

Rice University

What Mystics May Come
Forming More Perfect Unions from Pragmatism to Posthumanism

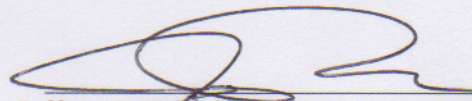
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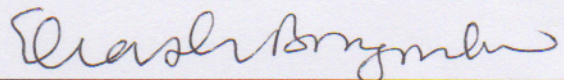
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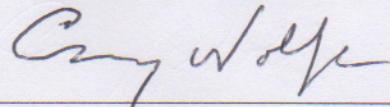
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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, after the American Civil War but before the World Wars, William James and others drew on the wisdom of the World's religious traditions, especially the "mystical languages of unsaying," to construct the modern category of mysticism, in part to provide a common core around which divided peoples might rally in the hopes of forming a more perfect union—both religiously and politically. Over one hundred years later, postmodern theorists turn to unknowingness as a resource rather than a threat to aid in our efforts to honor others. My dissertation examines such recent appropriations of ancient unsaying, but moves beyond the merely linguistic and logical to analyze the embodied and emplaced through comparing what I call mystical and mundane modes of undoing, such as Jamesian pragmatic participation in a pluralistic universe (Chapter 1); orthodox and heterodox, Eastern and Western embodiments of cosmic vibrations from ancient gnosis, through Christian mystical theology, to Allen Ginsberg's poetry (Chapter 2); the yearning for more life meaning in African American religiosity represented by Howard Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Sojourner Truth (Chapter 3); and democratic theorizing from feminists to posthumanists (Chapter 4). With creative collisions of apparently disparate thinkers who nevertheless share similar dynamics of embracing "spiritual but not religious" practices, I seek to move discussions of the mystical forward through developing resources for understanding and transforming dynamics of oppression such as gender, race, class, species, and other issues of embodied difference. Using Jacques Derrida as a bridge figure, I counter what I call the linguistic misread of deconstruction to advocate for more aware participation in an embodied mode of experiencing a generative vulnerability that is absolutely universal. Understood anew, embodied finitude may provide resources for promoting justice by uniting around a different kind of common core—a common core of no common core. Indeterminateness, then, may mean daring to unknow ourselves and our others through participation in a mystery beyond clear cut divisions—immanent and transcendent, material and immaterial, male and female, human and animal.

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
–Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

Let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being *transformed from glory to glory*, and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, and never arriving at any limit of perfection. For that perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth in good, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation.
–Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*

P.S. I add that the capacity for perfection is within us,
but that in a few million years we will have developed our capacities to near perfection.
Also, by perfection I really don't mean god. I'm hazy on this point. Say, “more-perfect.”
(“To form a more perfect Union, establish justice,” etc.)
–Allen Ginsberg, *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*

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Introduction **Re-Deeming**

It may be that what is right and what is good consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, in knowing unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and in recognizing the sign of life in what we undergo without certainty about what will come.
—Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

The “more,” as we called it, and the meaning of our “union” with it,
form the nucleus of our inquiry.
—William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*

Many years later, as I faced the sixth through twelfth grade students in the Episcopal church in Austin, Texas, where I worked as their youth minister for eight years, I was to remember that distant afternoon when a brain injury took me into blindness and amnesia for eight hours.¹ At that time, I was six years old and had gone to ride bikes with my big brother. And just like everyone else back then, we wore no helmets. Riding hard to keep up with him, I jumped off of a root wrong and hit my head on a rock. The blow caused my brain to swell in such a way that I could not see, or remember who I was. Someone told me afterwards that I spent the entire time asking for my mother. For hours and hours I kicked and screamed and struggled to get away and get home to mom.

What I know now is that my mother was the one holding me the whole time. She drove us to the park to ride that day. She was there when it happened. She rushed me immediately to the hospital. And she hugged me while I was kicking and crying for her. In the dark and not knowing where or who I was, I called out for the very love that was embracing me all the while.

¹ The structure of this beginning sentence alludes to the beginning of one of my favorite books—*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” And, yes, such an allusion suggests that talking to teenagers about God is not entirely unlike facing a firing squad.

How different should we deem my blindness and amnesia in the embrace of my mother from the “darkness of unknowing” of much mystical theology, which declares love to be the deepest current of creation, whether we recognize it or not? Such a thought of love as more core to us than we are to ourselves may be seen as connected to the mystical element of religion—the interconnection of the human and the transcendent. Attending to what we may deem as mystical, this dissertation interrogates the interrelations of us and our (m)o/Other(s), and their implications for religion, ethics, politics, and human difference.

A standard psychoanalytic interpretation could diagnose my amnesia story as revealing the basic thrust of the mystical to be the desire to reclaim the unity felt in a mother’s embrace. Coming from the Greek *muo*, meaning “to close,” as in to close one’s eyes, *mystikos* in earliest usage appears to gesture to the hidden rituals of initiation into ancient cultic practice, and came in Christian parlance to refer to the hidden meaning of scripture and participation in the liturgy which could yield perception into the hidden depths of the cosmos as centered in Christ.² But rather than perception of hidden depths of texts or reality, followers of Freud, argues William B. Parsons in his book, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism*, “cast doubt on any transcendent source, interpreting metaphysical claims as projections of developmentally specific modes of apprehension.”³ Instead of a common core of some transcendent realm being experienced, “fluctuations in mystical texts are explained,” Parsons continues, “as cultural elaborations of a universal experience: the unity the infant feels

² See Louis Bouyer, “Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word,” in *Understanding Mysticism: Its Meaning, Its Methodology, Interpretation in World Religions, Psychological Evaluations, Philosophical and Theological Appraisals*, ed. Richard Woods (New York: Doubleday Image, 1980). For a discussion of the liturgical location of the mystical in patristic Christianity, see Alexander Golitzin’s, “‘Suddenly, Christ’: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites,” in Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, eds., *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003).

³ William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), 10.

with the nurturing breast of the mother.”⁴ This “received view” of the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation of the mystical would be much more nuanced, Parsons convincingly argues, with attention to issues arising from the thought of a French writer with whom Freud corresponded—Romain Rolland.

Rolland advocates for the legitimacy of experiencing what he dubbed “the *Oceanic*,” a marker of which is to be absolutely disinterested in welcoming what may come:

What I *desire* is: *Nothing* . . . (Nothing, *for me*). As for others, may their desires be fulfilled! But I do not aspire to anything more, for myself, other than repose and effacement, unlimited and total. I have labored enough in my life . . . But I add that, whatever can become of it, I am prepared for all that may come. I would not be French, if it were not inscribed in my character: “*Do what you must*” (or, more accurately: “*Be what you must*”) “*come what may!*”.

I am therefore telling you that my feeling—or intuition—(or whatever one calls it)—“*Oceanic*”—is absolutely disinterested!⁵

In response to such proclamations of mystical knowing, Freud writes that he is “not an out-and-out skeptic.”⁶ Indeed, he seeks commonality in *not* knowing: “Of one thing I am absolutely positive: there are certain things we cannot know now.”⁷ Whether mystically or scientifically, admitting our shared ignorance seems to provide epistemological common ground apart from disputed sacred ground.

Though it is beyond the scope of my project to further discuss the Freud-Rolland exchange, I mention it here in order to introduce my agreement with Parsons that “what one can

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁶ Ibid., 177–78.

⁷ Ibid.

unequivocally state is that in an age of postmodern confusion, psychological modes of thought, and the meeting of diverse cultures and religions, Rolland's stress on mystical psychoanalysis, based on the felt inner certainty of interdependence, deep empathy, tolerance, and inclusion, is pregnant with potential."⁸ My dissertation seeks to affirm the pregnant potential of this deep empathy arising from felt interdependence, while at the same time showing the ways "postmodern confusion" has itself been confusingly misunderstood, and to do this by putting discussions of the mystical into conversation with another French writer—Jacques Derrida.

Not unlike Rolland, Derrida declares that his constant project is the thinking of "interconnectedness," though he adds—"albeit otherwise."⁹ Derrida, too, links the mystical to welcoming whatever may come. Moreover, he relates the structure of the "to come" itself to justice.¹⁰ Thus, if, according to Derrida, "*Deconstruction is justice*," then it may also be a bit mystical.¹¹ Through comparing Derrida to other thinkers of our interrelations with the transcendent and the mundane, my dissertation shows how the thinking of interconnectedness, "albeit otherwise," offers resources for rethinking religions, embodied difference, and democracy.

"If there is a deconstruction of all presumption to a determining certainty of a present justice," Derrida argues in his "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,"

it itself operates on the basis of an 'idea of justice' that is infinite, infinite because

irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other—owed to the other, before any contract,

⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

¹⁰ In stressing *à venir* literally "to come" in French to play on and break open "the future" or *l'avenir*, Derrida, among other things, gestures to the openness that constitutes time consciousness, as we will see in coming chapters.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 243. Emphasis in original.

because it has *come*, it is a *coming* [*parce qu'elle est venue*], the coming of the other

And so, one can recognize in it, even accuse in it a madness, and perhaps another kind of mysticism [*une autre sorte de mystique*].¹²

As this dissertation explores, we may perhaps recognize in the thought of Jacques Derrida another kind of mysticism that he links to justice. Which is not to say that Derrida himself is a mystic—merely that some of his ideas may seem to tremble with the enigmatic marks of the mystical. We may think thoughts, perhaps, that exhibit a touch of the mystical without needing to be mystics ourselves.

We may better understand Derrida's mystical without a mystic by briefly examining his discussion of law and justice in "Force of Law." In that essay on mystical foundations, Derrida makes a distinction between *law*, which involves calculation among recognized rules, and *justice*, which perhaps does not. "Perhaps"—one must [*il faut*] always say *perhaps* for justice—there is no justice," Derrida writes, "except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth."¹³ According to Derrida, justice, if there is justice, involves "the coming of the other as always other singularity," and arrives as an event without calculation or reason. "Deconstruction takes place," says Derrida, there "in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law."¹⁴ As necessarily implemented in particular contexts, however, law ever always falls short of this infinite idea of justice, declares Derrida, his argument being not unlike that of mystics who claim that human concepts fail to reach the fullness of divine glory or, by definition, to assail the truly transcendent.

¹² Ibid., 254.

¹³ Ibid., 257.

¹⁴ Ibid., 243.

Derrida argues that we must deny that any particular laws achieve full realization of justice because they could always be improved upon or adjusted toward a better accounting of the always-too-complex context. Similarly, mystics deny that any human attempts to gesture at the Ultimate ever attain full accuracy because it exceeds such containers as words and images. Thus, the Derridaean desire to revise any actual laws in favor of an ever elusive idea of justice, and the mystic desire to negate any and all concepts in favor of an ever more ascendant perspective exhibit the same structural trait—the preference for the possible over the actual. The processes these desires spark—deconstruction and apophaticism—involve ever always opening to what more may come.

If apophatic or negative theologies seek to move beyond or otherwise than what words can say or concepts convey, then perhaps we may deem Derrida's deconstruction as a more radical form of negative theology, so radical it risks atheology, not only praying God to rid us of God, as did Meister Eckhart, but even doing without the recognition of God altogether, while retaining the structure of prayer as opening to whatever other or others may come. Or, if not more radical, since that might still be identifying it as a process in which the negation of negation bursts its bounds and becomes affirmation again, perhaps Derrida simply wants to gesture at a general structure of openness that negative theologies share as well, yet beyond which they then may say or do more. Such comparisons have generated an entire industry in academia of either affirming or denying deconstruction's affinities with negative theology.¹⁵ What I find so

¹⁵ The literature is vast. To cite a few exemplary works: Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Fordham University Press, 2000). Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). Ilse Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate, *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 1999). Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York:

interesting or frustrating about these discussions are the ways that people so often assume that Derrida attacks faith, and thereby discounts their particular ontological commitments, be they orthodox or heterodox, when Derrida actually defends it: “no critique of *religion*, or of *each determinate* religion, however necessary or radical that critique may be, should or can, in my view, impugn *faith* in general.”¹⁶

If Derrida defends faith, why then do the differences between apophaticism and deconstruction so often get framed as an either/or? Instead of either apophaticism or deconstruction, I seek to compare their structural similarities as mystical and mundane modes of undoing, suggesting that Derrida’s deconstruction relates to apophaticism much like William James’s “common core” of “mystical experience” relates to the “over-beliefs” of particular religious commitments. Perhaps unavoidably, though, I am already using heavily abused terms that we need help unpacking.

Much recent scholarship may deem mysticism to be a dead category supplanted by the body, but the *apophatic* breathes on.¹⁷ From the Greek *apophemi*, “to deny,” and found in various forms in the world’s so-called mystical traditions, apophasis unsays all positive affirmations with negations, then negates the negations to ignite an excess that seeks to move beyond words and images. Similarly, the body in cultural criticism generates an excess of speech

Routledge, 2004). For an excellent recent introductory article on Derrida on religion, see Ellen Armour, “Thinking Otherwise: Derrida’s Contribution to Philosophy of Religion,” in *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Morny Joy (New York: Springer, 2011), 39–60. For more, see Robyn Horner’s *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), Horner’s “Aporia or Excess? Two Strategies for Thinking r/Revelation” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2005), and John Caputo’s “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 255.

¹⁷ For instance, William R. LaFleur’s “Body” entry in Mark C. Taylor’s *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* begins with this, as Leigh Eric Schmidt begins his essay “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism’” by noting.

that finds no bounds, its very materialism stubbornly resistant to totalizing theory. A recent book even conjoins naysaying with embodiment under the alluring title *Apophatic Bodies*.¹⁸ What is it about mystical and mundane modes of undoing that still so entices us today?

By putting Derrida in dialogue with various recent thinkers who deal with the tensions between immanence and transcendence, between embodied and out-of-body ways of knowing and experiencing, my dissertation demonstrates that deconstruction helps us understand the deep consonance among what we may deem as mystical practices of undoing, such as Jamesian pragmatic participation in a pluralistic universe (Chapter 1); orthodox and heterodox, Eastern and Western embodiments of cosmic vibrations from ancient gnosis, through Christian mystical theology, to Allen Ginsberg's poetry (Chapter 2); the yearning for more life meaning in African American religiosity represented by Howard Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Sojourner Truth (Chapter 3); and democratic theorizing from feminists to posthumanists (Chapter 4). Countering what I call the linguistic misread of deconstruction, I show that Derrida advocates for more aware participation in an embodied mode of experiencing a generative vulnerability that is absolutely universal, and thus may provide resources for living more harmoniously through uniting around a "common core," which was a hope of the construction of the modern category of mysticism. My reading of Derrida, however, offers a common core that succumbs neither to a naïve perennialism, which sees mystical experience as everywhere and always the same, nor to a constructivism, which sees it as entirely psycho-socially determined. Thinking interconnection otherwise through indeterminateness, my discussion of mystical and mundane modes of undoing reveals a common core of no common core that helps us open to what more may come.

¹⁸ Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

To better understand what I mean by mystical and mundane modes of undoing, however, we need to know more about the mystical languages of unsaying. Apophaticism, explains Michael Sells in his book *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, “is a discourse in which any single proposition is acknowledged as falsifying, as reifying.”¹⁹ Necessarily paired with *cataphasis*, which in Greek means speaking with and refers more generally to positive or affirmative speech about something, the apophatic entails that “every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying.”²⁰ Yet, more than a simple reversal, “it is a discourse of double propositions, in which meaning is generated through the tension between the saying and the unsaying.”²¹ Thus, the tension between affirmation and negation makes the meaning.

In the Christian traditions, which are my area of specialization (and I use the plural to perform the point that they are not one, rather, there are now and have ever only been Christianities), the pairing of positive and negative theologies has often been known as “mystical theology,” which traces its origin back at least to Dionysius the Areopagite, in whose corpus the phrase makes its first recorded appearance. The negative movement in mystical theologies differs from a Hegelian double negation that aims toward totality because, as Sells argues, “rather than pointing to an object, apophatic language attempts to evoke in the reader an event that is—in its movement beyond structures of self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of mystical union.”²² Such mystical union, then, allows for no final resolution of the tensions between immanent and transcendent, finite and infinite, self and other because those very tensions effect the union itself.

¹⁹ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

The mode of union effected by the linguistic and logical strategies of apophaticism Sells designates by the term “meaning event”—“that moment when the meaning has become identical or fused with the act of predication.”²³ Sells uses that term in order to avoid the critiques of the category of “experience” (which we will return to later). Rather than reifying the experience as an objectifiable thing, a meaning event involves perpetual self-criticism. Sells argues that apophaticism “resides not in a realm free of contamination from reification and linguistic idolatry but rather in a self-critical stance, an acknowledgment of its own reifications, and a relentless turning-back to unsay them.”²⁴ Rather than describing a consciousness of *something*, even the consciousness of pure consciousness or of nothingness, “apophasis is the continually-in-process turning of language back upon and beyond its own reifications.”²⁵ As an anarchic mo(ve)ment, then, its essence is to contest its essence.

Sells’s conjoining of meaning and event conveys that apophasis requires performative speech acts: language that *does* rather than merely describes. The speech necessary to refer to the union also effects the union. With the apophatic, to speak is to do, or rather, to un-speak is to undo. In apophatic speaking of the relation between human and transcendent, a meaning event undoes the difference between them. “It does not describe or refer to mystical union,” writes Sells, “but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union.”²⁶ Thus, a meaning event more than describes, it performs. A meaning event makes mystical union, if only semantically.

“In contrast to the realization as instance of mystical union which entails a complete psychological, epistemological, and ontological transformation,” however, “the meaning event is

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 225n31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

a semantic occurrence,” writes Sells.²⁷ As a literary rather than religious event, it exceeds exclusively traditional contexts. A meaning event, Sells maintains, “can occur to readers within and without a particular religious community (though its significance may be different for the two groups of readers).”²⁸ As readers of mystical texts, then, we may achieve or receive the meaning event, even if not as fully as the writers themselves, whether or not we adhere to the particular traditions. Though not immersed in the form of life required by the religious traditions, which might yield more full meaning or more radical transformation, we may nonetheless grasp or be grasped by the union effected through the fusion of predication and meaning found in mystical texts.

Though incredibly helpful as a discrete analysis, the dynamics that Sells analyzes cannot be limited to the semantic. As heuristically powerful as such a study of language use may be, the transformative effects of semantics can seep into the other levels as well—psychological, epistemological, and ontological—such that a more expansive analysis is needed. In his book, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, Jeffrey J. Kripal appropriates Sells’s term, explaining, “a meaning event is a literary mode that attempts to replicate in human language the structure of the original state of consciousness that inspired it.”²⁹ Kripal, however, takes the term further, beyond the merely semantic, or rather, makes the semantic more expansive. Kripal’s usage carries cosmic implications because his meaning event is, as he argues, much like Jung’s synchronicity, “a moment in space and time where and when the physical world becomes a text to be read out and interpreted, where and when the event is structured not

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 292n49.

by causal networks of matter but by symbolic references producing meaning.”³⁰ Kripal expands Sells’s term in order to bring the tools of religious studies to bear on paranormal phenomena such as telepathy and alien abductions that confound traditional models of reality and interpretation. “If, however, paranormal phenomena are meaning events that work and look a great deal like texts,” Kripal continues,

then it follows that texts can also work and look a great deal like paranormal phenomena.

Writing and reading, that is, can replicate and realize paranormal processes. *This* is what I finally mean by the phrase “authors of the impossible.” It is also what I am trying to effect with *this* text.³¹

Hoping to make the impossible possible, in part, through a magical mode of writing, Kripal, then, seeks to conjure a meaning event in his text and his readers that mirrors the text of the cosmos. Through writing that confounds our current epistemologies and ontologies, Kripal hopes to create new possibilities that mirror potentialities of reality which lie beyond our presently regnant parameters.

Such writing of the impossible Kripal calls a “hermeneutical mysticism,” in which the scholar-mystic, like Bertrand Méheust, one of the authors whom Kripal examines, “experiences the world as a series of signs or meaning events to read, interpret, and then write out again in his own written work. And as he reads and writes, he is read and written.”³² More than mere writing as commonly understood, “this is how he lives, how he comes to be.”³³ Read and written through reading and writing reality, the hermeneutical mystic comes to be.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 201.

³³ Ibid.

For Kripal, such a hermeneutical mysticism opens onto a mystical humanism. If the reality “out there” exceeds the parameters of the presently possible, and is mirrored in the writing of the mystic-scholar’s own texts and life, then this mirroring process means that human nature itself exceeds that which is presently considered possible. Kripal’s impossible ontology requires a negative anthropology. “The question becomes, then,” Kripal writes in *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*:

What do we mean by *human being* or *human consciousness*? In my thought, at least . . . this human referent is quite literally ineffable; that is to say, human nature constitutes a secret that is immeasurably deeper and more complex than any strictly rational method or language can possibly grasp and that requires for its fuller (never full) explication hermeneutical methods that are best represented in those forms of religious thinking and practice we have come to call, for our own purposes and in our own poetic terms, “mystical” or “gnostic.” Such a (non)ground in turn requires for its appearance the intellectual courage of a truly open-ended anthropology. That anthropology, which is also a general methodological principle, inevitably tends toward what I would call a *mystical humanism*.³⁴

Ever re-read and re-written as well, the one performing such processes would ever come to be anew. And, by reading and writing one may indeed read and write reality anew as well, even as one is then again re-written. If we can be re-written along with matter itself, then I argue that Kripal’s mystical humanism requires as a condition of its possibility a quasi-mystical posthumanism. And this is what Derrida, or my reading of him, provides.

³⁴ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 87–88.

If humanism is the anthropocentric history of liberalism, and transhumanism the opening onto expansive human potential (whether through spiritual or technological means), then posthumanism means moving otherwise than humanism to value nonhuman animals and the systemic interrelations of all life in a shared suffering of exposure to vulnerability, and thus also to the threats and possibilities of technology and death.³⁵ Like any “post” move, however, posthumanism remains dependent on that from which it takes off. What is needed to open onto a “beyond” of humanism, I argue, is an ever more radical undoing of the human and its others, which involves a perpetual process we may deem akin to mystical unknowing.

My dissertation demonstrates that such mystical union made possible by the tension of opposites as Sells discusses, and such hermeneutical fusion of a mysterious universe written and read through a mirroring process at the heart of a mystical human as Kripal analyzes are made possible by a prior vulnerability of our exposure to others. As Sells argues of mystical union effected through a meaning event:

Its achievement is unstable and fleeting. It demands a rigorous and sustained effort both to use and free oneself from normal habits of thought and expression. It demands a willingness to let go, at a particular moment, of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability. Yet for those who value it, this moment of unsaying and unknowing is what it is to be human.³⁶

Such vulnerability, however, cannot be limited either to a fleeting moment or to humanity.

Constituted amidst a passivity of affectivity in relation to that which precedes and exceeds us,

³⁵ For more, see Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁶ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 217.

what if we cannot conclusively circumscribe ourselves from whatever or whomever we deem as other? What if being human means always ever already being constituted by that very indeterminacy?

We may well experience the ineffable infinite through such mystical reading and writing of texts and reality, but our finitude—and that of nonhuman animals—of subjection to a context that precedes and exceeds our lives may well share such dynamics. Indeed, if we accept William James’s main markers of the mystical—ineffability and a noetic quality—then whatever else a mystical knowledge may communicate, there nevertheless remains its ambiguous relation with the unsayable. What if what we recognize as mystical experiencing of an infinite ineffable may merely be the mundane experiencing of our finitude?

What if what James identifies as a mystical “More” is actually our mundane exposure to death and a natural “more” of psycho-social-material processes, or what John Dewey called “the community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed”?³⁷ The mystically inclined may seek to secure the identification of some supernatural force, but we will see that the risk of misrecognition remains because the conditions that make such an *as such* structure possible—recognized *as* unrecognizable—simultaneously make it insecure. That’s the classic paradox of the ineffable—just by naming it as ineffable you have already named it. Perhaps such performative contradictions effect a meaning event that unifies us with some ineffable Other, but perhaps they transform us by virtue of the fully embodied grammatical games that they are.

³⁷ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 85.

In his books *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* and *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human*, Thomas A. Carlson examines such problematics of identification of the incomprehensible according to what he calls the “apophatic analogy”:

the analogy between the logic of Being-toward-God in traditions of mystical theology, where the relation of soul to God concerns a naming of the unnamable or a thinking of the unthinkable, and the logic of Being-toward-death in Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian thinking about the human as finite, mortal existence, where the individual’s relation to death signals the paradoxical possibility of an impossibility. In both directions, . . . the subject of thought and language finds itself always already constituted in relation to a term that conditions all thought and language while ever eluding their full or final capture in the presence of any experience. Figured in terms of their “indiscretion,” then, the structure and movement of a negative theology—according to which the endlessly named, conceived, and imagined God remains ultimately ineffable, inconceivable, and unimaginable—could never be securely distinguished from, nor identified with, the structure and movement of a negative anthropology, according to which our finite, mortal existence remains ever a mystery to us.³⁸

Relations with the unknowable thus involve an exposure to that which can neither be identified nor distinguished.

Mystical theologians identify the incomprehensible as God. Yet any incomprehensible pole can play the same structural role as a God in a negative theology. Post-Heideggerian philosophers identify death as the impossible. Gender theorists speak of embodiment in relation to the (m)other; African American philosophers speak of complex subjectivity; Marxists of

³⁸ Thomas A Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude & Creation of the Human* (Chicago, Ill., 2008), 1.

emancipation from processes that are other than they appear. Systems theorists account for that which exceeds the system. Even science thrives on the search for new data that may overturn previous paradigms. Neuroscientists study the arising of consciousness from processes that exceed awareness, while physicists examine the occurrence of the cosmos in relation to dark matter. All thrive on a process of seeking what more may come. The positivistic Enlightenment knowing subject may have died, along with the deistic God in whose image he was made, yet something new—perhaps wicked, perhaps wonderful—this way comes. So who, then, is this mysterious other who comes after the sovereign self?

What if we can neither recognize nor distinguish self from other? What if we can never conclusively determine what is I and what not-I? As Ludwig Feuerbach famously argues, the religious itself arises from our interrelation with we know not what:

The ultimate secret of religion is the *relationship* between the *conscious* and *unconscious*, the *voluntary* and *involuntary in one and the same individual*. . . . Man with his ego or consciousness stands at the brink of a bottomless abyss; that abyss is his own unconscious being, which seems alien to him and inspires him with a feeling which expresses itself in words of wonderment such as: What am I? Where have I come from?

To what end? And this feeling that I am nothing without a *not-I* which is at the same time my *own* being, is the religious feeling. But what part of me is I and what part is not-I?³⁹

What parts indeed. What if the very possibility of circumscribing a self or anything at all simultaneously means the impossibility of securing its distinction because of an unavoidable powerlessness to protect itself from surprising contexts and effects?

³⁹ As quoted in Kripal, *Serpent's Gift*, 162.

If the conditions of recognition simultaneously entail the impossibility of complete unequivocal recognition, then perhaps we must ever always strive to recognize the unrecognizable. Such a perilous and perpetual process of ever more expansive recognition in the midst of recontextualization, my dissertation demonstrates, is exactly what Derrida seeks to describe through his deconstruction of speech and writing and his analyses of difference (with or without an a). Difficult as they are to understand, these dynamics may provide resources to help us form more perfect unions—whether mystical, sexual, or political.

Whatever union we can presently perceive or conceive may always be reformed by something better—or deformed by something worse—to come. That reformation process is the very condition of possibility for its formation in the first place. If, as Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, “differance . . . is the formation of form,” then his neologism helps us understand how anything’s formation entails its possible deformation—the very conditions that make the formation of form possible simultaneously make it impossible for that form to stay as is. We will dissect these ideas further as we delve into the body of the dissertation, but, shocking as it may seem, the simplest way for me to communicate what this might mean is with the movie *The Matrix*.

The main character, Neo (whose name is an anagram for the One, but also evokes new, or different from the original) finds himself in a virtual world in all ways indistinguishable from the real one. By playing with the electro-chemical processes of our brains, the machines of the future have fabricated the Matrix—a world in which humans live and move and have their being. Morpheus (that dream master) saves Neo from the dream conjured by the evil mechanical demons. He awakens to the desert of the Real—a post-apocalyptic wasteland. For our purposes, that’s all of the plot we need to wonder whether, with only the cold-comfort of Descartes’

extinguishing of hyperbolic doubt through the certainty of doubting itself, Neo might have realized that the possible fabrication of reality meant that the Real itself was haunted *from before its first appearance* by the possibility of its spectral replication.

Thus, that science fiction movie shows that the very formation of a world also means that such a possible world may then be fabricated, duplicated, or re-formed elsewhere at some other place and time. The possibility of a real world unavoidably entails the possibility of a virtual one. The dynamics of the formation of form which enable that form to be reformed at some other place and time, which also mean it may be deformed, Derrida dubs by his neologism *différance*. Along these lines, he also argues that our very experience of a world shares the properties of writing.

I could also explain this by the following both bold and banal statement: writing is telepathy. I wrote this sentence in the past, but you are reading it here and now, wherever you are—my mind to your mind through the body of the written word. Whatever life experiences we share or do not share in common, we know now that we at least share this one—reading what has been written. You may or may not understand this as I intended, but you are certainly able to read it and you have thereby been affected by it whether you want to be or not. The deed is done. My mind to your mind through the body of the written word.

If what I think in my head can come out, survive, and transport across time and place, as it does through the body of the written word, then that means that mind and body are not now, nor were they ever, entirely discrete, to the scandal of modern post-Cartesian philosophy. Whatever vibrations reverberate in my head that enable the miracle of consciousness to occur and allow me to hear myself think, also, if you are reading this, appear to be able to travel across time and clime to affect you, however minimally, right here and now. My mind to your mind

through the body of the written word. And thus the possibility is opened that mind, body, and word, yours and mine, are inter-connected, as if by magic, whether we like it or not. The material processes of writing infect our very being such that we are haunted by a mystical power or powerlessness of possible reappearance in some other place at some other time that might entirely transform us and our realities. The material, it seems, is spiritual (and vice versa).

I thus use “mystical and mundane modes of undoing,” rather than mystical languages of unsaying, to gesture at the analyses of performativity that emphasize embodiment and emplacement. Though, as Michael Sells aptly demonstrates, these dynamics can be successfully examined as literary techniques, Derrida’s deconstruction of speech and writing shows that the vulnerability effected by apophatic oscillation cannot be limited to the merely linguistic, but carries for all forms of egoic consciousness, and even for the formation of form itself. There is a mo(ve)ment of openness and vulnerability that is us, which negative theologies identify at the heart of the human and the divine. What Derrida’s deconstruction maintains, however, is that the vulnerability entailed in such a process cannot be limited to merely the mystical ascent. Rather, such processes constitute us before we can ever even say, “I.”

And the process does not stop, so long as we have the power to say I, as in the transitive mode of consciousness. We may live and move and have our being in a state of grace, but if and when that state enters a state of consciousness *of* it, then it is subject to misrecognition, misapplication, and misdeeds. “On or about ‘grace given by God,’” says Derrida,

deconstruction, as such, has nothing to say or to do. If it’s given, let’s say, to someone in a way that is absolutely improbable, that is exceeding any proof, in a unique experience, then deconstruction has no lever on this. And it should not have any lever. But once this grace, this given grace, is embodied in a discourse, in a community, in a church, in a religion, in a

theology—that is why the word “theological” is a real problem to me—then deconstruction, a deconstruction, may have something to say, something to do, but without questioning or suspecting the moment of grace. Of the discourses, the authorities, the law, the politics, all of which might be consequences of this grace, yes, deconstruction might have something to say or do, while respecting the possibility of this grace. The possibility of this grace is not publically accessible.⁴⁰

Derrida thus respects the possibility of grace or some reality or mode of experiencing that may completely exceed proof or the parameters of egoic consciousness, but he directs our attention to that necessary negotiation with the limits of our finitude. And, Derrida strains to attend to whatever may arrive that may surprise.

Like the apophatic requires the prior predication, so deconstruction requires a prior givenness. Rather than conclusively identifying what is given, Derrida seeks to perpetually attend to what or who may have been missed or marginalized by the regnant codes governing current perception and conception. Straining to hear the call of he knows not what, Derrida takes a leap of listening for an unknown and unknowable other beyond language and socio-cultural conditioning. “And from that point of view,” Derrida says,

I am really Kierkegaardian: the experience of faith is something that exceeds language in a certain way, it exceeds ethics, politics, and society. In relation to this experience of faith, deconstruction is totally, totally useless and disarmed. And perhaps it is not simply a weakness of deconstruction. Perhaps it is because deconstruction starts from the possibility of, if not grace, then certainly a secret, an absolutely secret experience which I

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39.

would compare with what you call grace. That's perhaps the starting point of any deconstruction. That is why deconstruction is totally disarmed, totally useless when it reaches this point.⁴¹

What may be more than that point apart from deconstruction Derrida does not say, not merely because such a point apart would be beyond words, but because—structurally—it exceeds (whether by plenitude or vacuity) what can be circumscribed in a consciousness, at least a consciousness *of* anything (or nothing) at all.

Derrida thus directs us to a sort of gateway experiencing that must be crossed continually, for we are always traversing the threshold of consciousness, which may expand and expand through opening more and more to what may come. But so long as it takes up the structure of consciousness *of*, it already finds itself exposed, open, and vulnerable. To experience more would be to experience the impossible. Yet, Derrida desires such a more—even without certainty or recognition of what may come. “What I am interested in,” declares Derrida, “is the experience of the desire for the impossible. That is, the impossible as the condition of desire.”⁴² What could such a desire for the impossible be?

