, “reveals—or is already—my association with the Good”²⁴ for the “unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human” where “the suffering of the other. . . solicits me and calls me.”²⁵

Two insights into the inadequacy of Ivan’s argument emerge with the help of Levinas. Ivan’s indignation in the face of *innocent* suffering tears him away from the world of interpersonal encounters and allows him to envision his relation to the world as a spectator at a play. But are we “in the world” as a spectator? If he imagined he could not leave, how would that change the scenario? He may ask for forgiveness, instead of asking who can forgive (see final page of “Rebellion”). He would always already be responsible for all those who suffer uselessly, unjustifiably.

Second, Ivan’s theory-laden approach to evil successfully exposes evil’s excess yet can not entertain an ethical response able to measure that excess opened by his argument. Innocent suffering, in the space of Ivan’s argument, unleashes an ethical nihilism.²⁶ Ivan’s rebellion is predicated on an inability to imagine a justice independent of the promise of a higher harmony or a happy end proposed by theodical reasoning. He rebels against a cruel justice as future harmony, in so far as it is future, so that the world as it stands now is unacceptable according to that standard of justice.

Levinas, on the other hand, rethinks the possibility of responsibility “beyond” the “closed dimensions sketched by the judgments of the intellect.”²⁷ In the vulnerability of the other, Levinas uncovers a basis for ethics “after Auschwitz,” one capable of “measuring” evil’s excess and overcoming an ethical nihilism opened by that excess. It cannot therefore “be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if the moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise.”²⁸ The problem of *innocent* suffering may well require the radical response of “turning back” one’s ticket, yet the ethical claim of *vulnerability* for Levinas issues a radical demand as well, one that remains independent of any “higher harmony” or “the Happy End.” The excess of evil, its malignancy that resists integration, solicits a transcendence that “shines forth in the face of the other man. . . . The [*concreteness of the face, which is ethical from the outset,*] puts into question the sufficiency of my identity as an ego; it binds me to an infinite responsibility with regard to the other. . . . Is it not that this evil might touch me, as if, from the first, the other

man appealed to me, placing into question my *resting upon myself* and my *conatus essendi*. . . . *Does not the Good break through there, in evil*. . . ? A Good that is not pleasant, which commands and proscribes. . . . and implies no other reward than this very elevation of the dignity of the soul; and disobedience implies no punishment if not the rupture itself with the Good. A service indifferent to remuneration! No failure could release me from this responsibility for the suffering of the other man.”²⁹

Levinas’ ethical response to evil involves a distinctive understanding of the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal responsibility to and for the other, responding directly to their concrete suffering. In the horror of evil I am infinitely responsible to and for the other, whose useless suffering solicits me to suffer for the “suffering of someone else. It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties) can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle.”³⁰

Notes

1 See Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” in *Entre Nous* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 105 and Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 67: “As Alyosha Karamazov says in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky: ‘We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.’ And he does not mean that every ‘I’ is more responsible than all the other, for that would be to generalize the law for everyone else—to demand as much from the other as I do from myself. This essential asymmetry is the very basis of ethics: not only am I more responsible than the other but I am even responsible for everyone else’s responsibility!” In “The Paradox of Morality” he continues: “I would even ask whether we are not faced with an order that one cannot preach. Does one have the right to preach to the other a piety without reward? That is what I ask myself. It is easier to tell myself to believe without promise than it is to ask it of the other. That is the idea of asymmetry. I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other.” Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, p. 176.

2 See Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) and “Transcendence and Evil,” in *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).

3 See for example Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas's Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), and Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002), chapter 6.

4 Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature" in *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 291.

5 Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, p. 176.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 20. For Agamben, ethics can not exhaust the problem of the twentieth century, but rather the "very problem was so enormous as to call into question law itself, dragging it to its ruin," reflecting "the powerlessness of men, who continue to cry 'may that never happen again!' when it is clear by that 'that' is, by now, everywhere."

9 "I meant to speak of the suffering on mankind generally. But we had better confine ourselves to the suffering of children. That reduces the scope of my argument to a tenth of what it would be" (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 219).

10 Job also focuses on *his* own suffering. Like Levinas, Ivan sets up the problem in terms of the suffering of others not his own.

11 Ivan asks Alyosha, "Imagine you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last. Imagine that you are doing this but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . in order to found that edifice on it unavenged tears. Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me. Tell the truth" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 226).

12 Ibid.

13 "Evil is not only the non-integratable, it is also the non-integratableness of the non-integratable" ("Transcendence and Evil," p. 128).

14 "But does not this end of theodicy, which imposes itself in the face of this century's inordinate trial, at the same time and in a more general way reveal the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other, the outrage it would be for me to justify my neighbors suffering?" ("Useless Suffering," p. 98).

15 *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 225.

16 "Useless Suffering," p. 65-66

17 *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 219.

18 Ibid.

19 *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 223.

20 Note how Ivan's rejection of the world is dependent on certain narrowing of options (that Alyosha is unable to catch and so allows them to pass, indirectly granting them legitimacy) both here in the initial stages of the argument and in the spurious choice Ivan must make between a world working toward a higher harmony or the deterministic world

of science, that would require Ivan to forsake his love of innocence.

21 "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous*, p. 103.

22 "Ethical transcendence is "borne by recourse to a "material datum" of the consciousness, to a "concrete content," rather than by reflection upon some "formal structure" ("Transcendence and Evil," p. 133).

23 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1952), p. 124.

24 "Transcendence and Evil," p. 131.

25 "Useless Suffering," p. 94.

26 "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 21).

27 "Transcendence and Evil," p. 133.

28 *The Provocation of Levinas*, p. 176.

29 "Transcendence and Evil," p. 133-34

30 "Useless Suffering," p. 94.

“Jean-François Lyotard, Evil, and the
Turn to ‘Para/Ethics’”¹

Victor E. Taylor

By evil, I understand, and one can only understand, the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being.

--Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*

Certainty is the region of death, uncertainty the valley of life.

--Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*

W(h)ither Postmodernism?

You are informed that human beings endowed with language [*doués de langage*] were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears upon a minute part of this situation [*Quand ils en parlent, leur témoignage ne porte que sur une infime partie de cette situation*]. How can you know that the situation itself existed? That it is not the fruit of your informant's imagination? Either the situation did not exist as such. Or else it did exist, in which case your informant's testimony is false, either because he or she should have disappeared, or else because he or she should remain silent, or else because, if he or she does speak, he or she can bear witness only to the particular experience he had, it remaining to be established whether this was a component of the situation in question.

“I have analyzed thousands of documents. I have tirelessly pursued specialists and historians with my questions. I have tried in vain to find a single former deportee capable of proving to me that he had really seen, with his own eyes, a gas chamber” (Faurisson in Pierre-Naquet, 1981:81). To have “really seen with his own eyes” a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable

proof that is was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber--The plaintiff complains that he has been fooled about the existence of gas chambers, fooled that is, about the so-called Final Solution. His argument is: in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now, according to my opponent, there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber [*il n'y a donc pas de chambre à gaz*].

--Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*

In the decades that saw the rise of postmodern studies—1980s and 90s—a discussion of “evil” was more or less “traditionally” placed into the philosophical sub-disciplines of epistemology, metaphysics, and, most obviously, ethics. By placing “traditionally,” I mean to suggest that in this historical context engagements with “evil” presumed that inquiries into the topic would yield some practical, prescribed, or actionable result. Postmodernism, with its anti-foundationalist impulses, seemed contrary to this goal and questions such as, How do postmodernists intend to rid the world of “evil”? Does epistemological “uncertainty” lead to ethical undecideability? Does metaphysical “uncertainty” spiral into moral solipsism, ethical vacuity? formed the basis for rejecting postmodernism’s relevance to the topic. I should further add that many viewed postmodernism, at the time, as a new and unfortunate form of skepticism and, with its refusal to accept any realist or deterministic totalizing approach to issues in general, many assumed postmodernists to be advocates of placing “evil” in the vast undifferentiated space of relativistic, amoral philosophy. In other words, postmodernism, if not “theory” itself, which was synonymous with postmodernism, ran counter to ethical reflection and would do absolutely nothing to curtail “evil” in the world, which, to be honest, was only partly true. While it is true that postmodernists did not have a plan to combat “evil,” it would be false to say that postmodernists were not at the time concerned with the “problem of evil”; that is, the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical “problem” that evil posed.

To be more historically precise, the anti-Semitic war time writings (the existence of which was announced on the front page of the *New York Times* in 1987) of the deconstructionist critic Paul de Man made the non-academic and academic communities enormously suspicious of these “new postmodern” philosophies coming from Paris and New Haven. And, in the case of the latter, there arose an even more dismissive

attitude of postmodernism's ability to deal effectively with "moral issues." This history has been a major obstacle for "theory," generally, and postmodernism, specifically—overcoming the designation of "relativistic, ethically quiet French irrationalism." Even today, Slavoj Žižek, ironically the world's most famous theorist, regularly casts postmodern theory as a philosophy of relativistic multiplicity—a pastiche of variable, relativistic [(un)certainties. The problem with this characterization, however, is that while postmodernist approaches in some corners were driven by a desire for a vapid pluralism, postmodernism, Lyotardian postmodernism to be precise, situated "evil" as the "problem of evil" differently and with quite different concerns. It is for this reason that a discussion of postmodernism and the problem of evil take a detour around this historical impasse—in short, one could say today, "that" wasn't the postmodernism that we were talking about.

The first epigraph from Lyotard, in which he defined evil as "the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being," sounds very much contrary to the caricatured postmodern definition of evil as that which, like everything else, "is all relative." In *The Differend*, for instance, Lyotard is seriously concerned with the problem of "incessant interdiction" as a "problem of evil." In fact, "doing wrong to a phrase," as opposed to doing wrong to a person, is the basis of injustice and, subsequently, evil. From a casual reader's perspective, however, this emphasis on "phrasing" as an ethical theory may seem lacking, which would be correct if ethical theory necessitated a specific, concrete action. The "problem" of evil, from a Lyotardian point of view, is first a problem of phrasing; that is, linking phrases onto events is, with the intention of closing off all other future linkages, unjust, if not evil. This is an important element in Lyotard's thinking, and one would be correct to see this in the context of metaphysics as well as ethics.² Phrases, language produce reality-effects and it is important ask, What reality-effects is one creating with one's phrasings? Or, with one's interdiction of phrases?

Postmodernism attempts to dissolve a traditional definition of "evil" and then readdress it as a "problem of evil" is critical to understanding Lyotard's "gaming" of the problem of evil. It is this "transcendental move," a critique of the linguistic conditions for the concept, that caused many in the past to think that postmodernism and postmodernists were non-responsive, at best, to the issue of evil. As Adorno states in *Metaphysik*, "metaphysics would have to be defined as the effort of thinking to rescue what, at the same time, it dissolves."³ Comparing Lyotard to Adorno, then, would allow us to substitute "ethics" for

“metaphysics,” in this instance. The “problem of evil,” rather than “evil,” would be an ethical (re)thinking that tries to save ethics from the dissolution of ethics. In other words, the “problem of evil,” which is the incessant interdiction of phrases, cannot be addressed by the interdiction of more phrases. Saving ethical thinking means, in Lyotardian terms, saving the possibility of phrasing or bearing witness to the fact that there are phrasings that have yet to be phrased—resisting evil is, then, resisting the closure of phrasing or the closure of thinking. While “evil” may describe actions in the world, the problem of evil describes an ontology of injustice that is concerned with closing off the possibility of phrasing. The two, however, are not equivalent, and Lyotard never drew a moral line connecting the killing of people to the “killing” of phrasings, although the latter is the antecedent condition of the former.