With our discussion of the apophatic, we have already been introduced to mystical desire, which is made possible by the perpetual tension between immanent and transcendent, saying and unsaying. The paired paradoxical process of mystical theology thus involves, as Thomas A. Carlson argues, “an endless oscillation *between* assertion and denial, position and erasure, thesis and negation—and in that endless oscillation lives and moves a desire or expectation that knows

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “On the Gift: A Discussion Between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. Caputo and Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 72.

no end . . .”⁴³ Not dissimilarly, in attempting to differentiate his deconstructive desire from the Hegelian one of totalization, Derrida confesses, “I am not sure that this is simply possible and calculable; it is what escapes from any assurance, and desire in this regard can only affirm itself, enigmatic and endless.”⁴⁴ How can we ultimately differentiate or conflate such endless desires?

For a further introduction toward determining mystical and/or mundane qualities of deconstruction, let us listen to what one of Derrida’s translators, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who claims that deconstruction is discernably not mystical, writes of deconstructive desires. If in deconstructing texts or experience-as-text, Derrida appears also to affirm the ancient insight that wisdom consists in knowing that we do not know, then, as Spivak points out in her translator’s preface to *Of Grammatology*, he also recognizes that this desire for nonknowledge paradoxically turns back on itself in its performance:

Derrida acknowledges that the desire of deconstruction may itself become a desire to reappropriate the text actively through mastery, to show the text what it “does not know.” And as she deconstructs, all protestations to the contrary, the critic necessarily assumes that she at least, and for the time being, means what she says. Even the declaration of her vulnerability must come, after all, in the controlling language of demonstration and reference. In other words, the critic provisionally forgets that her own text is necessarily self-deconstructed, always already a palimpsest.⁴⁵

⁴³ Thomas A. Carlson, “Caputo’s Example,” in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 270.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 82.

⁴⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), lxxvii.

There are more and less aware ways of declaring vulnerability, I would add. And Derrida advocates engaging our vulnerability otherwise than by the pretentious grasping of the supposed autonomous knowing subject constructed by Enlightenment humanism.

Such grasping Derrida defines according to the desire for origin and essence from which to then derive deviation and deformation.

The enterprise of returning “strategically,” “ideally,” to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.⁴⁶

Derrida desires to move otherwise than this “metaphysics of presence.” Instead, agency and passivity must be thought together.

“The desire of deconstruction,” Spivak however continues, “has also the opposite allure.”⁴⁷ In addition to the performative contradiction of righteously being certain of uncertainty and thinking one clearly means what one says or does while protesting that we cannot clearly know or mean what we say, the deconstructive critic may also become intoxicated with the vertiginous amazement of uncertainty and unknowing:

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1st ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 93.

⁴⁷ Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” lxxvii.

Deconstruction seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality—by thus “placing in the abyss” (*mettre en abîme*), as the French expression would literally have it—it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom.⁴⁸

A dialectic would resolve the duality between these options—certainty and nihilism, being and nonbeing—through synthesis; deconstruction, however, exposes and accentuates their heterogeneity and indissolubility to cause displacement and rupture in welcoming the (im)possible coming of the other(s).

“There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play,” writes Derrida.

The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, through the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.⁴⁹

A dialectic seeks in some manner or other to reconcile differences toward an ultimate telos or determinate and stable meaning. Deconstruction rather seeks to expose the dream for a center and the turning from the center towards its perpetual play as entirely heterogeneous yet completely inseparable options.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 292.

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field. . . . For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*.⁵⁰

Derrida sees two options that cannot be resolved. When certainty means clear cut essences and distinctions, then Derrida desires otherwise. When nihilism means denying phenomenal reality and meaning entirely, Derrida desires otherwise.

Derrida desires to deconstruct reality, or point to how it deconstructs itself, in order to attend to the relation to the other as justice, which may make one dizzy. Spivak adds, however, that the experience of “this terrifying and exhilarating vertigo is not ‘mystical’ or ‘theological.’”⁵¹ Perhaps not. But, then again, though apparently not affirming any big-guy-up-in-the-sky theology, perhaps deconstruction can be seen as a mindfulness practice that does indeed cultivate modes of knowing and experiencing that verge on what we may deem mystical.

The experience of the impossible that Derrida advocates is one that resides not solely in an extraordinary experience of an ultimate, but in the shared suffering of vulnerability. The former may or may not be universally accessible; the latter undeniably is. Thus, to further a project of interreligious dialog and of ethically and politically ever forming more perfect unions (whether political, mystical, or sexual unions, or any otherwise), one could do worse than developing resources revolving around helping us all to grow more comfortable in responding to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 293.

⁵¹ Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” lxxviii.

the commonality of shared vulnerability, which would mean affirming “*the noncenter otherwise than as loss of center*.”⁵²

Back when I first read those words of Derrida’s from his seminal essay, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” I was in college being trained in gender critique and the suspicion of meta-narratives while at the same time working twenty hours a week with those 6th-12th grade students in that Episcopal church I mentioned previously—the same church, I might add, where Karl Rove then went. Going from classes like “Feminist Literary Criticism” and “Sexual Violence and American Manhood” during the day to trying at night to talk to those students about how Jesus’s love was supposed to translate into abundant life, I wondered how good can the “good news” be when it contributes to so much sexism, racism, militarism, homophobia, and violence?

I had also been going on Saturday nights to the very ritualized showings/performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. That quasi-religious, liminal environment fed the desire to integrate into my work those elements of sexuality that orthodoxy deemed aberrant. I wanted to find healthy ways of living, respective of gender differences and passion.

Knowing that I too often spoke from my own fears, prejudices, and needs, I strove at the end of the day to de-center the words of my preaching, fraught with faults as they unavoidably were, into God’s centering presence. Praying to “our Father in Heaven” carried with it at best images of a benign Father figure and at worst associations of abuses of male power. To get beyond images of a big guy up in the sky, I looked to mysticism.

Attempting to counter coercive power plays, I trained the youth in my care to ask, “what is at stake?” and “whose truth?” while also helping them to cultivate awareness through

⁵² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292. Emphasis in original.

contemplation and service to others. On the one hand, I used deconstruction to expose fissures in the texts that compose our lives in order to welcome our marginalized others—whether people on the underside of history or thoughts from the underside of consciousness—to come to the fore. While on the other, I trusted that the "Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words"(Romans 8:26), as silent prayer, *lectio divina*, and mystical practices became bulwarks of my ministry.

To balance church mystics like Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila, I read others like Blake, Whitman, Dickinson, and Ginsberg. Looking back, I must admit a certain pleasure in realizing that I was just as likely to (selectively) read the poetry of the gay, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg—"Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!"—to the youth as read scripture.

It was in that context that I told my amnesia story again and again, each time ending with the message: "God's love embraces us more perfectly than we see or understand." Desiring to be as inclusive as possible, I translated it more and more outside of the explicitly Christian context and deemed the love that passes understanding more expansively to include the entire sweep of the cosmos, whether governed by a theistic God or not. "The deepest current of the universe is love," I would preach, "whether we see it and know it or not." In working for a total of eight years with youth who struggled with self-image and suicidal thoughts, however, I discovered that one of the dangers with cultivating a taste for the mystical "darkness of unknowing" is the risk of valorizing suffering. And if we allay despair through asserting a transcendent hope, how do we also avoid disparaging those others who do not see things the same?

If mystical believers practice the presence of God or the Ultimate through unknowing both themselves and their conceptions of the transcendent, and postmodern theorists undo both

the subject and the societal context in which modern subjectivity matters, then how do we avoid getting lost in the dark night? If every saying needs unsaying, how does one avoid losing the power to say, "I love you"? Not to mention the ability to speak truth to power? Indeed, how to reconcile the need for empowerment, voiced so trenchantly by liberation, feminist, and womanist thinkers, with the inherent loss of power associated with the kenotic disciplines of much mystical praxis? Or with the uncertainty of open-ended performativity? And, as my dissertation asks and seeks to answer, what would it mean to embody them—both in communal traditions of religious practices and in scholarly disciplines of religious studies?

“At least at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied,” Marcel Mauss argues. “This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God.’”⁵³ Commenting on this passage, Talal Asad writes, “thus, the possibility is opened up of inquiring into the ways in which embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies.” According to Asad, then, “‘Consciousness’ becomes a dependent concept.”⁵⁴ Following Foucault, many interpret such an entwinement of consciousness and practice as trapping us in discourse, merely skimming the surface of reality in

⁵³ Marcel Mauss and Nathan Schlanger, *Techniques, Technology and Civilisation* (Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books, 2006), 93.

⁵⁴ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 76–77. For an insightful discussion of these topics, see Amy Hollywood, “Practice, Belief, and Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 52–71.

the hall of mirrors created by cultural construction. I am thinking here of Russell McCutcheon's position in a recent exchange with Ann Taves over the status of "religious experience."⁵⁵

In her book, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Taves updates the perennialist-constructivist debate to renew the prescription to look more at how we deem experiences as set apart. She is of course updating Proudfoot's famous, *Religious Experience*, which analyzed how James and Schleiermacher were not so much identifying a *sui generis* religious realm as deeming to have done so.⁵⁶ Thus, whereas religious studies scholars should still describe processes—beliefs and practices—in terms the practitioners would accept, we should also then go on to analyze them in terms that account for social processes of ascription. And Taves supplements her analysis of processes of ascription with recourse to the latest neuroscientific findings.

Russell McCutcheon, however, is troubled by Taves's move to deeming because he still thinks she moves to reifying "experience" as a noun and not a verb, therefore failing to have the requisite discourse analysis of the social construction of all of our objects of study. "What therefore troubles me about the attempt to find religious experiences in the mind/brain or religion in the genes," he writes, "is the manner in which, despite the sophistication that informs its use, a culturally and historically local nomenclature (i.e., this is religion, that is not religion) is being dehistoricized and thus normalized by being medicalized and thus naturalized."⁵⁷ This troubles McCutcheon, he continues, because

⁵⁵ I use Taves-McCutcheon as touchstones for the larger discussions in religious studies over the status of the term "experience," but for more see Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (University of Chicago Press, 1998). See also, Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American And European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). And Kevin Hart and Barbara Eileen Wall, *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response* (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁵⁷ Russell T. McCutcheon, "Will Your Cognitive Anchor Hold in the Storms of Culture?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 1185.

we all know—or at least I thought we did—of the critiques of the category of religion as it was once used (I think here of critiques of the notion of *sui generis* religion). We all know that none of its possible Latin precursors likely meant what we mean by religion today (or at least as we have commonly defined it for the past few hundred years). We also all know that both this and the previous sentence’s “we” are something that always needs attention, for they signify a rather precise group, originating in that part of the world commonly known as Europe, whose members eventually perfected the use of the marker “religion” to name a seemingly distinct domain of diverse (thought not necessarily inherently related) items of human activity and production.⁵⁸

When he argues “that a theory of *deeming* (i.e., a theory of signification) is far more required than a theory of religion,” Taves responds that that is precisely her project, now following Durkheim more than James because of his connections to and currency with sociological theory, and therefore thoroughly social and public processes.⁵⁹

Not content with Taves’s rejoinder, McCutcheon argues that her analysis still waffles, leaving him “wondering whether we are studying nouns or verbs—that is, whether we are examining the human pre-conditions that enable us to deem some objects *as* special or, instead, simply examining special objects themselves, taking their classificatory status as an identity rather than the result of a choice (whether conscious or not) by social actors.”⁶⁰ I argue that what Derrida adds to these discussions is that (1) the very processes of deeming by which “we all know” anything we know at all, are themselves not merely discursive, but more thoroughly constituted by a materiality and mechanicity that moves them beyond the merely human; thus,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1189.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

(2) the “human,” itself needs constant attention and revision, not merely the constructed categories of religion or mysticism. Which is precisely what deconstruction does—as does pragmatism or posthumanism. Where Derrida also leads us, but where he could perhaps not go himself, is to a place where anything is possible—truly.

Perhaps we need a more Derridean reading of Foucault. As Cornel West argues in regards to the question of human subjectivity,

Foucault’s answer—anonymous and autonomous discourses, disciplines, and techniques—is but the latest addition to the older ones: the dialectical development of modes of production (vulgar Marxisms); workings of the *Weltgeist* (crude Hegelians); or activities of transcendental subjects (academic Kantians). All such answers shun the centrality of dynamic social practices structured and unstructured over time and space.⁶¹

Maybe what we need to address this question differently is a more thorough thinking through of what Asad notes parenthetically—the way language is an embodied practice that matters, meaning discourse is not only important but also always already material. Consciousness as dependent then means not that we are trapped in a surface linguisticism, but rather that language fuses mysteriously with materiality such that words do things as things are done to them by differing social practices. Moreover, discourse, concepts, and consciousness are so entwined with all that is such that differing movements of culture, history, and consciousness can create entirely different realities, not merely differently interpreted realities.

“Is it a dumb reading of Michel Foucault, for example,” asks the deconstructionist, feminist theorist Vicki Kirby, “to consider that if discourse constitutes its object, then matter is

⁶¹ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: a Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 225.

constantly rewritten and transformed?”⁶² It is not dumb—neither stupid nor silent—for, just in reading language we create material effects, even as the material text affects us. Though little read this way, Derrida always proposed understanding discourse in such expansive, enmeshed, world shaping and shaped ways. “The paradox,” Derrida says, “is that even though I proposed to deconstruct the hegemony of linguistics, my work is often presented as a linguisticism.”⁶³ Given that debates about the mystical rage over the role of language, and that deconstruction has been insufficiently understood in its critique of linguisticism, gaining a better grasp on some more basics of deconstruction should help our comprehension of its contributions to discussions of mysticism.

Deconstruction, I would emphasize, is first and foremost a practice: it is what it does. It is not a critique, in that it does not have a set agenda or determined interpretation, and it does not invade from outside. Rather, says Derrida, texts auto-deconstruct themselves, or the impulse and resources for deconstruction arise from the texts themselves. Deconstruction, argues Derrida,

is “inherently” nothing at all; the logic of essence (by opposition to accident), of the proper (by opposition to the improper), hence of the “inherent” by opposition to the extrinsic, is precisely what all deconstruction has from the start called into question. . . .

Deconstruction does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts; it “is” only what it does and what is done with it, there where it takes place.⁶⁴

Deconstruction is not destruction, although it comes from Derrida’s translation of Heidegger’s *destruktio*, which came from Martin Luther’s use of that word to refer to a shaking loose of

⁶² Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

⁶³ Jaques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 1st ed. (Malden: Polity, 2001), 77.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 141.

biblical text to uncover a more original meaning. Like destruction, it entails that something is there originally to be deconstructed, but it also encompasses the motion of reconstruction or creation that happens through exposure to fissures in a (con)text.

Deconstruction goes beyond Saussure in saying not only that signifiers take up meaning through oppositional relation with each other and thus have an arbitrary relation to the signified, or that language is fluid because of the instability inherent in the possibility that signifiers may fail to point to signified, but also that language encompasses all consciousness, or more specifically, that language or “arche-writing” cannot be limited to the inner voice of “hearing-myself-speak” and its supposed outer re-presentation through speech or writing, but may be extended to experience in general. If presence is ever always re-presentation, then here inside and outside flip and open as if in a dizzying circle. “What we are describing as primordial representation,” says Derrida, “can be provisionally designated with this term only within the closure whose limits we are here seeking to transgress by setting down and demonstrating various contradictory or untenable propositions within it, attempting thereby to institute a kind of insecurity and to open it up to the outside.” “This,” Derrida continues, “can only be done from a certain inside.”⁶⁵

Language is not then something that my self-presence picks up and assumes when it wants its inner presence to move outside into the world. Language unavoidably and always ever already involves materiality and all the messiness of moving through space and time. Indeed, language, as the process of circumscription, is involved from before the first moment of consciousness. Text, language, and the functioning of the mark make consciousness possible. Consciousness as consciousness *of* something (even consciousness of nothing, or consciousness

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 57n6.

of pure consciousness) is constituted amidst context, even if just the minimal context of consciousness of something, such as consciousness itself.

“We can call ‘context,’” writes Derrida, “the entire ‘real-history-of-the-world,’ if you like.”⁶⁶ Hence, when Derrida famously wrote in *Of Grammatology*, “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” or there is nothing outside the text, he meant there is nothing outside of context.

One of the definitions of what is called deconstruction would be the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualization. The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (“there is nothing outside the text” [*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context.⁶⁷

At least within the confines of the categories of Being, there are only contexts, infinitely recontextualizable, or infinite because they are finite—delimited and circumscribed, thus capable of being communicable at another place and time.

As Derrida says in the interview, “Eating Well,”

If one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one re-inscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of differance.

These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, *are themselves not only human*.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 136.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Points . . .*, 284–85.

What Derrida suggests is thus not only that Cartesian subjectivity that would know itself in talking to itself—“I think, therefore I am”—is displaced through the prior feeling of flesh, but also that our feeling ourselves follows after an irrecoverable mystery opened in the p(l)acing between the material and immaterial, which may never be purely divisible. I follow (*je suis*) mystery, therefore I am (*je suis*).

If what may come may so surprise as to alter all we think we know and are, then, in regards to the question of subjectivity, Derrida argues, “nothing should be excluded.”⁶⁹ Following Derrida more than Foucault means that the “know thyself” of humanity entails daring to unknow ourselves and our others through participation in a mystery beyond clear cut divisions—immanent and transcendent, material and immaterial, living and nonliving, human and other. If whatever or whoever haunts the human exceeds full recognition within the parameters of the presently possible,⁷⁰ then it may be indistinguishable from death (Heidegger),⁷¹ face or call (Levinas),⁷² excess (Marion),⁷³ the messianic to come (Derrida),⁷⁴ more (James or Schleiermacher) or less (Beast or Abyss). “In order to be authentic,” says Derrida, “. . . the belief in God must be exposed to absolute doubt. I know that the great mystics experience this.”⁷⁵ What matters is who or what may come, perhaps a God or more expansive human potential, or perhaps some other—unforeseen and unforeseeable.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 269.

⁷⁰ For an intriguing study of the expansion of the possible, see Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*.

⁷¹ On the undecidability between the analogies of death and an incomprehensible God, see Carlson, *Indiscretion*.

⁷² On the passivity of the affected subject and an undecidability between death and the call of the other, see Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*: (Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁷³ On the undecidability between saturated phenomena and aporias, see Robyn Horner, “Aporia or Excess? Two Strategies for Thinking r/Revelation,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 325–36.

⁷⁴ See especially Derrida 1994, 167-68: “we prefer to say *messianic* rather than *messianism*, so as to designate a structure of experience rather than a religion.”

⁷⁵ Derrida, “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” 46.

“Religion without religion” is the phrase from *The Gift of Death* and elsewhere that Derrida deploys to mark a “subtle and unstable” distinction between “*the revelation of an event*” and “the possibility of such an event but not the event itself.” “This,” Derrida continues and as we will examine more in Chapter One, “is a major point of difference, permitting such a discourse to be developed without reference to a religion as institutional dogma, and proposing a genealogy of thinking concerning the possibility and essence of the religious that doesn’t amount to an article of faith.”⁷⁶ As we will see in Chapter Two, this difference relates also to Derrida’s distinction between prayer, as pure address to the other, and praise, as address to a particular addressee, explored in his essay “How To Avoid Speaking: Denials.” As I argue, Derrida makes these distinctions—a religion without religion, a prayer without praise—in order to attend to the gateway experiencing between the universalizable conditions of revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) and the particular context of revelation (*Offenbarung*). Such analyses build resources for a common faith that we all share in order to ease strife and further justice as the relation to the other—any and every other.

“Invincible to all skepticism, . . . this ‘idea of justice’ seems indestructible in its affirmative character,” argues Derrida, “in its demand of gift without exchange, without circulation, without recognition or gratitude, without economic circularity, without calculation and without rules, without reason and without theoretical rationality, in the sense of regulating mastery.”⁷⁷ With all these *without*s, of course, Derrida echoes the naysaying of so many mystical traditions, with justice playing the role of the Good, God, Brahman, Emptiness, the Tao, or the Ultimate—whatever is asserted as being beyond assertions.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 49.

⁷⁷ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” 254.

Derrida's use of the word *without* (*sans*) explicitly relates not just to modern continental thinkers such as Patocka, Marion, Levinas, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Kant, but also to Augustine, and to Eckhart's quotation of him:

a quotation of Augustine recalls the simultaneously negative and hyperaffirmative meaning of *without* (*sans*): "St. Augustine says: God is wise without wisdom [wise âne wîsheit], good without goodness [guot âne güete], powerful without power [gewaltic âne gewalt]." *Without* does not merely dissociate the singular attribution from the essential generality: wisdom as *being*-wise in general, goodness as *being*-good in general, power as *being*-powerful in general. It does not only avoid the abstraction tied to every common noun and to the being implied in every essential generality. In the same word and in the same syntax it transmutes into affirmation its purely phenomenal negativity, which ordinary language, riveted to finitude, gives us to understand in a word such as *without*, or in other analogous words. It deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism.⁷⁸

Derrida's phrasing also evokes Blanchot's and Levinas's uses of the phrase "relation without relation" to talk about religion and ethics after WWII. Which are not unrelated to Bonhoeffer's "faith without religion," or Spiegelberg's "religion of no religion" used in his theorizing after fleeing Nazi Germany in 1937 about his 1917 nature experience. There is thus, perhaps, a common matrix of attempts to theorize religion or quasi-religious experience in the wake of the horrors of the 20th century and the development of a similar further formulation of a paradoxical grammar that rejects yet nevertheless retains a relation with "religion."

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in Coward, Foshay, and Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 78–79.

This dissertation explores several understudied attempts at such theorizing through various comparisons of thinkers who share similar dynamics of constructing a religion without or apart from dominant religions—William James’s “more,” the counter-cultural spirituality of Allen Ginsberg, African American religiosity in the spirituals and the blues, and feminist and Marxist theorizing of what exceeds recognition. By comparing these thinkers with the naysaying of deconstruction and of Christian mystical theologies, I admit my choices are determined for my own purposes according to my own history. Here I confess to what Jonathan Z. Smith argues of scholars of religion:

In the case of the study of religion, as in any disciplined inquiry, comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar’s mind for the scholar’s own intellectual reasons. It is the scholar who makes their cohabitation—their “sameness”—possible, not “natural” affinities or processes of history.⁷⁹

I have chosen these authors, then, less because of common historical currents and more because of my particular passions. Through creative collisions of apparently disparate thinkers, I seek to construct affinities among diverse constituencies in order to promote the desire for justice.

Building such a coalition of authors thus moves discussions of the mystical forward through developing resources for understanding and transforming dynamics of oppression such as gender, race, class, species, and other issues of embodied difference. “If the first three-quarters of the twentieth-century discourse on mysticism,” writes Jeffrey J. Kripal, “was dominated by perennialist language and the last quarter by epistemological questions and constructivist (essentially Kantian) commitments,” then perhaps, he suggests, what we require is

⁷⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 51. Also cited approvingly in Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 39.

a third turn, “. . . this one to the mystical body as a real body, indeed as a variable set of bodies.” This turn would involve studying “real suffering, real desires, real skin, mucous membrane, vaginas, and penises . . . as some of the deepest structuring principles of mystical literature and their interpretation.”⁸⁰ With rich and varied examinations of power and gender, many scholars have moved in just these directions.⁸¹ What my analysis adds is the conviction that we need to study the structuring processes of further dynamics as well, such as nonhuman animals and the material world, while also opening to unrecognized and unrecognizable others.

The ways so called postmodern thinkers have sought to circumvent Enlightenment rationality and discover who comes after the subject have been well traced, and I intend my dissertation to supplement these discussions through more attention to marginalized figures, but also to participation and constitution amidst a communal context that precedes and exceeds us, whoever we are. What gets missed are the ways that deconstruction does not impose an ontology, minimally or maximally, rather it points out the ways that “ontology is a conjuration,” as we will see in the final chapter, which touches on Derrida’s “hauntology.”⁸²

We may, then, I argue, recognize a certain madness or mysticism in Derrida’s affirmation without why of infinite justice. “And deconstruction,” Derrida says, “is mad about and from such justice, mad about and from this desire for justice,” which is to say this mad desire may perhaps also be a bit mystical.⁸³ Whether we praise or accuse this justice without calculation, without rules, without reason as being a bit mystical depends on whether we wish to valorize or

⁸⁰ Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Mystical Bodies: Reflections on Amy Hollywood’s ‘Sensible Ecstasy,’” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 596.

⁸¹ For instance, see Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*.

⁸² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Routledge, 1994), 161.

⁸³ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” 254.

demonize the mystical. If deconstruction is a kind of mysticism, however, then, at least when compared with classical mystical types, it is *perhaps another sort of mysticism*.

Universal though it may be, as we will see, Derrida's mystical idea of justice need not mean unity. Indeed, if it is preached by Derrida, that prophet of *différance*, we must expect it to revolve around a relation with the other that can allow no final fusion of total union. Yet, neither does his faith slip into the solipsistic isolation of a disembodied ego, unrelated to others and unable to communicate or interact. It is a matter of thinking difference and sameness together as inseparable yet heterogeneous. Neither dual nor nondual, both dual and nondual, Derrida's deconstruction exceeds such differences. It moves otherwise in order to honor justice as the relation to the other.

"Such justice," says Derrida, "which is not law, is the very movement of deconstruction at work in law and in the history of law, in political history and history itself, even before it presents itself as the discourse that the academy or the culture of our time labels deconstructionism."⁸⁴ "Deconstruction," he continues, "is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist, if it is not *present*, not yet or never, *there is justice* [il y a *la justice*]. . . . I am sure this is not altogether clear. I hope, without being sure of it, that it will become a little clearer in a moment."⁸⁵

To make this experience of the impossible perhaps more clear is the purpose of this dissertation. "Deconstruction," however, Derrida elusively points out,

as such is reducible to neither a method nor an analysis (the reduction to simple elements); it goes beyond critical decision itself. That is why it is not negative, even though it has often been interpreted as such despite all sorts of warnings. For me, it

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 243.

always accompanies an affirmative exigency, I would even say that it never proceeds without love. . .⁸⁶

Whether we see or understand by the end of this dissertation, deconstruction as love opens to whatever others may come.

⁸⁶ Derrida, *Points* . . ., 83.

Chapter 1

Deconstructing

From Pragmatism to Posthumanism

In man the negation of all fixed modes is the essential characteristic. . . .
He is, *par excellence*, the *educable* animal.
—William James, *Psychology*

Above all, one would have to reelaborate a problematic of consciousness, that thing that, more and more, one avoids speaking of, as if one knew what it was or as if its riddle had been exhausted. And yet is any problem more novel today than that of consciousness? . . . [I]t would be necessary to reconsider all the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, as well as those between man and animal, that is, an enormous system of oppositions.
—Jacques Derrida, “How To Avoid Speaking”

I. Introduction: The Common Core of No Common Core

“To come,” writes William James, “immediately to the heart of my theme, then, what I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance ‘you may end it when you will.’”¹ In answer, then, to the titular question of his essay, “Is Life Worth Living?”, James gives several reasons that culminate ultimately in a hope in what may come. As to “the more” and the mode of our union with it, for James that union means indeterminateness and perpetual revision.

If the most core mystical insight is, as James maintains, “that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different,”² then the method of study appropriate to such experiential insight must unseat normal consciousness’ claims to encompass all of reality. Speaking

¹ William James, *Writings 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 485. To situate our James epigraph quote on man as the educable animal, we might mention that James wrote this before Nietzsche’s, “Man is the animal whose nature has not yet been fixed,” from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and after Pico della Mirandola’s “Man is an animal of diverse, multiform, variable and destructible nature,” from *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486).

² William James, *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 349.

pragmatically, all we have are possible truths, open to revision. Tomorrow's data may supersede today's, causing a paradigm shift necessitating not merely new scientific knowledge but new modes of living. For pragmatism—the philosophy which holds that the true is what works and that we should replace knowledge with hope—present truth and morality must open to what may come.³ Maybe, James insists, there are larger or other unseen orders into which we might live if only we have the organs to perceive. For James, such chance makes all the difference. And helps us live.

In “Is Life Worth Living?”, James follows his suicidal thought experiment with the question: “What reasons can we plead that may render such a brother (or sister) willing to take up the burden again?”⁴ Given that he originally gave this essay as an address to the Harvard Young Men's Christian Association near the end of the nineteenth century, we might applaud his inclusive gesture of mentioning a sister in the ranks of fellow-mortals, albeit parenthetically. Even more expansively, in offering his reasons that life truly is worth living, he goes on to generously consider even the mortality and suffering of nonhuman animals.

When we face the suffering of others, says James, and “for instance, realize how many innocent beasts have had to suffer in cattle-cars and slaughter pens and lay down their lives that we might grow up, all fattened and clad, to sit together here in comfort and carry on this discourse, it does, indeed, put our relation to the universe in a more solemn light.”⁵ With such

³ “In the context of post-Kantian academic philosophy, replacing knowledge by hope means something quite specific. It means giving up the Kantian idea that there is something called ‘the nature of human knowledge’ or . . . ‘the human epistemic situation’ . . . For, once we drop it, we shall not be able to make sense of Descartes’ claim that the fact that we might be dreaming casts doubt on all our knowledge of the external world. This is because we shall recognize no such thing as ‘our knowledge of the external world’, nor any such order as ‘the natural order of reasons’—an order which, for example, starts with the ‘deliverances of the senses’ and works up from there” from Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 34.

⁴ James, *Writings 1878*, 485.

⁵ James, *Writings 1878*, 494.

solemn light shining on us (and James died before the horrors of World War I and World War II, which added even more dark solemnity to those who suffer in train cars and slaughter pens), even suicidal persons might find the desire to continue living and to take on compensatory self-suffering. “Are we not bound,” James asks, “to take some suffering upon ourselves, to do some self-denying service with our lives, in return for all those lives upon which ours are built?”⁶ Out of “a resignation based on manliness and pride” even one beset by life’s ills might fight to remedy wrongs for others. Repaying our debt owed to others for our lives, such as even our nonhuman others, could well give one reason and resources to keep on living.

Unfortunately, James then goes on to use a vivisected dog’s suffering in service of explaining how humans might acquiesce to our own suffering through faith in powers that pass understanding. To our ears today, this use of animal suffering sounds unsettling at best. To James too, the real cries he heard while the dog lay dying deeply disturbed him. A great lover of dogs, James nevertheless participated in vivisection as a witness in his anatomy class during medical school.⁷ Years later when addressing the suffering of a suicidal fellow-mortal in his talk to Harvard men, James would remember the mortality of that vivisected dog and seek to make some greater meaning than bare biological knowledge from the ordeal. He tries to take up that pain into a larger and higher narrative of healing and redemption.

Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisecting in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at his executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his

⁶ James, *Writings 1878*, 494.

⁷ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 163.

poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce.

Recoiling from the horror, James wants the suffering of the vivisected dog to cry out the possibility of unseen forces that could redeem such suffering and us.⁸

“Now I wish to make you feel,” he says earlier, “. . . that we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again.”⁹ For James, this right to believe in the unseen assumed on trust is the essence of religion: “A man’s religious faith (whatever more special items of doctrine it may involve) means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained.”¹⁰ So he tells the tale of the suffering dog to make us feel the possibility of something more than the mundane.

When hearing the dog’s howls, James hopes we might hear also that present suffering may purchase future transformation and alleviation:

Healing truth, relief to future sufferings of beast and man, are to be bought by them. It may be genuinely a process of redemption. Lying on his back on the board there he may be performing a function incalculably higher than any that prosperous canine life admits of; and yet, of the whole performance, this function is the one portion that must remain absolutely beyond his ken.¹¹

⁸ James did write a pamphlet for the anti-vivisection league calling for more humane practices, albeit also offering the same more-ascendant-viewpoint defense of the practice. See William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹ James, *Writings 1878*, 495.

¹⁰ James, *Writings 1878*, 495.

¹¹ James, *Writings 1878* 499-500.

Though passing present understanding, unseen forces may have the power to help and save. Like dogs and cats are in our world but not of it, says James, seeing our actions, such as our giving and taking of money or our scribbling in books, and yet not grasping the complexity of their meanings, so too, “our whole physical life may lie soaking in a spiritual atmosphere, a dimension of being that we at present have no organ for apprehending.”¹² James hopes we might find the power to act as if life is worth living if we understand that a laboratory animal’s suffering may serve a greater purpose beyond understanding. Extrapolating from our difference from the less than human, we might accept the possibility of a more than human in which we are immersed, yet which we currently lack the power to perceive and the organs to apprehend.

James thus hopes that we might hear in the cries of the suffering of nonhuman animals something more that speaks to us that life is worth living. Attending to the way we treat that which we deem as less, James hopes for something more. Pain and suffering, of both humans and our nonhuman others, should speak to us that life is worth living at least in part because there is something more to hope for. Our mundane material world of which we are aware, where so much suffering and pain seem senseless, we might deem otherwise if only we developed different senses to perceive beyond our present conceptual schemes.

In this chapter, I show that, contrary to the notion that his “common core” to religious experience in the root and center of mystical experience reduces to a naïve perennialism, James’s thought may lead in far more nuanced and embodied directions that help us to understand dynamics of posthumanism today. Rather than reducing “the More” to a common core mystical experience of unity, I argue that James, at least at times, preaches a common core of no common core, and his indeterminate human embodied and embedded in an evolving pluralistic universe

¹² James, *Writing 1878*, 499.

helps us to think about ethics and politics in new ways that can help us be more responsive to not only what may be more or other than normal human consciousness, but also what we then seemingly inevitably deem and demean as less.