II. Faurisson’s Outrageous Challenge and the Work of Memory

Robert Faurisson, the French academic and Holocaust denier who was tried, convicted, and fined in 1983 for his revisionist account of Hitler’s role in the death camps made a disturbing, perhaps perverse, legalistic challenge to the facticity of the Shoah by calling forth a “live” witness to testify to the deadly effects of Zyklon B. It is, as we sadly know, impossible to bring forward such a witness to testify for himself or herself or on behalf of those who had died in the gas-chamber—Zyklon B represents the ultimate closure of “eye witness phrasing.” It is through this hyperbolic, juridical moment of absence that Faurisson attempts to arrive at what he considers to be the unquestionable historical truth: the non-existence of the gas-chamber. By invoking the power of representation and memory, in the form of an absent witness, to reveal the “truth” of the gas-chamber, Faurisson offers to us as a fact or the “logical conclusion” that the Shoah never occurred as a historical event. While the “active interior” of the gas-chamber may not be presentable as a narratological situation,⁴ it does not necessarily mean that it did not exist or, as we shall see, that its “existence” cannot be limited to experience of an “eye witness.” For Faurisson, however, if just one living witness to the gas-chamber were to step forward from history and recall the chamber’s interior, its death, then sufficient proof would be in that moment of recollection. This is where I would like to begin a discussion of evil and the differend.

Faurisson’s denial of the gas chamber is, oddly, both an affirmation and a renunciation of memory’s depth and, perhaps, its rootedness

in the sacred, in the sense that memory is thought to be complete, epistemologically sound, incorrigible, validated by the continuity of the sacred, and the measure of truth—one “swears to God” to witness truthfully, at least in the American system. It can be argued, at the same time, however, that memory can attest to the abyss, the lapses in narrative, the pervasive forgetfulness of history; that is to say, memory, ironically, can bear “witness” to forgetting. It is this duality that brings to the surface a significant contrast between remembering and not forgetting.

Memory, I argue, after the Shoah, has become the “problem of memory.” One of the many troubling questions that arises after the Shoah is one concerning the understanding of memory’s long-held juridical connection to truth and the sacred. This is perhaps why the initial Holocaust memorials were not fixed or permanent to a landscape as they are today. Instead, they were narratives, *The Yizkor Bikher*, for instance. James E. Young, in his book *Holocaust Memorials and Meaning: The Texture of Memory*, likens these “books” to “symbolic tombstones” for those who died and did not leave “corpses to inter.”⁵ Young continues his analysis of the *Yizkor Bikher* by way of the interior site of the memorial over and against the memorial as an exterior site. Before the memorials occupied a landscape, they were sanctioned by and occupied an interior landscape of the mind, and it is here that one can ask, What is memory? What is forgetting? What is recollection? Are they not phrasings? Linkages? What does it mean to remember and forget? Answers to these questions concerning juridical memory begin, some would argue, with the Greeks and their mythology. After all, was it not Tiresias who did not forget his own murder?

Oedipus: “What tales? I must hear them all?”

Chorus: “How he met his death through traveling vagabonds

Oedipus: “I’ve heard that too. We have no witnesses, however.”⁶

The preservation of memory finds its form in and as history through Herodotus. History, in the Greek sense, was not forgetting (not dying) what had taken place. In Plato’s *Republic* the Myth of Er speaks to this deep connection between death and forgetfulness. It is Er who experiences death without suffering the casualty of memory:

After all the souls had chosen their lives, they went forward to Lachesis in the same order in which they had made their choices, and she assigned to each the daimon it had chosen as guardian of its life and fulfiller of

its choice. This daimon first led the soul under the hand of Clotho as it turned the revolving spindle to confirm the fate that the lottery and its own choice had given it. After receiving her touch, he led the soul to the spinning Atropos, to make what had been spun irreversible. Then, without turning around, they went from under the throne of Necessity and, when all of them had passed through, they travelled to the plain of Forgetfulness in burning and choking, terrible heat, for it was empty of trees and earthly vegetation. And there, beside the River of Unheeding, whose water no vessel can hold, they camped, for night was coming on. All of them had to drink a certain measure of this water, but those who weren't saved by reason drank more than that, and as each of them drank, he forgot everything and went to sleep. But around midnight there was a clap of thunder and an earthquake, and they were suddenly carried away from there, this way and that, up to their births, like shooting stars. Er himself was forbidden to drink from the water. All the same, he didn't know how he had come back to his body, except that waking suddenly he saw himself lying on the pyre at dawn.

And so, Glaucon, his story wasn't lost but preserved, and it would save us, if we were persuaded by it, for we would then make a good crossing of the River of Forgetfulness, and our souls wouldn't be defiled. But if we are persuaded by me, we'll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and we'll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason every way.⁷

Although one may find juridical memory to be uniquely Greek, it is the Jews who forge an idea of memory as history through a conversion of memory into remembrance, *Zakhor*.⁸ In other words, Jewish history is not predicated on the not forgetting, but on the inclusion of God in the events of the world. History, then, is God remembered, theophany. It is this tension between the Greek accessible memory and Jewish inaccessible memory which will shape our discussion of the sacred and memory.

Mircea Eliade's *Myth and Reality* provides us with a beginning through this tension and labyrinth of memory by taking up the history of memory in terms of Greek mythology. For Eliade, memory (*mnemne*) and forgetfulness (*amnesia*) are aspects of mythology insofar as one is the dialectical inversion of the other within the deep structures of human experience. Here, there are two primary sites, one of primordial memory and the other of individual memory. In this understanding, memory is separated from the profane. The truth, knowledge, for the Greeks, was a process of remembering that which the soul already knew:

For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into our human form, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning—and such understanding is the recollection of those things which our soul beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we suppose to be, and gazing up to that which truly is.⁹

Recollection (*anamnesis*), however, is that which interrupts the smoothness of the dialectic, and the depth of the structure in that the soul does not recollect the totality of memory: “Memory, Plotinus held, is for those who have forgotten. For those who have forgotten, remembering is a virtue; but the perfect never lose the vision of truth and they have no need to remember.”¹⁰ Here is where one finds the difference between recollection (*anamnesis*) and memory (*mnemne*). Memory is complete and of the soul, while recollection is partial and fragmentary. Faurisson’s point, if one understands him correctly, is that those who actually died in the gas chamber are the only ones who can speak to the truth of its existence. Faurisson links memory with existence in a peculiar way when he makes a thing’s existence contingent upon memory or a memory. This brings us to the relationship between knowledge and memory. Of course, for the ancient Greeks, knowledge was memory. That is to say, what one knows is an effect of the soul’s memory. This is particularly true of the relationship between knowledge and memory developed in the *Meno* and *Phaedrus*.

Faurisson’s understanding of memory has a depth that is not altogether apparent if one does not see knowledge as a consequence of memory. The surface of memory, however, suggests a lack of depth, an absence of an original reality. In this sense, memory does not have the connotations of another world or original reality, which is somehow brought forth through remembering. One who remembers completely is a traveler between these two worlds, between life and death. Such a vision of the one who remembers, one who bears witness to an event, eclipses the surface of memory: “The fountain Lethe, forgetfulness, is a necessary part of the realm of death. The dead are those who have lost their memories.”¹¹ Those who cannot bear witness to the gas chamber, to return to Faurisson, have lost their memories to death. Like the waters from the fountain Lethe, Zyklon B erased memories. Therefore, there is no memory of the gas chamber, there is, in its place, death. Faurisson’s call to “witness” is a call to bear witness to death, to call forth memories which have been eradicated by and in death. In this regard,

Faurisson is calling out for Tiresias, Amphiaraus, or Aethalides who have unchangeable memories in an eternal existence.

Since we do not have a Tiresias, Amphiaraus, or Aethalides to bear witness to the event(s) of the Nazi gas-chamber or death itself, we only can be concerned about the gas chamber. That is to say, we can only (not) talk about the gas chamber, not of it. It is here that parasacrarality conjoins with ethics to form a “para/ethics,” an ethics about ethics or ethics beside and around itself. Ethics suffers from the same dialectical thinking which effects politics. Events are suspended between two oppositional points that are drawn together through a defined process of reconciliation of polarities. These two oppositional points are, actually, thought of as two interdependent realms, the real and the actual. Ethics is then traditionally presented as a way of tying together the two realms (opposing ends of the same string) or resolving the tension or distance between the two. What were to happen, conceptually, if the string were cut into an infinity of segments? What is/was the continuity keeping the string one single, uninterrupted line holding the two points in opposition? History? Sacrarality? God? Eternality? All of these could produce continuity depending of the narrative deployed with the bipartition of the world. It is the nature of narrative to tie together points. In this sense, anything could initiate a narrative that would explain any event. The move, however, is not to find the grandest of narratives, but to recognize, at least, two important points: anything (history, god, class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.) can produce a grand narrative which can account, with equal proficiency, for the continuity of all events; nothing can account for discontinuity given that accounting for is an invocation of continuity—the continuity of discontinuity, if you will. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari begin their book *What is Philosophy?* with the discontinuity of the concept:

There are no simple concepts. Every concept has components and is defined by them. It therefore has a combination [*chiffre*]. It is a multiplicity, although not every multiplicity is conceptual. There is no concept with only one component. Even the first concept, the one with which a philosophy “begins,” has several components, because it is not obvious that philosophy must have a beginning, and if it does determine one, it must combine it with a point of view or a ground [*une raison*]. Not only do Descartes, Hegel, and Feuerbach not begin with the same concept, they do not have the same concept of beginning. Every concept is at least double or triple, etc. Neither is there a concept possessing every component, since this would be chaos pure and simple. Even so-called

universals as concepts must escape the chaos by circumscribing a universe that explains them (contemplation, reflection, communication). Every concept has an irregular contour defined by the sum of its components, which is why, from Plato to Bergson, we find the idea of the concept being a matter of articulation, of cutting and cross-cutting. The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but it is a fragmentary whole. Only on this condition can it escape the mental chaos constantly threatening it, stalking it, trying to reabsorb it.¹²

The prefix *para* indicates this complexity, this beyond, this extra, this alteration of the continuous line found in things such as subjectivity, ethics, politics, experience. It is not so much a continuous missing the mark as it is an erring or a wandering around the not: “The question of the not, therefore, is a question of the unthinkable that we can neither think nor not think. In thinking not, thought approaches a limit that inhabits it *as if* from within. This exteriority, which is interior, rends thought, leaving it forever incomplete.”¹³ This beyond, extra, disruption, or alteration is what Jean-François Lyotard identifies in “Discussion, or Phrasing ‘After Auschwitz’” as speculative dialectics (dialectical logic). I attend to the trope of speculative dialectics through Deleuze’s (non) concept of “singularity-event.” Just as Deleuze comes to question the univocity (totalization) of actualization (the concretization of knowledge within language games), Lyotard, too, working out of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, comes to question the shaping rules which govern the linking of phrases within discursive structures or language-compounds. The linkages surrounding the death camp that set into motion Lyotard’s phrasing after Auschwitz point to another issue that I will subsequently take up as the beyond, extra, or alteration of speculative dialectics as it relates to politics, or the polis that wills its own end. This task culminates in an argument against a unilateral politics (the polis’ willing of its own end) and an argument for a *para* or *pagan* (*pagus*) politics which will, unlike the prior construction that is based upon a monological or one-sided infrastructure (pure ethics), have a heterological or multiple and varied infrastructure (*para*-ethics) out of which occurs a respect for *differends* and for the multiplicity of justice.

III The Lyotardian and Deleuzian Driftwork of Ethics

One drifts, then, from the synthesizing effects of the monological infrastructure (Lyotard’s Grand Narrative or speculative dialectics) and towards the Deleuzian supple segmentarity of lines or quantum flows

which offer the possibility of another sense of time, another subjectivity, and another politics.¹⁴ There is, I argue, a correspondence between Deleuze's and Lyotard's understanding of the epistemological question insofar as both philosophers' work take up and juxtapose the two "Kants." Kant, as Lyotard indicates, is both an epilogue to modernity and a prologue to postmodernity. Kant, sitting astride these two conceptual *regimens*, poses an interesting and equally troubling question of ethics and politics that focuses on the incommensurability of the Idea of reason and the concept. Both Deleuze and Lyotard recognize the Kantian problem as a problem concerning linkages within and between categories (faculties) or *genres*. Central to the Kantian problem is the issue of first principles or grounding—the ground(ing) of the subject and the ground(ing) of the political. Each of these ground(ing)s, if you will, is a nodal point along a segmented line(s). The first point is the "autonomous" subject who "knows" the ethical a priori; and the second point is the polis that is the alleged culmination of humanity; the self'-presence of the polis (we) allows itself to will its own telos. A Deleuzian and related Lyotardian rewriting of this Kantian problematic entails an encounter with this culminating moment identified as Hegelian dialectics—or, that which synthesizes the phrases of Kant's *Begebenheit* or event into a fixed historico-reality. Of this Lyotard writes in his essay "The Sign of History" that

[t]he *Begebenheit*, which is a *datum in* experience at least, if not of experience, must be the index of the idea of Free causality. With this *Begebenheit* we must get as close as possible to the abyss to be crossed between mechanism on the one hand and liberty or finality on the other, between the domain of the sensory world and the field of the suprasensible—and we should be able to leap across it without suppressing it, by fixing the status of the historico-political—a status which may be inconsistent and indeterminate, but which can be spoken, and which is even irrefutable.¹⁵

What is this leap if it is not the dialectic or the signifier in search of a signified?

Lyotard's writings on Auschwitz, "Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz'," concerns itself with the same questioning of the dialectic or leap which also concerns Adorno in his text *Negative Dialectics* where he writes, "In the camps death has a novel horror; since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death."¹⁶ This essay discusses the epistemological gap between the Idea of reason and concept, and the speculative discourses which have, in modernity, synthesized the two; the

chapter will first explore Deleuze's logic of sense or, more specifically, the (non)concepts of singularity and event and then Lyotard's *differend* in order to arrive at a discussion or phrases about the anonym Auschwitz. Another subjectivity, another politics, another ethics . . . , are perpetually bothered and hampered by the extant and rigid politics, ethics, subjectivity or Kant's nodal points and modernity's tendency to synthesize discourses through the Hegelian dialectic.

In prefacing his collections of musings entitled *Dialogues* Gilles Deleuze writes against a Kantian ground zero and a Hegelian totality: "Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like a blade of grass or the rhizome. We constantly oppose the rhizome to the tree, like two conceptions and even two very different ways of thinking. A line does not go from one point to another, but passes between the points, ceaselessly bifurcating and diverging, like one of Pollock's lines."¹⁷ Achieving another politics, another ethics, another subjectivity, Deleuze argues, necessitates thinking "rhizomically." Contrary to the historico-reality constructed by and out of the unifying tendency and binary logic of modernity or Enlightenment thinking, a rhizomic reality lacks a ground zero or a moment of metaphysical certitude and determinacy by which all phrases (shoots) are linked. Deleuze advances this rhizomic thinking through the (non) concept of singularity—the multiplicity or heterogeneity of the universe of phrases. For Deleuze the universe of phrases is like a universe of lines; lines which do not share a point of departure nor do they share a point of arrival. Deleuze, in *Dialogues, The Logic of Sense*, and *A Thousand Plateaus*, is preoccupied with the notion of lines and cracks. In *Dialogues* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "Crack-up" in which Fitzgerald describes his life as a collection of fractures represented by a multitude of lines. Fitzgerald, who is, in the text, looking back on a life of alcoholism and collapse, writes:

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.¹⁸

It is, I think, this process of breaking down that Fitzgerald manages to capture which interests Deleuze the most. Later in “Crack-up” Fitzgerald uses the image of a cracked plate, with all its divergent lines, to depict the process of living. It is a plate that must be hidden from company, and, on the rare occasion that it is used, it rests underneath another plate holding leftovers in the refrigerator. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze continues his preoccupation with lines and cracks when he refers to Fitzgerald’s alcoholism and turbulent relationship with Zelda¹⁹ as lines of flight:

Beautiful texts. All of the lines are there: the lines of family and friends, of those who speak, explain, and psychoanalyze, assigning rights and wrongs, of the whole binary machine of the Couple, united or divided, in rigid segmentarity (50 percent). Then there is the line of supple segmentation, from which the alcoholic and the madwoman extract, as from a kiss on the lips and eyes, the multiplication of a double at the limit of what they can endure in their state and with tacit understandings serving them as internal messages. Finally, there is a line of flight, all the more shared now that they are separated, or vice versa, each of them the clandestine of the other, a double all the more successful now that nothing has importance any longer, now that everything can begin anew, since they have been destroyed but not by each other. Nothing will enter memory, everything was on the lines, in the AND that made one *and* the other imperceptible, without disjunction or conjunction but only a line of flight forever in the process of being drawn, toward a new acceptance, the opposite of renunciation or resignation—a new happiness?²⁰

The line of flight (dis)connects the singularity of the universe of phrases to the relationship (event); this anti-Hegelian move is not accomplished by revealing the actual essence of Fitzgerald and Zelda’s relationship, but by drawing or extending the line(s) out of and around the relationship as it relates to family and friends—the line of flight, consequently, is a multiple line(s). For Deleuze, the line of flight forever in the process of being drawn is the para of (para) ethics and (para) politics because it prohibits the collapse of the universe of phrases into a solid, undifferentiated, discursive mass. If one takes the relationship between Fitzgerald and Zelda to be an event, then Deleuze’s fascination with it and the short story “Crack-up” becomes a telling moment in his assault on the synthesizing process of the dialectic. The on-going extension of the line(s) of flight speaks to what Wittgenstein would call the “state of affairs” insofar as the line(s) of flight don’t concede to a totality or

a determinate language game. Deleuze and Guattari find an added dimension to the relationship that complicates an all too glib explication of it in the discourses of psychology or marriage counseling, for example.

The “Fifteenth Series of Singularities” in *The Logic of Sense* addresses this issue of totalizing discourses or a determinate language game by setting up a distinction and relation between singularity and event. First, the singularities, Deleuze tells us, “. . . are the true transcendental events” [. . . *sont les vrais événements transcendants*]²¹ in that they escape a synthesizing moment or, in other words, never have their potential completely actualized within a discursive structure (Marxism, psychoanalysis, fascism). Singularities, as line(s) of flight, do not have a congealed ontos nor do they have a congealed telos. They have, as Lyotard would phrase it, two zero points much the same way a rhizomic understanding of language posits subterranean, unrooted shoots as a metaphor for disunity and multiplicity of logic. Deleuze, early in the chapter, uses the example of a battle that “. . . hovers over its own field, being neutral in relation to all its temporal actualizations, neutral and impassive in relation to the victor and the vanquished, the coward and the brave.”²² The battle, seen as hovering above its own field, prohibits a complete or exhaustive actualization through a grounding or an anchoring of intelligibility within a cognitive genre (pure referentiality). Deleuze understands this suspension to be an “indifference” to the total(izable) actualization; it is, instead, an event which has an infinite number of singularities bringing it into partial and incomplete positioning within the universe of phrases:

In the first place, singular-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, rather “metastable,” endowed with a potential energy wherein the differences between series are distributed. (Potential energy is the energy of the pure event [*l'événement pur*], whereas forms of actualization correspond to the realization of the event) [*tandis que les formes d'actualisation correspondent aux effectuations de l'événement*]. In the second place, singularities possess a process of auto-unification, always mobile and displaced to the extent that a paradoxical element traverses the series and makes them resonate [*fait résonner*], enveloping the corresponding singular points in a single aleatory point and all emissions, all dice throws, in a single cast [*tous les coups, dans un même lancer*].²³

If one understands the throw of the dice to be an event, then the combinations on the face of the dice correspond to the singularities.

Before the dice rest any combination is possible, and the possibility of the dice dropping off the table is a possibility as well. As an example of the heterogeneity of singularity within an event “dice work;” however, in a sense, it trivializes the conceptual space that Deleuze and Guattari have opened. A more philosophically troublesome example comes from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: “If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games [*Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachspiele*] in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: What is a question?—Is it the statement that I do not know such-and such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me. . .?— And is the cry “Help!” such a description?”²⁴ Wittgenstein finishes his thought with a speculation about the possibilities of transformation and how the multiplicity of the language games or keeping them organized would, eventually, become clearer in another place. It is contested as to whether or not Wittgenstein ever did make it any clearer. He, as I understand his work, muddled it—and this muddling was to his credit. Just as the throw of the dice ‘contain’ all the possible combinations, so, too, does a Deleuzean event. Wittgenstein’s hesitation over the possibilities of transformation corresponds to Deleuze’s singularity-event insofar as the phrasing is enmeshed in the action without a direct and knowable cause and effect relation:

The problem is therefore one of knowing how the individual would be able to transcend his form and his syntactical link with a world, in order to attain to the universal communication of events [*l’universelle communication des événements*], that is, to the affirmation of a disjunctive synthesis beyond logical contradictions, and even beyond alogical incompatibilities. It would be necessary for the individual to grasp herself as event [*Il faudrait que l’individu se saisisse lui-même comme événement*]; and that she grasp the event actualized within her as another individual grafted [*greffé*] onto her. In this case, she would not understand, want, or represent this event without also understanding and wanting all other events as individuals, and without representing all other individuals as events. Each individual would be like a mirror for the condensation of singularities and each world a distance in the mirror [*. . .chaque monde une distance dans le miroir*].²⁵

In the above passage, Deleuze unveils the problem of and in ethics and politics; both ethics and politics are united by and through the Enlightenment (self-present) subject. It is this autonomous individual who, as Kant (the prologue to postmodernity) tells us, is never fully autonomous. It is around the issue of the subject where Deleuze and

Kant seem to run similar intellectual paths. Deleuze, however, is more bothered by the belatedness of intelligibility than is Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*:

Reason concerns itself exclusively with absolute totality in the employment of the concepts of the understanding, and endeavors to carry the synthetic unity, which is thought in the category, up to the completely unconditioned. We may call this unity of appearances the unity of reason, and that expressed by the category the unity of understanding. Reason accordingly occupies itself solely with the employment of understanding, not indeed in so far as the latter contains the ground of possible experience (for the concept of the absolute totality of conditions is not applicable in any experience, since no experience is unconditioned), but solely in order to prescribe to the understanding its direction towards a certain unity of which it has itself no concept, and in such a manner as to unite all the acts of understanding, in respect to every object, into an absolute whole. I understand by idea a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience...If I speak of an idea, then as regards its object, viewed as an object of pure understanding, I am saying a great deal, but as regards its relation to the subject, that is, in respect of its actuality under empirical conditions, I am for the same reason saying very little, in that, as being the concept of a maximum, it can never be correspondingly given in concreto.²⁶