James's pragmatic thinking of the human as an educable animal, I argue, opens also onto a Derridaean posthumanism. Jamesian pragmatism coincides with Derridaean deconstruction. Indeed, to a thinking of deconstruction as justice through opening to whatever others may come, Derrida linked a recognition of "perhaps another kind of mysticism [*une autre sorte de mystique*]." ¹³ Perhaps we should thus imbue with new meaning Derrida's words about the deep resonances among speech and writing, nature and culture, science and history from *Of Grammatology* when he said: "Between rationalism and mysticism there is, then, a certain complicity." ¹⁴ Despite his severe reservations, Derrida was not so hostile to the mystical as so many thought.

James hopes that the possibility of experiencing a mystical "more" can help us co-create a better future, whereas Derrida thinks that experiencing the impossible through our mundane finitude may open us to justice as relation to whatever other(s) may come. On the one hand, James invites us in *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, to ascend his mystical ladder—starting with sensing the beauty of sunsets and music and climbing ultimately to the highest rung of full blown cultivated mysticism of the world's religious traditions. Then we might grasp the ethical and religious import of the possibility of what might be more than normal human consciousness. On the other, Derrida deconstructs our commonsense notions of our human nature to show that we are constituted through exclusion of what we deem as other.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 254.

¹⁴ *Of Grammatology*, 80. Cf. Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 67.

From our self-assured confidence in our own consciousness out into the world of materiality, we cannot be so certain of where our boundaries end and the other's begin. Constituted amidst the passivity of affectivity, we perpetually pass through the experience of the impossible at the limits of our finitude. Attending to such experiencing, Derrida argues, may help us rethink and revise for the better our ethics, politics, and religions.

The all-too-prevalent readings of James and Derrida on the mystical cast James as the naïve perennialist, believing mystical experience to ultimately be the same everywhere and always, and Derrida as the enemy of the same, deconstructing any pretensions to assert commonality to human nature across time and clime. Both readings miss the mark. Of course we can easily cast James as a perennialist—it would be hard to write a more perennialist proclamation than the famous lines from *The Varieties*:

In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old.¹⁵

But, from the same text, we can also cite other lines that reveal him as a contextualist: “So many men, so many minds: I imagine that these experiences can be as infinitely varied as are the

¹⁵ James, *Writings* 1902, 378.

idiosyncrasies of individuals.”¹⁶ Or even a constructivist, insisting that all “experience” arises from natural processes: “So of all our raptures and our drynesses, our longings and pantings, our questions and beliefs. They are equally organically founded.”¹⁷ And, Derrida’s attention to minute particulars causes many to accuse him of relativism, but

That is the opposite to what I have to say. Relativism is, in classical philosophy, a way of referring to the absolute and denying it; it states that there are only cultures and that there is no pure science or truth. I have never said such a thing. . . . I take into account differences, but I am no relativist.¹⁸

Problematizing such prevalent readings, I demonstrate that James and Derrida both argue for understanding human nature as indeterminate. But this indeterminacy, which generates innumerable differences according to always particular contexts, is nevertheless and thereby actually universal and even shared with nonhuman natures. Moreover, for both James and Derrida, the indeterminateness at the heart of the human mirrors that of the cosmos and what more may come.

True one emphasizes mystical experiencing of supernormal consciousness, while the other analyzes mundane experiencing of finitude. But one and the other both exhibit traits we may deem mystical and mundane—alternately or simultaneously. Such problematics demonstrate that we need to think otherwise about these apparently clear cut divisions. James’s experiencing deals more with particularly extraordinary dynamics from musical vibrations to drug states, which may or may not transcend time and clime, whereas Derrida’s experiencing of the impossible stresses an absolutely universal structure immanent to every moment whether we

¹⁶ Ibid., 368.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney, eds., *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, First Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 78–79.

want it to be or not. Through comparing James and Derrida, we will see that comparison itself cultivates an experience of *the impossible* that opens possibilities to help scholars of religious studies think otherwise about our chimerical divides—supernatural or natural, fideistic or scientific, mind or brain, spirit or body, sacred or secular.

II. Good Vibrations

Though never so tortuously as with the dog undergoing vivisection, James frequently elsewhere uses the comparison of humans with nonhuman animals to make his point about the possibility of unseen orders. For James, the lesser consciousness of nonhuman animals counts as proof that there may be more possibilities in excess of our abilities to circumscribe. In *Pragmatism*, James declares,

I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing rooms and libraries. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. . . . But, just as many of the dog's and cat's ideals coincide with our ideals, and the dogs and cats have daily living proof of the fact, so we may well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own.¹⁹

Like our consciousness seems more than that of lesser animals, so too might there be greater creatures than us living with us in this vast universe. And these higher powers may work in concert with us to create a better cosmos. Indeed, in *The Pluralistic Universe*, James writes that

¹⁹ James, *Writings 1902*, 619.

the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all.”²⁰

Other more ascendant consciousnesses could be enveloping us, collaborating with us in transforming our worlds. And this preponderance of possible consciousnesses means reality is plural.

“The pluralistic world,” James writes, “is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom.” Far from an apolitical, inner feeling, James’s mysticism, as Leigh Schmidt has shown, was constructed in part to serve the political purpose of reuniting the Union after the Civil War.²¹ If people could perceive that reality may be more than they dogmatically believe, then an enlivening humility of affirming the right to believe whatever aids individual and communal living might flourish. James hoped altered states could help heal the United States. Rather than totalizing forms of right and wrong fighting it out, James’s pragmatism calls for perpetual revision. James favors not a perfect union but rather the process of ever forming a more perfect union.

And the possibility of more extends from the cosmic through the political down to the minutest scientific particular in the universe: “However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.”²² If only we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see, we may perceive a pluralistic universe working in concert with our concerns. And his

²⁰ Ibid., 771.

²¹ Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 71, no. No. 2 (June 2003): 273–302.

²² James, *Writings 1902*, 776.

reduction of religion to a common core of mysticism was meant to assist this ethical and political project of empowering living.

In “Conclusions” of *Varieties*, James tries “to reduce religion to its lowest admissible terms, to that minimum, free from individual excrescences, which all religions contain as their nucleus, and on which it may be hoped that all religious persons may agree.”²³ Despite diverse creeds, all religions, James argues, contain a “common nucleus” consisting of (1) “a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand,” and (2) “a sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers.”²⁴ For both one and two, note immediately that *sense* functions as a key term. These two senses are the “uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet.”²⁵ (Note also the apparent tension between *one* common nucleus or uniform deliverance and *two* senses.)²⁶ Such sense is, for James, connected to mysticism since “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.”²⁷

For James, then, the common core of religion and mystical experience reduces to the believer’s sense of salvation by a higher power. The developed mind senses some higher part of itself connected to something more that saves.

²³ Ibid., 450–51.

²⁴ Ibid., 454.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I would say also that there is a further complication in the first sense since there is an embedded prior predication when James says, “there is.” Despite his rejection of the Hegelian Absolute, has James simply reproduced the dialectic—“there is” (Being/Thesis) “something wrong about us” (Non-Being/Anti-thesis), and then the *aufhebung*, “we are saved from the wrongness” (Becoming/Synthesis)? I would argue that to the extent that James succumbs to certainty in regards to an ultimate culmination in a cosmic consciousness, he has not escaped the idealist system he seems to reject. To the extent, however, that he holds to his pragmatic method of future truths to come that may revise prior truths and to his mystical affirmation simply of something other than consciousness that may come to disrupt normal consciousness, James, in my view, resists the closing off of his system through claims to full conceptual mastery (such as Hegel’s teleological apotheosis in the Absolute). Transmarginal sense opens us to whoever or whatever other may come.

²⁷ James, *Writings 1902*, 342.

He becomes conscious that this higher part is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.²⁸

And our capacity to perceive more expansive dynamics than nonhuman animals, James argues in his essay, “Brute and Human Intellect,” emerges from our differing brain function. According to James, our brain manages that miraculous separation through the ability to find a more ascendant perspective amidst ongoing vibration.

Working with the best nineteenth century neuroscience, James theorizes that the difference between human and nonhuman animals lies between habit and novelty—humans have more capacity to make new and unexpected or unforeseen associations because our brains vibrate more.

If the theory be true which assigns to the cerebral hemispheres definite localities in which the various images, motor and sensible, which constitute our thoughts are stored up, then it follows that the great cerebral difference between habitual and reasoned thinking is this: that in the former an entire system of cells vibrating at any one moment discharges in its totality into another entire system, and that the order of the discharges tends to be a constant one in time; whilst in the latter a part of the prior system still keeps vibrating in the midst of the subsequent system, and the order—which part this shall be, and what shall be its concomitants in the subsequent system—has little tendency for fixedness in time.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 454.

²⁹ William James, *Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 946.

In James's understanding, animals' brains' neural networks vibrate in one area or system and then pass that motion on to the next region necessary for processing the stimuli. In human animals, however, when the impulses pass to the next system, the previous region resonates for a while longer as well. James believes brutes' brain currents flow along a stable stream of instinctual habit; ours flow along an ever-creative stream of consciousness.

So, whereas animals' brains, according to James, fire primarily along well worn pathways, human brains are more likely to forge new paths through novel vibratory associations. In other words, human heads are full of creative harmonies. So-called lower animal brains play the same old tune once learned, whereas human brains can riff—one is more like a player piano, the other a jazz musician. James declares: "In terms of brain-process, then, all these mental facts resolve themselves into a single peculiarity: that of indeterminateness."³⁰ In short, according to James, humans share a common core of no common core.

In nonhuman animals, "fixed habit is the essential and characteristic law of nervous action. The brain grows to the exact modes in which it has been exercised, and the inheritance of these modes—then called instincts—would have in it nothing surprising," writes James. But because of our indeterminate brain functioning and good vibrations, we may perceive and conceive more. And here we come to the fuller context of our epigraph quote:

in man the negation of all fixed modes is the essential characteristic. He owes his whole preeminence as a reasoner, his whole human quality, we may say, to the facility with which a given mode of thought in him may suddenly be broken up into elements, which re-combine anew. Only at the price of inheriting no settled instinctive tendencies, is he

³⁰ Ibid.

able to settle every novel case by the fresh discovery by his reason of novel principles.

He is, *par excellence*, the *educable* animal.³¹

Moreover, James argues that humans inherit no settled instincts not because nonhuman animals operate by instincts whereas we do not, but rather because humans have *more* instincts than other animals.

In *Psychology: Briefer Course*, James writes that higher animals, such as humans, have more instincts, not less, and this abundance of oftentimes conflicting instinctual impulses yields higher powers: “*The animal that exhibits them loses the ‘instinctive’ demeanor and appears to lead a life of hesitation and choice, an intellectual life; not, however, because he has no instincts—rather because he has so many that they block each other’s path.*”³² Our imaginative capacity to generate novel associations and inferences from our conflicting impulses marks us as possessors of reason over instinct. James thus marks the difference between human and nonhuman not around lack but abundance. Nonhuman animals do not so much lack a capacity that we have, as we share a capacity—instinct—with other animals, which we simply have more of, and from this preponderance novel properties emerge.

Contemporary neuroscientist David Eagleman even notes James’s forethought in regards to the roles of abundant deep impulses in humans. Modern neuroscience is indeed confirming, Eagleman says, that most of our cognitive processes operate under our conscious awareness. Normal consciousness, as James would call it, arises from or emerges after copious subconscious processes. Through innumerable interrelations with our life-world, our bodies and brains burn-in billions upon billions of complex habitual networks of processes, most of which remain

³¹ Ibid., 948.

³² Ibid., 372. Italics in original.

completely transparent to conscious awareness. To the extent that we are conscious, Eagleman argues, we should use that awareness to burn-in our best possible processes.

Indeed, Eagleman titles a section in which he substantially quotes James: “Mantra of the Evolving Brain: Burn Really Good Programs All the Way Down to the DNA.” This evocation of mantra by a neuroscientist is telling, because mystics across time and clime have indeed been saying that habitual practices will transform our very bodies, perhaps even cultivating more luminous and subtle spiritual bodies. We will see more of mantra, and how Allen Ginsberg believed it could indeed burn transformation right down to our DNA, in the next chapter, but for now let us recognize that James too saw the practical importance of mantra and meditation.

While teaching at Harvard, James had occasion to meet with several Hindu practitioners who commented that Americans seem riddled with anxiety and stress, which they wear on their faces. One of them even told James that he did not see

how it is possible for you to live as you do, without a single minute in your day deliberately given to tranquility and meditation. It is an invariable part of our Hindoo life to retire for at least half an hour daily into silence, relax our muscles, govern our breathing, and meditate on eternal things. Every Hindoo child is trained to this from an early age.³³

To James, the fruits of such practice were obvious from the calm and confident comportment of his visitors, so much so that he grievously lamented more Americans would not do the same. Instead, through habit, Americans burn stress into their systems, and, “from its reflex influence on the inner mental states, this ceaseless over-tension, over-motion, and over-expression are

³³ Ibid., 755.

working on us grievous national harm.”³⁴ According to James, Americans actually hurt the country by not meditating more. For James, our neurochemistry means that meditating may cultivate altered states and also help the United States.

In James’s nineteenth century neuroscience, different habits create different neural networks, which today’s neuroscience confirms and extends with complex models of neuroplasticity glimpsed in new ways such as with fMRIs. In regard to plasticity, James was prescient. “The moment one tries to define what habit is,” James writes over 100 years ago, “one is led to the fundamental properties of matter.” Matter itself follows habitual flows, but the organic world, says James, flows more variably. Structures may shift, yet remain relatively stable, “if the body be plastic enough to maintain its integrity, and be not disrupted when its structure yields.”³⁵ With these structural changes, though, the outward appearance may remain the same. Iron bars become magnetic, rubber becomes friable, plaster sets, and organisms develop new habits:

Plasticity, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits. Organic matter, especially nervous tissue, seems endowed with a very extraordinary degree of plasticity of this sort; so that we may without hesitation lay down as our first proposition the following: that *the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed.*³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 756.

³⁵ Ibid., 137.

³⁶ Ibid., 137–38.

Our bodies—especially our brains—are plastic, that is, relatively stable enough to establish an equilibrium amidst our environment such as to maintain a structural boundary, which, being porous and supple, may also alter according to our differing habitual interactions.

“The most complex habits,” writes James, are “. . . nothing but *concatenated* discharges in the nerve-centres, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths, so organized as to wake each other up successively,” which happens, as we have seen, according to differing vibratory discharges. The more firmly ingrained into habit, however, the less plastic such pathways become. “Could the young but realize,” James pleads, “how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state.”³⁷ Thus, James believes man is the educable animal because he has so many differing instincts, impulses, and habits that his brain grows into a hub of complex resonant systems from which novel associations may arise. And James does indeed believe it is *man* who is the educable animal.

James pays this compliment of complex creative associations only to men, and not to women or nonhuman animals. And only certain types of educated men retain the capacity for plasticity into full adulthood, according to James. At the end of his essay on brute and human intellect, James manages then in the space of a few pages to abuse nonhuman animals, people of other races, and women. The entire essay hinges on nonhuman animals as clearly inferior to humans, and the next to the last page compliments the vivacity of the Italian in comparison with the untutored German, going on to say that if the German gained education, then he would likely be capable of intellectual feats the poor Italian could scarcely comprehend.

³⁷ Ibid., 150.

Similarly, he compliments young women of twenty years old as being far more mature and capable than young men, but then says women peak at that age to be exceeded by men in their much greater capacity to reason. Compared to that of his mature sister of the same age, a young man's "character is still gelatinous, uncertain what shape to assume, 'trying it on' in every direction. . . . But this absence of prompt tendency in his brain to set into particular modes is the very condition which insures that it shall ultimately become so much more efficient than the woman's."³⁸ James thinks the continuing plasticity of men's brains allows ever more novel unions of data to form, but older women and Italians share the incapacity of Brutes to continually develop creative associations from ongoing vibrations in their brains.

We now know, however, that plasticity does not stop. Twenty-first century neuroscience tells us that, so long as we live, neuroplasticity continues. And this is true for men as well as for women of any age, Italians and non-human animals too. You can indeed teach an old dog new tricks. James determines our nature and nature itself to be malleable and indeterminate. Thus, we all seemingly share the capacity for plasticity, or the common core of no common core.

III. Inner Catastrophe

James thought women and nonhuman animals become slaves to instinctual habit: they leave the plastic state. Perhaps James most feared slipping into such a diminished state, unable to create more insights or cast other possibilities toward which he might live. In other words, James feared death—but death as particularly connected to the dissolution not just of the body, but especially the brain. Like so many in his famous family, James had experienced and endured his own bouts of darkness and suicidal thoughts. He even recounted his personal experience with

³⁸ Ibid., 949.

such melancholy anonymously in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in the story of “panic fear” at seeing an epileptic patient, with blank eyes, curled up like “a sculptured Egyptian cat.”³⁹

He fell into a depression when faced with the human-as-stone-cat image of death as the impossibility of generating more. As Kelly Bulkeley notes, James extracted himself from depression by his capacity to keep casting new possibilities toward which he might live. As he recorded in his journal of April 30, 1870:

Not in maxims, nor in *Anschauungen* [contemplation], but in accumulated *acts* of thought lie salvation. *Passer outré* [Let us go beyond]. Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall be built in doing and suffering and creating.⁴⁰

As Bulkeley argues, “this diary entry contains the spiritual germ of James’ later explorations into emotion, consciousness, mystical experience, moral fortitude, and the philosophical reasons for believing in truth and valuing the good.”⁴¹ James would pair his mental effort with his physical impulses, building a life around suffering in the present while creating new possibilities. And, as we have seen, James thought that creative ability arose from the concatenation of multiple conflicting impulses. But what about when he would inevitably lose that physical possibility? He turned to the mystical “more” in part to avoid or overcome the fear of diminished brain function.

³⁹ James, *Writings 1902*, 150.

⁴⁰ As quoted in Kelly Bulkeley, *The Wondering Brain: Thinking about Religion with and beyond Cognitive Neuroscience* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

He felt terror at the man who had life but no brain—no organ for perceiving novel possibilities and as-yet-unseen forces.

To avoid such catastrophe, James advocated not only courageous creative living, but also undergoing an inner catastrophe of passive listening. Such an inner catastrophe reveals physically and intuitionally that there is indeed more to life than can be captured by any concept or creed. Attending to the deliverances of one's senses, one gains the understanding that there is more to reality than can be encompassed—there is too “much-at-once.” And, indeed, the ongoing stream of consciousness means that new, more expansive vistas for living might appear at any moment.

From sunsets and music to full blown cultivated mysticism, we might experience more. Though physiologically based, such processes take us to more. Or may. And the chance is all that is needed for James's system, and indeed for the strength to keep on living. But the new—the possibility that something better might come—is also needed for morality.

The most intimate experiencing of the mystical to which James admits was through taking nitrous oxide. This drug experimentation means James claims to have personally only achieved the fifth rung on what he would later enumerate as his “mystical ladder” of altered states, namely that of “drug states.” Or more specifically, James entered the “nitrous oxide trance” that he says involves the “keynote” of a sense of reconciliation of opposites to form a unity.⁴² This revelation enabled him to “understand better than ever before both the strength and the weakness of Hegel's philosophy.”⁴³ A drug-induced revelation of the reconciliation of opposites enticed James toward unity, but ultimately he favored plurality.

⁴² James, *Writings 1902*, 349–350.

⁴³ James, *Writings 1878*, 376.

“What reader of Hegel can doubt,” James writes in a note in *Varieties of Religious Experience*,

that that sense of a perfected Being with all its otherness soaked up into itself, which dominates his whole philosophy, must have come from the prominence in his consciousness of mystical moods like this, in most persons kept subliminal? The notion is thoroughly characteristic of the mystical level, and the *Aufgabe* of making it articulate was surely set to Hegel’s intellect by mystical feeling.⁴⁴

Indeed, Hegel was deeply indebted to the Hermetic tradition which envisioned an immaterial God above the petty God of the Bible. Into this God above God, all difference would be subsumed. Hegel’s esotericism led him to believe that the power of his system to encompass the paranormal would be proof of its validity.⁴⁵

“Place yourself,” says William James, “. . . at the centre of a man’s philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say.”⁴⁶ At the center of Hegel’s philosophic vision, according to James, is a mystical vision. Using his (mystical) reading of Hegel as a lens, we will attempt to place ourselves at the center of William James’s philosophical vision, seeing ultimately that attention to possibilities in excess of the actual animates his writing. At its center, James’s vision is of an intimate universe without center. At stake in this vision is the very possibility of morality.

⁴⁴ James, *Writings 1902*, 350.

⁴⁵ Glenn Alexander Magee, “Hegel on the Paranormal: Altered States of Consciousness in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit,” *Aries* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 20–36. See also, Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ James, *Writings 1902*, 750.

At the time of *The Will to Believe*, his first book on philosophy, James felt the need to “fire this skirmisher’s shot” that was his chapter “On Some Hegelisms.”⁴⁷ In it, James writes that “Hegel’s philosophy mingles mountain-loads of corruption with its scanty merits,” and that “[h]is system resembles a mousetrap, in which if you once pass the door you may be lost forever.”⁴⁸ Yet, at the end of this chapter comes the note in which James confesses that after this article was written he had his revelatory “nitrous-oxide-gas-intoxication” vision.⁴⁹ For James, this vision’s “first result was to make peal through me with unutterable power the conviction that Hegelism was true after all, and that the deepest convictions of my intellect hitherto were wrong.”⁵⁰ What was it in Hegel’s philosophy that could produce for James such a sense of repulsion and rejection and yet also compulsion and acceptance? The answer, we will see, is that those aspects of Hegel’s philosophy that lead to intimacy attract James, while those that lead to foreignness repulse him. The difference between these two directions comes down to morality. For James, foreignness precludes morality, whereas the possibility of intimacy enables it.

We see James’s fullest development of the importance of intimacy in *The Pluralistic Universe*. “The aim of knowledge,” James quotes Hegel as saying, “. . . is to divest the objective world of its strangeness, and to make us more at home in it.”⁵¹ According to James, some

⁴⁷ James, *Writings 1878*, 653. “On Some Hegelisms” first appeared in *Mind*, April, 1882.

⁴⁸ James, *Writings 1878*, 653, 661.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 676–79. James was prompted to experiment with nitrous oxide “by reading the pamphlet called *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, by Benjamin Paul Blood.” Reading a pamphlet written by a man James would later deem “a Pluralistic Mystic” prompted James to a mystical vision that provided insight for his reading Hegel as a mystic. With James, we see how reading and mystical experiencing are intimately entwined. Mystical experience yields hermeneutic insight; hermeneutic work may yield mystical experience. For more on this, see Jeffrey Kripal’s *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 676.

⁵¹ James, *Writings 1902*, 634. Quoting from *Smaller Logic*, Proposition 194.

philosophies further this aim, others hinder it. And, various philosophies reduce to a few types dependent on the particular philosopher's general attitude.

If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole *preferred*—there is no other truthful word—as one's best working attitude.⁵²

For James then, philosophers' visions reduce to their preferred best working attitudes as determined in relation to their life's experiences. "Cynical characters take one general attitude," says James, "sympathetic characters another."⁵³ From these two general attitudes of cynicism and sympathy, James maintains that materialistic and spiritualistic philosophies, respectively, result: "the former defining the world so as to leave man's soul upon it as a sort of outside passenger or alien, while the latter insists that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal."⁵⁴ James further divides spiritualism "into two species, the more intimate one of which is monistic and the less intimate dualistic."⁵⁵ Scholastic *theism*, which posits an unbridgeable gap between humans and God, represents the more dualistic, "while the monistic species is the *pantheism* spoken of sometimes simply as idealism, and sometimes as 'post-kantian' or 'absolute' idealism."⁵⁶ Dualistic theism, sympathetic though it is, does not achieve the extent of intimacy that James desires. The relation of humans to the universe in the dualistic species "is not as intimate a relation as to be substantially fused into it, to form one continuous

⁵² Ibid., 639.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 640.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

soul and body with it.”⁵⁷ But “pantheistic idealism, making us entitatively one with God, attains this higher reach of intimacy.”⁵⁸ Pantheism makes humans suffused by and in concert with the divine forces in the universe.

James’s philosophic vision favors intimacy and a social view of the universe because such a world makes morality possible. “From a pragmatic point of view,” says James, the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust. One might call it a social difference, for after all, the common *socius* of us all is the great universe whose children we are. If materialistic, we must be suspicious of this socius, cautious, tense, on guard. If spiritualistic, we may give way, embrace, and keep no ultimate fear.⁵⁹

James wants a world in which we can trust. Hegel’s philosophy, then, receives James’s approval to the extent that it is sympathetic, spiritualistic, and tends towards a pantheistic intimacy between humans and the universe. For James, the monistic idealism of Hegel and his ilk, however, founders because it introduces too much foreignness. When the dialectic churns towards its inevitable culmination in the Absolute, all things take up their appointed place in service of that telos. Instead of a social universe, Hegel’s monistic idealism offers a “block

⁵⁷ Ibid., 641. “It has to be confessed,” says James, “that this dualism and lack of intimacy has always operated as a drag and handicap on christian thought. Orthodox theology has had to wage a steady fight within the schools against the various forms of pantheistic heresy which the mystical experiences of religious persons, on the one hand, and the formal or aesthetic superiorities of monism to dualism, on the other, kept producing. God as intimate soul and reason of the universe has always seemed to some people a more worthy conception than God as external creator”(p.18). Though I agree with James that these two strands—God as intimate to Being and beings, and a creator God without Being—are both present in complex ways within the Christian tradition(s), I would dispute that they need be mutually exclusive. Giving flesh to such an argument, however, is beyond this chapter. Though, as we will see, I think James’s emphasis on possibility over actuality may point the way.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 641.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 644.

universe,” the apotheosis of the Absolute. Against this, James offers his pluralistic universe that entails perpetually new possibilities. “Only in such a world,” James writes in *The Will to Believe*, “can moral judgments have a claim to be.”⁶⁰ For there to be good and bad, it must be possible for things to change places, “[f]or the bad is that which takes the place of something else which possibly might have been where *it* now is.”⁶¹ “In the universe of Hegel,” says James, “—the absolute block whose parts have no loose play, the pure plethora of necessary being with the oxygen of possibility all suffocated out of its lungs—there can be neither good nor bad, but one dead level of mere fate.”⁶² Without the “oxygen of possibility” a pluralistic universe cannot breathe, and the chance of morality dies. According to James, Hegel's vision and his own diverge, then, over chance and fate.

“The vision in his case,” James says of Hegel, “was that of a world in which reason holds all things in solution and accounts for all the irrationality that superficially appears by taking it up as a ‘moment’ into itself.”⁶³ To the extent that this vision remains empirical, James approves. James likes that Hegel “plants himself in the empirical flux of things and gets the impression of what happens.”⁶⁴ Following such an impressionistic procedure, one sees “that things are off their balance.”⁶⁵ As we all know, life is a mess.

Accidents, either moral, mental, or physical, break up the slowly built-up equilibriums men reach in family life and in their civic and professional relations. Intellectual enigmas frustrate our scientific systems, and the ultimate cruelty of the universe upsets our religious attitudes and outlooks. . . . This

⁶⁰ James, *Writings 1878*, 670.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ James, *Writings 1902*, 668.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 669.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

dogging of everything by its negative, its fate, its undoing, this perpetual moving on to something future which shall supersede the present, this is the hegelian intuition of the essential provisionality, and consequent unreality, of everything empirical and finite. Take any concrete finite thing and try to hold it fast. You cannot, for so held, it proves not to be concrete at all, but an arbitrary extract or abstract which you have made from the remainder of empirical reality⁶⁶

In this aspect of his vision, James says Hegel is accurate. “There *is* a dialectic movement in things,” says James, “. . . but it is one that can be described and accounted for in terms of the pluralistic vision of things far more naturally than in the monistic terms to which Hegel finally reduced it.”⁶⁷

Hegel’s fault, according to James, comes when he transports these empirical insights into the conceptual realm. “Hegel was dominated,” says James, “by the notion of a truth that should prove incontrovertible, binding on everyone, and certain, which would be *the* truth, one, indivisible, eternal, objective and necessary, to which all our particular thinking must lead to its consummation.” This dominating need for ultimate certainty, according to James, causes Hegel to turn from the realm of perceptual flux where the truth of dialectic first appeared to the realm of conceptual stasis where a concept could be said to be secure.

When elevated to pure thought, however, the dialectic succumbs to what James calls “vicious intellectualism”—“*The treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name’s definition fails positively to include.*”⁶⁸ According to Hegel’s procedure of double negation, as James explains it, in order to make your affirmation of anything not subject to the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 670.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 657.

whims of some possible contradiction, one must make it “*self-securing* . . . by getting it into a form which will by implication negate all possible negations in advance.”⁶⁹ James explains, “you’re A must not only be an A, it must be a non-not-A as well; it must already have cancelled all the B’s or made them innocuous, by having negated them in advance.”⁷⁰ If the name does not account for all possible otherness within it, then it is not self-securing and cannot keep from getting caught in the dialectic and process of churning the triads—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—that Fichte had so named and which was taken up by the German Idealism James saw in Hegel and sought to reject by the formulation of his pragmatism. Such intellectual flights of fancy take us, according to James, away from the vital flux of life and all its attendant messiness. It tries to make reality cleaner and more organized than it is in the service of an ultimate telos that is not only untenable but also morally repugnant.

According to James, Hegel’s dialectic gets going when he simply posits the given of *being*, which then implies *non-being*, which in turn suggests the third term of *becoming*, which preserves and sublates the difference through a higher synthesis. Posit one thing and its contradiction is implied. This positing process, once begun, presses onwards. “Then,” as James explains, “as the other things, thus implicitly contradicted by the thing first conceived, also by the same law contradict *it*, the pulse of dialectic commences to beat and the famous triads begin to grind out the cosmos.”⁷¹ Logically, for Hegel, this system entails an ultimate culmination in the realization of the Absolute, the all-incompassing Idea or Spirit that takes all difference into itself by being ultimately its own other. All history, then, is merely the coming to self-knowledge of the absolute. Hence James’s moral objection, as this begs all the questions of theodicy and irrationality that can be leveled against dualistic theism. If all bad in the end serves the good of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 676.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 678.

the absolute, in what sense can it be considered immoral? According to James, such absolutist thinking ultimately “makes a spherical system with no loose ends . . . that is forever rounded-in and closed.”⁷²

At the high point of his nitrous oxide vision James embraced the truths of Hegel, but as the intensity of the effects waned, so did his enthusiasm for Hegel’s dialectic. Ultimately, James declares that “the identification of contradictories, so far from being the self-developing process which Hegel supposes, is really a self-consuming process, passing from the less to the more abstract, and terminating either in a laugh at the ultimate nothingness, or in a mood of vertiginous amazement at a meaningless infinity.”⁷³ Hegel’s dialectic thought, according to James, deems a pluralistic universe irrational and leads instead to a block universe that forecloses the possibility of morality. For James, “the notion that real contingency and ambiguity may be features of the real world is a perfectly unimpeachable hypothesis.”⁷⁴ In his essay “On Some Hegelisms,” James lists among “the reasons why I am *not* an Hegelian” his belief in the proposition that the “moral judgment may lead us to postulate as irreducible the contingencies of the world.”⁷⁵ For James, a pluralistic universe most makes morality possible.

James argues that Hegel maintains that “[t]he absolute is true because it and it only has no external environment, and has attained to being its own other.”⁷⁶ “Granting his premises that to be true a thing must in some sort be its own other,” James says, “everything hinges on whether he is right in holding that the several pieces of finite experience themselves cannot be said to be in any wise *their* own other.”⁷⁷ It comes down, for James, to whether concepts can adequately

⁷² Ibid., 676.

⁷³ James, *Writings* 1878, 679.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 670.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 675.

⁷⁶ James, *Writings* 1902, 679.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

circumscribe life's pulses. "Every abstract concept as such excludes what it doesn't include," James agrees.⁷⁸ And, "if such concepts are adequate substitutes for reality's concrete pulses, the latter must square themselves with intellectualist logic, and no one of them in any sense can claim to be its own other."⁷⁹ If everything hinges on Hegel's concepts needing to supplement percepts, then revealing fringes to percepts ungraspable by concepts unravels the intellectualist system. As James says,

if, however, the conceptual treatment of the flow of reality should prove for any good reason to be inadequate and to have a practical rather than a theoretical or speculative value, then an independent empirical look into the constitution of reality's pulses might possibly show that some of them *are* their own others, and indeed are so in the self-same sense in which the absolute is maintained to be so by Hegel.⁸⁰

Concepts, according to James, are frozen things that serve merely as pragmatic helps to negotiate the "much-at-once" of perceptual pulse and flux. James argues that when viewed in this light, actual lived experience might reveal itself to be "its own other" in the sense of entailing all other possibles in its initial deliverances. To explain what this might mean, James turns to the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

According to James, Bergson leads us to turn away from intellectual and conceptual thinking and towards life as it is really lived.

Dive back into the flux itself, then, Bergson tells us, if you wish to *know* reality, that flux which Platonism, in its strange belief that only the immutable is excellent, has always spurned; turn your face towards sensation, that flesh-

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

bound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse.—This, you see, is exactly the opposite remedy from that of looking forward into the absolute, which our idealistic contemporaries prescribe. It violates our mental habits, being a kind of passive and receptive listening quite contrary to that effort to react noisily and verbally on everything, which is our usual intellectual pose.⁸¹

Opposed to intellectualist logic, James advocates his “radical empiricism” that involves “a kind of passive and receptive listening” to reality as it gives itself apart from whatever possible conceptions we have of it. It is *radical* because even in looking to the deliverances of the senses, it does not preconceive what might come. The concepts of intellectualist logic break life apart, freezing it so that the parts cannot seem to logically relate. “What really *exists*,” writes James, “is not things made but things in the making.”⁸² Attending to radical empiricism gives us the much-at-once of lived experience. “The immediate experience of life solves the problems which so baffle our conceptual intelligence,” writes James.⁸³

Immediate sensations flow into and co-penetrate one another, thereby rendering them “their own others” and immune to intellectualist criticism. “The absolute,” James writes, “is said to perform its feats by taking up its other into itself.” But, if we refuse to value conceptual knowledge over perceptual, we may see that the “sensational stream” gives us no discontinuities that would need to be brought back together into the whole of the absolute. Attending to the stream of life, we see that “no part absolutely excludes another, but that they compenetrates and are cohesive; that if you tear out one, its roots bring out more with them; that whatever is real is telescoped and diffused into other reals; that, in short, every minutest thing is already its

⁸¹ Ibid., 746. For more on Bergson, see G. William Barnard, *Living Consciousness: The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

⁸² James, *Writings 1902*, 751.

⁸³ Ibid., 749.

Hegelian ‘own other,’ in the fullest sense of the term.”⁸⁴ Though the coherence of the stream of life is difficult for our conceptual minds to grasp, we need to find ways to attend to how life exceeds our abilities to conceptually frame it.

This radical openness to whatever other(s) than the actual might come leads us, in the words of one of Bergson’s students whom James quotes, to “a certain inner catastrophe, and not everyone is capable of such a logical revolution.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, James leads us to abandon our preference for conceptual form over and above the perceptual flux. Rather than form over flux, James advocates diving into the stream:

if, as Bergson shows, that form is superimposed for practical ends only, in order to let us jump about over life instead of wading through it; and if it cannot even pretend to reveal anything of what life’s inner nature is or ought to be; why then we can turn a deaf ear to its accusations. The resolve to turn the deaf ear is the inner crisis or ‘catastrophe’.⁸⁶

Experience gives more than can be framed by our concepts. Pure experience is in excess of our ability to frame, freeze, or circumscribe it totally into concepts. When one tries to conceptually circumscribe one part of reality, the rest comes along with it. Hence, whatever reality can be framed by egoic consciousness is always fringed by more. To attend to this more, James suggests we lead our logic through an “inner catastrophe,” and then open through embodied and receptive listening to whatever other possibilities might come.

“Our mind,” says James, “is so wedded to the process of seeing an *other* beside every item of its experience, that when the notion of an absolute datum is presented to it, it goes through its usual procedure and remains pointing at the void beyond, as if in that lay further

⁸⁴ Ibid., 754.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 752.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 755.

matter for contemplation.”⁸⁷ This quote expresses quite nicely what I am stressing about James’s philosophical vision as opposed to Hegel’s, especially how it moves from mind to matter. As far as our conceptual consciousness goes, we are always moving otherwise than our normal modes, looking beyond to further matters. To push James further, we might read “matter” here as multivalently as possible—material matter, moral importance, and conceptual and spiritual realities to come. In short, the excess of the real over consciousness’s ability to circumscribe it means that possibilities beyond our wildest imagination remain live options.

As James says, “for those who deem Hegel’s heroic effort to have failed, nought remains but to confess that when all things have been unified to the supreme degree, the notion of a possible other than the actual may still haunt our imagination and prey upon our system.”⁸⁸ Thus, structurally, James’s philosophical vision differs from Hegel’s by the lack of a teleological culmination. If we follow James’s pragmatism and radical empiricism, even our most assured modes of engaging reality must perpetually traverse the risk of revision by the possibility of new modes to come. A thoroughgoing pragmatism will acknowledge that the presently identifiable parameters of the possible may always change through participating in reality differently.

In regards to religion, James’s vision of a pluralistic universe best expresses the possibility of ever evolving knowledge and ways of living that open onto unseen orders. As James notes, “[t]he vaster vistas which scientific evolutionism has opened, and the rising tide of social democratic ideals, have changed the type of our imagination, and the older monarchical theism is obsolete or obsolescent. The place of the divine in the world must be more organic and intimate.”⁸⁹ Thoroughgoing naturalistic pragmatists (like Wayne Proudfoot) are unfaithful to James’s philosophical vision when they express certainty in their explanatory reduction of

⁸⁷ James, *Writings* 1878, 510.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 511.

⁸⁹ James, *Writings* 1902, 643.

religion to entirely natural/material causes. Such certainty functions to close off possibility, which, for James, means not only that other possible realities might be missed (like transmarginal consciousness and psychic abilities), but also it means the death of morality. Essentially, James's moral insight is that the best is always yet to come. As soon as reality, whether moral reality or otherwise, is declared complete, as in Hegel's absolute, then that reality has just been declared dead.

‘Ever not quite’ has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.⁹⁰

Considered in terms of consciousness, one's grasp on the world can never become all-surveying and sovereign. Rather than reigning supreme like a king, consciousness must open to the flux of lived existence and thus to possibilities otherwise than the actual. As opposed to Hegel's all-encompassing absolute, James holds open the possibility that the limits of any concepts or experiences may always be revised by what may come. Such infinite revision is James's democratic and pluralistic philosophical vision.

Of course, when we remember that James's reading of Hegel was informed by his nitrous-oxide induced mystical vision, we see that James's philosophical vision merges imperceptibly with his religious one. If we catch James's vision, we may define religion simply as *humans' relations to what or whoever may be beyond or otherwise than everyday*

⁹⁰ Ibid., 776.

consciousness. This definition, of course, modifies James's own definition that we find in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. There, James reduces religion to one's inner experience or feeling in relation to the divine.

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*.⁹¹

For James, this definition of religion allows him to talk about his convictions that our deepest internal feelings are in concert with the deepest powers of the universe. People build “religion,” then, as “over-beliefs” on top of this inner experience of cosmic consciousness.

The possibility of an other to everyday consciousness is all James needs to open onto religion and morality. All we need is a possible *more* than the mundane. “It may be,” says James, “that possibility and permission of this sort are all that the religious consciousness requires to live on.”⁹² The study of religion, then, would focus on the various ways people engage with the possibility of this “more.”

An other to the actual always haunts James's system. Any circumscribed thing immediately entails its own other. And, for James this other fringes off into unimaginably more others. Thus, on the level of phenomenal appearance, James differs from Hegel because there can be no end to possibility. Yet, I would argue that James also has a transcendental difference from Hegel. Whereas Hegel operated on the level of pure thought, with the mind churning out the cosmos, James's philosophical vision suggests to me that our very epistemic apparatus—concepts, categories, and senses—can be transformed.

⁹¹ Ibid., 36.

⁹² Ibid., 386.

Essentially, James radicalizes Kant. The very categories through which we can know reality—perceptual and conceptual—can change, grow, expand themselves, as well as revise previous modes of engaging reality. According to James, Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception actually becomes Hegel’s Absolute, the all-knower. As we have seen, James rejects this precisely because it can become the teleological apotheosis of all knowledge and experience into the block universe and thus the ruin of moral possibility. Certainty of the categories of knowing stifles possibility. For James, morality needs the breathing room of mere possibility. Thus, even the very categories through which we engage the world might be transformed, allowing more and more expansive and different views of reality to appear. If we live differently, with different interests, we might discover different realities. Granted, the givenness of reality exerts causal pressures that we must negotiate, but our modes of engagement with these may evolve.

Thus, I would say that James offers the scholar of religion two levels on which she needs to open to the “more” of possibilities in excess of the actual: the phenomenal and the transcendental. What appears may be other than we have previously thought or imagined, and the very modes of appearing and perceiving may undergo transformation such as to open onto realities beyond our imagination—which means we all walk by faith, whether we want to or not.

“Faith,” James says in *The Will to Believe*, “means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance.”⁹³ And, since it is always theoretically possible that even our most assured confidences can be revised by something other to come, then faith is the very air all of our actions, concepts,

⁹³ James, *Writings 1878*, 524.

and experiences breathe. “The necessity of faith as an ingredient in our mental attitude,” James notes, “is strongly insisted on by the scientific philosophers of the present day; but by a singularly arbitrary caprice they say that it is only legitimate when used in the interests of one particular proposition—the proposition, namely, that the course of nature is uniform.” James proposes that we all walk by faith—whether rationalists, pragmatists, or fideists. Reason and religion, then, are “over-beliefs” built upon the ground of faith (which, of course, is no firm ground, but rather the free form of possibility). The “more” that James offers for scholars’ consideration, however, is that it is possible that nature is plural, and that we may always be surprised by what may come.

Let us now turn from James’s desire for mystical experiencing that might help form more perfect unions and foster peace for those who share it to Derrida’s analysis of experiencing the impossible that is a structure of experience which is shared by all whether they want it to be or not.

IV. From a Common Core of No Core to Religion Without Religion

“Deconstruction,” says Derrida, “certainly entails a moment of affirmation,” he says. “I mean,” explains Derrida, “that deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it.”⁹⁴ Derrida’s deconstruction responds to the excluded, to the other—“other, as other than self, the other that opposes self-identity.”⁹⁵ “The guiding insight of deconstruction,” writes Mark C. Taylor in his eulogy for Derrida, “is that every structure—be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious—that organizes

⁹⁴ Derrida in *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester Univ Press, 1984). 118.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out.”⁹⁶ Striving to always attend to what gets left out, Derrida suspects assertions of pure self-presence as supporting repression. The dream of a center pushes the other to the periphery.

Derrida felt such marginalization himself, seeing firsthand that repression of the other contributed to the horrors of the 20th century. Taylor explains:

As an Algerian Jew writing in France during the postwar years in the wake of totalitarianism on the right (fascism) as well as the left (Stalinism), Mr. Derrida understood all too well the danger of beliefs and ideologies that divide the world into diametrical opposites: right or left, red or blue, good or evil, for us or against us. He showed how these repressive structures, which grew directly out of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, threatened to return with devastating consequences. By struggling to find ways to overcome patterns that exclude the differences that make life worth living, he developed a vision that is consistently ethical.⁹⁷

“That is what gives deconstruction its movement,” Derrida says, “that is, constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice.”⁹⁸ For Derrida, as we shall see, promising pure presence dishonors the other.

During his college years and early career in France, Derrida experienced depression, and, like James, contemplated suicide. In a note to his friend, he wrote, “I’m no good for anything except taking the world apart and putting it together again (and I manage the latter less and less

⁹⁶ Mark C. Taylor, “What Derrida Really Meant,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2004, <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/derrida/taylorderrida.html>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ John D Caputo and Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (Fordham Univ Press, 1997), 18.

frequently).”⁹⁹ And, similarly to how James kept going by continually projecting the possibility of a more positive future, Derrida developed the endlessly renewing deconstructive desire to open to what may come.

“During the last decade of his life,” Mark Taylor writes, “Mr. Derrida became preoccupied with religion and it is in this area that his contribution might well be most significant for our time.”¹⁰⁰ Taylor continues,

He understood that religion is impossible without uncertainty. Whether conceived of as Yahweh, as the father of Jesus Christ, or as Allah, God can never be fully known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings.

And yet, we live in an age when major conflicts are shaped by people who claim to know, for certain, that God is on their side. Mr. Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning, purpose and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary, the great religious traditions are profoundly disturbing because they all call certainty and security into question. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a mortal danger.

. . . . Fortunately, he also taught us that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief—one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not understand. In a complex world, wisdom is knowing what we don't know so that we can keep the future open.¹⁰¹

Openness to the future, to what is to come, to the other: this is the faith that Derrida prescribes.

⁹⁹ Benoit Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography* (Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 77.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, “What Derrida.”

¹⁰¹ Taylor, “What Derrida.”

In apparent agreement with James on the necessity of faith, Jacques Derrida professes that “you cannot address the other, speak to the other, without an act of faith.”¹⁰² Though little read in connection to pragmatism, especially the more thoroughgoing Jamesian version of pragmatism that I have sketched thus far, Derrida’s deconstruction offers recent resources for continuing such theorizing about mystical religion. If James preached a common core of no common core connected to a faith in what may be more, then perhaps we can see Derrida as the prophet of a religion without religion linked to a faith in what other(s) may come.

To many, it will come as a surprise that one who may “quite rightly pass for an atheist” nevertheless has faith.¹⁰³ Derrida’s faith, however, differs from those of the world’s religions. Distant from dogmatic truth claims, Derrida’s faith comes closer to the attributes of the “spiritual but not religious.” “For me,” says Derrida, “there is no such thing as ‘religion.’”¹⁰⁴ “Within,” he continues, “what one calls religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or other religions—there are again tensions, heterogeneity, disruptive volcanoes, sometimes texts, especially those of the prophets, which cannot be reduced to an institution, to a corpus, to a system.”¹⁰⁵ In a very Schleiermachian or Jamesian gesture, Derrida says, “I would distinguish between religion and faith.” “If,” he says, “by religion you mean a set of beliefs, dogmas, or institutions—the church e.g.—then I would say that religion as such can be deconstructed, and not only can be but should

¹⁰² Caputo and Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22.

¹⁰³ “. . . the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything, . . .” Jacques Derrida from *Circumfession: Fifty-nine periods and periphrases written in a sort of internal margin, between Geoffrey Bennington’s book and work in preparation (January 1989–April 1990)*, in *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); p. 155.

¹⁰⁴ Caputo and Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

be deconstructed, sometimes in the name of faith.”¹⁰⁶ Yet, not only does Derrida deconstruct certainty of a big guy up in the sky, but also he unsettles our neat certainty of our selves and who or what we experience in our inner intimacy. A relation with the other, he argues, precedes or exceeds our awareness of ourselves or of anything at all. And that relation is justice.

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Derrida’s “universal faith” offers resources not only for rethinking the study of religion, especially comparativism and the perennialist-constructivist divide in discussions of mysticism, but also for rethinking the differences that divide religions from one another, us from each other, and even what divides us from the so-called “more” of a supernatural Wholly Other, or the so-called “less” of other animals or of the natural, material world.

To better explain Derrida’s thinking, we could also situate him vis-à-vis Hegel. Hegelian dialectic sees dualities and seeks synthesis through an economy that culminates in a whole; Derridaean deconstruction sees dualities and exposes and accentuates their heterogeneity and indissolubility to cause displacement and rupture to the (im)possible coming of the wholly other(s). “If there were a definition of *différance*,” Derrida says, “it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève wherever* it operates.”¹⁰⁷ Rather than seeking absolute resolution like Hegel, Derrida deals with dualities more like William Blake—

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, *Positions*, 40. Hegel’s dialectic, though, has seemingly endless resources for appropriating difference, so, perhaps the only way to secure a difference from Hegel’s absolute idealism is to make one’s system (or consciousness) insecure. And to relate it to what it cannot ever hope to synthesize. In the end (can there ever be an end?), perhaps the only way to resist culmination of the operation of the *aufhebung* in the Absolute, the movement of lifting up and preserving through a more comprehensive view that eventually includes all, would be to radicalize it—or engage in a “Hegelianism without reserve.” For more on this possibility, see Jacques Derrida’s “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegeliansim Without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Derrida’s title, of course, includes the undecidability of a double meaning: both a Hegelianism that opens to loss and reserves nothing, and a Hegelianism that is unreserved and thoroughgoing in its fidelity to Hegel’s system.

engaging the tension of opposites so as to unleash imaginative creative energies. Rather than rehashing Hegel, however, let us, as we did with James, attend to how Derrida deals with animal suffering.

Whereas James goes from animal suffering to mystical religion, Derrida can be seen as going from animal suffering to a religion without religion. James moves toward what may be more; Derrida opens to the other. James extrapolates from animal suffering the capacity to conceive of other unseen orders. The suffering of the vivisected dog is akin to the inability of nonhuman animals to understand what lies beyond their kin—namely, our words and libraries. If only their conceptual power were greater, so would their perceptual be. Lacking language, however, nonhuman animals cannot ascend to the same heights of consciousness as us. In this, James follows the dominant trend of the western philosophical tradition in asking primarily what powers we have which animals lack, like language.

In contrast, Derrida follows Jeremy Bentham in believing that “[t]he *first* and *decisive* question would rather be to know whether animals *can suffer*.”¹⁰⁸ Citing Bentham, Derrida argues,

“The question is not: can they speak? But can they suffer?” Because, yes, we know this, and no one would dare to doubt it. Animals suffer; they manifest their suffering. We cannot imagine that an animal doesn’t suffer when it is subjected to laboratory experimentation or even to circus training. When one sees an incalculable number of calves, raised on hormones and stuffed into a truck, on their way from the stable straight to the slaughterhouse, how can we not imagine that they suffer? We know what animal

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (Fordham Univ Press, 2008), 27.

suffering is, we feel it ourselves. Moreover, with industrial slaughter, these animals are suffering in much larger numbers than before.¹⁰⁹

So, like James, Derrida philosophizes about animal suffering. Unlike James, Derrida does not simply extrapolate from their suffering to move beyond to something more, rather he enters into such suffering, showing the ways we share it.

“Can they suffer?” amounts to asking “Can they *not be able*?” And what of this inability [*impouvoir*]? What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability? What is this nonpower at the heart of power? What is its quality or modality? How should one take it into account? What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us?

Derrida answers by saying that it concerns us in our inmost being. At our core, we share such suffering. We share such vulnerability and anguish. And their nonpower at the heart of power is our nonpower as well—our queer ability to not be able.

Recognizing this same incapacity in others calls us to account, even though the scales may be beyond balance. Derrida continues:

Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability, and the vulnerability of this anguish.¹¹⁰

Taking account of this nonpower at the heart of power that is our shared suffering is, as we will see, what I argue in Derrida’s thinking most opens onto the mystical. Structurally, I argue that

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow . . . : A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort, 1st ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 70.

¹¹⁰ Derrida, *The Animal*, 28.

this nonpower of passivity lies also at the heart of the mystical—we might see it in James’s mystical marker of ineffability, or, as we will glimpse with Allen Ginsberg in the next chapter, it can be, at least at some level, indistinguishable from the Christian darkness of unknowing or Buddhist emptiness.

V. Two Passivities: Embodiment and Iterability

In regards to this shared nonpower of suffering, Cary Wolfe helpfully argues, in his introduction to *Philosophy and Animal Life*,

that there are *two* kinds of finitude here, *two* kinds of passivity and vulnerability, and that the first type (physical vulnerability, embodiment, and eventually mortality) is paradoxically made unavailable, *inappropriable* to us by the very thing that makes it available—namely, a second type of “passivity” or “not being able,” which is the finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language, a technicity which has profound consequences, of course, for what we too hastily think of as “our” concepts, which are therefore in an important sense not “ours” at all.¹¹¹

Wolfe argues that with attention to these two finitudes—embodiment and iterability—Derrida provides a third way between the dual ethical horns of, on the one side, ethnocentrism, or claiming our norms and divisions of human and nonhuman are right just because they are ours, such as a Wittgensteinian “form of life” argument, or, I might add, Richard Rorty’s unapologetic “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism”; and, on the other, the quest for certainty of ethical universals, such as Peter Singer’s rationalism. Derrida instead demonstrates that the human is

¹¹¹ Stanley Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 25–26.

open to its other(s) in its very constitution, all while directing us to the particularity of our embodiment and emplacement in a world.

“There is no need,” writes Wolfe,

to rehearse here Derrida’s theorization of iterability, *différance*, trace, and so on; rather, I simply want to mark how this second kind of “not being able” renders uncertain and unstable . . . the relationship of the human to itself because it renders unstable not just the boundary between human and animal but also that between the organic and the mechanical or technological. And for these very reasons—because of the estrangement of the “the human” from the “auto-“ that “we” give to ourselves—the relation between the human and nonhuman animals is constantly opened anew and, as it were, permanently.¹¹²

Like James’s perpetual vibration opening us to what may be more, Wolfe points out that Derrida too defines the human indeterminately as constantly opening anew. “Derrida’s point, however,” writes Wolfe, is “that our *relation* to flesh and blood is fatefully constituted by a technicity with which it is prosthetically entwined, a diacritical, semiotic machine of language in the broadest sense that exceeds any and all presence, including our own.”¹¹³ Rent by finitude, we share both fleshly and mechanical vulnerabilities or passivities with nonhuman animals, which confront us and call for our response.

To explain this more thoroughly, however, I do need here to rehearse some necessarily difficult nuances of Derrida’s thought about such (non)concepts as *différance* and trace. In an essay differentiating his terms from negative theologies, Derrida echoes apophatic language:

What *différance*, the *trace*, and so on “mean”—which hence *does not mean anything*—is “before” the concept, the name, the word, “something” that would be nothing, that no

¹¹² Ibid., 28.

¹¹³ Ibid., 30.

longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality.¹¹⁴

The key difference lies in that unlike a negative theology that aims ultimately at union with the incomprehensible God, Derrida seeks to analyze a structure of experience that would be constitutive of such efforts—or any effort.

Though complex, a further exploration of these thoughts will help us understand how Derrida may be seen as placing the mystical at the heart of the human, albeit a mystical inseparable from the mechanical. And this Derridaean inflection of the mystical, which need involve no God, may well help us to better understand and relate to ourselves, other animals, and the world we share. Whereas apophaticism desires to open to form a union with an Ultimate Other, deconstruction desires to attend to unavoidable openness to whatever other(s) may come. Such openness may indeed entail an ineffable Real that suffuses and subsumes us, but it may also mean simply the generative and threatening possibilities of our exposure to others—other contexts, other living organisms, other material processes, and other realities that exceed imagination, like death. Such conjoined possibilities and impossibilities are at play when Derrida deploys the term mystical—or *différance* or trace.

Drawing on Levinas, Derrida's use of the term trace gestures at any thing's singularity being non-essential: no thing can (be) present itself without being exposed to possible repetition. Kevin Hart succinctly explains Derrida's argument as follows:

Very roughly, his argument is that all objects—even ideal ones, like geometrical figures—presume in their very constitution the possibility of being inscribed. Were this not so, there could be no guarantee of their intelligibility for other people at other times. To inscribe an

¹¹⁴ Kevin Hart, "Introduction to Jacques Derrida," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 79.

object, though, is to allow that the mark be repeatable in any context whatsoever, where it can be ironized or parodied, divided or supplemented. Whether or not it is inscribed in fact, it will always be *possible* for the being of an object to diverge from its meaning. Or, to say the same thing in another way, equivocity can never in principle be reduced.¹¹⁵

Anything perceived or conceived in an *as such* structure—for example, a triangle conceived *as such* by me—is ever already exposed to an unavoidable risk of possible repetition. “The absolute character of its singularity,” Kevin Hart again explains, “is therefore withdrawn in its very presentation, leaving only a trace of that absolute character.”¹¹⁶ Trace means, if it means anything, that anything’s essence is at least in part nonessential.

Another way of explaining this would thus be to utilize the classical terms of essence and accident. As conceived by Aristotle, essence pertains to intrinsic properties, whereas accidents are individual variations that occur by chance. In this schema, then, my essence would be to be human, whereas my white skin and brown, curly hair, and my having been born in Texas to my my particular set of parents, are accidents. “Derrida’s question with respect to this schema,” argues the philosopher Henry Staten,

is so simple that it can scarcely be misunderstood and so radical in its implications that it can scarcely be understood. It is this: if essence is *always* exposed to the possibility of accidents, is this not then a necessary, rather than a chance, possibility, and if it is always and necessarily possible, is it not then an *essential* possibility?¹¹⁷

If we necessarily always follow after a context in which we are enmeshed in complex interrelations, then how much can my or any essence be discerned apart from these relations?

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 162.

¹¹⁶ Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 167.

¹¹⁷ Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1986), 16.

And would not these inter-relations need then to be reconceived as constitutive, rather than merely supplementary?¹¹⁸ Shouldn't the interconnection of essence and accident be thought otherwise?

Constituted amidst a context that precedes and exceeds us, we appear as time-space creatures whose consciousness necessarily carves out only a limited slice of reality when forming our world of awareness. Thus, in order to circumscribe our consciousness of the here and now, we necessarily exclude the there and then. Yet, because, as we saw with James, consciousness flows like a stream, even in constituting the here and now we are structurally defined in relation to the there and then, thereby opening whatever we perceive or conceive of as our present reality to what may be other than the narrowly delimited here and now. Western philosophy traditionally regards this structural openness to the excluded as a mere accident, something that could in principle be eliminated if we are just careful enough, and then goes on with the project of corresponding our conceptions and perceptions of the here and now to the way things really are everywhere and always. Derrida thinks otherwise.

The conditions that make it possible for us to perceive a present reality also simultaneously make it impossible for us to secure this awareness from other contexts which might shift it. Because forming the union of a particular consciousness involves excluding not only other perspectives, but also other possible ways of carving out a particular slice of space-time, there is always the possibility of other data coming which may alter things. The whole thrust of James's pragmatism moves in this direction when he says that however broadly one conceives of a whole, our minds move on to the possibility of something more. James again:

¹¹⁸ Derrida's thought definitely shares commonalities with Buddhist or Hindu nondual thought—see David Loy's and Harold Coward's essays in Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

“Our mind is so wedded to the process of seeing an *other* beside every item of its experience, that when the notion of an absolute datum is presented to it, it goes through its usual procedure and remains pointing at the void beyond, as if in that lay further matter for contemplation.”¹¹⁹

Moreover, just the simple possibility of recognizing something as the same entails the impossibility of it *actually* being the same, if only because it is cognized in a different moment of the stream of consciousness, and, by the minimal difference of that relation, is itself somewhat different.

“Nothing can be conceived as the same,” James writes, “without being conceived in a novel state of mind.”

Thus, my armchair is one of the things of which I have a conception; I knew it yesterday and recognized it when I looked at it. But if I think of it to-day as the same arm-chair which I looked at yesterday, it is obvious that the very conception of it *as* the same is an additional complication to the thought, whose inward constitution must alter in consequence. In short, it is logically impossible that the same thing should be *known as the same* by two successive copies of the same thought. As a matter of fact, the thoughts by which we know that we mean the same thing are apt to be very different indeed from each other.¹²⁰

In order, then, for something to be identified as *the same* it must be communicable across space and time as that same thing as before or over there. To be communicable as the same across different times and places, a thing’s recognition as “the same” must be able to be deferred to some other time or to differ from the original context of its coming to presence in a consciousness.

¹¹⁹ James, *Writings 1878*, 510.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

In other words, the structural possibility of something being (recognized as) the same entails possible difference and deferral. This conjoined possibility of sameness, difference, and deferral, or this impossibility of the coincidence of meaning and being, Derrida dubs *différance*. Saying “*différance*” aloud in English as a French accented shibboleth for the supposed postmodern secret that there is no secret is slightly problematic. This French flourish obfuscates things for English speakers. In French, *différance* with an a and the normal *différence* sound the same. Thus, in order to reference Derrida’s neologism, one would need to reference the written sign, even if only saying “difference with an a.” This necessary reference to the written performs Derrida’s point of unsettling the “metaphysics of presence” that relies on a mark’s ability to communicate to presence the prior speech of a present-to-self subject. Difference (with an a) makes sameness possible and impossible simultaneously.

The conditions of possibility for sameness are also simultaneously and unavoidably the very conditions of its impossibility as well, meaning that it is not really “the same” if only in that it is now being (identified) at some other place and time, or could possibly be, and is thus a little bit different. This does not mean that we cannot identify things as similar or the same, or that we cannot compare one thing with another, but rather that when we do we necessarily participate in a process that, along with sameness, also involves a bit of difference or creation of something new. We (as space-time creatures) can never enter the same stream (of consciousness) twice. This analysis of *différance* completely unsettles the metaphysics of presence, upon which rationality depends, because a *sign* is supposed to merely *supplement* speech. To better understand the interrelations of life and world, we need a better understanding of Derrida’s deconstruction of speech and writing. Perhaps then we will then be in a position to understand why Derrida links the mystical with the mechanical.

As Derrida argues, a core assumption of the “metaphysics of presence,” which he diagnoses as the major bulwark of Western intellectual traditions, is that speech equates to presence. “‘Experience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence,” says Derrida, “whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.”¹²¹ Presence reduces to hearing-myself-speak, and I write, then, in order to supplement my speech or to supplement the thing itself that could otherwise be communicated to presence by its own presence or by present speech. Writing is supposed to supplement the prior presence of speech. Writing is intended “to make speech present when it is actually absent.”¹²² Yet, as the ‘a’ in *différance* communicates, speech needs to make reference to the written mark in order to fulfill itself. Metaphysics must repress this connection because the mark is predisposed to equivocation—it can find itself transposed into other unforeseen contexts. The functioning of the mark disturbs presence, or at least presence-to-consciousness, of any thing. The supplement of the sign, then, unsettles speech, and with it presence-to-self as hearing-myself-speak and the whole of the metaphysics of presence.

“It is thus,” Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, “the idea of the sign that must be deconstructed, through a meditation upon writing which would merge, as it must, with the undoing of onto-theology, faithfully repeating it in its *totality* and *making it insecure* in its most assured evidences.”¹²³ If a mark or sign is the representation of a prior presence, then it supposedly communicates to presence the concept of the thing of which it is a sign. The sign is not the thing; it conveys the presence of the thing. In metaphysics, as Derrida notes, “the sign is

¹²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 60.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 144.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

always the supplement of the thing itself.”¹²⁴ A sign by definition, however, must be able to function in the absence of the person who wrote it, or even of the intended recipient. Thus, as we have seen, the deconstruction of the sign shows that possible difference and deferral of meaning inhere in the very nature of the sign or mark.

A written mark may supplement speech as an accretion or substitution. As Derrida writes, either “the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest* measure of presence,” or, it “intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void”(OG, 144-145). Metaphysics maintains that the mark is the first type of supplement to speech, accretion. It represses the possibility that the mark, as with the ‘a’ in *différance*, actually fulfills what was lacking in speech. The equivocal supplement of the sign disturbs presence as presence-to-self. And this disturbance isn’t localized to just some higher order level of discursive or linguistic thought. Any awareness *of* anything is exposed, open, and vulnerable.

And here we see the pertinence to the famous twentieth century debates in the philosophy of mysticism that raged over the role of language in so called mystical experience because the dynamics of this deconstruction of speech and writing cannot then be limited to what we traditionally call language. “I would like to demonstrate,” says Derrida, “that the traits that can be recognized in the classical, narrowly defined concept of writing, are generalizable.” “They are valid,” he continues, “not only for all orders of ‘signs’ and for all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would

¹²⁴ Ibid., 145.

call experience, even the experience of being: the above-mentioned ‘presence.’”¹²⁵ Différance—altered and altering repetition—haunts any presence.

According to Derrida, consciousness ever always comes too late. Affected by what precedes or exceeds it, awareness arrives after a relation with the other. At least consciousness as construed as presence does, or as hearing-myself-speak or even feeling-myself. Language, according to Derrida, also precedes and exceeds awareness. Of course children acquire language skills at a certain developmental age, and chimpanzees and pc’s may develop communication abilities. And prior to this language stage the world may only be so much somatic nonsensical noise full of sound and fury. We all know this. And we don’t need fancy French theory to tell us so. Yet what gets missed in so many discussions of the “linguistic turn” in so-called French, postmodern, or poststructuralist theory is the ways in which, for Derrida, language ever always already affects experience and entails the materiality of the mark.

Which is not exactly to say that language limits what may be known, or that experience is limited to language, or that our reality is linguistically structured or constructed. For Derrida, no such thing as language can be opposed, related, or even interrelated with something else called the world. The two are ever already one. Or, rather, the one is ever already two. “The first step for me, in the approach to what I proposed to call deconstruction,” Derrida says in an interview in response to a question about language and the linguistic turn,

was putting into question of the authority of linguistics, of logocentrism. And this, accordingly, was a protest against the “linguistic turn,” which, under the name of structuralism, was already well on its way. The irony—painful, at times—of the story is that often, especially in the United States, because I wrote “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”

¹²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1st ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 2.

[there is nothing outside the text], because I deployed a thought of the “trace,” some people believed they could interpret this as a thought of language (it is exactly the opposite). . . . I take great interest in questions of language and rhetoric, and I think they deserve enormous consideration; but there is a point where the authority of final jurisdiction is neither rhetorical nor linguistic, nor even discursive. The notion of trace or of text is introduced to mark the limits of the linguistic turn. This is one more reason why I prefer to speak of “mark” rather than of language. In the first place the mark is not anthropological; it is prelinguistic; it is the possibility of language, and it is everywhere there is relation to another thing or relation to an other. For such relations, the mark has no need of language.¹²⁶

Consciousness and its other are always ever together as a being-two. And, according to Derrida, this means consciousness, inasmuch as it is consciousness of anything at all, is ever already affected by circumscription, or the process of delimiting a field of awareness against horizons that fade into unawareness.

Derrida, then, directs us to a quasi-mystical experience of dizziness, with deconstruction as its meditative practice, in order to be faithful to justice as the relation to the other. Perhaps there may be supernatural grace or paranormal outer space apart from the trace, but as it becomes embodied, even the minimal embodiment of my own inner intimacy, it will have been necessary to run the risk of misrecognition.

Derrida’s analysis of iterability—the possibility of any circumscription of reality in a consciousness being surprised by novel contexts—helps us think otherwise about our relations of language, thought, embodiment, world, and ourselves. It also helps us understand our shared

¹²⁶ Jaques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 1st ed. (Malden: Polity, 2001), 76.

suffering with nonhuman animals, and even our commonalities with inorganic matter, and how that matters.