In not having an object in the concrete or an unalterable syntactical mooring in the world, the subject is left with what Lyotard calls in "Discussions, or Phrasing 'After Auschwitz'" a "paraexperience." It is the Kantian gap between the idea of reason and concept, or Deleuze's disjunctive synthesis, which makes a determinate experience impossible and, by implication, any cohesive cognition impossible as well. Through Kant and, later, Deleuze, a critical force in philosophy is made visible and that vision, unlike Boethius' vision of Lady Philosophy, to borrow a phrase, is incorrigible. The seeing subject, then, is a deconstructed subject living in the wake of post-referential indeterminacy. This decentered subject is the cornerstone of poststructuralist thought and there is an overabundance of texts annotating the decentered subject's affect on literature, psychoanalysis, and culture studies. These rehearsals of the Kantian wound often move toward a quick suturing by way of some banal playfulness of language, or deconstruction as a reading technology. , Lyotard, like Gilles Deleuze, asks the difficult historico-political question about Auschwitz. From a complex poststructuralist

or postreferential frame, a frame which I have tried to work in terms of Deleuze's (non) concepts of singularity and event, Lyotard rewrites this historico-political, or the modern moment without its actualization within the unified Enlightenment subject nor its objects in concreto. Instead, Lyotard writes the historico-political as a contest of phrases in and around a *differend*:²⁷ "The differend is the unstable state or instant of language which ought to be able to be phrased cannot yet be phrased."²⁸ It is this rewriting of Auschwitz through the concept of the *differend* which I understand to be what Deleuze means by a new type or post-referential revolution in the course of becoming possible.\

IV. *The Ethics of the Differend*

The *differend* is, I argue, an expression of Deleuze's singularity-event. The instability of language creates a moment of radical doubt within the language-games (genres) of ethics and politics. The referent, that object in the world, hovers above, like the Deleuzean battle, its own ground. This lack of grounding rends the historical fabric by which ethics and politics are arrived at and adjudicated. Perhaps the most crucial historical event in the twentieth century is Auschwitz. It stands to signify a multitude of ethical and political agendas. For the revisionist historian Faurisson, Auschwitz is the historical event that never was. For others, it is the historical event that will always be. It is this sense of Auschwitz which Lyotard finds so compelling in Adorno. Lyotard, from his reading of Adorno, "Discussion, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz,'" writes:

'Auschwitz' is a model, not an example. From Plato to Hegelian dialectics the example, says Adorno, has the function in philosophy of illustrating an idea; it does not enter into a necessary relation with what it illustrates, but remains 'indifferent' to it. The model, on the other hand, 'brings negative dialectics into the real.' As a model, 'Auschwitz' does not illustrate negative dialectics. Negative dialectics, because it is negative, blurs the figures of the concept (which proceed from affirmation), scrambles the names borne by the stages of the concept in its movement. This model responds to this reversal in the destiny of the dialectic; it is the name of something) of a para-experience, of a paraempiricity) wherein dialectics encounters a non-negatable negative, (*un negatif non niable*), and abides in the impossibility of redoubling that negative into a 'result.' Wherein the mind's wound is not scarred over. Wherein, writes Derrida, 'the investment in death cannot be integrally amortized.'

The “Auschwitz” model would designate an experience of language which brings speculative discourse to a halt.²⁹

The name Auschwitz brings speculative discourse to a halt by first denying the Kantian nodal points—a subject who could bear witness³⁰ to the gas chamber and the culmination of humanity in an act of consensus about the status of the event— Secondly, the name Auschwitz interrupts the synthesis of an understanding, as Adorno indicates, when dialectics encounters a non-negatable negative. Lyotard continues Adorno’s point of a non-negatable negative by stating that Auschwitz can no longer be named in the Hegelian sense of naming “. . . as that figure of memory”, like the Deleuzian dice, “. . . which assures the permanence of the *rest* when mind has destroyed its signs.”³¹ “Auschwitz” is a name for the anonymous. The collapse of the name in the Hegelian sense opens the anonym, “Auschwitz”, to another ethics, politics, subjectivity, which I mentioned earlier as a new type of revolution or (pagan) (para) politics. The anonym ‘Auschwitz’ bars the litigation over a claim to realism within a cognitive regime. For Lyotard, litigation has ended with the arrival of the *differend*. Instead of competing claims to the real, one has the question, What is to be linked onto Auschwitz?

The question of linkage is the question of justice and, ultimately, the question of the heterogeneity of justice. Claims to the historico-real, such as Faurisson’s, install an oppressive regime within the universe of phrases. Positivist historians, in a conflict with revisionist historians such as Faurisson, must find the witness he asks for. Both the positivist and revisionist historian are tied to realism or unmediated referentiality. In other words, the historians who claim the gas chamber existed are obligated, because of the cognitive regime, to justify the real experience of the gas chamber by producing a witness. Revisionist historians need only to ask for the empirical evidence, an eyewitness. Of course, a quick dismissive wave of the hand places Faurisson and those like him in the category of the insane, unethical or Nazi. But, the question of ethics still persists as a gap between the concept and the Idea of reason. In *The Differend*, Lyotard responds to the cognitive genre by pointing to the silences within it, the multiplicity which has been dialecticized:

That is why the question ‘Auschwitz?’ is also the question ‘after Auschwitz?’ The unchaining of death [*Le déchaînement de l’obligation extrême, la mort*], the utmost obligation, from what legitimates it is perpetuated ‘after’ the crime; scepticism, and even nihilism, have every reason to feed off this endlessly. For it is not even true, as Hegel believes,

that afterward it still remains for us to chew and digest, in our lair, the 'nul and void' of the legitimate linkage [*de l'enchaînement légitimant*], the extermination of a determined we. The dispersive, merely negative and nearly analytical dialectics at work under the name of 'Auschwitz', deprived of its 'positive-rational operator', the *Resultat*, cannot engender anything, not even the sceptical we that chomps on the shit of the mind. The name would remain empty, retained along with other names in the network of a world, put into mecanographical or electronic memory. But it would be nobody's memory, about nothing and for no one [*Mais mémoire de personne, à propos de rien et pour personne*].³²

What does it mean for Auschwitz to be nobody's memory? Lyotard, I think, is assaulting Kant's (here the epilogue to modernity) first nodal point—the knowing subject. In this sense, it is nobody's memory because nobody is capable of synthesizing the singularities and the event. In other words, the gas chamber is reproducible. The same can be said of the memory being about nothing. To be something is to find an end within the dialectic. Lyotard reads Adorno, and I think he is correct, as saying that the end of the dialectic is that novel part of the death camps, that "worse than death."³³

(The sea of my memory is white. It will be blue if I want, with words joining in dreams and in the violence of waves swelled and beaten down by fever.

Secret fauna and flora which the reverberations of the page had hidden, now, at the end of the day, I watch them evolve as one might dive with eyes open to explore deep waters.

I go to meet my words and bring them back to the surface, unaware that I lead them to their death.
But this is an illusion.

The surface of the sea is a mirror one breaks in turning the page.
All azure of my pen and my death which I importune.

I have the algae for living companions.)
--Edmond Jabés, *The Book of Questions*

Are we, then, left with nothing? The answer is yes, if by nothing one means a result³⁴ out of a dialectic; the answer is no, if by nothing one means the anonym Auschwitz as something which cannot be remembered

nor be forgotten, a borderland. It is this tension between not remembering and not forgetting where Lyotard's "paganism" is useful and it is in *Just Gaming* where he develops it in relation to the ethical-political arena. In the dialogue, Lyotard's interlocutor, Jean-Loup Thebaud, asks, ". . . where does the specificity of paganism lie?"³⁵ Lyotard answers, ". . . What makes paganism? It consists in the fact that each game³⁶ is played as such, which implies that it does not give itself as the game of all other games or the true one."³⁷ A (language) game that gives itself as the game of all over games is the game of ethics insofar as ethics posit an ontological truth. The same holds true for the (language) games of politics, Marxism, Freudianism, and feminism. The pagan ends totality by pressing for the invention of new ways of phrasing which can either be actual inventions or alterations of old phrasings. Much like Deleuze's sense of segmentarity, the pagan opens onto the multiplicity of languages with the recognition that *differends* exist and persist. One such *differend* occurs when 'Auschwitz' needs to be phrased and cannot yet be phrased. At first one looks to the linkages surrounding the phrasing of Auschwitz. Whose phrasing is it? It is the experience of Auschwitz which now serves as the ontological moment of truth. Lyotard asks the following:

Why say that this anonym designates an 'experience of language', a 'para-experience'? Is that not to insult the millions of real dead in the real barracks and gas chambers of real concentration camps? It can be surmised what advantages a well-led indignation can derive from the word reality. And what is spawned by this indignation is the embryo of the justice-maker. It is this indignation, however, with its claim to realism, which insults the name of Auschwitz, for this indignation is itself the only result it derives from that collective murder. It does not even *doubt* that there is a result (namely itself). Now, if this name is a nameless name, if Auschwitz does not provide an example but a mode, it is perhaps because nothing, or at least not all, of what has been expended in it is conserved; because the requirement of a result is therein disappointed and driven to despair; because speculation does not succeed in deriving a profit from it, were it the minimal one of the beautiful soul. That all this is an affair of language is known only too well by asking the indignant ones: what then does 'Auschwitz' mean to say to you? For one must, in any case, *speak* (dire).³⁸

Phrasing after Auschwitz has been a phrasing of the ethical-political from an example or descriptive model. It has urged us to see or glimpse the truth of the gas chamber when all we are actually able to glimpse is our own 'paraexperience.' Since we cannot breathe in the gas, we ought not

to claim that we can and do. To do so, is to speak for those who cannot speak and this speaking in place of is an annihilation as well. Instead, we have a nameless Auschwitz, an anonym without a moment of translucent intelligibility to be linked onto another event. Auschwitz was and is in the borderland. It is in the borderland now because it works, as Derrida tells us in *Margins of Philosophy*, as a “breach” (felure) – a “unique event, nonreproducible, hence illegible as such and when it happens. . . .”³⁹ If Auschwitz is that breach in the ethical-political arena, then what will follow this rupture? This is what Lyotard takes up as an issue of phrasing “after Auschwitz.” Not only is a notion of time, that linear progression of events, breached, the links between these “events” and the constructedness of events themselves are breached as well. A new type of revolution in the course of becoming possible is not a simple deferral of Auschwitz; it is a revolution that holds open the possibility for an end to oppression, breaching the integrity of the cognitive regime. To not speak for those who cannot speak is to bear witness to their annihilation.

To say, as Faurisson does, that, “There is, therefore, no gas chamber” is to forge a link between to phrases within an empirical reality. “There is” suggest an historical real or referential scheme which serves to measure and adjudicate all understandings. Faurisson, here, points to the real and, in his act of pointing, calls upon modernity to join “there is” to “there is no. . .”; “Therefore” is the phrase’s hinge. With “therefore”, Faurisson instantiates the ready made frame of empiricism. One, then, is forced to accept the link “no gas chamber.” A (para) politics out of Deleuze and Lyotard would have us say, “There is, therefore, . . . a differend.” The difficulty of a (para) politics is that it calls attention to its own (para) ethical structuration. In other words, unlike the empirical frame Faurisson invokes, a (para) ethical frame works against itself. It works against itself by acknowledging an ‘outside’ to itself. Outside the frame is the revolutionary point in that the (para) political frame forecloses on its claim to internal integrity and pure referentiality. The gas chamber, then, was not and is not an enclosed space; it opened and opens onto other points outside of itself that have and cannot yet be put into phrases. And because of this inability to phrase, as Adorno writes, the death camps take on a “novel horror”--an illegibility, a problem of silence, a problem of evil.

Notes

1 This essay is a revised version of a chapter entitled “Para-Shoah” from *ParaInquiry: Post-*

modern Religion and Culture, London/New York: Routledge, 2000.