VI. Mystical Mathematics: $N+1$

Attending to what may come, Derrida demonstrates that a condition of possibility for the mystical is unavoidably its possible contamination by the mechanical. According to Derrida, mechanical and mystical must be thought together as one and the same possibility. To return to suffering and the two passivities, this analysis of iterability shows that there are not so much two, as one, which immediately divides. Derrida refers to this dynamic by a quasi-mystical mathematics of $n+1$. Like James thinks that conceiving of any whole generates more, or that an other to any actual always haunts, so too does Derrida insist that coming to consciousness involves a relation with something or someone other than us. And, again like James, Derrida links this to the need for faith, but to a faith of a particularly universal kind.

Perhaps there are not so much two passivities—embodiment and iterability—as one, which immediately divides or multiplies. Or the one is ever already two—me and (m)o/Other. Any one is always more than one. Of such quasi mystical mathematics, Derrida says in his essay, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone”:

Why should there always have to be *more than one* source? There would not have to be two sources of religion. There would be faith and religion, faith or religion, because *there are at least two*. Because there are, for the best and for the worst, division and iterability of the source. This supplement introduces the incalculable at the heart of the calculable. (Levinas: “It is this being-two <*être à deux*> that is human, that is spiritual.”) But the more than One <*plus d’Un*> is at once more than two. There is no alliance of two, unless

it is to signify in effect the pure madness of pure faith. The worst violence. The more than One is $n + \text{One}$ which introduces the order of faith or of trust in the address of the other, but also the mechanical, machine-like division (testimonial affirmation and reactivity, “yes, yes,” etc., answering machine and the possibility of radical evil: perjury, lies, remote-control murder, ordered at a distance even when it rapes and kills with bare hands).¹²⁷

With the title of this essay Derrida evokes, of course, Kant and Hegel, but also Bergson.

Unpacking Derrida’s thought here is very difficult because it requires thinking the mystical and the machine together, as one and the same possibility. “We are constantly trying to think,” writes Derrida, “the interconnectedness, albeit otherwise, of knowledge *and* faith, technoscience *and* religious belief, calculation *and* the sacrosanct.” In thinking the interconnection of religion and reason otherwise, then, we come up against questions of the calculable and the incalculable.

“‘To think religion?’ you say,” writes Derrida. “As though,” he continues, “such a project would not dissolve the very question in advance.” Naming the subject of study makes the analysis and critique possible, but it also in a sense perpetuates and machine-like replicates the very bundles of behaviors it seeks to circumscribe. Identifying and demarcating a stable thing means it may ghost-like reappear in some other place at some other time. Delineating the real also fabricates the spectral. Thus, in advance, “the affair is decided.” Like a machine meant to fabricate the religious sphere, designed to ever always assure “the return of the religious,” the very thought of “religion” automatically replicates the thing it intends to think and perhaps question. “Already in speaking of these notes as a machine,” confesses Derrida, “I have once again been overcome by a desire for economy, for concision: by the desire to draw, in order to be

¹²⁷ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 100.

quick, the famous conclusion of the *Two Sources* . . . towards another place, another discourse, other argumentative stakes.”¹²⁸

Referring to Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Derrida remarks that “the book’s concluding words are memorable,” and then he quotes: “the effort required to accomplish, down to our refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods.” Derrida admits that his reading “could always be—I do not exclude it—a hijacked translation, or a rather free formalization,” but of Bergson’s book Derrida nevertheless wonders, “what would happen if he had, as though despite himself, left a place or a passage for a sort of symptomatic *retraction*, following the very movement of hesitation, indecision and of scruple, of that turning back (*retractare*, says Cicero to define the *religious* act or being) in which perhaps the *double source*—the double stratum of *religio* consists?”¹²⁹ Like Cicero turning to the heavens and scorning whatever human he sees there in order to love justice more than vanity, what if Bergson left a place where his intentions could be scorned, and what he invested in the text could be turned to another purpose, and precisely in order to love an incalculable justice more than his own calculable intentions in writing the work?

By delineating both static and dynamic religions, Bergson sought to free religion from mere mechanicity and the obligation to the norms and rules of a closed society at war with others, and to adumbrate through the *elan vital*, or life force, a more mystical religion of an open society embracing others in all-encompassing love and moving beyond matter through creative evolution. If, however, Bergson’s words, despite his best intentions, could be turned or turned

¹²⁸ Ibid., 77.

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 77–78. 77-78.

back on themselves, then his progression from the mechanical to the mystical could be put in question. “Were such the case,” says Derrida,

then that hypothesis would receive perhaps a doubly *mechanical* form. “Mechanical” would have to be understood here in a meaning that is rather “mystical.” Mystical or secret because contradictory and distracting, both inaccessible, disconcerting and familiar, *unheimlich*, uncanny to the very extent that this machinality, this ineluctable automatization produces and re-produces what *at the same time detaches from and reattaches to* the family (*heimisch*, homely), to the familiar, to the domestic, to the proper, to the *oikos* of the ecological and of the economic, to the *ethos*, to the place of dwelling.¹³⁰

Here mystical for Derrida means the dizzying conjunction of both that which makes us to feel at home and that which unsettles and disturbs us, similar to how Rudolf Otto describes the holy or numinous as *Mysterium tremendum and fascinans*—both daunting and fascinating, terrifying and enticing.¹³¹ Rather than merely extraordinary highpoint or traumatic experiences though, Derrida analyzes the ways in which the very conditions of consciousness in their most mundane manifestations or operations such as circumscribing a mo(ve)ment can be both comforting and disconcerting. The practice of writing both authors our lives and unwrites us. The mark, too, is a bit mystical—at once the enabling condition of consciousness and the impossibility of it ever securing itself, both enabling comprehension and unleashing incomprehensibility.

Derrida talks about the possibility of turning Bergson's text, and thus the possibility that the progression of static/mechanical religion to dynamic/mystical religion might turn back on

¹³⁰ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 78.

¹³¹ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1958).

itself, because writing (from the rudimentary "mark" of any transitive consciousness to the full blown "tele-techno-science" of modern satellites and wireless technology) is, as we have seen, at once the positive possibility of communication and the impossibility of it ever perfectly arriving at full, clear, unrevisable completion. Thus, whereas Bergson thinks that the mechanical can be harnessed in service of the mystical, helping humanity to rise above the merely mechanical habitual violence of static religion, Derrida wants to analyze the ways such a hopeful outlook is made possible by the very forces that unavoidably make it impossible to secure against the risk of the very worst.

In his recent book on Derrida's essay, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media*, Michael Naas inflects as miracle that which I am inflecting as mystical. Both miracle and mystical are present in Derrida's text, but Naas elevates the one to his title and relegates the other mostly to his footnotes. Thus, we find the following explication of Bergson that could well—and perhaps more appropriately given Bergson's final section title of "Mechanics and Mysticism"—have ended with a comparison to the mystical, but Naas compares instead to miracle:

This reference to evolution by the author of *Creative Evolution* (1907) puts everything we have seen thus far in a somewhat different light. For it suggests that both kinds of religion, static and dynamic, and both kinds of morality, closed and open, along with both instinct and emotion, are in the end the products of a single, ongoing, "evolutionary" process. It suggests that all of these are, in the end, expressions of *life*. Life is the common source of both kinds of morality and religion, even if the development of one kind of religion, static religion, has been blocked and become predictable, simply turning in circles like a machine, while the development or progress of dynamic religion, inspired

and drawn out of itself, is unpredictable and sudden, coming to humanity from above, so to speak, through an unexpected mutation, through a leap or an *élan*, a *tout d'un coup* . . . that might be compared to a kind of miracle.¹³²

Not that miracle isn't a helpful concept here, I just don't think it's as helpful or faithful to either Bergson or Derrida as mystical might be. That's why Derrida links mystical and mechanical in that complex quote above. From the material processes of the universe, something *more* emerges. And what is the mystical if not the relation to something more or other?

A single source that immediately divides in two, or two sources that have to be thought together, neither separable nor collapsible, is how Derrida reads Bergson to help think the common testimonial source of both reason and religion ("Trust me, I am speaking to you."). Whereas for Bergson static and dynamic, mechanical and mystical, both can be seen as springing from *life*, for Derrida reason and religion both rely on faith. Naas continues:

As in Derrida, then, there is in the end really only one source that divides in two as human intelligence, in Bergson's account, tries to understand it. What Derrida thus retains from Bergson's account, or what Derrida's account has in common with Bergson's, is, among other things, this notion of a single source of religion that, already at the origin, divides in two, though also a thinking of religion in relationship to the machine (the last part of Bergson's work is entitled "Mechanics and Mysticism"), along with a certain displacement of reason by that which comes before it or exceeds it, habit or inspiration, or obedience and love, for Bergson, faith for Derrida.

What, we may then ask, is Derrida's faith? Though it should become clearer in the next chapter through comparison with the specific examples of Christian mystics and Allen Ginsberg, we here

¹³² Michael Naas, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 315.

introduce you to the “universal faith” that Derrida analyzes as a structure of experience rather than a particular religion. Many times, he refers to it as “the messianic,” as opposed to a particular messianism—“we prefer to say messianic rather than messianism so as to designate a structure of experience rather than a religion.”¹³³ We will see more of the messianic in the final chapter because it connects to Derrida’s theorizing about ethics and politics of the democracy to come. For now, let us focus on faith, which Derrida links to testimony.

“Religion and reason,” says Derrida, “develop in tandem, drawing from this common resource: the testimonial pledge of every performative.”¹³⁴ For either religion or reason to get going, one will already have had to communicate to some other, even if only to oneself as if one were another. Awareness involves assuring myself that this is really happening. Testimony, it seems, is primary. And, says Derrida, this testimonial context in which consciousness comes to be structurally requires faith.

What are you doing when you attest to something? You address the other and ask, “believe me.” Even if you are lying, even in a perjury, you are addressing the other and asking the other to trust you. This “trust me, I am speaking to you” is of the order of faith, a faith that cannot be reduced to a theoretical statement, to a determinative judgment; it is the opening of the address to the other. So this faith is not religious, strictly speaking; at least it cannot be totally determined by a given religion. That is why this faith is absolutely universal.¹³⁵

¹³³ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Routledge, 1994), 167–68.

¹³⁴ Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 66.

¹³⁵ Caputo and Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22.

Found anywhere awareness finds itself, “the opening of the address to the other” founds us. We are ever always already respiring in the air of trust and faith because of the structural conditions of communication, even if only with ourselves.

When speaking, I am asking you to trust me. “When I speak to you” Derrida says, “I am telling you that I promise to tell you something, to tell you the truth.”¹³⁶ Just speaking entails the *promise* of that truth. “Even if I lie,” Derrida says, “the condition of my lie is that I promise to tell you the truth.”¹³⁷ In the future, it may turn out to have been a lie, or deceit, or the communication could be understood and received properly, but regardless, the conditions of the original communication, even a lie, depend on the promise of truth. Whether I am lying to you, or whether you think I am deceiving you, the context of our communication entails trust. Otherwise, there could be no communication, nor experience of existence or anything at all. Trust inheres in the act of communicating. I speak to you, attest to you, witness to you at least of the very minimum truth that I am speaking to you.

In forming a world or coming to consciousness, we have to trust that this is indeed happening. We may, like Descartes, doubt until we discover that we can doubt everything except doubt itself, but even this process needs the *a priori* context of trust and testimony in order for it to even occur. Of the project of attending to both faith and knowledge, Derrida says, “we have to find in our experience, each as a living being, the experience of faith far beyond any received religious tradition, any teaching.” “That is why,” he continues

I constantly refer to the experience of faith as simply a speech act, as simply the social experience; and this is true even for animals. Animals have faith, in a certain way. As soon as there is a social bond there is faith, and there are social bonds in animals: they

¹³⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

trust one another; they have to. (Sometimes they fight, sometimes they don't.) This trust, this bond, this covenant within life, is the resource to understand the heterogeneity between faith and knowledge. Both are absolutely indispensable, but they are indissociable and heterological. That's the ground of our experience of faith as living beings.¹³⁸

Consciousness, or our inner-intimacy of hearing-ourselves-speak or feeling-ourselves, ever always occurs enmeshed in a context that precedes and exceeds it. Constituting a world, or becoming conscious of oneself and whatever is more or other than oneself, entails a performative force that circumscribes or forms the objects that make up the world while simultaneously being exposed to possible alteration of context and slippage of meaning and identification.

Even if I'm only talking to myself or attesting to myself in my inner intimacy that this is indeed what is taking place, this act involves the basic division of an "I" and a "me": I am talking to me. One must speak to an-other. We find ourselves amidst a relation with something more or other than ourselves. In a sense, we are ever already two. Such is our relation with the world. Or with the (m)other. Experience, if there is any experience at all, involves testimony to an other (even if only in myself) and structurally entails trust. Faith, then, is inherent in the speech-act. And, as we have seen, speech is interconnected with writing (although this interconnection must be thought otherwise than as two separate things which touch), and writing with world, and all arising from we know not what, heading we know not where.

Coming from the unknown and unknowable other, the desire to speak needs the context of truth; it cannot be otherwise. Coming from the other, even the other in me, communication

¹³⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 45.

must be received in the context of trust. I cannot help but trust in speaking. Speaking, or hearing speech (or reading writing or whatever), performs its own truth of the fact of speaking. This truth is not independent of this fundamental testimony. It does not await verification by the senses. I speak to you, attest to you, witness to you at least of the very minimum truth that I am speaking to you. This opening of an address, Derrida says, is of the order of faith. The always already prior context of trust involved in any speech act issues an unavoidable call for faith.

This call precedes and exceeds the “I” that would speak to the other or to itself. If language (mark, “experience,” etc.) involves the promise of communication, then this promise is older than we are. Indeed, the ideal of language cannot be cleanly delimited within the inner-intimacy of hearing-myself-speak. Language is not the subsequent communication of what I have already told myself in my head and could have kept to myself if I wanted. Not only does speech entail the prior context of faith, but it cannot be kept apart from writing, and the passage of the mark and the materiality of the world.

“If one admits,” Derrida writes, “that writing (and the mark in general) *must be able* to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, etc., that implies that this power this *being able*, this *possibility* is *always* inscribed, hence *necessarily* inscribed as *possibility* in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark.”¹³⁹ Any mark, be it written on a page or impressed upon a consciousness, thus entails the possibility of difference in terms of both space and time. To work, a mark must be able to function in some other place and time. It must be able to differ spatially from the person who wrote it, and it must be able to defer communication of meaning until another time when some recipient reads it. Derrida asserts that this very *possibility* of difference and deferral makes meaning slip. A mark may find itself in

¹³⁹ Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 48.

some completely *other* context than intended. The possible *absence* of the thing itself makes its communication to *presence* by the sign necessarily equivocal.

Inasmuch as this functioning of the mark makes life possible, and is life, it is also non-life, the mechanical, the inorganic of technology. Such mechanical reproduction and repetition makes great things, like the Hubble telescope and the vast dissemination of information over the internet possible, at the same time that it makes the worst possible, like surveillance drones that rain death from afar or the large-scale slaughter of modern agri-business. Bergson hoped that we humans would turn our technological possibilities toward effecting peaceful and spiritual ends, but, as Derrida points out, Bergson wrote “between the two world wars and on the eve of events of which one knows that one does not yet know how to think them, and to which no religion, no religious institution in the world remained foreign or survived *unscathed, immune, safe and sound*.”¹⁴⁰ After citing this from Derrida, Ellen Armour concludes her excellent essay, “Thinking Otherwise: Derrida’s Contribution to Philosophy of Religion,” with the following insight:

These are sobering words indeed for those of us living through the current religious wars, manifest in the event now known as “9/11” and their kin and in the global war on terror unleashed by the U.S. in 9/11’s wake. To take on or take up the task of a responsible philosophy of religion in a time and place where life-giving and death-dealing deserts are more than metaphorical, where terrifying visions of the yet-to-come are all too easy to conjure up, is daunting, to say the least, but all the more important for that context.¹⁴¹

Would Bergson have been so sanguine about technology after the mechanized death of Auschwitz or Hiroshima? What Derrida reminds us is that any effort to think the mystical today

¹⁴⁰ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 77.

¹⁴¹ Ellen Armour, “Thinking Otherwise: Derrida’s Contribution to Philosophy of Religion,” in *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Morny Joy (New York: Springer, 2011), 58.

must be thought together with the machine, and all which that makes possible, for better and worse.

VII. Experiencing the Impossible: Mystical Affirmation of Justice, Love, and Life

“We find ourselves in an aporia,” Plotinus famously writes, “in pangs over how to speak.” “An aporia,” according to Derrida, “is an experience, enduring an experience, in which nothing . . . presents itself as such.”¹⁴² Aware of the conceptual difficulties with a term like experience, Derrida nevertheless does not dispense with it, arguing: “I find no better word than *experience*, that is to say, the voyage that crosses the boundary.”¹⁴³ Derrida eludes the critiques of the category of experience because he does not describe it as a discrete thing, a noun and not a verb (*pace* McCutcheon). Rather, Derrida’s experience of an aporia is a process or passage.

According to Derrida, “the very experience of the aporia is not unrelated to what we just called the *mystical*.”¹⁴⁴ Though the quest for Cartesian apodictic certainty seems to have been abandoned by Derrida, he nevertheless tries, “in order not simply to give up the idea of truth, to measure it or to proportion it to this problematic of the impossible.” Thus, it seems there is some justice in saying that deconstruction is impossible to understand, if, as Derrida avers, “the interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible: that is . . . of the other—the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible.”¹⁴⁵ And, according to Derrida, “the deconstruction I try to practice is impossible, is

¹⁴² Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning God*, ed. Caputo, Dooley, Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 62.

¹⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 242.

¹⁴⁴ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 244.

¹⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf, and Elizabeth Rottenberg, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other. Vol. I.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 15.

the impossible—is precisely this experience of *the impossible*.” He explains that “this is not simply an impossible experience.” It is not (*pace* Denys Turner on the mystical) simply the negation of experience.¹⁴⁶ It is to be undergone. We suffer it. “What happens in the experience of *the impossible*, which would not simply be a non-experience,” says Derrida, “that is what I try to do.”¹⁴⁷

“What,” Derrida however wonders, “would such an *experience* be?”¹⁴⁸ He points out that the word “experience,” may mean

passage, traversal, endurance, and rite of passage, but can be a traversal without line and without indivisible border. Can it ever concern (in all the domains where the questions of decision and of responsibility that concern the border—ethics, law, politics, etc.—are posed), surpassing an aporia, crossing an oppositional line *or else* apprehending, enduring, and putting, in a different way, the experience of the aporia to a test? And is it an issue here of an *either/or*? Can one speak—and if so, in what sense—of an *experience of the aporia*? An *experience of the aporia as such*? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?¹⁴⁹

An aporia, or impossible concept, for Derrida cannot have intuitional fulfillment because its conditions of possibility are simultaneously its conditions of impossibility. For example, giving a gift or hospitality.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For an insightful critique of Turner, see Kevin Hart, “The Experience of Nonexperience,” in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 200–201.

¹⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. Caputo and Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 72.72

¹⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

Concepts like pure gift or unconditional hospitality are impossible structures that enable what cannot (be) present itself to nevertheless be thought. Pure gift, as something freely given (without any return) and freely received (without incurring any debt) is not possible because the very conditions that would make such a thing realizable in the present (as present to consciousness) are the very conditions that make it impossible. Likewise, unconditional hospitality cannot be realized: If I give over everything in my household, which the impulse to give at the heart of hospitality propels me to do, then I am no longer a host, but a guest in my own home.

For a gift to be *pure* gift, it would have to exceed or rupture any economy. If I feel good I receive a return, thus engaging in a circular economy. Saying “thank you” reveals an attempt to reconcile a debt, even if only a debt of gratitude. Whether self-congratulation or debt of gratitude, gift giving in the present involves us in economy. Yet, in giving an account of the gift we cannot zero the accounts because the thought of giving a gift impels us beyond or otherwise than economy. For gift to be pure gift, it cannot ‘be’ in the sense of an object—be it material or immaterial. To be recognized as a gift, if there is such a thing, would involve the gift itself triggering some circle of reciprocity, debt, or obligation. Recognizing a gift *as such* means the gift has been annulled and a cycle of exchange begun. Thus, “gift” as an aporetic concept can keep us attentive to how we constantly compromise the unconditional universal in the midst of particular conditions. A gift, purely speaking, is impossible. A gift cannot (be) present.

Thus, regardless of whether we share the intuition of a transcendent deity, we can share concepts that hint at an experience of impossibility. These concepts of gift and hospitality are two of Derrida’s near regulatory “quasi-transcendentals”: unlike Kant’s transcendentals that are conditions of possibility, Derrida’s quasi-transcendentals are conditions of possibility

simultaneously carrying their own impossibility. These aporias can thus serve as universal concepts to help us attend to others, thereby engaging in an incalculable calculus of the impossible gift of life.

“It is . . . a place of non-gift,” says Derrida, “which makes the gift possible by resisting it. It is the place of non-desire.” “The *khora*,” Derrida continues, referencing his nonconcept of *khora* that many have accused of being his God behind deconstruction, “does not desire anything, does not give anything. It is what makes taking place or an event possible.” And mimicking apophatic language, Derrida declares: “But the *khora* does not happen, does not give, does not desire. It is a spacing and absolutely indifferent.” In speaking like a mystic in paradoxical language, Derrida continues:

Why do I insist on this, on this perplexity? Why, for instance, in *Sauf le nom*, do I try to articulate this with the problem of negative theology and phenomenology? If you read this small essay, you will see that I try to point to a strange affinity between negative theology and phenomenology. I think that this reference to what I call *khora*, the absolutely universal place, so to speak, is what is irreducible to what we call revelation, revealability, history, religion, philosophy, Bible, Europe, and so forth. I think the reference to this place of resistance is also the condition for a universal politics, for the possibility of crossing the borders of our common context—European, Jewish, Christian, Muslim I think this reference to this non-history and non-revelation, this negativity has heavy and serious political implications. I use the problematic of deconstruction and negative theology as a threshold to the definition of a new politics. I am not saying this against Europe, against Judaism, Christianity or Islam. I am trying to find a place where a new discourse and a new politics could be possible. This place is the place of

resistance—perhaps resistance is not the best word—but this non-something within something, this non-revelation within revelation, this non-history within history, this non-desire within desire, this impossibility. I would like to translate the experience of this impossibility into what we could call ethics or politics.”¹⁵⁰

As an experiencing of immanent finitude more than an infinite transcendence, Derrida’s experience of the impossible can cross religious contexts, aiding us to revise toward ever more perfect embodiments of giving, forgiveness, and hospitality.

Radical hospitality involves letting the other come, without invitation or expectation, without warning, without even the requisite of recognition. To honor the other, to be just, requires letting the other in some account be totally other. “For unconditional hospitality to take place,” Derrida argues, “you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone. That is the risk of pure hospitality and pure gift, because a pure gift might be terrible too.”¹⁵¹ We must run this risk in making any political or ethical decisions regarding proper care for the sacred dignity of a living other, that is, if we wish to further justice.

“It goes without saying,” Derrida writes in “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” “that discourses on double affirmation, the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable, the incommensurable or the incalculable, on singularity, difference and heterogeneity are also, through and through, at least oblique discourses on justice.”¹⁵² One may wish to criticize that with his impossible notions Derrida leaves us in a place of postmodern paralytic indecision. Derrida concedes that deconstruction brings us to the aporias between

¹⁵⁰ Derrida, “On the Gift,” 76–77.

¹⁵¹ Dooley and Kearney, *Questioning Ethics*, 71.

¹⁵² Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 235.

undecidable options. Yet, Derrida says that it is just this place of indecision where true decision is possible. He argues that true decision is possible only as impossible.

Many of those who have written about deconstruction understand undecidability as paralysis in the face of the power to decide. That is not what I would understand by ‘undecidability’. Far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability. If you don’t experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premises or of a matrix. So a decision has to go through some impossibility in order for it to be a decision.¹⁵³

According to Derrida, authentic decision must pass through the impossibility of the undecidable. So, when it comes down to deciding about how best to honor the other, we must face, by some account, an *aporia* and pass through without full justification.

If we *only* act from knowledge of the clear choice, we are not making a decision, but merely implementing a program. To care for the other we must account for unknowing. “For me,” says Derrida, “the *aporia* is not simply paralysis, but the *aporia* or the non-way is the condition of walking: if there was no *aporia* we wouldn’t walk, we wouldn’t find our way; path-breaking implies *aporia*. This impossibility to find one’s way is the condition of ethics.”¹⁵⁴

[Wolfson quote about mystical as walking the path where there is no path?]

If we look for some rule to guide us through the *aporia*, all we have is the impulse or intuition to “continue to desire, to dream, *through* the impossible.”¹⁵⁵ Derrida says we must

¹⁵³ Dooley and Kearney, *Questioning Ethics*, 66.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵⁵ As quoted above, “On the Gift,” 72.

struggle to determine and discern as best we can, but at some level even our best guiding norms or universals will be asymptotic to clear, transparent, univocal *rightness* (or *wrongness*). Anything other would not be living decision but simply the implementation of a program—a rote automatic process devoid of responsibility. In some measure, I must always have a “bad conscience.” A “good conscience” would be the surest signal that we are in error. (Derrida notes, parenthetically, that “it is also necessary to say that the serious, unsmiling mask of a declared bad conscience often exhibits only a supplementary ruse; for good conscience has, by definition, inexhaustible resources.”)¹⁵⁶

Surely, we desire and deserve a moral compass with clearer bearings than this to aid in our walk. And, I think Derrida does provide such clarity. So, keeping in mind the impossible, let us in conclusion attend more closely to Derrida’s offering of the aporia of the other and those others. It is akin to the problem between the singular and the unconditional or the particular and the universal.

In a roundtable discussion on forgiveness, Derrida speaks of the decision to give preference to a particular person or animal or nation as resulting in a bad conscience. In choosing to feed *this* starving person or animal, I am not feeding the other, that other, those others. In choosing to feed one, I am not caring for others. About this, we should not have a clear conscience.

“I, of course,” says Derrida, “have preferences. I am one of the common people who prefer their cat to their neighbor’s cat and my family to others. But I do not have a good conscience about that. I know that if I transform this into a general rule it would be the ruin of

¹⁵⁶ Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

ethics.”¹⁵⁷ Honoring ethics, Derrida reminds us, requires attending to our moral duties to all. “So when I give preference to my cat, which I do” Derrida says, “that will not prevent me from having some remorse for the cat dying or starving next door, or, to change the example, for all the people on earth who are starving and dying today. So you cannot prevent me from having a bad conscience, and that is the main motivation of my ethics and politics.”¹⁵⁸ Derrida goes on to say, “I try not to make a difference, not to make a difference ethically and politically, between my family and his family and your family. I confess that it is not easy. I know that practically I grant a privilege to kinship, to my language, to France, to my family, and so on. But I do not have a good conscience about that.”¹⁵⁹

So, finally, how does Derrida’s deconstruction differ from negative theology? It comes down to the name. Once we attend to the other, even the other within oneself, and offer hospitality, then the other becomes not just other, but any and every other, every possible other. Derrida’s phrase for this is *tout autre est tout autre*: Every other is totally other. “The other is God or no matter whom, more precisely, no matter what singularity, as soon as any other is totally other [*tout autre est tout autre*],” Derrida declares. When I honor a particular other as other, when I authentically welcome the other without even the welcome of invitation, anticipation, or even (asking for) identification, then every other is totally other. This carries the dual implication that (1) the particular other is other than me and I cannot fully circumscribe that otherness into my grasp, and (2) the particular other represents all the other others, thereby reminding me that in attending to this one, I have forsaken the others. By communing with my cat and caring for it, I have sacrificed others. It is impossible for the sacredness of the other to

¹⁵⁷ Derrida, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” 69.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 69.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 69

remain unprofaned, yet this is precisely what deconstruction and responsible decision propel us to do. “For the most difficult, indeed the impossible,” says Derrida, “resides there: there where the other loses its name or can change it, to become no matter what other.”¹⁶⁰ The name of the wholly other: it must and must not remain sacred.

Ever adjudicating among various others, Derrida declares that “justice starts when you have to compare.”¹⁶¹ Can we know ourselves without comparison? Can we even have a human apart from its being carved out by difference from its environment of world, stone, and animal? Or perhaps angels? “Man is a mean between animal and angel,” said Augustine. Heidegger said, “the stone is worldless [*weltlos*], the animal is poor in world [*weltarm*], man is world-forming [*weltbildend*].” In other words, the human is distinguished as such by comparison. And perpetually negotiating the aporias of comparison is justice. And dizzying.

In order to distinguish, “The Beginning of Metaphysical Questioning with the Question of the World,” Heidegger sought to follow “the path of a comparative examination.” As Derrida points out in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, “this is the only time, to my knowledge, that Heidegger uses the word *comparative*, that he announces that he is going to proceed by means of a comparative move.”¹⁶² Derrida’s analysis of Heidegger’s comparative method shows that ultimately (1) the human is defined by what it is not, by denying attributes to the others, animal or stone, and (2) that the human is unsettled by the fact that it cannot seem to purely obtain for itself those very things it tries to deny in the other.

Of course there are differences between humans, animals and stones, Derrida says, but wherever we try to make them too rigid, a comparative analysis reveals that they are somewhat

¹⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 74.

¹⁶¹ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 27.

¹⁶² Derrida, *The Animal*, 151.

unstable. Deny speech to the animals and we see that even humans can't quite communicate as cleanly and clearly as we hope—the equivocal functioning of the mark assures that. “At bottom,” says Derrida,

all these theses, apparently so positive and sure of themselves, on man, on the animal, and on the stone, merely aim, in a way, by means of this theatrical strategy, this grand pedagogical strategy, to circumscribe a moment where Heidegger says: at bottom, we don't know what world is, it's a very obscure notion, one that is becoming more and more obscure. . . . He notices that these comparative considerations are caught in a circle, and that that circle makes one dizzy. He insists a lot on this dizziness, which, he says is *unheimlich* . . . Heidegger confesses that the vertigo is *unheimlich* but that it is necessary. This vertigo is that of an interrogation into the animal, and, finally, it's the concept of world itself that becomes problematic and fragile.¹⁶³

What Derrida via Heidegger gives us to think is that comparing the human with other animals, or humans with profoundly different humans, or religions with other religions, reveals a certain vertigo, uncanniness, or unsettling openness to the unforeseen and unforeseeable that is as necessary as it is unavoidable.

With the two passivities as well as the mechanical and the mystical understood as embodied and enworlded, then, ultimately one cannot be separated from the other, not so much because there are not differences between language and world or between humans and other animals, but because there are too many. And perpetual attention to these differences for Derrida is linked to justice and the mystical. Comparison conjures new realities. Reality must be deconstructed.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 151–55.

Thus, in order to be faithful to justice as comparison and the relation to the other, Derrida directs us to a quasi-mystical experience of dizziness with deconstruction as its meditative practice.

Chapter 2

Desiring

Widening Awareness

Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, in his book *De Divinis Nominibus*, arrives at the throne of God by denying and overcoming every moral and metaphysical attribute, and falling into ecstasy and prostrating himself before the divine obscurity, before that unutterable immensity which precedes and encompasses the supreme knowledge in the eternal order. The mental process by which Blake arrives at the threshold of the infinite is a similar process. Flying from the infinitely small to the infinitely large, from a drop of blood to the universe of the stars, his soul is consumed by the rapidity of flight, and finds itself renewed and winged and immortal on the edge of the dark ocean of God.
 –James Joyce, *Critical Writings*

There cannot not be this dream, this dreamed-of desire of a purely idiomatic voice that would be what it is and would be in some way indivisible. Even if this dream is destined to remain a dream, the promise . . . as promise, is an event, it exists; there is the promise of unity and that is what sets desire in motion.
 –Jacques Derrida, “Dialanguages”

In this dream I am the Dreamer
 and the Dreamed I am
 that I am Ah but I have
 always known

. . . .
 Come, sweet lonely Spirit, back
 to your bodies, come great God
 back to your only image, come
 –Allen Ginsberg, “The Change”

While idly masturbating and reading William Blake’s poetry when he was twenty-two, Allen Ginsberg, the famous poet of the American Counter-Culture “Beat” generation, had the first of a series of what he would later call in his poem “America” his “mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.”¹ In response to an interview question about what had initiated his opening of consciousness, Ginsberg replies that he had given up on love: “given up in the sense that St. John of the Cross says that when finally after seeking and seeking you give up, you go into a night of

¹ The Joyce epigraph quote is from an untitled manuscript on William Blake, in *Critical Writings*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 222. I first discovered this quote in Thomas A. Carlson’s *The Indiscrete Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 176.

despair, a dark night of the soul; when the soul then is passive, when it's not straining, striving, not seeking, when it is open unto the sky, then it sees."² In apparent consonance with a Christian mystic, Ginsberg proclaims that awareness widens by passing through a state of passive openness. This chapter examines such passive openness as a generative process for possibly seeing mystical or mundane visions of more harmonious interrelations with who/whatever we deem as our others and/or ourselves.

The purpose of life, Ginsberg writes later in his journal after passing through even darker times, is to "widen the area of consciousness till it becomes so wide it includes its own death."³ As we have seen, this magic telepathy of writing—which cannot be cleanly cut off from even my living inner intimacy of hearing myself speak—works because these words can function even if I am dead. "My death," Derrida thus argues, "is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the *I*."⁴ Writing has to be able to communicate the presence of my thought even in my absence, whether I am far away or gone forever. Writing shows that the voice in my head can come out and survive even if I am dead.