2 Rodolphe Gasché, "Saving the Honor of Thinking: On Jean-François Lyotard," *Parallax*, 2000, vol.6. no.4, 127-145.

3 Ibid, 132.

4 In the foreword to Jean-François Lyotard's *Heidegger and the "jews,"* David Carroll explains the difficulty the survivors' memory has in (re)telling the events of the Holocaust. He points to Shoah as an example of memory which easily can take multiple political, moral, and military paths. The difficulty, as Carroll reading Lyotard suggests, is in understanding the Holocaust as a foundation for political or ethical action:

The literature of the concentration camps indicates that most survivors of the Shoah, who are hostage to the impossible obligation and task of talking/not talking about "that," are more modest than this. They know that if it is impossible to tell of what happened, this is why they must tell and retell what happened. This gives them no privilege; on the contrary they find themselves in an impossible narratological, political, and moral situation each time they begin to talk about "that." If they do not know what to tell or how to tell, they do know that it will do no "good" to tell, that what will be ignored or misunderstood, perhaps even used for dogmatic political, religious, and moral purposes that most often probably make it seem as if it would have been better not to have told at all. But because they have to tell, they do, but never easily and most often with a feeling that they have betrayed something or someone by doing so, that their telling has betrayed what it has told and those who cannot tell (Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and the "jews,"* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, ix-x).

5 James E. Young, *Holocaust Memorials and Meaning: The Textual of Memory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 7.

6 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, New York: Harper Row, 1960, 34.

7 Plato, *Plato's Republic*, trans. G.M.E. Grube, New York: Hackett Publishing, 1992, ll. 620e-621d.

8 Cf. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Yosef, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1982, 5.

9 Plato, *The Phaedrus*, Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1980, ll. 249c

10 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, New York: Meridian Books, 1970, 119.

11 Eliade, 121.

12 Gilles Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 15-16.

13 Mark C. Taylor, *Notes*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 1.

14 In *Dialogues*, Deleuze writes his way to a more accessible articulation of singularity through the example of lines. He states that,

Whether we are individuals or groups, we are made up of lines and these lines are very varied in nature. The first kind of line which forms us is segmentary-of rigid segmentarity (or rather there are many lines of this sort): family-

profession; job-holiday; holiday-family-and then school-and then the army-and then the factory-and then retirement. And each time, from one segment to the next, they speak to us saying: 'Now you're not a baby any more'; and at school, 'You're not at home now'; and in the army, 'You're not at school now'. . . In short, all kinds of clearly defined segments, in all kinds of directions, which cuts us up in all senses, packets of segmentarized lines. At the same time, we have lines of segmentarity which are more supple, as it were molecular. It's not that they are more intimate or personal--they run through societies and groups as much as individuals. They trace out little modifications, they make detours, they sketch out rises and falls: but they are no less precise for all this, they even direct irreversible processes. But rather than molar lines with segments, they are molecular fluxes with thresholds and quanta. A threshold is crossed, which does not necessarily coincide with a segment of more visible lines (*Dialogues* 124).

These second lines are the linchpin for Deleuzean "politics" in that these second lines open onto other possibilities or becomings. In other words, the fluidity of the second lines "compensate" the rigidity of the first lines by continually positing the phrase, ". . . it could be otherwise."

15 Jean François Lyotard, "The Sign of History," *The Lyotard Reader*, trans. G. Bennington, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 400.

16 Lyotard, 363.

17 Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, viii.

18 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Crack-up" in *The Fitzgerald Reader*. Arthur Mizener, ed. New York: Scribners, 1963, 405.

19 In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari cite Fitzgerald's description of his relationship with Zelda:

Perhaps fifty percent of our friends and relations will tell you in good faith that it was my drinking that drove Zelda mad, and the other half would assure you that it was her madness that drove me to drink. Neither of these judgments means much of anything. These two groups of friends and relations would be unanimous in saying that each of us would have been much better off without the other. The irony is that we have never been more in love with each other in all our lives. She loves the alcohol on my lips. I cherish her most extravagant hallucinations. . . . In the end, nothing really had much importance. We destroyed ourselves. But in all honesty, I never thought we destroyed each other (206).

20 Deleuze and Guattari, 206-7.

21 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 102.

22 Deleuze, 100.

23 Deleuze, 104.

24 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations in Deconstruction in Context*, Mark C. Taylor, ed., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 228.

25 Deleuze, 178.

26 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1959, 383-384.

27 In *The Differend* Lyotard states the following:

The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: "One cannot find the words," etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants this differend to be smothered right away in a litigation and for the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless. What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.

In the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist (13).

28 Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Differend*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 22.

29 Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, 363-4.

30 The concept of witness is a complicated one for anyone reading Lyotard. In *The Differend*, he uses the word "witness" to call attention to impossibility of such a person. In *The Postmodern Condition*, on the other hand, Lyotard calls upon the reader to bear witness to the differend and multiplicity.

31 Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, 364.

32 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 101.

33 Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, 363.

34 In "Result" Lyotard discusses the result as the end of the Hegelian dialectic. He quotes Adorno in order to set the rules for linking:

A chain of phrases comes to be linked together on the basis of this rule. Here are some of its links: 'It lies in the definition of the negative dialectic that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is a form of hope' (*The Differend*, 152).

Lyotard's discussion in *The Differend* often turns to the Hegelian dialectic in order to further complicate the event of Auschwitz. To invest in the dialectic, is to end Auschwitz and it is this moment of closure on which Lyotard wages war.

35 Jean François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985,

60.

36 I am acutely aware of dangers or possible connotations “game” has here. I think Lyotard has to be given some room in the sense that “game” has been a word used to describe the actions of language around a set of rules (i.e. Wittgenstein).

37 Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, 60.

38 Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, 362.

39 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981, xvii.

Forebodings

Uncanny Approaches to Evil

Rosa Sledgers

Introduction

In her essay “Le double e(s)t le diable” [*The Double is/and the Devil*] Sarah Kofman argues that what makes E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tale *The Sandman* uncanny [*unheimlich*] is the element of repetition. Scenes and themes are repeated and characters are doubled, causing both the reader and the protagonist of the story to doubt what is real and what is imaginary: it remains ambiguous till the end whether there really are evil forces at work or rather if the protagonist is suffering from some sort of pathology. Sigmund Freud, who famously used *The Sandman* as the central example in the second part of his essay “The Uncanny,” ignores much of the ambiguity of the story in order to make it fit his hypothesis about the uncanny nature of repressed childhood complexes, especially the castration complex. In the third part of the same essay, however, Freud leaves behind the story of *The Sandman* and turns to other examples to explain the uncanny nature of repetition and doubling. I engage both Freud and Kofman in a rereading of Hoffmann’s tale to argue that one inherent dimension of uncanny experiences is a suspicion or foreboding of evil. This aspect of experiences of the uncanny is arguably absent from Freud’s own renowned descriptions as well as those of several of his commentators. My argument to this effect necessitates a retelling of *The Sandman* in order to make clear those aspects of the story that Freud obscures or neglects. Most relevant for my argument here is that the kind of evil that uncanny experiences foreshadow is hidden and secretive, perpetually at work behind the scenes of normal, everyday human existence. This evil is detected in the most pedestrian occurrences that this evil, but never with certainty; it is always lurking just beyond the reasonable explanations with which one tries to expel it.

From Heimlich to Unheimlich

In the first part of his essay “The Uncanny,” Freud proposes two

different methods to investigate the phenomenon of the uncanny or *das Unheimliche*: First he will provide a linguistic account of the word *heimlich* (homely, familiar, cozy) and its negative counterpart *unheimlich* (unhomely, uncanny); then he will put his etymological findings to the test with case studies and other examples of *Unheimlichkeit*. Both methods, Freud promises, will yield the same result: “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”¹ Freud’s linguistic account of the ambivalent opposition between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* shows that the familiar becomes uncanny when it appears to harbor some hidden evil.

The most literal translation of *heimlich* is “homely” in the sense of “belonging to the house or the family,” or “cozy.”² What belongs to the house and is familiar from one perspective, however, is “concealed” to the outsider or the one who does *not* belong to the house. As a continuation of this concealed aspect of the familiar, *heimlich* can even mean “secretive” or “deceitful.”³ This explains why what is *heimlich* is “inaccessible to knowledge:” what is *heimlich* is familiar to the person “belonging to the family,” but hidden from the outsider.⁴ To feel *heimlich* means to feel free from fear in a friendly, intimate setting where one is “withdrawn from the eyes of strangers.” Freud’s overview includes many additional shades of meaning, showing that the word *heimlich* is itself ambiguous. Though it always refers to the familiar, what is *heimlich* can be either homely or strange depending on one’s perspective. The familiar can appear as alien or even dangerous (as evidenced by the word “deceitful”), and so what is *heimlich* can become *unheimlich*, blurring the boundary separating the two “opposites.” The negative *unheimlich* Freud first defines as “eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear” is a clear opposite of *heimlich* as “familiar” or “cozy.” But the fear aroused in the uncanny is of a very particular kind: “‘*Unheimlich*’ is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”⁵ Freud concludes his etymological investigation into the uncanny: “Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”⁶ Both what is *heimlich* and what is *unheimlich* can have an element of danger because one suspects there is more to it than meets the eye. This hidden quality that makes the familiar uncanny is a suspected evil, all the more threatening because it manifests itself in everyday occurrences.

The evil detected in an uncanny experience is an evil that belongs “to the home” and is familiar. Freud writes: “This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the

mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”⁷ Something that used to be *heimlich*, familiar, homely, has become a source of *Unheimlichkeit* because it has been (unsuccessfully) repressed. According to Freud, the uncanny nature of the Sandman is explained by the repressed infantile fear of castration. Sarah Kofman successfully critiques Freud’s argument concerning the castration complex and points out that many other aspects play into the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hoffmann’s story. I will not, therefore, pursue the issue of repressed infantile complexes but focus on another source of *Unheimlichkeit* described by Freud: surmounted primitive beliefs.⁸ These are the kind of beliefs that, according to Freud, a rational person reasonably rejects, such as the belief in the evil eye or the belief that the ghosts of the dead will return. Even though reason tells one to reject these beliefs, traces of these old convictions remain and when one experiences something that appears to confirm the old beliefs, we feel uncanny. In “Fiction and Its Phantoms,” Hélène Cixous writes: “To surmount does not mean to expel: new convictions are sometimes overwhelmed by a return to the old beliefs which a real fact, such and such extraordinary coincidence, seems to confirm. . . the text of reality always uncaps it anew.”⁹ To further explain the suspicion of something evil at work in everyday reality, it serves to turn to the instances of the uncanny in Freud’s text, which find their source in these “old beliefs.”

Undeniable Instances of the Uncanny

Though Freud opens his essay with the statement that he feels compelled to investigate the phenomenon of *das Unheimliche*, a topic largely ignored in the field of aesthetics, he admits that he “must plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy of perception would be more in place.”¹⁰ This obtuseness need not be an obstacle, however, since Freud can turn to literary sources where one can find many instances of the uncanny recognizable even to those lacking in delicacy of perception. So it is for this reason that, after offering an etymological account of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in the first part of his essay, Freud turns to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* to explore the “qualities of feeling” related to the uncanny in the second part. In the third part of his essay, however, Freud completely ignores the “case” of the Sandman and offers several additional examples of the uncanny that make the reader question Freud’s supposed obtuseness in the matter. Furthermore, these additional examples can aid the understanding of the uncanny nature of *The Sandman*, and so I will discuss them before engaging Hoffmann’s story.