If just the power to say *I* also exposes us to the powerlessness of no longer being able to say it because we are dead, then having such a power of powerlessness also means that from the moment we've come to consciousness we participate in a movement that reverberates beyond us, possibly to alter other lives elsewhere, such as Ginsberg's altered state that was catalyzed by Blake. My call of consciousness, then, just in saying or dreaming, "I am that I am," could have unknown hearers to come, even after I'm gone. Thus, Ginsberg felt that Blake's consciousness

² Allen Ginsburg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 16.

³ Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 332.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 96.

had been transported across time and space through poetry written on the page such that it catalyzed the same consciousness in him.

“The thing I understood from Blake,” says Ginsberg, “was that it was possible to transmit a message through time which could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn’t just pretty, or just beautiful, as I had understood pretty beauty before—it was something basic to human existence, or it reached something, it reached the bottom of human existence.”⁵ Reading Blake’s poetry, Ginsberg got the impression “that it was like a kind of time machine through which he could transmit, Blake could transmit, his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead—in other words, build a time machine.”⁶ In a sense, the “cosmic vibrations” encoded in Blake’s poetry catalyzed Ginsberg’s “mystical visions.” And attention to such vibrations could be called prayer.

“The highest form of epistemological research,” Ginsberg feels, “would be prayer.”⁷ “By prayer,” he continues,

I mean a kind of mantra. In other words, use of rhythmic language to rouse the senses, arouse perceptions, and arouse sense of inner space, to alter all of consciousness itself, rather than to rearrange the language digits within one realm of consciousness. It could be quiet or silent, it could be prayer without words, i.e., just pure attention, attention maybe to breathing, or attention to no-thing.”⁸

Prayer, then, for Ginsberg involves a vibratory alteration in consciousness and widening of awareness effected by aroused attention. Not dissimilarly to Ginsberg’s Hindu-Buddhist mantra inflected discussion of cosmic vibrations that could possibly be accessed through pure attention

⁵ Allen Ginsberg, “Allen Ginsberg,” in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton, Third (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 302–303.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Ginsburg, *Allen Verbatim*, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*

to breathing, Derrida, in his essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy” in which he examines the call “come” found at the end of the Christian New Testament—“The breath and the bride say, ‘Come!’” Revelation 22:17—describes his quasi-concept of the trace (which again is what unsettles anything’s singular presence because of its possible plurality of representations at other places and times) as “pure differential vibration.”⁹ Later in an interview, Derrida continues by connecting this differential vibration to a living bliss of breath and desire that he imagines as plural:

This “differential vibration” is for me the only possible form of response to desire, the only form of bliss, and which can therefore be only a remote bliss, that is, bliss for two or more, bliss in which the other is called; I cannot imagine a living bliss which is not plural, differential. This is marked in a minimal fashion by the fact that a timbre, a breath, a syllable is already a differential vibration; in a certain way, there is no atom.

After splitting the atom into a cosmic field of differential vibration and desire, Derrida moreover continues in another interview to say that “the best example of this trace . . . would be prayer.”¹⁰

Among Ginsberg, Blake, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Derrida, then, we see a common nexus of associations to mystical visions, cosmic and differential vibrations, desire, breath, life, death, and prayer. This chapter unpacks these associations through the specific lens of prayer—especially in relation to the Christian tradition of mystical theology refracted through Dionysius the Areopagite. As has been discussed by many scholars, Ginsberg ultimately deems his Blake experience in light of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Western Esotericism.¹¹ What has been

⁹ Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 137.

¹⁰ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 35.

¹¹ For example, see Tony Trigilio, *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012). John Lardas Modern, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Amy Hungerford, “Supernatural Formalism in the Sixties: Ginsberg, Chant, Glossolalia,” in *Postmodern Belief*

almost entirely unexplored, however, is how Ginsberg also explicitly uses Christian mystical theology to help make sense of his sexuality, suffering, and poetics.¹²

Given the popularity of the recent James Franco movie “Howl,” based on the obscenity trial of Ginsberg’s poem of the same name, and the just-released “Kill Your Darlings,” in which Daniel Radcliff (aka Harry Potter) plays Ginsberg, I find the lack of sustained attention to the American counter-culture Beat poet in religious studies generally, and in philosophy of religion particularly, quite striking, even more so when we consider that he was friends with many in the French-theory crowd. Deleuze directly cites him as an influence, and Guattari saw Ginsberg for several sessions of psychoanalysis.¹³ This chapter contributes to the correction of this lack of attention.

Citing his mystical inheritance, Ginsberg refers in “Howl,” to those “who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah.” In his notes on that line, Ginsberg writes—“Overt intention of this mystical name-dropping was to connect younger readers, Whitman’s children already familiar with Poe and Bop, to older Gnostic tradition.”¹⁴ Explicitly weaving John of the Cross, the sixteenth century Spanish mystic and Roman Catholic reformer of the Carmelite Order, into a gnostic heritage, then, Ginsberg, as we see in the first section, shows that many of the modes of knowing and experiencing that he deems as gnostic

American Literature and Religion since 1960 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Or my “Widened Awareness: Allen Ginsberg’s Poetic Transmission of a Blakean Inflected Esoteric Dream-Insight,” *Aries* 8, no. 1 (2008): 37–61. This chapter builds on material from my earlier essay.

¹² A notable exception is Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1978). Portugés, however, offers only a brief comparison of Ginsberg and John of the Cross. My analysis deepens and furthers this comparison, and places Ginsberg in context of the broader span of mystical theology.

¹³ See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. by Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2008), 59, 65, 67–68. For a notable exception to this inattention see Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl: A Study of Allen Ginsberg’s Poetry, 1943–1955* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983).

¹⁴ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript and Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts and Bibliography* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006).

were also retained after Nicea in Christian mystical theology. The problems posed by such experiencing for Ginsberg culminate in a dichotomy: either mystic transcendence of the flesh and materiality through ascendant intellect, or mystic deepening of embodiment and acceptance of affect and the world.

Then through a close reading of the differing views on prayer held by Ginsberg's stated influences from among Christian mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, we see how they too, like Ginsberg, wrestled with tensions between body and spirit, affect and intellect. Next, through a discussion of the spiritual senses traditions tracing at least from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa up through Dionysius the Areopagite and Medieval mystics to Teresa and John, we see how though many mystical practitioners have made use of a nexus of associations involving procreation, intense prayer, and the loss of control associated with orgasm in such a way as to promote "male" (intellectual and willed) visionary experience over and above "female" (bodily, affective and passionate), many have sought and still seek to live the (inter)relations of body and mind otherwise. Lastly, we see how Derrida's theorization of prayer as a structure of openness may aid our interrelations with whatever others may come. Such data as the particular case studies of Ginsberg, Teresa, John, and Derrida (and a little Georges Bataille), I argue, seem to point to the potentiality of the human through an openness to what may be more, but we perhaps share such openness with nonhuman animals, and maybe even the material universe.

If the capacity to be affected by vibratory resonances marks consciousness, and if those differing resonances can utterly alter awareness, then perhaps the essence of consciousness is to widen until what it thought it knew means nothing.

II. Ginsberg's Dark Night to Beat Light

When challenged by the arch-conservative William F. Buckley on whether the Beat message was just a “rancid” version of the love that is “the essence of the whole Christian idea—that we’re all related to each other,” Ginsberg replies, “love is not what was ultimately proposed, it was a widening of awareness.”¹⁵ According to Ginsberg, this message of widened awareness spread by the hippies and the Beat generation was neither something new nor substantially different from the early Christian message. “In no sense,” says Ginsberg, “have they said anything new, except that they’ve simply brought forward and out front, both like politically and sociologically and consciousness and avant-garde artwise, the old gnostic tradition which had been somewhat suppressed by the Whore of Babylon, that is to say, the organized, rigidified, militarily crusading Church.”¹⁶ In other words, Ginsberg sees the message of the 1960’s counter-culture as consonant with the first century counter-cultural Jesus movement. In fact, the Beats make exoteric what has been esoteric at least since Constantine.

This esoteric “gnostic” tradition Ginsberg traces “back from Blake through Paracelsus and Plotinus and Jacob Boehme all the way back to Pythagoras, and back from, back to in those days, the Eleusinian mysteries and the Bacchic mysteries to the mystery cults, and back through the mystery cults to the Near East, back to the source of it all, you come to the same sources.”¹⁷ Deeming Blake to have initiated him into these sources, Ginsberg ultimately takes Blake as his guru—“Since guru, the teacher, is not necessarily human or living human incarnation, it might be any influence, even a bird or the giant piteous cat-squeak of a whale recorded on a machine. Anything that will catalyze the total consciousness is the teacher.”¹⁸ Ginsberg argues that Blake is “an eighteenth-century vehicle for Western gnostic tradition that historically you can trace

¹⁵ Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958-1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

back to the same roots, same cities, same geography, same mushrooms, that give rise to the Aryan, Zoroastrian, Manichaen pre-Hindu yogas.”¹⁹ The basic insight of this tradition, according to Ginsberg, is that altered states of consciousness reduce the pretensions of normal consciousness to nothing.

But “the really interesting thing to realize,” says Ginsberg, “is that the Indian and the Western converge in their origin.”²⁰ The shared awareness “that all apparent sensory feelings, thoughts and impressions are illusory,” which he identifies as the common insight of East and West, was repressed, he argues, by the organized church after Constantine and the Council of Nicaea.²¹ “So, in other words,” said Ginsberg,

what happened in the fourth century is that the basic Indian understanding that the apparent physical universe is only apparent, and really is a dream-structure in which we’re trapped, because attached to a thing that’s real—that was extirpated from Christ-doctrine, and also the books wiped out and burned, so that it took people like Paracelsus, Bohme, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge, Emerson, to perpetuate that memory out of their own intuitions and glimmerings—and also checking out the hand-me-down legends and texts, the oral transmission. Poetry’s carried it all along. Poetry’s carried the dream-insight all along.²²

In this section of the chapter, we glimpse how Allen Ginsberg carried this “dream-insight” in his own poetry and life.

Initiated by natural mystical experiences involving William Blake, continued through drug experimentation, notably with ayahuasca in South America, and culminating in Hindu-Buddhist forms of chanting meditation that eventually return him again to Blake, Ginsberg’s

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 265.

²¹ Ibid., 266.

²² Ibid.

altered states were connected to a desire to reconcile himself with his mother's insanity, his own sexuality, and the deaths of his family, friends, and ultimately his own body. Also concerned about the possible death of democracy, Ginsberg sought through cultivating altered states of consciousness to alter the United States, ultimately linking his Blakean, gnostic consciousness via a supernatural chant-poetics to a mystic idea of America and its political future.

To call "Howl," which is perhaps his most famous poem, a "work of nihilistic rebellion," Ginsberg says, "would be to mistake it completely." Though "it offers no 'constructive' program in sociological terms—no poem could. It does offer a constructive human value—basically the *experience*—of the enlightenment of mystical experience—without which no society can long exist."²³ According to Ginsberg, good poetry, like good chanting, can give one an insightful and embodied mystical high. "So you find in Blake or in any good poetry," Ginsberg said, "a series of vowels which if you pronounce them in proper sequence with the breathing indicated by the punctuation . . . breathing that, if reproduced by the reader, following the poet's commas and exclamation points and following long long long breaths, will get you high physiologically . . . will actually deliver a buzz like grass, or higher."²⁴ Though Ginsberg derives this practice primarily from the yogic traditions, we may also find similar resources in Christianity. "This breathing of the air," writes John of the Cross,

is an ability that the soul states God will give her there in the communication of the Holy Spirit. By this divine breath-like spiration, the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself . . . And this kind of spiration . . . is so sublime, delicate, and deep a delight

²³ Ginsberg, *Howl: Original*, 154

²⁴ Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 23.

that a mortal tongue finds it indescribable, nor can the human intellect, as such, in any way grasp it.²⁵

And Ginsberg read his John of the Cross before going to India in the 60s and before his Blake experiences that influenced *Howl*.

Though little explored, Christian connections to Ginsberg are oft mentioned by scholars, perhaps because throughout his life Ginsberg himself often mentioned them. Admittedly, when he spoke of Christianity in general, Ginsberg mostly cited it as a negative influence. Although he blamed the church for violently suppressing ancient gnosis of breath, entheogens, and altered states of consciousness, he also had some positive associations, particularly with mystics.

The first line of “Howl”—“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked”—actually in an earlier draft read, “starving, mystical, naked.”²⁶ Ginsberg writes, “the poem itself is an act of sympathy . . . —of sympathy and identification with the rejected, mystical, individual even ‘mad.’”²⁷ He argues that “what seems ‘mad’ in America is our expression of natural ecstasy . . . which suppressed, finds no social form organization background frame of reference or rapport or validation from the outside and so the ‘patient’ gets confused thinks he is mad and really goes off rocker.”²⁸ In the poem, Ginsberg was “paying homage to mystical mysteries in the forms in which they actually occur here in the U.S. in our environment.”²⁹ According to Ginsberg, society rejects mystics as merely mad, leaving them without support. Isolated, those whose consciousness cannot fit into normal modes internalize

²⁵ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* 39.3. from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodrigues, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications 1991); 623.

²⁶ Ginsberg, *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile*.

²⁷ Allen Ginsberg, *To Eberhart From Ginsberg: A Letter About Howl 1956* (Lincoln: Penmaen Press, 1976), 18.

²⁸ Ginsberg, *To Eberhart*, 18.

²⁹ Ginsberg, *To Eberhart*, 18.

the country's negative judgment and then really cross over into a state of madness. Labeling mystics as hysterics, the United States demonizes altered states.

So, “mystical” in the first line of “Howl” has too positive a connotation for Ginsberg because he says he wants to entertain something akin to John Keats’s “negative capability” of holding two opposed notions in juxtaposition—judgment and sympathy. Such opposite imagery as valorizing a negative was needed to convey the judgment of society, yet counter it with his own positive personal identification. In the annotation of that line, Ginsberg quotes Whitman—“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”—saying such contradiction was “key to the tone of the poem.”³⁰ Using such striking contrary wording to evoke new insights in the reader, Ginsberg’s paradoxical poetics may perhaps be seen as not far from the pragmatics of pairing cataphatic and apophatic speech in much mystical theology.

“In mystical literature,” as William James notes, “such self-contradictory phrases as ‘dazzling obscurity,’ ‘whispering silence,’ ‘teeming desert,’ are continually met with.” And such pairings are also present in both Christian mystical theology and Ginsberg’s poetry. “They prove,” argues James, “that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth. Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions.”³¹ And, as part of the first step on his “mystical ladder” James introduces the mystical through poetry and music, or specifically their capacity to evoke something more or other that escapes the confines of conceptual consciousness:

lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these
vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding

³⁰ See note, Allen Ginsberg, *Howl: Original Draft Fascimile, Transcript & Variant Versions* (New York: HaperCollins, 1986), p. 124.

³¹ Tony Trigilio, *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012).

our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.³²

This mystical susceptibility to be affected by what may be more marks not only Ginsberg's poetic process, but also much of Christian mystical praxis.

Indeed, Ginsberg explicitly cites as early influences on his own mystical and poetic experiences two of the later inheritors of the Dionysian tradition of mystical theology—John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. As mentioned, Ginsberg at twenty-two had a series of mystical experiences that defined much of his later life and work which he associated William Blake, but he also throughout his life associated that time with John and Teresa. In a 1990 interview, to cite one example among many, Ginsberg refers to the weeks before his dramatic mystic experiences of 1948, saying, “I had been living very quietly, eating vegetarian diets, seeing very few people, and reading a great many religious texts: St. John of the Cross, the Bible, Plato's *Phaedrus*, St. Teresa of Avila, and Blake, So I was In a kind of solitary, contemplative mood.”³³ In “Howl,” Ginsberg mentions “orange crates of theology,” which refers to his reading during that time.

It is not merely that he read the Carmelites and associated them with his dark solitude, but further Ginsberg valorizes the dark night, even linking it with the very etymology of the term “Beat” for the Beat writers of the American counter-culture who identified with those beat down by life. “If you’re interested in the origin of the phrase,” he writes in a letter to his Aunt, “. . . it was a word Huncke [another Beat icon] used to use, or we used to use about Huncke, to describe the peculiar physical and spiritual depression he used to get into—typical of a junkie . . . during and after which he (Huncke) used to experience a kind of religious illumination—that is being beat down to his naked human core.”³⁴ Ginsberg deems this beat-down experience “similar in a

³² Ibid., 345.

³³ Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 473.

³⁴ *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2008), 188.

sense to the experience of the Dark Night of the Soul described by St. John of the Cross—or any classical mystic.”³⁵ After a period of anxiety and depression, such people, says Ginsberg, can receive transformative insight and have their “soul sort of cracked open to admit the light.”³⁶ Thus, Ginsberg likens the inspirational process of the “classic beat type” to the purgative-illuminative-unitive path of the classic Christian mystic. Ginsberg engages in a sort of ethical training through flouting the dominant society’s mores, and a prolonged period of study and contemplation, culminating finally in climactic mystical insight. Ginsberg’s process, then, mirrors the classic Christian path in his own heretical way.

“So anyway—there I was in my bed in Harlem . . . jacking off,” says Ginsberg of his own process before the Blake experiences.³⁷ “There’s a kind of interesting thing about,” says Ginsberg, “you know, distracting your attention while you jack off—that is, you know, reading a book or looking out of a window, or doing something else with the conscious mind which kind of makes it sexier.”³⁸ Shortly after he had been the one to sign the papers authorizing his schizophrenic mother’s lobotomy, Ginsberg was graduating from Columbia, with no job prospects, and his friends (and later fellow “beat” icons) William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, and Jack Kerouac had already left the city for their various elsewhere. He had also just received news that Neal Cassady, long time object of his desire, was decidedly ending their love affair. “I got a letter from him,” says Ginsberg, “saying, Now, Allen, we gotta move on to *new* territory. So I felt this is like a great mortal blow to all of my tenderest hopes. And I figured I’d never find any sort of psychospiritual sexo-cock jewel fulfillment in my existence!”³⁹

³⁵ Ginsberg, *Letters*, 188.

³⁶ Ginsberg, *Letters*, 188.

³⁷ Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Despairing, then, at his sexual prospects with men, much less his prospects of achieving the type of normal heterosexual life with a respectable job and kids that his father kept urging him towards, and in the wake of his friends' departures and his mother's lobotomy, Ginsberg found himself masturbating while directing his consciousness otherwise through Blake's poetry. "So," said Ginsberg,

in that state therefore, of hopelessness . . . And just after I came, on this occasion, with a Blake book on my lap . . . idling over the page of "Ah, Sun-flower," and it suddenly appeared . . . suddenly I realized that the poem was talking about *me*. "Ah, Sun-flower! Weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the sun; / Seeking after that sweet golden clime, / Where the traveller's journey is done." Now, I began understanding it, the poem while looking at it, and suddenly, simultaneously with understanding it, heard a very deep earthen voice in the room, which I immediately assumed, I didn't think twice, was Blake's voice. . . . the peculiar quality of the voice was something unforgettable because it was like God had a human voice, with all the infinite tenderness and anciency and mortal gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son. . . . Meaning that there *was* a *place*, there was a sweet golden clime, . . . and simultaneous to the voice there was also an emotion, risen in my soul in response to the voice, and a sudden *visual* realization of the same awesome phenomena. That is to say, looking out at the window, through the window at the sky, suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of the universe.⁴⁰

For Ginsberg, the sky and buildings became illuminated, and he beheld reality as transformed or transfused with something more or deeper. Ginsberg declares, "it was a sudden awakening into a

⁴⁰ Allen Ginsberg, "Allen Ginsberg," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton, Third (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 302–303.

totally deeper real universe than I'd been existing in."⁴¹ He felt he had been born for this experience, this moment, this "initiation."

His entire life was about "this vision or this consciousness, of being alive unto myself, alive myself unto the Creator. As the son of the Creator—who loved me, I realized, or who responded to my desire, say. It was the same desire both ways."⁴² Vowing then and there, he thought, "never forget—never forget, never renege, never deny. Never deny the voice—no, never *forget* it, don't get lost mentally wandering in other spirit worlds or American or job world or advertising worlds or war worlds or earth worlds. But the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realize."⁴³ The supernatural voice spoke his life's calling, but it was not all joy and light.

Several minutes later, the voice recurred while he read Blake's "The Sick Rose." "This time," says Ginsberg, "it was a slightly different sense-depth-mystic impression."⁴⁴ The sickness of the rose seemed to Ginsberg to convey the illness in the world, and he felt it "applied to the whole universe, like hearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of doom." For Ginsberg, "it was very beautiful and very awesome. But a little of it slightly scary, having to do with the knowledge of death—my death and also the death of being itself, and that was the great pain."⁴⁵ Ginsberg took it as "a prophecy as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the *entire* universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe."⁴⁶ According to Ginsberg, this meant "a breakthrough from ordinary habitual quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all of heaven in a

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 303-304.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 305.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 304.

flower.”⁴⁷ Such was the substance of Ginsberg’s first visions of “cosmic consciousness”—light tinged with the pathos of death, or, in more Blakean terms, a beautiful but frightening marriage of heaven and hell.

Later that same week, the flashes returned and he thought he was going mad. He even tried sharing his revelations. “Actually what I think I did,” says Ginsberg, “was there was a couple of girls living next door and I crawled out on the fire escape and tapped on their window and said, ‘I’ve seen God!’ and they *banged* the window shut. Oh, what tales I could have told them if they’d let me in!”⁴⁸ His altered state also yielded heightened hermeneutic powers. He rushed through the various books of the theological library, and, says Ginsberg, “I *immediately* doubled my thinking process, quadrupled, and I was able to read almost any text and see all sorts of divine significance in it.”⁴⁹ From this, Ginsberg gained a theory of poetry that he continued to develop throughout his life, namely “seeing poetry as the communication of the particular experience—not just any experience but *this* experience.”⁵⁰ He may not have been able to share with the women next door, but, in various ways, Ginsberg struggled to communicate these visions and others through his poetry for the rest of his life.

After those first blissful times, he tried to actively bring on this cosmic awareness by dancing and shouting in his kitchen. “And then,” said Ginsberg, “it started coming over me, this big . . . creepy feeling, cryptozoid or monozoidal, so I got all scared and quit.”⁵¹ Next, again reading Blake, but this time in public in Columbia University’s bookstore, he found himself “in

⁴⁷ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 307.

⁴⁹ Ibid..

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 308.

the eternal place *once more*.⁵² Looking up from the text, he saw past everyone's facial masks into their common pained souls.

He saw that everyone knew that they and everyone else was tormented, but they hid this knowledge from themselves and each other.

They all had the consciousness, it was like a great *unconscious* that was running between all of us that everybody *was* completely conscious, but that the fixed expressions that people have, the habitual expressions, the manners, the mode of talk, are all masks hiding this consciousness. Because almost at that moment it seemed that it would be too terrible if we communicated to each other on a level of total consciousness and awareness each of the other—like it would be too terrible, it would be the end of the bookstore, it would be the end of civ— . . . not civilization, but in other words the position that everybody was in was *ridiculous*, everybody running around peddling books to each other. Here in the universe! Passing money over the counter, wrapping books in bags and guarding the door, you know, stealing books, and the people sitting up making accountings on the upper floor there, and people worrying about their exams walking through the bookstore, and all the millions of thoughts the people had—you know, that I'm worrying about—whether they're going to get laid or whether anybody loves them, about their mothers dying of cancer or, you know, the complete death awareness that everybody has continuously with them all the time—all of a sudden revealed to me at once in the faces of the people, and they all looked like horrible grotesque masks, grotesque because *hiding* the knowledge from each other. Having a habitual conduct and forms to prescribe, forms to fulfill. Roles to play. But the main insight I had at that time was that everybody

⁵² Ibid., 308.

knew. Everybody knew completely everything. Knew completely everything in the terms which I was talking about.⁵³

Ginsberg's powerful vision of identification with human suffering carried with it the realization that its revelation would disrupt and destroy normal life. From his altered state, the grasping attachment of capitalist consumer society seemed ridiculous and tortured. Ginsberg says, "the *awareness* that we all carry is too often painful."⁵⁴ This awareness involves a "hardening, a shutting off of the perception of desire and tenderness which everybody *knows* and which is the very structure of . . . the atom! Structure of the human body and organism. That desire built in."⁵⁵ Into the very structure of the cosmos, Ginsberg writes desire for one another's welfare and awareness of our tender exposure to all that is. (Or, as Derrida argues, there is no atom.) In Ginsberg's mind, shutting ourselves off to such widened awareness has physiological and material consequences.

Awakening awareness in others, then, could transform America. "So," says Ginsberg, "the problem then was, having attained realization, how to safely manifest it and communicate it." In the wake of these visions, he sought to "break down everybody's masks and roles sufficiently so that everybody has to face the universe *and* the possibility of the sick rose coming true and the atom bomb. So it was an immediate messianic thing."⁵⁶ Ginsberg's poetic vision, which altered but never ceased, is to transform individuals and society through communicating the positive and negative potentialities of cosmic and demonic consciousnesses.

His last vision of that period happened outside, walking on Columbia's campus. This last vision involved "the same depth of consciousness or the same cosmical awareness but suddenly

⁵³ Ibid., 308-309.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 309.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 310.

it was not blissful at all but it was *frightening*. Some like real serpent-fear entering the sky.”⁵⁷

Instead of an illumined sky, this time it was like

death coming down on me—some really scary presence, it was almost as if I saw God again except God was the devil. The consciousness itself was *so* vast, much more vast than any idea of it I’d had or any experience I’d had, that it was not even human any more—and was in a sense a threat, because I was going to die into that inhuman ultimately.⁵⁸

Ginsberg had had enough. “I didn’t urge my way there,” he says, “I shut it all off.” Faced with this cosmic-demonic vision of the inhuman, Ginsberg “got scared, and thought, I’ve gone too far.”⁵⁹

After his first experiences with “cosmic consciousness,” Ginsberg felt he was born to communicate the desire of the supernatural going both ways—desire of the creator for creation, and desire of creation for the cosmic creator. Later, however, it was like death, the devil, or an inhuman force. And, he worried about the role of ego annihilation, recognizing “loss of identity and confrontation with nonhuman universe as the main problem, and in a sense whether or not man had to evolve and change, and perhaps become nonhuman too. Melt into the universe, let us say.”⁶⁰ Ultimately for Ginsberg, the problem broke down to a decision—either transcend the flesh and materiality through ascendant intellect, or embrace deepening of embodiment and acceptance of affect and the world. These worries and problems followed him to South America where he tried the hallucinogenic drug Ayahuasca, also known as Yagé.

Travelling for months in South America, Ginsberg became deeply disillusioned by the vast inequalities and injustices he saw. According to Schumacher, Ginsberg’s journals from this

⁵⁷ Ibid., 311.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 314.

period were some of the most intensely and overtly political of his life. Such travels in poorer countries, Ginsberg says in a later interview, made him realize

that the people that get the real evil side effects of America are there—in other words, it really is like imperialism, in that sense. People in the United States all got money, they got cars, and everybody else *starves* on account of American foreign policy. Or is being bombed out, torn apart, and bleeding on the street, they get all their teeth bashed in, tear gassed, or hot pokers up their ass, things that would be, you know, considered terrible in the United States.⁶¹

At this time, Schumacher recounts, Ginsberg was “pessimistic about the planet’s future.”⁶² “In his experiments with various drugs,” says Schumacher, “Allen had tried to find the level of consciousness that would lead him to God, to perfection, to ultimate self-realization, but, as he readily recognized, he was limited by his own conceptions, begun with his Blake visions and continued through his experiences with drugs, as to what that perfection was.”⁶³

Ginsberg’s journals told of the paradoxical thoughts and feelings he was having on the verge of trying ayahuasca.

. . . God is so beautiful it doesn’t make any difference whether we see him or not.

Or, there is an X resolution of the paradox of existence that is so perfectly sublime that it makes no difference whether we know it or not.

Which seems to leave us out, as human level from importance, but as I warned you the resolution is so sublime it makes no difference that it includes us in an inconceivably beautiful way. . . .

⁶¹ Ibid., 298.

⁶² Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 326.

⁶³ Ibid.

This is the Understanding perfected in nearly mathematical form in words. Now to the next stage which is to incorporate it in my body so that it makes no difference whether I live or not to the Consciousness which is called Allen Ginsberg & clings to that energetically, afraid of blood.

Beauty or truth is so perfect it makes no difference whether the Universe exists or not.

This reconciled the Void of Laughing Gas with the Transcendental Dancing Spirit of Lysergic Acid.

Tomorrow to take Ayahuasca. . . .⁶⁴

On May 23rd, 1960, alone in his hotel in Lima, Peru, Ginsberg tried ayahuasca.

This first time, Ginsberg notes, resulted in similar sensations to his trips on other drugs such as LSD. As he was later to discover, the drug's potency derives from a mixture of leaves, and its strength increases with its freshness. Upon the advice of William Burroughs, he traveled to a small town called Pucallpa. During the week-long journey, rendered agonizingly slow by the poor travel conditions in Peru, Schumacher recounts, Ginsberg wrote his father: "Being 'world famous' is a minor childplay compared to the beauty and terror of what I can guess of the nature of the universe. . . . That is to say, most of my consciousness activity is concerned with that obscure part of the mind which connects with the creator. I am more and more convinced I'll wind up studying mind-control in India for a few years, later."⁶⁵

Once in Pucallpa, Ginsberg was able to find a *curandero* or guide who would administer the drug in a group ritualized setting. Mirroring the hermetic initiation structures, like those found in the Nag Hammadi text *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, in which a master who had already experienced the visions cultivated them in another, Ginsberg's *curandero*, called

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 327.

Maestro, had already gone to the depths of ayahuasca. Maestro ritually administered the drug to Ginsberg and the others, watching over them as a guide on their visionary journeys. In his ayahuasca visions, Ginsberg was once again brought up against not only the beautiful, but also the terrifying cosmic consciousness.

This second time of trying ayahuasca, Ginsberg “began seeing what I thought was the Great Being, or some sense of It, approaching my mind like a big wet vagina.”⁶⁶ “Also,” he felt “a great feeling of pleasantness in my body, no nausea. Lasted in different phases about 2 hours—the effects wore off after 3—the phantasy itself lasted from 3/4 of hour after I drank to 2 1/2 hours later more or less.”⁶⁷ The next time with Maestro and the group, Ginsberg says, “the brew was prepared fresh and presented with full ceremony—he crooning (and blowing cigarette or pipe smoke) tenderly over the cupmouth for several minutes before.”⁶⁸ Though many dismiss the altered modes of experiencing practiced by Ginsberg and others as somehow less authentic because presumably focused around solitary and selfish pursuits of extraordinary experiences, note that Ginsberg’s pursuits never involved himself alone, but always others and their welfare. And that in this case, the individual experience was very much knowingly constituted amidst communal participation.

After drinking this fresher mixture, Ginsberg “lay down expecting God knows what other pleasant vision and then I began to get high—and then the whole fucking Cosmos broke loose around me, I think the strongest and worst I’ve ever had it nearly—(I still reserve the Harlem experience, being Natural, in abeyance. The LSD was Perfection but didn’t get me so deep in nor so horribly in).”⁶⁹ Ginsberg “felt faced by Death,” and “got nauseous, rushed out and began

⁶⁶ Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, *The Yage Letters: Redux* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2006), 57.

⁶⁷ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 57-59.

⁶⁸ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 60.

⁶⁹ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 60.

vomiting.”⁷⁰ Ginsberg wrote to his friend Burroughs, who had been there before him, that he seemed

all covered with snakes, like a Snake Seraph, colored serpents in aureole all around my body, I felt like a snake vomiting out the universe—or a Jivaro in head-dress with fangs vomiting up in realization of the Murder of the Universe—my death to come—everyone’s death to come—all unready—I unready—all around me in the trees the noise of these spectral animals other Drinkers vomiting (normal part of the cure sessions) in the night in their awful solitude in the universe—vomiting up their will to live The whole hut seemed rayed with spectral presences all suffering transfiguration with contact with a single mysterious Thing that was our fate and was sooner or later going to kill us—the Curandero crooning, keeping up a very tender, repeated and then changing simple tune, comfort sort of, God knows what signified—seemed to signify some point of reference I was unable to contact yet—I was frightened and simply lay there with wave after wave of death-fear, fright, rolling over me till I could hardly stand it, didn’t want to take refuge in rejecting it as Illusion, for it was too real and too familiar . . . —finally had a sense that I might face the Question there and then, and choose to die and understand—and leave my body to be found in the morning—I guess grieving everybody—couldn’t bear to leave Peter and my father so alone—afraid to die yet then and so never took the chance . . .⁷¹

Having come close to giving himself over to death in the midst of the vision, Ginsberg was more afraid than he had ever been before. “God knows I don’t know who to turn to finally when the chips are down spiritually,” he wrote in his journal, “and I have to depend on my own Serpent-

⁷⁰ Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 60.

⁷¹ Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 60.

self's memory of merry visions of Blake—or depend on nothing and enter anew—but enter what?—Death?”⁷²

By this point, Ginsberg says he was “afraid of some real madness, a Changed Universe permanently changed.”⁷³ Ginsberg wrote Burroughs saying, “I don’t know if I’m going mad or not, and it’s difficult to face more.”⁷⁴ With his mother’s kaddish still unfinished, Ginsberg felt that “this almost schizophrenic alteration of consciousness is fearful.”⁷⁵ Yet, as Schumacher notes

Unlike his Blake vision, which had shaken him so badly that he vowed to pursue the vision no further, the yage experience filled him with determination. As horrific as the vision had been, he would face it again—and again, if necessary. “I was all wrong—I am not ready to die,” he wrote in his journal the next day. “No, I resign myself to thee, Mystery.”⁷⁶

Continuing to experiment with yagé, Ginsberg turned to Blake, his mystical mentor, for help.