One of the examples in the third part of the essay runs as follows:

We naturally attach no importance to the event when we hand in an overcoat and get a cloakroom ticket with the number, let us say, 62; or when we find that our cabin on a ship bears that number. But the impression is altered if two such events, each in itself indifferent, happen close together – if we come across the number 62 several times in a single day, or if we begin to notice everything which has a number – addresses, hotel rooms, compartments in railway trains – invariably has the same one, or at all events one which contains the same figures. We do feel this to be uncanny. And unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition, he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number; he will take it, perhaps, as an indication of the span of life allotted to him.¹¹

As Cixous describes this passage, “an inanimate number can become an evil spirit,” but only if there is some trace left in us of the primitive belief in, for instance, a universe governed by hidden rules and patterns of which we now and then catch a glimpse. The obstinate recurrence of the number 62 in the above example is taken as evidence by those susceptible to the uncanny whose reaction would be something like: “So it is true that there exists a predestined order and that we can come to know it if we pay attention to the numbers we encounter in everyday existence!” Something as *heimlich* as a simple number becomes decidedly uncanny through repetition.

Freud then turns to even more forceful examples describing “undeniable instances of the uncanny.”¹² He mentions a neurotic who wishes to book a room in an establishment but cannot get the room of his choice because it is already occupied by an old gentleman. The neurotic is annoyed and says: “I wish he may be struck dead for it.” Two weeks later the old man dies, and the neurotic has the uncanny feeling that he has brought on the man’s death. Freud remarks that the *Unheimlichkeit* of this situation would have been stronger still if less time had elapsed between the neurotic expressing his annoyance and the man’s death. It turns out, however, that the neurotic and other patients like him are able to point to many similar incidents: they run into someone they were just thinking of, and they have presentiments of accidents or deaths. What makes these incidents uncanny is that it gives people the feeling that their mere thoughts can have a (dangerous) effect on reality, a belief Freud refers

to as the “omnipotence of thoughts.”¹³ About the possibility of affecting reality through thought, Freud writes:

We – or our primitive forefathers – once believed that these possibilities were realities, and were convinced that they actually happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation.¹⁴

When something happens that appears to confirm the belief that we *can* kill a person by a mere wish, or that there *is* a predestined order in which it has been decided that we will not live past sixty-two, we feel uncanny. Hitherto innocuous words and numbers suddenly appear to be linked to a hidden pattern or have the power to make an accident occur. Again: in order for this uncanny feeling to take hold, the old beliefs must be surmounted but not expelled; to the person immune to the uncanny, however, “the most remarkable coincidences, the most mysterious repetition of similar experiences – none of these things will disconcert him.”¹⁵

I now turn to an account of Hoffmann’s tale *The Sandman* in light of these preliminary remarks. Through an integration of Freud’s linguistic account of *das Unheimliche* and his consideration of surmounted primitive beliefs, I argue that in the uncanny one finds evidence for a hidden evil. This evil can only be glimpsed and suspected because it hides in the most familiar and everyday occurrences; it is not out in the open but secretively at work in and behind the pedestrian and commonplace. Those immune to the uncanny can easily explain it away, but as Freud suggests, these people are very few in number since by far most of us carry some trace of old beliefs that are triggered by any “evidence” provided by new experiences.

The Sandman

Referring to Freud’s discussion of Hoffmann’s fictional tale *The Sandman*, Cixous writes: “Freud’s own text, here, functions *like* a fiction.”¹⁶ It is Freud’s opinion that writers can create uncanny situations better than anyone else, and Cixous suggests that Freud, too, wants to provide a literary answer to the enigma of the uncanny. Freud recounts the story of Nathaniel, the protagonist of *The Sandman*, as a “case history,” making

it into a “linear, logical account.”¹⁷ This explains one of the most striking aspects of Freud’s account, namely that the narrator of the original story has disappeared entirely. As Neil Hertz remarks in “Freud and the Sandman,” the narrator has been replaced by Freud himself.¹⁸ And as Cixous argues, this selective retelling eradicates all doubt, leaving no room for intellectual uncertainty.¹⁹ Freud also ignores the particular structure of the story: *The Sandman* opens with three letters, giving it an air of authenticity, and it is only after these letters that the narrator makes himself heard and explains that he could only begin the story of Nathaniel by not beginning at all, that is, to open the story with the three letters between Nathaniel, Lothaire, and Clara.²⁰ The reader of Hoffmann’s story first encounters only the letter writers and their account of the events, while the reader of Freud’s *summary* of the story knows from the beginning which interpretations can be trusted, and which should be dismissed. The readers of Freud’s essay who have read only Freud’s summary, and not Hoffmann’s tale itself, are therefore not experiencing the intellectual uncertainty created by the opening letters. My retelling of the story, however, is not meant primarily as a critique of Freud’s summary and treatment of *The Sandman*, but as an investigation of evil as it appears in the experience of the uncanny. In what follows it will become clear that this approach to evil benefits far more from Freud’s remarks on the uncanny outside of his discussion of *The Sandman* than from his explanation of the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hoffmann’s story in terms of the castration complex.

The Sandman opens with a letter from Nathaniel to his friend Lothaire. Nathaniel writes that “dark forebodings of a cruel, threatening fate tower over me like dark clouds” as the result of a “horrible occurrence:” the visit of a barometer dealer named Coppola. Nathaniel explains the “circumstances of the most peculiar kind” that made this seemingly trivial event take on this measure of importance. When Nathaniel was young, he writes, someone used to come to the house on certain evenings to visit his father. The children only heard this person’s step and never saw him when he arrived; before they could catch a glimpse, their mother sent them off to bed with the words: “Now, children, to bed – to bed! The Sandman’s coming, I can see.” Nathaniel was not reassured by his mother’s explanation that the Sandman was not a real person but only a way of saying that Nathaniel was sleepy and needed to go to bed. His nurse gave him a far more satisfactory picture of the Sandman:

He is a wicked man, who comes to children when they won’t go to bed, and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they

start out bleeding from their heads. He puts their eyes in a bag and carries them to the crescent moon to feed his own children, who sit in the nest up there. They have crooked beaks like owls so that they can pick up the eyes of naughty human children.

When Nathaniel got older he realized that the nurse's tale could not be true, but he never managed to completely overcome his fear of the Sandman, and the strange, evening visits to his father continued to both scare and fascinate him. One night Nathaniel decided to hide in a cupboard in his father's room to get a view of the mysterious visitor and found out that the Sandman was in fact the hideous advocate Coppelius, a friend of his father who always took pleasure in scaring him and his siblings and taking away their appetite at dinner with his disgusting presence. For Nathaniel, the Sandman now no longer was the boggy from the nurse's tale, but "a hideous, spectral monster, who brought with him grief, misery and destruction – temporal and eternal – wherever he appeared." Coppelius and Nathaniel's father set to work in the study and started a fire in a hidden hearth. From his hiding place, Nathaniel thought he saw human faces in the fireplace, with holes where the eyes should be. When he heard Coppelius roar: "Eyes here eyes!," Nathaniel shrieked and was caught by the lawyer who dragged him to the fire place. Nathaniel describes in his letter how Coppelius was about to sprinkle red-hot coals into his eyes when his father begged his friend to stop; instead, Coppelius screws off Nathaniel's hands and feet and then puts them back on again mumbling "There's something wrong here... But now it's as good as ever. The old man knew what he was doing!"²¹ Nathaniel loses consciousness and when he wakes Coppelius is said to have left town. The family was happy now that the evening visits had ended until, about a year later, Coppelius returned for one last time. During the night there was an explosion and Nathaniel's father was found dead in his study; Coppelius had disappeared. This story about his childhood leads Nathaniel back to his "dark forebodings:" the barometer dealer whose visit had upset Nathaniel, now a student, was none other than Coppelius. Nathaniel claims that the former lawyer has now taken on the name Coppola and works as an optician.

A letter from Clara, Nathaniel's fiancée and Lothaire's sister, follows Nathaniel's letter. It turns out that Nathaniel distractedly addressed to Clara the letter he had meant for Lothaire, and so it is Clara who writes in response. About the "dark fatality" Nathaniel described she says that "all the terrible things of which you speak occurred merely in your own mind, and had little to do with the actual external world." She insists that

there must be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all the events that occurred: Coppelius and Nathaniel's father were conducting alchemical experiments which led to the explosion, and Coppola just reminds Nathaniel of the awful man whom he holds responsible for his father's death. Clara suspects that her letter will not please Nathaniel and that he will blame her for seeing only "the variegated surface of the world" and having a "cold nature. . . impervious to any ray of the mysterious." But Clara emphasizes that she, too, believes in the possibility of a "dread power which endeavors to destroy us in our own selves," but that if there is indeed such a power, it can only take hold because we ourselves "grant it the room which it requires to accomplish its secret work." She sums up her advice to Nathaniel: "Be convinced that these strange fears have no power over you, and that it is only a belief in their hostile influence that can make them hostile in reality." She adds that she will scare away Coppelius with "loud peals of laughter" and that "he shall neither spoil my sweetmeats as an advocate, nor my eyes as a Sandman."

Nathaniel writes back not to Clara but to Lothaire, dismissing Clara's "philosophical epistle" and mocking her "intelligent professorial definitions." Nathaniel claims no longer to believe that Coppola and Coppelius are the same person anyway, yet he still feels ill at ease as a result of the barometer dealer's visit. In the same letter, Nathaniel describes his first sight of Olympia, the mysterious daughter of Spalanzani, the physics professor. He cuts short his account of Olympia, however, and announces that he may just as well tell Lothaire about her in person when he returns home in two weeks.

At this point in the story there is a sudden shift in perspective. The three letters have followed each other without explanation, but now a narrator appears who says he felt compelled to tell us of Nathaniel's life but could not find a way to open his story; this is why he chose to "not begin at all" and have the story start with the three letters instead. This narrator now continues the story about Nathaniel's return to Lothaire and Clara. Initially, Nathaniel appears to have forgotten his gloomy thoughts, but soon it becomes clear to those around him that "everything, his whole life, had become to him a dream and a foreboding, and he was always saying that man, although he might think himself free, only served for the cruel sport of dark powers." Nathaniel further claims that one cannot resist these powers and that one is better off resigning oneself to one's fate. "Clear-headed" Clara has no patience for what she calls Nathaniel's mysticism. About Coppelius she says: "so long as you believe in him, he really exists and exerts his influence; his power lies only in your belief."

Nathaniel in turn lectures her on a variety of doctrines of evil to which she responds that Nathaniel himself is an evil principle with a hostile effect on her coffee – if he does not stop reading to her, “none of you will get any breakfast.” Clara finds Nathaniel’s dark stories increasingly tedious, and even to Nathaniel himself the picture of the Sandman is starting to fade until he revives the image of Coppelius in a poem. In this poem, Nathaniel is about to be married to Clara but Coppelius appears, takes Clara’s eyes, throws them into Nathaniel’s chest, and then throws Nathaniel into a “fiery circle” where he spins around as in a hurricane. Clara screams that she still has her eyes and that what burnt Nathaniel’s breast were drops of blood from his own heart, but when the circle stops spinning and Nathaniel looks at Clara, “it is death that looks kindly upon him from her eyes.”

Nathaniel is scared of his own creation when he first reads the poem to himself, but soon this feeling is replaced by satisfaction and he goes to Clara to read her. She expects another tedious tale about evil but then sees how an “internal fire deeply reddened his cheeks” and “tears flowed from his eyes.” She asks him to throw the poem into the fire after which he calls her an “inanimate, accursed automaton” and runs off.

After a reconciliation with Clara, Nathaniel returns to his room in the city where he again encounters Coppola. He is afraid at first but decides to put his fear aside as he promised Clara and even buys a small spy-glass from him. Through it, he can look at Spalanzani’s daughter Olympia who sits very still in her room across the street nearly every day. After Nathaniel receives an invitation to a grand party organized by Spalanzani to introduce his strangely secluded daughter to the public, Nathaniel spends the entire evening with Olympia. In conversation, she never even looks away from his face and listens to him without the slightest interruption except the occasional sigh “ah, ah!” Spalanzani appears pleased with the connection between his daughter and Nathaniel, but Nathaniel’s friend Sigismund lets him know that everybody else thinks there is something wrong with Olympia, who is referred to as a “wooden doll” and a “wax face.” She moves like a wound-up clockwork, Sigismund says: “we all find your Olympia quite uncanny, and prefer to have nothing to do with her. She seems to act like a living being, and yet has some strange peculiarity of her own.” Nathaniel responds: “Olympia may appear uncanny to you, cold, prosaic man. . . She utters few words, it is true, but these few words appear as genuine hieroglyphics of the inner world, full of love and deep knowledge of the spiritual life, and contemplation of the eternal beyond.” Never had he known such an

admirable listener, the narrator adds.

Nathaniel has forgotten all about Clara and is about to propose marriage to Olympia when he finds her father, Spalanzani, fighting the optician Coppola in Olympia's room. The two men are tugging on opposite ends of what appears to be a female figure. Coppola turns out to be the stronger and takes off with the figure slung over his shoulder. Nathaniel "had seen but too plainly that Olympia's waxen, deathly-pale countenance had no eyes, but black wholes instead – she was, indeed, a lifeless doll." Spalanzani cries: "After him – after him – what are you waiting for? Coppelius, Coppelius – has robbed my of my best automaton – a work of twenty years . . . – the clockwork – the speech – the walk, mine; the eyes stolen from you." Nathaniel indeed sees a pair of eyes lying on the ground and when Spalanzani throws the eyes at Nathaniel's chest madness seizes him and he screams "ho – ho – ho – a circle of fire! Of fire! Spin round, circle!" while attacking the professor. Friends restrain Nathaniel and bring him first to the insane asylum and then home to Clara and Lothaire.

Nathaniel again recovers and comes to appreciate the "heavenly purity" of Clara's mind. Walking around in the small town where they now live, Clara and Nathaniel decide to climb the town hall steeple. At the top, Nathaniel takes from his pocket the little spy glass he had bought from Coppola to look at a "curious little grey bush" Clara points out in the distance. Putting the telescope to his eyes, Nathaniel finds Clara in the way of the lens. Nathaniel lets out horrible laughter as he cries "Spin round, wooden doll! – spin round!" and tries to throw Clara down from the tower. Lothaire rushes up and saves her, but when people down at the ground prepare to go up to restrain the mad Nathaniel, the advocate Coppelius has arrived at the scene and says: "Ha, ha – just wait – he will soon come down of his own accord." Nathaniel spots Coppelius from the top of the tower, yells out "Ah, pretty eyes – pretty eyes!" and jumps to his death. Coppelius disappears in the crowd.

Repetition and Disquieting Strangeness

In Freud's summary of the story, a few things stand out. He conflates Nathaniel's first encounter with Coppola with the second, omits the scene in which Coppelius rearranges Nathaniel's limbs, and makes no reference to Nathaniel's dark poem. Furthermore, Freud states that "we may suppose" that Nathaniel sees Coppelius through the spy glass on top of the tower, whereas in fact Nathaniel sees Clara who was standing

in between Nathaniel and the “curious little grey bush.” Nathaniel sees Coppola only after Clara has been rescued and brought down from the tower. Contrary to Freud’s account, it appears that it is the sight of Clara through Coppola’s telescope which brings on the last fit of madness in Nathaniel.²² Furthermore, Freud insists that the end of the story makes clear that Coppola and Coppelius are the same person and that “there is no question, therefore, of any intellectual uncertainty here.”²³ Freud argues that since, on the one hand, there is no doubt at the end of the story about the identity of Coppola and Coppelius, and, on the other, the uncanny effect of the story remains even though the intellectual uncertainty has been resolved, intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the uncanny effect of the story. This argument is problematic because even at the end of the story it remains unclear whether Coppola and Coppelius were indeed the same person. Freud therefore cannot legitimately use this supposed identity to support his claim. More importantly, I argue that intellectual uncertainty is at the very core of both the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hoffmann’s story and Freud’s own suggestions elsewhere in his essay.

Kofman explains that Freud’s quick conclusion about the Sandman’s identity at the end of his account is understandable since the end of the story appears to suggest that Nathaniel’s perspective was right. Still, his perspective remains just that, one perspective among others, and it is therefore not decisive : « il y a peut-être, ici, une coïncidence tout à fait “étrange” entre le fantasme et la réalité. »²⁴ The end is ambiguous, and doubt about the Sandman remains.

Neil Hertz’ remarks support this reading of the story: in answer to the question “Is the tale psychological or daemonic?” he suggests that Nathaniel’s compulsion is neither “exactly exterior and ‘daemonic’” nor “exactly inner and psychological.”²⁵ Nathaniel and Clara present the two sides of this ambiguity: Nathaniel claims to be a plaything of dark powers; Clara claims that the dark powers are within ourselves or even identical with us.

In his essay, Freud observes that “the factor of the repetition of the same thing will perhaps not appeal to everyone as a source of uncanny feeling.”²⁶ We must recognize, however, that under certain circumstances repetition is very likely to arouse an uncanny feeling, even in Sigmund Freud himself, who earlier claimed to be “obtuse” in these matters and relatively insensitive to the uncanny. Freud’s examples, it is implied, should convey an uncanny feeling even to the obtuse. Freud describes

how someone who is caught in a mist and trying to find one's way home keeps returning to the same spot one is trying to get away from; in another example someone collides with the same piece of furniture time and again in a dark room.²⁷ About these examples Freud says: "It is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of 'chance.'"²⁸ Surprisingly, Freud does not use this insight in his discussion of Hoffmann's story. As Kofman points out, Hoffmann shows that *la folie* and *la raison* are not neatly separated, but Freud sides with Nathaniel's perspective precisely because this allows him to draw a neat distinction between the two.²⁹ The fantastic and reality coincide, and it is impossible to establish clear distinctions between the real and the imaginary: "brouillage particulièrement apte à provoquer, selon Freud, l'inquiétante étrangeté."³⁰ Everyday reality takes on an uncanny aspect, I have suggested, when one is not sure whether the evil forces one suspects are merely a product of the imagination; it is because the evil is hidden in and behind everyday existence that it takes on its disquieting nature. Freud's examples of undeniably uncanny situations all concern seemingly innocent phenomena that suddenly appear to mask an inescapable evil.

Conclusion: Diabolical Mimesis

Nathaniel clearly takes some sort of pleasure in this sense of hidden evil. His correspondence permits him to masochistically and narcissistically re-enact his past without the possibility of interruption by his reasonable fiancée.³¹ In his dark poem Nathaniel seeks to revive the evil forces and impress them upon others. Even when he was young and kept drawing pictures of the Sandman he was purposefully reviving his horror. Fiction, and in particular his own work, appears to have a stronger effect on Nathaniel than life itself: he brings himself to tears with his own poem. Kofman introduces the concept of « diabolical mimesis » to emphasize the dangerous nature of these creations : « La littérature comme mimésis que se substitue à la vie est une perversion de la créature qui rivalise avec Dieu : Mimésis diabolique. »³² Nathaniel's actions reflect the diabolical nature of this type of mimesis when he calls Clara an automaton and desires to marry the doll Olympia. Nathaniel's relationship to Olympia is the inverse of his relationship to his real-life fiancée. What Nathaniel wants is « une femme inerte et frigide, pur miroir de lui-même, qui puisse donc écouter ses poèmes sans protester. »³³ It is exactly Nathaniel's love

for his «creatures » that allows him to confuse the inanimate with the animate because it is he who gives them life.³⁴

It could be suggested that, in line with Kofman's remarks, one should label the uncanny instances central to Freud's argument diabolical repetitions. The doubling and repetition which bring on uncanny experiences are diabolical because they appear to point at evil forces at work behind the scenery of everyday human existence. It is important to recognize this diabolical nature of the uncanny because it helps us understand the threatening and alienating effects of an evil that is hidden and secretive. The phenomenon of the uncanny itself, on the other hand, should be understood as a foreboding or suspicion of evil; without reference to evil, I have argued, the discussion about the uncanny ignores what the uncanny experience is an experience *of*: secretive, hidden evil.

Notes

1 Freud, "The Uncanny," (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr., ed., rev. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1971); reprinted as an appendix to Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")," *New Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 3, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 1976), 620.

2 621

3 622

4 624

5 630

6 624

7 634

8 639

9 Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")," *New Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 3, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 1976), 545-6

10 620. As Sarah Kofman points out, this could lead one to wonder why Freud feels compelled to understand the uncanny if it does not affect him. Sarah Kofman, « Le double e(s)t le diable, » *Quatre romans analytiques* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1973), 139.

11 Freud, 632. Cixous remarks that Freud had himself reached the age of 62 as he was writing "The Uncanny." 644, note 17. Also: "This banal evocation of the little mysteries of everyday experience shows how an inanimate number can become an evil spirit." 541

12 632

13 633

14 639

15 639

16 Cixous, 531

17 Cixous, 533

18 Neil Hertz, "Freud and the Sandman," *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*. (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009), 304.

19 Cixous, 533-5

20 See also Hertz, 306.

21 Kofman: Les paroles prononcées par Coppélius sont celles d'un rival de Dieu (le vieux) qui constate, avec dépit, son échec dans sa tentative de faire mieux que lui. Kofman adds that Nathaniel is not being castrated but rearranged ; he is being treated as if he were a machine with separate parts. Kofman, 163.

22 Kofman suggests that what Nathaniel sees through the spy glass is Clara as he described her in his poem, "death looking kindly upon him from her eyes." Kofman, 151

23 Freud, 628

24 Kofman, 150.

25 Hertz, 309, 307.

26 Freud, 631.

27 Freud in Italy: three times he finds himself in "a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt." 631

28 Freud, 631-2

29 It is exactly the "brouillage des limites du normal et du pathologique, de l'imaginaire et du réel, que situe *L'homme au sable* plutôt dans les oeuvres du premier type d'inquiétante étrangeté que dans celles du second. »152

30 Kofman, 158

31 Kofman, 155

32 Kofman, 159. This, of course, is why Coppola could only create Olympia by stealing Nathaniel's eyes: the eye in Hoffmann's story creates life, but only an artificial life. Nathaniel always sees double, unable to distinguish the real from the imaginary, the animated from the inanimate. Lunettes and lorgnettes always function as temptations and Nathaniel has an irrepressible desire to see.

33 Kofman, 160.

34 Kofman, 160. This, of course, is why Coppola could only create Olympia by stealing Nathaniel's eyes: the eye in Hoffmann's story creates life, but only an artificial life. Nathaniel always sees double, unable to distinguish the real from the imaginary, the animated from the inanimate. Lunettes and lorgnettes always function as temptations and Nathaniel has an irrepressible desire to see.

Poetry

Alison Swan

Catalogue

Look at me, standing
flatfooted on library tile
between card catalogue files
and plate-glass windows
turned mirror by night,

reflecting row upon row of
little wooden drawers with
tiny brass pulls and frames,
holding wee paper labels
marked, for instance, Aa-Ab.

Look at the beige linoleum,
so highly polished it reflects
every lettered label and
my shadow self standing,
flatfooted, imagining

I pull *Jude the Obscure* from
my blue knapsack, tear out
a page then fold it in half,
in quarters, then eighths,
each crease seeded with words.