In his journal, harkening back to his first visionary experience by reference to the line from “Ah Sunflower,” the poem that inspired that first vision in Harlem, Ginsberg writes,

O Blake Come help me now

The tears run down the Cheek

That hides my skull.

“Where the youth pined away with desire”

as I have pined away,

⁷² Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 64.

⁷³ Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 64.

⁷⁴ Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 65.

⁷⁵ Ginsberg, Yage Letters, 65.

⁷⁶ Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 329.

and am no youth anymore. . . .⁷⁷

“The answer, though not specified in his journal as coming from Blake,” Schumacher writes, “was: Widen the area of consciousness till it becomes so wide it includes its own death. This is the purpose of life.”⁷⁸ After returning from his forays into altered states of ayahuasca consciousness, Ginsberg would encode this message as the concluding epigraph to the finally finished version of *Kaddish*.

Sent off to Lawrence Ferlinghetti for publication shortly after his return from South America in the summer of 1960, *Kaddish* was Ginsberg’s last published poetry volume until after his Indian journeys. Still very much exuding the robust, Whitmanesque “self-prophetic master of the universe”⁷⁹ voice of *Howl*, it also reflects Ginsberg’s then nascent movement toward a more embodied, human poetics and mode of life. In “Magic Psalm,” the first of the ayahuasca influenced poems, Ginsberg odes to the Great Being: “I am Thy prophet come home this world to scream an unbearable Name thru my 5 senses hideous sixth.” Yet, “The Reply,” the second of the ayahuasca poems, ends with the following verse: “The universe turns inside out to devour me! / and the mighty burst of music comes from out the inhuman door—.” In a sense, the prophetic cry of the first poem is answered in the second by the annihilation of the self in a blast of inhuman music—perhaps a foretaste of his move toward his later no-self, Buddhist-emptiness inflected chant-poetics.

At this time, however, Ginsberg was moving into a phase in which writing poetry seemed worthless to him, causing him to suffer from a writers block from which he was not to recover until after journeying to India and receiving the advice from various gurus to become more embodied through compassion toward other humans. Thus, it seems fitting that “The End” the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 332.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 332.

⁷⁹ Ginsberg, *Writers at Work*, 320.

last ayahwasca poem and the concluding poem of *Kaddish* would end with this verse: “come Poet shut up eat my word, and taste my mouth in your ear.” The very last phrase—*taste my mouth in your ear*—Ginsberg included as the introductory epigraph to *Kaddish* which he dedicated to Peter Orlovsky, his life-long lover. The dedication to Peter also included the phrase, “in Paradise,” furthering an indiscretion between the Great Unnamable Being and his named lover Peter, and between a sublime, perfect world, and this very-far-from-perfect world of flesh. Chant, for Ginsberg, comes to represent a fusion of these opposite poles. Eventually, Ginsberg incorporates chant into his poetics to harmonize tensioned contraries into a beatific marriage of body and mind.

As he had written his father that he probably would, Ginsberg travelled throughout in search of spiritual wisdom. As Ginsberg recounts

The Asian experience kind of got me out of the corner. I painted myself in with drugs. That corner being an inhuman corner in the sense that I figured I was expanding my consciousness and I had to go through with it but at the same time I was confronting this serpent monster, so I was getting in a real terrible situation. It finally would get so if I'd take the drugs I'd start vomiting. But I felt that I was duly bound and obliged for the sake of consciousness expansion, and this insight, and breaking down my identity, and seeking more direct contact with primate sensation, nature, to continue. So when I went to India, all the way through India, I was babbling about that to all the holy men I could find.⁸⁰

What Ginsberg took away from the advice he received from all the gurus, saints, and scholars he consulted was the insight that he needed to get back to the body. And, the way back to the body was through chant.

In an interview, Ginsberg says, “a whole series of India holy men pointed back to the body—getting *in* the body rather than getting out of the human form. But living in and inhabiting

⁸⁰ Ibid., 314.

the human form.”⁸¹ Previously, Ginsberg had thought, “[g]o into the nonhuman, go into the cosmic” and embrace death.⁸² “So I thought,” says Ginsberg, “that what I was put up to was to therefore break out of my body, if I wanted to attain complete consciousness.”⁸³ But, “the gurus one after another said, Live in the body: this is the form that you’re born for.”⁸⁴ The Jewish theologian Martin Buber, whom Ginsberg met in Israel at the beginning of his journeys of this period, was actually one of the first to propose he redirect his path back to the human and the body.

After more than a year traveling and studying chant and meditation in India and elsewhere, Ginsberg found himself alone on a train in Japan about to head back to North America. As Ginsberg says in an interview,

It all winds up in the train in Japan, then a year later, the poem “The Change,” where all of a sudden I renounce drugs, I don’t renounce drugs but I suddenly didn’t want to be *dominated* by that nonhuman any more, or even be dominated by the moral obligation to enlarge my consciousness any more. Or do anything any more except *be* my heart—which just desired to be and be alive now. I had a very strange ecstatic experience then and there, once I had gotten that burden off my back, because I was suddenly free to love myself again, and therefore to love the people around me, in the form that they already were. And love myself in my own form as I am. And look around at the other people and so it was *again* the same thing like in the bookstore. Except this time I was completely in my body and had no more mysterious obligations. And nothing more to fulfill, except be willing to die when I am dying, whenever that be. And be willing to live as a human in this form now. So I started weeping, it was such a happy movement. Fortunately I was

⁸¹ Ibid., 315.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

able to write then, too, “So that I do live I will die”—rather than be cosmic

consciousness, immortality, Ancient of Days, perpetual consciousness existing forever.⁸⁵

Though we may be tempted to view 1963 as a pivotal year for Ginsberg resulting in “The Change,” as indeed it was and did, nevertheless, there is far more consonance between his early very Blakean inflected poetics and his post India, still Blakean poems than many scholars seem to acknowledge.

Such poems as “Guru Om” or “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” that overtly try to effect a certain consciousness in the hearer, differ from his earlier poetry to the extent that they use mental words and concepts to get us *into* the body and a physiologically based altered state of consciousness, rather than *out* of the body and into an ethereal suffusing supernatural reality. In other words, after India, Ginsberg’s supernaturalism takes on a decidedly undecidable bent. Words, concepts, and mind work to move us to pure sound, nonconceptuality, and embodiment, only to return us again in the next word or poem to the very words and concepts that enabled us to move beyond them, thereby, rhythmically, enabling our further liberation, and so on in a possibly infinite process. Ginsberg’s mature poetics balance body and mind states in such a way as to open onto a more imaginative, or rather unimaginable future state. With his poetry, Ginsberg was trying to cultivate an altered state of body-mind consciousness.

And, characteristically, Ginsberg, interpreted this holistic body-mind state through a Blakean lens. “So,” Ginsberg said in the late 1980s, “I think the implication of the sixties was, as Blake pointed out, that hyperrationalism has created chaos so that the body’s existence, the existence of feeling, and the existence of the poetic imagination, the fantasy and dream, the poetry, have to be acknowledged as equal partners in Albion, the whole man.”⁸⁶ For Ginsberg, “normal consciousness” was deranged and out-of-whack, whereas “altered states of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 316.

⁸⁶ Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 468.

consciousness” meant altering our body-mind by bringing it into balance. The rationalistic western thinking that had given us the bomb had to be brought into balance with the heart. “That was Blake’s formulation,” said Ginsberg, “and . . . not only reason, but reason in balance with heart—feelings, the body, and the imagination.”⁸⁷

For Ginsberg, the ultimate implication of the 1960s awareness was a breakthrough of imagination, a breakthrough of recognition of the health of the body of the individual and the planet as against the poisons of hyper-industrialization, and breakthrough of human feeling again: a return to human feeling after the homogenization and objectification or reification of human feelings due to automatic reproduction in the computerized machine age. So those are the stakes, not just drugs, drugs were the catalysts to recognize some of it.⁸⁸

After his original Blake visions and the quest for cosmic consciousness as well as his extensive drug experiences, Ginsberg found in India methods that enabled him to again have a naturally induced ecstatic experience, this time propelling him not towards inhuman, out-of-body trips to the eternal, but toward embodied compassionate living in the here and now.

In a 1976 interview, about fear-of-death consciousness Ginsberg says, “paying attention to the breath wipes out that self-consciousness. I would say meditation is above acid, ultimately. I must admit it. I was wrong all along.”⁸⁹ Ginsberg’s solution to the alternative of facing the inhuman out-of-body or embodied modes of knowing and experiencing led to a dialectical tension without sublation between intellectual insight and non-conceptual embodiment manifested in the rhythms and breathing of chant, which he encoded in his poetry. In the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978).

Christian mystics Ginsberg studied too, we may see such a tension in regards to their differing inheritance of the spiritual senses tradition—intellectual or bodily—to which we now turn.

III. Different Prayers: Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and the Dionysian Heritage of Mystical Theology

Ginsberg was able to find a measure of peace when he professed in “The Change” that he was ready to accept death and mortality in order to actually live. Or he was able to accept life in his body when he was also able to accept that he would die—“So that I do live I will die.” The phrasing of that line encoded in Ginsberg’s poetry is noteworthy because of its similarity to a refrain from the poetry of both Teresa and John: “I die because I do not die.” For Teresa and John, the line means nearly the opposite of Ginsberg’s—they suffer because they are still in this world and this body and not in the full union with Christ to come in the next life. Which path to walk: death to this life to activate the hereafter, like Teresa and John sought, or, encompass death through accepting the lack of control over our human finitude, like Ginsberg? We have seen some of Ginsberg’s path, so let us examine John’s and Teresa’s.

Whereas both John and Teresa yearn for the more intimate and complete union that might come with their resurrected bodies, they have an important difference as to how such union should be cultivated in this life. Teresa feels that the body—especially the physical body of Jesus—may assist the spiritual path at all stages, but John thinks it should be shunned in order to enter the dark night as a necessary purgation on the path of spiritual ascent. John desires to die to this body and the deliverances of the senses in order to actuate the life of the spirit. Both Teresa and John link their teachings on contemplative practice to the much older history of mystical theology that traces back at least to Dionysius the Areopagite, but Teresa, I argue, is perhaps the more faithful inheritor.

Demonstrating their genealogy, Teresa and John both use Dionysius's characteristic phrases "mystical theology" and "knowing through unknowing." For instance, of experiencing intimate presence, Teresa, writes,

It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him. This did not occur after the manner of a vision. I believe they call the experience "Mystical Theology." The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost. For, as I say, the intellect does not work, but it is as though amazed by all it understands because God desires that it understand, with regard to the things His Majesty represents to it, that it understands nothing.⁹⁰

Teresa testifies to a relation of love, involving the suspension of memory and the amazement of intellect, in which God gives the understanding that one understands nothing.

Similarly, although with oftentimes more of an emphasis on negativity and absence, John of the Cross also writes of passing through such mystical moments. For John, these involve a "dark night" for the soul:

Because of its obscurity, she calls contemplation night. On this account contemplation is also termed mystical theology, meaning the secret or hidden knowledge of God. In contemplation God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and

⁹⁰ Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life* 10.1, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodrigues. All quotes of St. Teresa of Avila, unless otherwise stated, will be from *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila: Volume One & Two*. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1987).

natural things. Some spiritual persons call this contemplation knowing by unknowing.⁹¹

John testifies to an obscure, secret, hidden, wordless knowledge that is non-knowledge, given via a non-bodily, non-spiritual faculty. Remembering that Teresa and John were monastics, we can see from just these brief excerpts that their “mystical theology” takes place in the midst of a communal life of prayer and involves a gratuitous, excessive nature. It is not grasped; it grasps them. It involves knowledge, but gives unknowing. Teresa and John both testify, in a sense, that the contemplative life cultivates receptivity through performativity.

Though both inherit their contemplative practices from the Dionysian tradition, Teresa, however, offers a critique of John’s more “masculine” spirituality and is thus perhaps the more faithful inheritor of the Dionysian tradition of mystical theology.

To begin her book written for nuns at the direction of her male confessors, Teresa recounts receiving in prayer an image to begin her discourse on prayer. Teresa, of course, uses the image of the interior castle made of diamond to guide her in guiding others to the intimacy of “spiritual marriage” with Christ in the center of the soul. In this union, all is liquid and light, “[f]or from those divine breasts where it seems God is always sustaining the soul there flow streams of milk bringing comfort to all the people of the castle.”⁹² And, “it is understood clearly that there is Someone in the interior depths who shoots these arrows and gives life to this life, and that there is a Sun in the interior of the soul from which a brilliant light proceeds.”⁹³ From union in the center of the soul light irradiates the entire castle and therefore all of one’s life. Teresa’s mysticism, then, seems to be a mysticism of light.

⁹¹ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* 39.12. All quotes of St. John, unless otherwise stated, will be from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodrigues, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications 1991).

⁹² IC VII 2.6

⁹³ IC VII 2.6.

St. John of the Cross, in apparent contrast, seems to be most known for darkness. For John, union involves a “dark night” for here “the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul” and “causes spiritual darkness.”⁹⁴ “This is why St. Dionysius and other mystical theologians,” John explains, “call this infused contemplation a ‘ray of darkness.’”⁹⁵ Of this difference between John and Teresa, Edward Howells, in his insightful *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, summarizes simply: “John’s theology is more negative than Teresa’s.”⁹⁶ It is not, however, according to Howells, as negative as the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite.⁹⁷ Howells argues, “John puts forward a kind of ‘temporary Dionysianism,’ applying the negativity of Dionysius to the rational faculties only in the middle, ‘midnight’ stage of the mystical itinerary.”⁹⁸ “Like Teresa,” Howells continues, John “thinks the soul is expanded by illumination such that it becomes equal to the infinite greatness of God in its own infinite capacity, and at this point it starts to know God positively in union.”⁹⁹ Though union involves darkness for John, the darkness turns to light.

Teresa and John differ then, according to Howells, “in the approach to union in the early stages.”¹⁰⁰ John focuses on absence, whereas Teresa allows for presence. Howells notes, “John emphasizes the feeling of God’s absence in the progress to union rather than presence and regards this as a cause of great suffering to the soul, while the element of suffering is less prominent in Teresa’s account.”¹⁰¹ For John, identification with and imitation of Christ means dying to all physical and imaginative apprehensions and experiences. Disdaining “a spiritual

⁹⁴ N, II.5.3.

⁹⁵ N, II.5.3.

⁹⁶ Howells, *Mystical Knowing*, 129.

⁹⁷ The title of this book, interestingly, is the only place the particular phrase “mystical theology” appears in the entire corpus.

⁹⁸ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 130.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

sweet tooth,” believers should seek to be as Christ on the cross, “the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things,” and experience “annihilation of themselves for God in the sensory and spiritual parts of their souls.”¹⁰² The journey to union, then, consists “in the living death of the cross, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior.”¹⁰³ The soul will have to empty itself of these images and leave this sense in darkness if it is to reach divine union. Even imaginative images of Christ should be shunned, “for these images, just as the corporeal objects of the exterior senses, cannot be an adequate, proximate means to God.”¹⁰⁴

Howells notes that, like John, “Teresa also regards the rational faculties as negated in regard to their ordinary operations when mystical theology begins, but at this point she thinks that the soul already has the ability, within these faculties, to recognize God’s presence *as presence*, rather than feeling it only as absence.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, Teresa asserts “that it is fitting for souls, however spiritual, to take care not to flee from corporal things to the extent of thinking that even the most sacred humanity causes harm.”¹⁰⁶ For John, Christ on the cross means denying all and focusing on lack, whereas, for Teresa, honoring Christ means respecting the corporal¹⁰⁷ at every stage.

Their differing emphasis on the humanity of Christ manifests itself in regards to their differing views of imaginative visions and painted icons: for Teresa, they help in identifying with

¹⁰² Ascent II.7.11.

¹⁰³ Ascent II.7.11.

¹⁰⁴ Ascent II.12.3

¹⁰⁵ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 130.

¹⁰⁶ IC VI.7.14 “Creo queda dado a entender lo que conviene, por espirituales que sean, no huir tanto de cosas corpóreas que les parezca aún hace daño la Humanidad sacratísima.”

¹⁰⁷ Note that Kavanaugh does translate this as “corporal” rather than “corporeal” (which he uses with John). Corporal can mean both “bodily” and the cloth used during Communion upon which the host is placed. If the latter, it could emphasize Teresa’s more explicit reverence for and belief in the efficacy of the Eucharist in cultivating contemplative awareness of God’s presence. Indeed, if this is the case, it directly shows how Teresa and John’s Christological difference relates to eucharistic devotion: For Teresa, it connects us to both the humanity and divinity in Christ through physical senses as well as spiritual, whereas for John it may verge on distraction from the passive contemplation involving negation of the physical senses.

Christ's suffering; for John, they hinder. Like Christ's total dereliction on the cross, we must crucify all images according to John, and, Howells argues, "this is behind his whole treatment of negativity." Teresa, however, views Christ's two natures to imply identification with God's presence even in the midst of the physical. Seeing the physical we can see Christ.

Though we must cultivate internal vision, we must not disdain the image of Christ, indeed, "by gazing at His grandeur, we get in touch with our own lowliness; by looking at His purity, we shall see our own filth; by pondering His humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble."¹⁰⁸ For both John and Teresa, proximity to God involves negative views of our self as stained with sin, but for Teresa these views can be cultivated through literal viewing of the image of Christ *at all stages*.

"The practice of turning aside from corporeal things must be good, certainly, since such spiritual persons advise it," Teresa says.¹⁰⁹ "But," Teresa goes on, "in my opinion, the soul should be very advanced because until then it is clear that the Creator must be sought through creatures."¹¹⁰ In advanced stages of contemplation, God may take the initiative and draw one's gaze from physical or imaginative images. Here, "it is very certain that in emptying ourselves of all that is creature and detaching ourselves from it for the love of God, the same Lord will fill us with Himself."¹¹¹ Contra John, Teresa held "that the most sacred humanity of Christ must not be counted in a balance with other corporeal things," thus, when one is not passively grasped, the image of Christ—imaginative and literal—can foster his presence.¹¹² Thus, says Teresa, "that we should skillfully and carefully accustom ourselves to avoid striving with all our strength to keep this most sacred humanity always present (and please the Lord it would be present always), this .

¹⁰⁸ IC I.2.9.

¹⁰⁹ Life, 22.8.

¹¹⁰ Life, 22.8.

¹¹¹ IC, VII 2.7

¹¹² Life, 22.8.

... is what I don't think is good."¹¹³ Adverting *away* from images of Christ is God's work, not ours.

Indeed, that images of Christ would be distracting and a cause for stumbling, Teresa links with weakness, particularly *male* weakness. "Some quote," she writes, "that the Lord said to His disciples that it was fitting that He go. I can't bear this. I would wager that He didn't say it to His most Blessed Mother, because she was firm in the faith; she knew He was God and man, and even though she loved Him more than they did, she did so with such perfection that His presence was a help rather than a hindrance."¹¹⁴ Jesus may have said to the *male* disciples that his physical form may have been a stumbling block because of their lack of faith and failure to see that "He was God and man" in hypostatic union. "The apostles must not have been as firm then in the faith as they were afterward and as we have reason to be now."¹¹⁵ But, because of her strong faith, great love, and perception of his dual natures, Mary, the mother of Jesus, could rest in Christ's spiritual *and* physical presence.

Of actively turning away from his presence, seeking total absence of images both physical and imaginative, Teresa says, "I tell you, daughters, that I consider this a dangerous path and think the devil could make one lose devotion for the most Blessed Sacrament."¹¹⁶ Thus, Teresa links the desire to negate *all* images of Christ perhaps to a certain male weakness of faith, and certainly to a fear of loss of Eucharistic devotion.

Interestingly, Howells seems to cast John's and Teresa's differing Christological emphases in what can be seen as a valuing of a certain form of "male" intellectual reason over a "feminine" connection to the body. And, he links this to two differing trajectories of the "spiritual senses" tradition. Howells argues,

¹¹³ Life, 22.8.

¹¹⁴ IC, VI.7.

¹¹⁵ IC VI 7.14.

¹¹⁶ IC, VI 7.14.

John's is the more intellectualist, Origenist approach to spiritual sensation, which argues that the soul can 'feel' Christ only by denying the bodily senses in favor of purely spiritual senses, whereas Teresa's is the more bodily approach found in Bernard of Clairvaux and various other late medieval mystics, which regards the *bodily* senses as capable of mediating spiritual benefits, in certain circumstances, through the union of spirit and flesh in the incarnation.¹¹⁷

Actually, as we will see in this next section, a conception of the spiritual senses as connected to the bodily senses can be traced back much further, at least to Gregory of Nyssa. Whereas Origen stressed a strict disjunction between physical and spiritual senses, such that to awaken the latter one must deny and disconnect from the former (like John), Gregory allowed for a far more continuous connection between them (like Teresa).¹¹⁸

For Nyssa and Teresa, then, physical sense directed Godward could cultivate spiritual sense. Thus, instead of only metaphorical connection, physical and spiritual could coincide in conducting growth in relation with God. The difference between the Carmelites may thus be refined to a difference in cultivation: John advocates cultivating absence, whereas Teresa feels absence should not be actively sought.

Instead of only metaphorical connection, then, physical and spiritual could coincide in conducting growth in relation with God. Given that Howells' "solution" to the apparent disjunction between physical and spiritual in the soul in Teresa and John is to stress the dynamism in the inner center of the soul, I find it striking that Howells so strongly seeks to stave off such dynamism from moving from the physical to the spiritual.

According to Howells, the normative aspect of the epistemology implicit in Teresa and especially John is that the inner, intellectual apprehension of God must happen first to enable

¹¹⁷ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 135.

¹¹⁸ See, Sarah Coakley. *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*. Blackwell: Malden 2002. Ch. 8, esp. p. 136-141.

union. Teresa's more positive view of the flesh and of images Howells casts as an "exception" and something John viewed as "untidy and unnecessary."¹¹⁹ Howells argues that John saw anything corporeal, even images of Christ, as a distraction from the suffering of Christ on the Cross. Basically, Howells reduces their difference to a stress on presence or absence: for Teresa, presence may always be felt; for John, complete sense of absence of God is necessary for union. I would say this can be refined to a difference in cultivation: John advocated cultivating absence, whereas Teresa thought absence should not be actively sought. "He will absent Himself," says Teresa, "when He sees such absence is fitting and when He desires to draw the soul out of itself."¹²⁰ For Teresa the physical senses must be directed to Christ, and through this, rather than through attention on absence, attachment to things not infused with Christ will drop away: "Fix your eyes on the Crucified and everything will become small for you."¹²¹

Howells argues that Teresa's allowing the exterior senses to communicate Christ to the soul is a "temporary stage which is superseded in the final union."¹²² He claims that in her maturity Teresa moves, in regards to final union, to what had been John's position all along. In the Seventh Mansion, "Teresa joins John in saying that the soul no longer requires bodily images of Christ."¹²³ Yet, what Teresa actually says of the use of images of the humanity of Christ in the final "spiritual marriage" is that "anyone whom the Lord places in the seventh dwelling place rarely, or hardly ever, needs to make this effort."¹²⁴ Rarely, or hardly ever, is certainly not never. In other words, Teresa seems to intone that even in the final union the flow of the divine must still be allowed to move from the physical into the interior, center of the soul. "Dynamism" does not just irradiate from inside out, but from outside in.

¹¹⁹ Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 136.

¹²⁰ Life, 22.10.

¹²¹ IC VII 4.8.

¹²² Ginsberg, *Yage Letters*, 137.

¹²³ Howells, *Mystical Knowing*, 137.

¹²⁴ IC VI 7.9.

To bring the “mystical theology” of Teresa and John into conversation with that of Dionysius, then, we can see that Teresa understands not only human ecstasy in which “the intellect ceases to work because God suspends it,” but also divine ecstasy in the incarnation.¹²⁵ Referring to Galatians 2:20, Dionysius writes that ecstasy fueled by Divine yearning “is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’”¹²⁶ Likewise, “in truth,” Dionysius writes, “it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything.”¹²⁷ The Divine is “beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.”¹²⁸ Here, we see Dionysius appropriating neo-platonic notions of procession and return to make sense of the incarnation.

In Dionysius’s notion of Divine ecstasy, according to Andrew Louth, “we have something inconceivable in Plotinus or in any neo-Platonist.”¹²⁹ Thus, like Teresa’s, Dionysius’s “mystical theology” involves not only the ecstatic moment in which one “knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing,” but it also cherishes *at every stage* the importance of Jesus’s humanity, the cross, and the eucharist as movements of God’s proceeding humanly into creation

¹²⁵ Life, 12.5.

¹²⁶ DN 4 712A

¹²⁷ DN 4 712B

¹²⁸ DN 4 712B

¹²⁹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 176.

and returning to unity-in-difference in the Trinity.¹³⁰ In short, in his negation, darkness, and absence, John of the Cross over-emphasizes return.

Negation, for Dionysius, enables one to move through the “sacred veils”¹³¹ of the “images derived from the senses”¹³²—the cross, baptism, eucharist, entire liturgical life—in which the divine has “adapted to what we are” towards union with the Trinity.¹³³ Like “artists who love beauty in the mind,” Christians are to take the physical images of the liturgy, such as the host, and “make an image of it within their minds” which “enables them to produce an exact likeness of God.”¹³⁴ These positive images of the liturgy can only be in the likeness of God if our purely human conceptions of them are negated. In this type of “denial of all beings,” then, “we would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside, they show up the beauty which is hidden.”¹³⁵ In other words, positive images coupled with their negation reveal a hidden image. It appears we cannot get away from image making. But, this motion through positive and negative imaging, which may be called *pragmatic*, which is the motion of the liturgy, enables physical, imaginative, and intellectual images to be transformed into *icons*.¹³⁶

Practitioners gaze through them to God and are given no end to their gaze, but are transformed in their mode of seeing and living. In other words, the physical senses help cultivate the spiritual senses, both of which are given from God and return to God—but practitioners *do*

¹³⁰ Though space and time constraints preclude an extended meditation on Dionysius as a distinctly *Christian*, as opposed to *neoplatonic*, thinker, let it suffice to refer to the superb work of Alexander Golitzen. See, for instance, “‘Suddenly, Christ’: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites” in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* ed Kessler and Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Also, consult the work of Andrew Louth.

¹³¹ In, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans Colm Lubheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), see pages 52, 146, 188, 226, 273, and 284.

¹³² *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 199. *EH* 376D.

¹³³ *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 199. *EH* 377A.

¹³⁴ *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 226, *EH* 473C-D.

¹³⁵ *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 138. *MT* 2 1025A-B.

¹³⁶ See Jean-Luc Marion’s *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham, 2002), Ch. 6.

not gain the latter at the expense of the former. Rather, in imitation of and participation in Christ, practitioners' lives—body and soul—are transformed. According to Dionysius, a seeker of the Christ “must be perfected in a more holy and uplifting mode of life by love for God and by sacred activities.”¹³⁷ The entire Christian “form of life” enables one to properly participate in the saving activity of the sacraments: “The singing and reading of the scriptures incubate the uninitiated toward life-giving sonship.”¹³⁸

Of his own Baptism, Dionysius writes, “it was this one which first gave me the gift of sight.”¹³⁹ Having received the capacity for Divine sight through the initiation of Baptism, Dionysius explains that “the light coming first from this led me toward the vision of the other sacred things.”¹⁴⁰ For Dionysius, the physical senses employed Godward through liturgical participation and contemplation help foster the spiritual senses that make one capable of receiving light, and of entering “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.”¹⁴¹

In his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius writes that through praise of the Holy Trinity, “by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.”¹⁴² As beings of praise beholding this ray of shadow, we may enter “into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” and belong “completely to him who is beyond everything.”¹⁴³ In this place or state of union, one is “neither oneself nor someone else,” but rather, “one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by

¹³⁷ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 565C

¹³⁸ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 477A

¹³⁹ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 3 425A

¹⁴⁰ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 3 425B

¹⁴¹ *Pseudo-Dionysius* MT 1001A.

¹⁴² *Pseudo-Dionysius* MT 1000A

¹⁴³ *Pseudo-Dionysius* MT 1001A

knowing nothing.”¹⁴⁴ Here “we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.”¹⁴⁵ This may appear to be a fleeting moment of incredible noetic darkness. But, I argue this highpoint cannot be considered apart from the context of Dionysius’s wider configuration. And, the rest of the Dionysian landscape shines forth in light.

Moving through images via affirmation and negation, as we have seen, practitioners are drawn into the way of life in Jesus Christ. “Such a way,” Dionysius writes, “guides the soul through all the divine notions, notions which are themselves transcended by that which is far beyond every name, all reason and all knowledge.”¹⁴⁶ According to Dionysius, the passage through affirmation and negation takes one “beyond the outermost boundaries of the world” at which point “the soul is brought into union with God himself.”¹⁴⁷ For Dionysius, walking the path of affirmation and denial leaves us “with our beings shaped to songs of praise.”¹⁴⁸

“In the time to come,” Dionysius writes, “when we have come at last to the blessed inheritance of being like Christ, then, as scripture says, ‘we shall always be with the Lord.’”¹⁴⁹ At that time, “we shall be ever filled with the sight of God shining around us,” and, Dionysius further asserts, “we shall have a conceptual gift of light from him and, somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with him and, our understanding carried away, blessedly happy, we shall be struck by his blazing light.”¹⁵⁰ After death or at the parousia, practitioners will become beings of praise struck by the blazing light of God’s presence in an unknowable way.

And, in a more Nyssan continuous vein, the bodies remain. Our “body will deserve to have a share of the honors bestowed on the soul which was its companion in the sacred struggle.

¹⁴⁴ *Pseudo-Dionysius* MT 1001A

¹⁴⁵ *Pseudo-Dionysius* MT 1025B

¹⁴⁶ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 981B

¹⁴⁷ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 981B

¹⁴⁸ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 589B

¹⁴⁹ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 592B-C

¹⁵⁰ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 592C

That is why divine justice links the body with the soul when final judgment is rendered to the soul, for the body also took part in the same journey along the road of holiness.”¹⁵¹ Practitioners’ bodies are companions on the journey with soul and mind, and will participate in the union of the time to come. “Indeed,” Dionysius says, “we see some already united here and now with God, for they are lovers of truth and have abandoned the passion for material goods. . . . They praise the divine name ceaselessly.”¹⁵² If we move in praise that involves a pragmatics of affirmation and negation gesturing beyond and otherwise than predication, if our passion for material goods is subsumed to our passion for God, and if our mind is darkened to purely human conceptions, then, Dionysius claims, we may achieve union of transformed life, moving deeper and deeper and higher and higher into the dazzling divine from this life through to what may come.

For Dionysius, union is not for believers alone, but must flow through them for the illumination of others. Yearning love for God reorders the yearning for others. Love will be so encompassing as to be ecstatic—“This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved.”¹⁵³ The ecstatic state brought on by divine yearning “is shown in the providence lavished by the superior on the subordinate. It is shown in the regard for one another demonstrated by those of equal status. And it is shown by the subordinates in their divine return toward what is higher.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, love of others—below, equal, and above—marks ecstasy for Dionysius. Creatures are ecstatically constituted in destabilization into the o/Other. We are stabilized only in the o/Other. In a mutual meeting of ecstasies, all bodies and souls become resonant with Divine inflow and outflow for others. The vision of a Dionysian cosmology and anthropology, then, is of an overall harmonic resonance of ecstatic love reverberating throughout.

¹⁵¹ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 565B

¹⁵² *Pseudo-Dionysius* Epistle 10 1117B.

¹⁵³ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 4 712A

¹⁵⁴ *Pseudo-Dionysius* DN 4 712A

Just as Teresa says, “This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.”¹⁵⁵ And again, her core guidance: “Fix your eyes on the Crucified.”¹⁵⁶ For Dionysius too,

The sign of the cross indicates the renunciation of all the desires of the flesh. It points to a life given over to the imitation of God and unswervingly directed toward the divine life of the incarnate Jesus, who was divinely sinless and yet lowered himself to the cross and to death and who, with the sign of the cross, that image of his own sinlessness, marks all those imitating him.¹⁵⁷

Thus, looking to the cross, and not disdaining images of the Christ, Teresa seems perhaps the more faithful heir of the Dionysian heritage of mystical theology.

To sum up: on mystical theology, the facets Teresa and John both share with Dionysius are the following: (1) emphasis on the cross, (2) passive knowing through unknowing, (3) intellectual failure and noetic union, and (4) the possibility of union in this life. Teresa differs from John and converges with Dionysius on the following: (1) role of bodily and imaginative visions, (2) liturgical and eucharistic emphasis, and (3) emphasis of union flowing out for others. As for darkness and light, well, John might be the closer. I agree with Howells that Teresa genuinely is not as negative as John. I have shown, however, that John’s yielding darkness to light is not simply clear cut “temporary Dionysianism.” Indeed, like Teresa and John, Dionysius seems to think that darkness yields to light in the time to come. Although, Dionysius does not seem entirely consistent in regards to darkness and light (what is a ray of shadow?), and this may have been part of his point. To inherit mystical theology, then, means participating paradoxically

¹⁵⁵ IC VII.4.6

¹⁵⁶ IC VII.4.8.