Look at me looking at
the card catalogue files,
imagining I curl my index
finger under one hook and
pull a drawer open to

scores of thumbbed cards,
every single one hole-punched

and slipped onto a brass rod
anchored to a drawer and
joined with a book here,

under this same roof,
because capable hands, with
their capable fingers, once
held each book and typed
an ink record onto paper.

This is how we indexed
records of our knowledge.
This is where we arranged it.
And this is where he was walking
and where I was walking, too,

brimming with unuttered
words and hauling a knapsack
heavy with papers and books
through the corridor between
cards and mirrors,

reflecting us standing there,
where I'm thinking about
flipping a drawer of cards
forward and dropping one
folded page into the space in back.

Look at me stopped, knowing
the concrete planters outside
the windows were growing
shrubs simply from dirt and
fountain water climbed the air.

I'm noticing this from far
in the inscrutable future, because
this is where I was walking
and he was walking and
she was walking and where

we all stopped together on
the polished linoleum in

front of the reflective glass
and rows upon rows of
card catalogue files where my

whole body relaxed into the
same goddamned space he'd
left it in over and over again,
my heart really rather
suddenly feeling like a

peony bud, my chest cavity
too small to hold the blossom
it would become, because they
stopped too, his hands and
fingers on her shoulders.

Look at us, standing next to
the calling cards of countless
books, packed into dark
wooden boxes. The page from
Jude almost left in the one

that happens to be the one
that's never opened again,
my fingers already preparing
to stop a certain kind of
touching forever alongside

an index of practically
everything important that's
already been read.

The Ecology of Art

Adina was twelve when we lived in Cambridge.
I think I saw her riding her bike in Inman Square.
I think she liked the 1996 winter of so much snow
and imagined a place with winter nights like ours,
dark and wide-horizoned like her paintings
I found in this magazine mailed from Boston.

I turn to those images now with a start of familiarity
and think of her turning to the pages of her own copy,
imagining someone like me in the snowed-under
flatlands, someone admiring her paintings,
their horizon lines studded with the silhouettes
of houses, barns, trees, sliver of mailbox, fence;

someone remembering Cambridge, Mass., where
the sides of buildings tower and crowd, so
I learned to turn the edges of all the leaves
of the Brahmin maples into horizons,
one single tree an entire world onto itself,
one black-and-white warbler an orbiting moon.

Phillip Barron

The problem of history

Under sky's gray lid
black birds spot the yellow safety rails
framing the site of creation.
Sunday morning at the quarry
caws weigh heavy in humid air
thread the silent gantries
conveyance belts poised
to tumble granite upward
deliver the foundations of kingdom
from layered contingency
to the steepest angles of solidity.
Time was digging a pit.

The gate which may never open
may never have been open.
In the silence of machined boundaries
in the absence of a mechanism
we trespass in a place
that asks not to be kept.

The problem of identity

a cleaner sort of lastingness - Linda Gregerson

There would have come a time
when all the wood was new.
Rotted planks replaced

so as not to forget a debt
paid in voyages. The ship

of semaphores killed both
Minotaur and king,
was it still the trireme

of Theseus? The curious
constructed another
from the saved planks of the first.

Its blackened boards
weaken with each passing day

the conviction that identity's
vessel is reflection
in a vanity mirror. If both

sit moored at port,
then which is the ship
of Theseus?

What stories build
and a city saves
might be another sort

of self, the distance
between the first
draft and memory's lapse.

Perhaps the city renewed
the ship with a different
lastingness in mind, to recall

not the children saved,
but the ones lost to his restlessness —
the lover he deceived,

the father he killed,
the sentinel to the city of Dis,
and the beast he became.

There came a time
when all the ships renewed.
Fresh paint covered rust

so hulls could move on.
A city pays its debt in festival.

Ships freighted
with a trough economy
of the gantry crane,

was this still the work
of Theseus? Stevedores
construct another

ballast in imitation of labor
to pass the day's

arbitration. Is this a ship
to stay executions or one
whose black sails endure?

Tended flame embargoes
thoughts of blame
in a cacophony of mistakes.

What stories build
and a city saves
might be another sort

of self, the distance
between the first
draft and memory's lapse.

Perhaps language raises
the dead from language.
Translators decide which

sails to raise, whether
to say a text has been slain
or to owe a debt to the past.

Some translators forget
to change the sails.
Others decide not to.

David Wolf

From Sablier
(The Objectivist in the Land of the Fauves)

1.

I warned you against sleep in this hour's light
and slept myself.

a weathered green shutter swinging open to a violet glow

2.

At the café across the street, the chef arrives for work,
kissing the waitress in camouflage
hello.

Zinc-tainted wine's closing beam of day—
cracked tile or
spider?

Spider.

Another answer: the little girl on the beach this morning
feeding pebbles to her doll,

pigeons huddled in the wind, eyeing speech's damp sketch.

3.

Once more the carriage was placed back of the horse, rousing some
birdsong.

And so the squeaking wheels in my dream turned out to be that tree
full of birds, just before dawn.

4.

Let the tune from the unseen café, the glance of your passing, scurry
along noon's lit railing,
this brief sky my province.

From the balcony: a smattering of love below in the narrow streets—

Snatch
of a cloud
seems to steam from the tiled rooftops.

White gold of a commanding idea, blessedly you elude me, milliner to
the air.

5.

Sly meadow, deep in the confines of the mind, blows to a firm glaze gone
bust.

A broiled wave slips in, bans its own return, bubbles a summons to leap
all habit.

Daft pine, the birds seem to love your beret.

Floodlit gnarly self, unfit for the banquet,
go, it's time.

Forget again
this evening
all's demise

6.

The little wind pushed open the broad door.
The door let in the little wind.
And through the swung pane: *September's champagne light.*

7.

Knives, forks, crosses clink behind me.

I turn to see the dead bloom of war
and the seed's pitch romancing like black ice.

When you're just a polished, mottled shell
longing for the air brushed by the fern...
(sea wave in the dark, I forgot to say I heard you; lucky you, you can't
care),
oil and gold just stink of anger and doubt
(...and even when you are not).

Beauty disavows the empire.

*Rose nuzzling a green chili
in the parade's passing shadow.*

Hey, and there's Mars, that prick
of red starlight
deepening
in late summer's dusk.

*From Sablier
(Time Coming Round)*

1.

Goat-jester of a cloud, go ahead and laugh at all my old tethers.

The long form of the world flutters:
a fly's shadow against the lit weave of the blind,
the blue in the bend of the nail, bullets ringing in another day.

Better to be moved to say that the high bridges of the world have never
shaken hands.

Well, I'll be
disciplined as the wine's joy, tooling through the void.

Picked up some explanations, held some, tossed a bunch.

I once spat abstraction, insensitive to the lord's distress but who knew?

Just as a smile's gap can prove particulate...

up came the sun and out came the red of the barn.

2.

I intuit from the dream of the painting of the lost fountain,
some snarl and sweetness in the water.
"Horror, conviviality: this was how we purled," the colors seemed to say.

Dodder your way back from the past tense to dig
a garden of fear, redemption, kissed fruit, flesh aloft in the spirit of the
real hour,
done and not done like any season.

The air is here, the leaf is there, the jewels are in the trash.

sure feels like we sweep to no end known

ça va?

amen

3.

Vowed some late-summer nonchalance and ended up the featheredge I
just can't dull.

The thermostat snaps its fingers.
Indifference is just kindling.
We've all got bundles.

Mist over the morass: rustled interior:
Mother to all ferment, my fancy leaps the folds, free of cosmology's
twinkling shtick,
the jammed spur of bitterness and the goo of the real.

I remember waking in a fever, charged to demystify
why the wrenched imperatives of the obfuscatory Real seemed so
harmonious of late,
so transparently embracive of mercy, air, love—

*early autumn night—
the leafless locust tree now
budding with stars*

4.

No need to tell light's loose accord from haze's shimmer showered
through with rain's
brief passing—

Doesn't mean time's not here
to say it again:

O dizzy rose, o dizzy, dizzy rose

A quick turn like history might agree:
once a cracked stone (enclosure's symbol), how long a cracked stone?

Day, may all grow close once more.

5.

Time keeps fiddling with its initials, miry as much as wiry.

Down in the valley full of being, nothingness,
some geese fly over—

Were you seeking to refrain from singing, “Time keeps altering its
signature,”
afloat there in your leafy river of buoyant liaison?

The wind sounds vague as any dynasty I’ve ever known.

Harvest moon, shine down through the drafty binaries.

6.

Foggy runes of pine:
dead buck or bramble
up ahead?

I feel weakened
like the old hammock
that holds only so many excuses.

Love, willow, rain-drift,
love—

let’s fall,

remain?

Notes on Contributors

Phillip Barron's first book of poetry, *What Comes from a Thing*, won the 2015 Michael Rubin Book Award and will be published by Fourteen Hills Press. Elsewhere, his writing appears or is forthcoming in *New American Writing*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Orion*, *Saw Palm*, and *Radical Philosophy Review*.

Eric Boynton is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Allegheny College in Western, Pennsylvania. He is both chair of the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department and Director of Interdisciplinarity. His research involves the study of Continental figures such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt and his interests include the question of evil, current debates in meta-ethics, and the relation of philosophy, art, film, and theology. He has published articles on the Continental philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and film. In addition to guest-editing this special issue of the journal *Janus Head* on contemporary considerations of evil and is currently working on his third edited volume titled: "Trauma and Transcendence: Limits of Theory and Prospects in Thinking" with Fordham University Press. In 2006, Boynton was awarded the Thoburn Award for Excellence in Teaching and in 2015 the Jullian Ross Award for Excellence in Teaching.

John D. Caputo is the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus (Syracuse University) and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus (Villanova University). His latest books are *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, (Indiana UP, 2013), which explores the theological implications of Derrida's notion of "peut-être;" and *Truth* (Penguin, 2013). His newest book, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* is forthcoming from Fortress Press in the fall, 2015.

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Eric Severson is a philosopher specializing in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. He is author of the books *Levinas’s Philosophy of Time* (Duchesne University Press, 2013) and *Scandalous Obligation* (Beacon Hill Press, 2011), and editor of several other works. He lives in Kenmore, Washington with his wife Misha and their three children, and currently teaches for both Seattle University and Seattle Pacific University.

Alison Swan’s poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in many publications, including her second chapbook of poems *Before the Snow Moon* (Alice Greene & Co.), *North American Review*, and *TriQuarterly*. Her book *Fresh Water: Women Writing on the Great Lakes* (Michigan State University Press) is a Library of Michigan Notable Book. An award-winning environmental activist, she teaches environmental studies at Western Michigan University.

Victor E. Taylor is department chair and professor of English and humanities at York College of Pennsylvania. His areas of scholarly interest are in comparative literature, philosophy, religious theory, and civic humanities. He is co-founder and executive editor of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, the director of academic publishing for Davies Group, Publishers, director of the YCP Center for Civic Arts and Humanities, and the co-founder, with Carl A. Raschke, of *The Global Art and Ideas Nexus* (www.global-art-ideas.com), a digital institute. He is currently working on book manuscript entitled *Jesus, The Plural Subject*.

David Wolf is the author of four collections of poetry: *Open Season*, *The Moment Forever*, *Sablier I*, and *Sablier II* (forthcoming). His work has appeared in *The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poet & Critic*, *River Styx Magazine*, and numerous other literary magazines and journals. He lives in Des Moines, Iowa, and is Chair and Professor of English at Simpson College.