¹⁵⁷ *Pseudo-Dionysius* EH 512A-B.

in the divine yearning of the Christic body, thereby coming to know God, the self, others, and all creation through unknowing, with God known ultimately as unknowable.

For John, this different inheritance means prayer should involve darkening the physical senses, even the sight of the savior; whereas, for Teresa, it means we can continually gaze away at God's glorious physical body. For John, to see Christ's mystical body we must look away from the physical body—both his and ours. And John's has by far been the more dominant mode of inheriting Dionysian noetic darkness. Whence this preference for the intellectual and spiritual accompanied by squeamishness about the affective and embodied? Why, in the most intimate moment of union in spiritual marriage, might a woman enjoy constantly gazing, whereas a male mystic would want to look away from the human body of Christ?

John's apparent homophobia in not wanting to look on the male body of Christ in mystical union may not be a case of failing to recognize spiritual gay marriage. Similarly, Teresa's cohabitation with Christ in the seventh mansion of spiritual marriage may not be as simple a domestic partnership as it seems. Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of a deconstruction of Christianity is not how to "queer" it, but how to overturn its normative male homosexuality.¹⁵⁸ Historically, Christianity has involved men desiring an overwhelmingly male God, with even women needing to "become men" on the path of spiritual maturity (who then desire a man, even if Christ or the Holy Spirit is viewed as an essentially womanly man).¹⁵⁹

Given these dynamics, the incomprehensibility of God's essence and accompanying iconoclasm may be in part protective strategies, but not merely ones enabling intellectual mysticism so much as masking male homoeroticism. In John's disdain of desire for Christ's human body and Teresa's excess of desire, then, perhaps we glimpse dynamics of the invisible

¹⁵⁸ See Jeffrey J Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁹ See Dale B Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Especially Chapter 6, "The Queer History of Galatians 3:28: 'No Male and Female.'"

desire that has truly dared not speak its name in Christian mystical theologies—heterosexuality. With authentic heterosexuality as yet unthought, all the active-passive gender flipping of even the most erotically creative mystical theologies from at least Gregory of Nyssa onwards may have served to reinforce a rigid gender binary through a liminal release of tension and subsequent return to and reinforcement of the old order.¹⁶⁰

Without genuine heterosexuality, such mystical revelry in gender confusion may ultimately re-instate with greater force the normative Male-dominated binary, which is really a male-male dyad that is ultimately underwritten by the God-man-world divide. In such mystical homoerotics, the feminine serves merely as the mirror of the masculine, enabling male-male desire to dress in theological drag. Women are then the as-yet-unseen “elsewhere” of normative male-male desire (as we will examine more closely in our last chapter).

Thus, in such religious systems, male desire of women, as well as female desire *in toto*, has historically been effaced in favor of ultimately male-on-male mystical union (even if effected by women or by feminized men). The yet-to-come in regards to Christianity and gender may thus be a genuine heterosexuality—a desire of the other through an exploding of the God-human-animal-material divides. When such a possibility comes, perhaps an authentically “queer” erotics of otherness may come simultaneously.

Toward such theorizing, we now turn in the next section with a closer examination of the spiritual senses traditions and their curious squeamishness about the body. Then, in the final section, we see how Ginsberg and Derrida offer embodied processes of prayer as differential vibration that may help us welcome what/whoever may come.

¹⁶⁰ I am thinking here of Victor Turner’s work on liminality. See Victor W Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

IV. The Spiritual Senses, Squeamishness, and the Song

Around the particular example just analyzed of gazing at icons of Christ in prayer, we can see the different inheritances of the Dionysian tradition of mystical theology, of which we may deem Allen Ginsberg an heir as well, in his own heretical way. These different modes of prayer involve differing trajectories of the spiritual senses—the one more bodily and affective, the other immaterial and intellectual. But why, we wonder, does the one feel fine about the body, whereas the other feels squeamish?

Sarah Coakley argues that such squeamishness about the flesh among the church Fathers is due at least in part to their desire to limit the connections of prayer in the Spirit and sexual loss of control. In “The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality: A Neglected Nexus in the Fathers and Beyond,” Coakley writes that “in any prayer of the sort in which we radically cede control to the Spirit there is an instant reminder of the close analogue between this ceding (to the trinitarian God), and the *ekstasis* of human sexual passion.” For this reason, Coakley argues, Origen, the second to third century progenitor of mystical theology, limits spiritual connections to physicality. For Origen only those capable, those divorced from the flesh and bodily sensuality, can perceive the spiritual. Thus, Origen addresses *On Prayer*, to Tatiana, “most disciplined and of most manly virtue, whose womanly nature has now been left behind.”¹⁶¹ Likewise, he links the gift to “pray as we ought” to only performing “the mystery of marriage . . . with great sense of solemnity, without haste and without too much emphasis on the physical passions.”¹⁶² Without emotion, without physical passion, perhaps then we may pray. Origen thus favors a more ‘male’

¹⁶¹ Origen, *On Prayer*, II.1. See Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom: Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, ed. Rowan A Greer and Hans Urs von Balthasar (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). Full text also accessible via Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/origen/prayer.html>.

¹⁶² Ibid, II.2

gendered approach to the spiritual senses in which control is never lost, and “feminine” and sexual senses are thwarted.

Indeed, something so sensuous as the *Song of Songs* must be read only by the spiritual, post-sexual elite, lest it twist one “away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal.”¹⁶³ Wrong reading of the *Song* may lead to “fleshly lust! For this reason, therefore, I advise and counsel everyone who is yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, we should strive to cease to *feel* the bodily in favor of the spiritual. Avoiding lust and carnality, we must quiet the deliverances of our physical senses in order to focus on those of the spiritual senses. Coakley notes that Origen even “advises against praying at all in a room in which sexual intercourse has taken place.”¹⁶⁵

For Origen, Jesus’ admonition to go into one’s room, to shut the door, and pray (Matthew 6:6) is allegorized to mean a person giving “no assent at all to the outside world . . . and, shutting up every door of the senses so that he may not be drawn away by them, and that the impression they receive may not enter into his mind.”¹⁶⁶ Ignoring the deliverances of the physical senses, “he prays to the Father who neither leaves nor forsakes such a hidden sanctuary, but dwells therein, and his only-begotten Son with him.”¹⁶⁷ For Origen, outside are physicality and

¹⁶³ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, ed. R. P. Lawson (New York: Paulist Press, 1956), 22.

¹⁶⁴ Origen, *Song of Songs*, 23.

¹⁶⁵ Coakley, Sarah, “The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality: A Neglected Nexus in the Fathers and Beyond,” *Bulletin/Centro Pro Unione*, N. 58 / Fall 2000, pp13-17; 16. Coakley references Origen’s *On Prayer* XXXI “For it must be considered whether it is a holy and pure thing to intercede with God in the place of intercourse.”

¹⁶⁶ Origen, *On Prayer*.

¹⁶⁷ Origen, *On Prayer*.

carnality, whereas inside resides pure, immaterial mind in Christ who is in the Father. To reach the latter, we must jettison the former.

Thus, prayer for Origen ultimately involves ignoring the deliverances of our physical senses and turning to our spiritual senses. Christ is mind and we are mind; body and our physicality are to be sloughed. The spiritual senses thus have no commerce with the physical, especially in prayer. Connections to ‘femininity’, sexuality, and loss of control are strictly demarcated as falling on the side of the outer man. In the dichotomy between inner and outer, true prayer for Origen leads us inward to the immateriality of mind.

Somewhat differently constituted from Origen, as Sarah Coakley argues, is Gregory of Nyssa. Though in many ways very similar to Origen, Nyssa, Coakley notes, is different from him in his thinking about the body. Nyssa is certainly not afraid to say that we are creatures who are linked body and soul such that after death our bodies will be united again with our souls.¹⁶⁸ Like Origen, Gregory holds that “a certain analogy exists between the activities of the soul and the sense organs of the body.”¹⁶⁹ But unlike Origen, Gregory allows for a closer analogy that retains a link between body and mind. John Meyendorff argues that Nyssa’s appropriation of the spiritual senses “was based on the idea of the natural supremacy of the *nous* over matter, but it implied neither the metaphysical independence of the mind from the body nor the immanence of God in the mind.”¹⁷⁰ For Gregory, the body and mind are both taken up in the soul’s ascent or growth into Christ-likeness. Coakley theorizes these differences might be linked to their differing biographies—Origen’s possible castration contrasted to Nyssa’s marriage previous to celibate

¹⁶⁸ See Nyssa’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

¹⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, The Archbishop Lakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Historical Sources (Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 52.

¹⁷⁰ John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), 122.

monastic life. Because he seems to have a more positive view of the body, Nyssa may allow for more connection between physical and spiritual senses.

Coakley contrasts Origen's stark inner/outer disjunction with Nyssa's more *continuous* conception of the spiritual senses. According to Coakley "Nyssa's subtly adjusted views seem to allow for some significant point of *continuity* or development from the physical to the spiritual in the spectrum of purgation of the senses."¹⁷¹ To support her argument that Gregory connects rather than disjoins the physical and the spiritual senses, Coakley cites Nyssa's prologue to his commentary on *The Song of Songs*: "I hope that my commentary will be a guide for the more fleshly minded, since the wisdom hidden [in the Song of Songs] leads to a spiritual state of the soul."¹⁷² She concludes that "on Nyssa's view the toehold for spiritual perception is precisely *in* the physical, a possibility that is rendered problematic by Origen's sterner disjunction."¹⁷³ Thus, for Coakley, Gregory's "less harshly dualistic" take on the physical and spiritual senses shows how "*transformation* of normal sense perception" connects with perception of divine reality.

Indeed, Gregory views human capacity as ever transforming through a process of desire, known as *epektasis*, fueled by God's energy of love and perpetuated infinitely by God's infinite, incomprehensible, ineffable nature. The scent of the divine is not picked up by our physical sense of smell, but "by a certain spiritual and immaterial power drawing in the good odor of Christ by an inhalation of the Spirit."¹⁷⁴ For Gregory, the spiritual senses allow intimacy with Christ through the power of the Spirit. Unlike Origen's strict inner/outer distinctions, Gregory allows for more continuity between the physical and spiritual senses, which also possibly allows

¹⁷¹ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 138.

¹⁷² Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Prologue J.4.

¹⁷³ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 138.

¹⁷⁴ Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, 52.

him freer use of the *Song* without such stern hesitancy about possible connections to sexuality and loss of control. Prayer for Gregory may thus be more connected to the physical sense of loss of control.

Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* charts the transformation of our physical and spiritual senses into the passage beyond sense into the divine darkness of unknowability. Although, Louth notes even here in the divine darkness Christ still "gives the soul some sense of His presence, even while He eludes her clear apprehension."¹⁷⁵ Louth argues, "In the dark night, the soul cannot *see*, but she can *feel* the presence of the Word."¹⁷⁶ In the darkness of unknowing, we know a radical loss of control, yet we are still given a spiritual sense of intimacy with Christ.

As Coakley notes, Gregory feels free to use gender in his commentary on the *Song* as the soul (presumably with some sort of body) seeks Christ and in turn is sought by Christ. In the interplay of seeker and sought, gender flips from active "male" to passive "female." Thus, Gregory's approach to the spiritual senses "stresses the absolutely crucial significance of the integration of the affective and the erotic in any adequate understanding or 'knowledge' of the risen Christ and things divine." On not finding but rather being found by God, Louth writes: "Gregory's thought here is based on the coming of God among us in the Incarnation: the soul's longing for God is a response to God's love for us in becoming one with us in the Incarnation."¹⁷⁷ Nyssa's more bodily, incarnational view of Christ, thus allows for the continuity between the physical and spiritual senses and a more explicit, less qualified noetic/erotic connection. For Coakley, this continuity with the physical makes a more fruitful resource for possibly re-ordering human physical desires toward wholeness and holiness.

¹⁷⁵ Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, XI: 1001 C

¹⁷⁶ Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 94.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

To sum up thus far, Origen's sharply dualistic conception of the physical and spiritual senses seems connected to definite squeamishness about the body and hesitancy to speak of "feminine" loss of control in sexual extasis. His prayer consists in discarding the physical in favor of the spiritual sense of immaterial reality. After ethical training, our body has only the role in such prayer of offering as little distraction as possible. Gregory of Nyssa, however, apparently opens an avenue of *continuity* between physical and spiritual senses such that the physical sense informs and transforms our spiritual (and vice versa). His prayer involves both, not the silencing of one in favor of the other.

And these are the main strands that would be taken up, albeit differently, by Teresa and John, and later Ginsberg. In his "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," renown mysticism scholar Bernard McGinn writes that "these authors taught that one must turn away from the outer person and external sensation in order to cultivate the inner self and the dormant spiritual senses."¹⁷⁸ And McGinn locates a turn to the body and to affect in the middle ages. I argue that this was not so much a turn, as a return to strands of the spiritual senses traditions that had been deemphasized in favor of Dionysian intellectual darkness. But remember, even Dionysius writes that our bodies deserve a share in divine glory as partners on the journey of the soul. And contrary to McGinn's treatment, Nyssa, like later medieval mystics, actually taught that the outer could help cultivate the inner. Thus, what McGinn identifies as the late-medieval "turn" to "new embodied mystical language" is not so new and not so much a turn as a return to a different strand of the spiritual senses—one promoted by Nyssa who had been happily married before becoming a monk, rather than the one promoted by Origen, the man rumored to have castrated himself.

¹⁷⁸ Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* Volume 1, no. Number 2 (Fall 2001): 163.

McGinn also argues that Gregory's gloss on *The Song of Songs* about the famous wounding of the arrow is about a paradoxical joining of motion and rest:

To explain further this life-giving wound, he joins verse 5 with its active imagery of wounding to verse 6, a picture of the Bride at rest ('His left hand is under my head and his right hand shall embrace me'). This enables him to fuse the contrary sensations of being in motion and being at rest (something impossible for external sensation), thus illustrating the paradoxical nature of the spiritual sensation in which the loving soul is both at rest in the arms of the Divine Lover and flying forward toward the infinite goal that always eludes her. 'Simultaneously,' he says, 'I am carried away by his act of shooting and I am at rest in the hands of the Bowman'.¹⁷⁹

Though occurring in the bridal chamber in the midst of nuptial bliss, McGinn uses this as an example, not of spiritual/sexual pleasure, but of synesthetic language to evoke a conjoining of motion and rest through "inter-imaginality"—"a process by which an image or sense description found in one scriptural text is explained, qualified, and enriched by related images and sensations from another text."¹⁸⁰ The image in question is Nyssa's analogizing the Trinity as archer-arrow-ointment.

In his *Fourth Homily on the Song of Songs* Nyssa likens the Trinity to an archer (Father), arrow (Son), and ointment or poison on the arrow's tip (Holy Spirit). And, says Gregory, "as soon as the bride receives the arrow of love, the imagery shifts from archery to nuptial delight."¹⁸¹ In other words, the imagery shifts from the wound of the arrow to orgasm in the bridal chamber, with Christ as the Father's penis and the Holy Spirit as semen or lubricant. After

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, M.852/J.128.

that, Nyssa glosses the verses that McGinn discusses about the left hand under the feminine soul's head with the right hand embracing. Given the previous imagery of a cosmic archer inserting his arrow into the virgin soul, and immediate shift to nuptial bliss, a fairly straightforward reading of conjunction of rest and motion in an embrace with the groomsmen would be a description of orgasm. Or that seems far more plausible than some sort of fitful nap. Thus, "being in motion and being at rest" is a description of the moment of mutual orgasm during sex with God in the missionary position. Yet, in *all of Christian history*, to my knowledge, that particular gloss of that particular homily by one of the most influential church fathers of all time, has never been seriously theologized. Why not?

Likewise, in his *Introduction to the Christian Mystical Tradition* in his chapter "Nicene Orthodoxy," Andrew Louth discusses every other reference in Nyssa's *Homily's on the Song of Songs* which refers to the arrow *except* this one where the martial overtly switches to the marital—the arrow to the penis. Coakley argues that we must "rethread" such strands and overcome the apparent squeamishness on these "matters in such a way that enacted sexual desire and desire for God are no longer seen in mutual enmity, as disjunctive alternatives, with the non-celibate woman or homosexual cast as the distractor from the divine goal."¹⁸² But Coakley does not provide a robust enough analysis of why there would be such squeamishness, with women and homosexuals serving as triggers for it, in the first place.

For such an analysis, let us turn comparatively to Jeffrey Hopkins' argument in his essay "The Compatibility of Reason and Orgasm in Tibetan Buddhism: Reflections on Sexual

¹⁸² Sarah Coakley, "The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality: A Neglected Nexus in the Father and Beyond," *Bulletin Centro Pro Unione* N. 58 (Fall 2000): 13.

Violence and Homophobia.”¹⁸³ According to Hopkins, a potential psychological defense mechanism against death and the onslaught of everything that might remind us of death, especially the loss of control in orgasm, is to project onto the object of desire all that we loathe in ourselves because of its mortality and vulnerability. Whatever draws us toward a loss of control, draws us deeper down into the body, and away from the sublimated mental ascent away from materiality, we must shun because it reminds us of mortality. Of course, the “we” and “us” of those preceding sentences would be overmuch the “masculine”—those aspects of our psyches that identify with control, mastery, activity, and autonomy. Thus, all too poignantly, women and “passive” men mirror back to “active” and heterosexual men all the weakness and fragility in themselves that they want to deny and destroy. In grasping after control and autonomy, men historically have repressed women and homosexual men, subjugating them and submitting them to all sorts of abuse and hatred because, Hopkins argues, they hate themselves, their bodies, and their own fear of death.

Since reason is identified with mind, then anything having to do with its opposite of body must be sloughed off, repressed, disparaged, and destroyed. But Hopkins argues that reason and embodied states like orgasm are continuous, much like Nyssa and Teresa. “It is my contention,” Hopkins argues, “that this Indo-Tibetan perspective of continuity”—which aligns with the continuity in the resonances of the Christian spiritual senses tradition that I trace in Christian mystics and in Ginsberg’s poetics—“could help to alleviate the sense of loathing that some males experience with respect to the power that sexual pleasure has over them, when the surface personality is collapsed in orgasm and the panic of annihilation sets in.” This strikes me as a

¹⁸³ Jeffrey Hopkins, “The Compatibility of Reason and Orgasm in Tibetan Buddhism: Reflections on Sexual Violence and Homophobia,” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 372–83.

powerful analysis, and very plausible psychological diagnosis of one of the continuing roots of patriarchy, and indeed all forms of domination.

Coakley diagnoses the same fear and projection in regards to the associations of Christian prayer and orgasm, but lacking is a fuller description of *why* men, or whatever aspects of humanity identify with “masculinity,” would find associations with orgasm problematic in the first place. Hopkins helpfully provides such an analysis, and his insights about the consonance in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism between reason and orgasm I would conjecture are very much part of why Ginsberg felt pulled more toward those traditions than mystical theology. Such knowledge is certainly present in John and Teresa, but had to be esoterically encoded or repressed. That gnosis, essentially, is that the lower and embodied can be as spiritually luminous as the upper and disembodied mind. The problem being that the spasmodic embodied feeling and the loss of control in orgasm remind us that our mental reason cannot keep us from dying.

It is not so much, then, that silent prayer reminds the church fathers of sex as sex reminds them of death, giving rise to the desire to demonize the objects of their desire. Hopkins explains:

They attempt to assert control and domination over the collapse and annihilation of their usual ego through hating the source of their sexual desire which they project onto others—these others being persons who are attracted to males. They seek domination both of their own sexual craving and also of the process of dissolution—in orgasm—of what is actually their superficial self. Panicking at their own disappearance in orgasm, they look for someone else to blame and to control even in brutal ways in order to distance themselves from their own craving for orgasm. At once attracted to and repelled by their own inner nature, they lash out in distorted disgust, attempting to claim a

privileged position over a process that does indeed undermine their identification with superficial states.¹⁸⁴

When “knowing beyond the mind by knowing nothing” of mystical theology, then, becomes dissociated from embodiment, then the mental becomes out of balance with the physical. If the mind becomes all then the body becomes nothing.

Thus liturgical participation in Christianity, or other ritual processes such as Hermetic rites or Ginsberg’s group ayahuasca crooning sessions, could serve to harness these powers, bringing them under a measure of control. Such an analysis provides a way of understanding why women and gay men have been and still are oftentimes prevented from participating in the performance of these rituals—because their presence could disrupt the male control of the very energies the rituals are designed to sublimate. Or, as Grace Jantzen argues in her *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, such ancient thought holds that

a lover of wisdom must overcome the desires of the flesh, and in so doing can actually appropriate at the level of spirit the reproductive function which in physical terms is uniquely women’s. . . . As Plato says in the Symposium, ‘who would not prefer such [spiritual] fatherhood to merely human propagation?’ This appropriation of reasoning to the male sex only, and the valorization of the offspring of male intellect above the reproductive capacity of the female, was to have a very long run in western thought, very much at the expense of women.¹⁸⁵

What we could be seeing with many of the rituals in the history of religions, then, would be the desire to control the loss of control experienced through desire.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 382.

¹⁸⁵ Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36.

Or more specifically, we see rituals designed to repress and sublimate the ways orgasm upsets subjectivity and opens it onto its other—the unconscious realm of the body, the semiotic, and everything deemed negative by the gender hierarchy. Moreover, practitioners of such rituals perhaps fear the way the power of procreation seems ceded to women in the paradoxical moment of orgasm, when men feel most powerful yet spasmodically lose control only to then feel their power pathetically wane. As April D. DeConick writes, even Aristotle shared such a fear of losing control of the power of procreation to women when, “in his argument against pangenesis, he said that the denial of female seed was intellectually satisfying because it put to rest any fear one might have that a woman, since she had a uterus and could produce menses for the nourishment of the embryo, might put forth her own seed and produce a child without the contribution of a father.”¹⁸⁶ We also find hints of such fear in the Hermetic text *Asclepius*:

For if you take note of that final moment to which we come after constant rubbing when each of the two natures pours its issue into the other and one hungrily snatches <love> from the other and buries it deeper, finally at that moment from the common coupling females gain the potency of males and males are exhausted with the lethargy of females.¹⁸⁷

If to be “male” means maintaining a controlling, intellectual, and rational grasp on one’s self, then certainly procreation and orgasm would involve a fear of the loss of control of one’s very “maleness” or self into the unknown, destabilizing “feminine.”

“Once reason is separated out as an autonomous entity and once persons identify mainly with this disembodied faculty,” Hopkins argues, “it is all too easy to view states and impulses

¹⁸⁶ April D. DeConick, “The Great Mystery of Marriage. Sex and Conception in Ancient Valentinian Traditions,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 322.

¹⁸⁷ Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction by Brian P. Copenhaver*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79.

that are actually part and parcel of one's own mind as threateningly impinging from the outside."¹⁸⁸ We then deem this outside as the demonic other. "Fear and rejection of sexuality," Hopkins continues, "lead to projection of sexuality onto women and homosexuals."¹⁸⁹ Thus, some heterosexual men project their self-loathing of their own sexuality—which reminds them of their exposure to their constitutive outside—onto those others whom they deem associated with that loss of control which comes in orgasm, thereby giving rise to all manner of social ill in the erection of a hierarchy that seeks to dominate all below transcendent, immaterial mind—namely everything from women to nonhuman animals to materiality itself. Given that Dionysius is credited with coining the very term *hierarchy*, then upending such repressive structures would be greatly aided by re-reading his tradition of mystical theology in ways that Ginsberg and Derrida provide, as we will see more of in the next section.

To transform such hierarchies, then, requires embracing embodiment with a clear mind, thinking our passivity in balance with how we feel our agency. "Such a revolution in perspective," writes Hopkins, "requires recognition of vulnerability and thus is not easy."¹⁹⁰ This revolution in perspective is precisely what Ginsberg argues we all need to do—embrace our vulnerability by widening our awareness to encompass our own death.

V. Prayer as Openness

Like Ginsberg, Teresa's spirituality is undeniably visceral. Teresa herself famously says that "at times an arrow is thrust into the deepest and most living recesses of the heart in such a

¹⁸⁸ Hopkins, "Compatibility of Reason and Orgasm," 383.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

way that the soul doesn't know what has happened or what it wants."¹⁹¹ She describes the pain as "so great that it made me moan," and says in such visions, "the Lord carries the soul away and places it in ecstasy."¹⁹² We need not read this reductively (like Lacan) as if she experienced physical pleasure and did not have words to describe it apart from madness or mysticism. Rather, we can see her as being particularly clever about how she would couch her language, esoterically veiling the otherwise obvious associations to the loss of control in the ecstasy of sexual pleasure. As Teresa herself compares:

It's like the experience of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance, it seems they understand each other. This must be similar to what happens in the vision; without our knowing how, these two lovers gaze directly at each other, as the Bridegroom says to the Bride in the *Song of Songs*.¹⁹³

Teresa thus explicitly connects her desire for God analogously to sexual desire.

If *Eros*, visceral physical love, and *Agape*, ethereal divine love, are interconnected, as indeed Dionysius asserts— "To those listening properly to the divine things the name "love" [*agape*] is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term "yearning" [*eros*]." DN 4.12—then how can we cleanly distinguish between the two? And why?

According to Teresa, in the prayer of quiet God looks upon us in love, desiring "to be so engraved upon the intellect that this vision [of God in Jesus Christ] can no more be doubted than

¹⁹¹ Teresa, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 251.

¹⁹² Ibid., 252-53.

¹⁹³ *Life* 27.10

can what is seen.”¹⁹⁴ God puts knowledge “deeply within” the soul “without image or explicit words.” To gaze upon God, we look within. Through interior gazing, the soul sees “the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.”¹⁹⁵ In the knowledge given by or in the gaze “you understand without speaking.”¹⁹⁶ With just the glance, two lovers reach deep understanding without signs. In mutual gazing between human and divine, the human, according to Teresa of Avila, is given “secrets” and “such friendship and love that one cannot describe this in writing.”¹⁹⁷ Given from God’s desire, knowing beyond ordinary knowing gets gifted to the practiced pray-er.

Here in *The Life*, the vision of God—with its knowledge and presence—resides in rapture. In her maturity of the Seventh Dwelling Place of *The Interior Castle*, we not only see the Trinity within, but see ourselves within the Trinity. And, *sense* of the Trinity remains even when clear *sight* fails. As Howells notes, in the “prayer of union” one senses God’s abiding presence even amidst actions in the world.¹⁹⁸ From the center of union, one perceives or receives God’s will like a “note or letter . . . written with intense love and in such a way that He wants you alone to understand it and what He asks of you in it.”¹⁹⁹ From the soul’s presence within the Trinity within us at its center, the soul sends “messages . . . from the interior center” downwards and outwards to the other and exterior parts of the soul.²⁰⁰ Here, Howells analyzes Teresa’s union in terms of *inputs* of Divine vision or sense received within the center of the soul, and *outputs* overflowing from there to actions in the world. Through practiced prayer, awareness runs from unmediated, interior sight and sense beyond language outwards into writing and action.

¹⁹⁴ *Life* 27.5

¹⁹⁵ *Life* 27.9

¹⁹⁶ *Life* 27.10

¹⁹⁷ *Life* 27.9

¹⁹⁸ Howells, *Mystical Knowing*, 115-116.

¹⁹⁹ *Interior Castle* 7 3.9

²⁰⁰ *Interior Castle* 7 4.10

Yet, whatever awareness she has prior to that embodiment in words and action—even if kept inside in a silent, wordless awareness—nevertheless once it reaches the minimal embodiment of the *as* structure by identification as God’s love, then her mystical pleasure succumbs to all the vicissitudes of writing we have already examined. If the reality she loves is incomprehensible, then whatever or whomever it is an awareness *of* must run the risk of being neither discernible from nor identifiable with others that are impossible to comprehend. How could she be certain? Like sense perception, Teresa has to use her contemplative practice to prove her contemplative practice. Thus, it rests on epistemic circularity.

Indeed, if I see you seeing me, then I have in some way constituted you as an *I* like me. At the same time you are *other* and *same*: other in that your gaze is not mine and I cannot fully see as you see; same in that I project onto you my understanding of what it means to be an *I*, gifted with sight. This mutual gazing carries a positive and a negative: positively we can connect as similar to one another as gazing subjects; negatively I dishonor your otherness to the degree I consider you like me. Connecting runs the risk of subsuming the other into the same. When lovers gaze lovingly at one another, they hopefully balance otherness and sameness to be brought toward their mutually best selves. But, what happens when my lover is God? If God is that *without which nothing*, what happens with/in my gaze?

If we sense ourselves as met by God’s counter gaze, one could argue that we have delimited God’s otherness and circumscribed God in the same—projecting human qualities onto the divine, or what philosophy deems ontotheology, the thinking of God in terms of (human) being. Indeed in the Seventh Dwelling 7 2.8, Teresa uses the image of a mirror to describe our seeing ourselves in intimacy with(in) the Divine. It is in just such a mirror image according to so

many theorists that we circumscribe our selves and cut ourselves off from the unconscious and what disturbs meaning and being.

In terms of subjectivity, then, we might perceive its dissolution and reorganization through the incoming of an incomprehensible God in a moment of ecstasy, and/or, we may well see similar phenomenal and transformational dynamics simply by coming. If both orgasm and mystic ecstasy involve the dissolution of identity of both self and other, how can we conclusively distinguish them or subsume one to the other? Perhaps we can say some energy or excess may inflow when subjectivity opens, but how can this be discerned as the workings of a divine power versus the working of the cosmos as embodied in our neurotransmitters?

Hence so many twentieth century French theorists read mystics as avenues to theorize the workings of powers beyond the rational. In the final chapter we will examine that of Luce Irigaray, but, as someone who was deeply formative on Derrida, it is worth mentioning here that Georges Bataille, in his work *Erotism*, reads Teresa along just this ambiguity. For him, however, Teresa testifies not so much to a supernatural deity as to the potential workings of the excess energy of the universe as represented by the sun—giving so excessively as to give way to loss. So too, he argues in his *The Accursed Share*, should we direct our consciousness to the “beyond of thought,” from which an excess of energy flows.²⁰¹ Humans must consider “a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result.”²⁰² Like the sun shining its rays without return or regard, so too is

²⁰¹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I* (New York: New Zone Books, 1991), 191n1. For an excellent reading of Bataille on the mystical, see Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Since she reads Bataille based mostly on his *Atheological Summa of Inner Experience, Guilty, and On Nietzsche* my brief analysis may be read as supplemental to hers, since it is drawn primarily the later *Accursed Share* volumes.

²⁰² Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 23.

the flow of energy through life itself. Briefly, let us foray a little further into Bataille's thought because his theorizing informs Derrida's inflection of trace and prayer as differential vibration.

"On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*," writes Bataille, "energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance."²⁰³ Through his work, Bataille attempts to draw our attention to this play of energy in life that constitutes consciousness and contests it simultaneously. For Bataille,

It is a question of arriving at the moment when consciousness will cease to be a consciousness of *something*; in other words, of becoming conscious of the decisive meaning of an instant in which increase (the acquisition of *something*) will resolve into expenditure; and this will be precisely *self-consciousness*, that is, a consciousness that henceforth has *nothing as its object*.²⁰⁴

Here we see that, for Bataille, directing our awareness to expenditure means becoming aware of nothing—"Nothing but pure interiority," he adds in a note, "which is not a thing."²⁰⁵ The point where particular consciousness meets and opens to expenditure (and hence exposing it to something that is nothing that can be contained within it, or, in other terms, transforming consciousness from a restricted to a general economy) is the point where Bataille tries to bring us.

This comes down in fact, as in the experience of the mystics, to intellectual contemplation, "without shape or form," as against the seductive appearances of "visions," divinities and myths.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 190.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 197n21.

²⁰⁶ Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 190.

But Bataille's point is for us not to enter into a darkness of unknowing the divine, but to an undoing of our secure subjectivity through entry into the flow of energy in the universe that expends itself lavishly without return.

I will begin with a basic fact: 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.²⁰⁷

Thus, when considered from the *particular* perspective of the individual subject, this reality of consciousness and its beyond poses an anxiety-inducing problem. We cannot contain or control all that we would like to in order to feel secure. When considered from the *general* perspective, an awareness arises that cannot be clearly delimited within words, but which may nevertheless be *lived*.

From the particular perspective, however, it means that the subject must irreducibly engage this anguish as the open wound in consciousness that actually makes subjectivity possible. Bataille's hope is of an awareness both of particular consciousness and the beyond of thought. What this entails cannot be known, but it can be experienced and lived. But lived only in relation to *the excess which is life*. "Anguish arises," Bataille says, "when the anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance."²⁰⁸ When one arrives at a point that encompasses both the conditions of possibility and impossibility for subjectivity

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 38-39.

and the excessiveness of lived existence, then anguish becomes a mere movement in a more expansive awareness.

There can be anguish only from a personal, *particular* point of view that is radically opposed to the *general* point of view based on the exuberance of living matter as a whole. Anguish is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is an overflowing by its very nature.²⁰⁹

Living from the general point of view would mean acceding to life as it is, anguish and all. It would mean accepting the excessive flow of energy that is beyond our control.

The general point of view encompassing the overflowing of energy in our awareness allows us to pose political problems differently. For Bataille, this analysis of anxiety

is the crucial analysis that alone can adequately circumscribe the opposition of two political methods: [1] that of fear and the anxious search for a solution, combining the pursuit of freedom with the imperatives that are the most opposed to freedom; and [2] that of freedom of mind, which issues from the global resources of life, a freedom for which, instantly, everything is resolved, *everything is rich*—in other words, everything that is commensurate with the universe.²¹⁰

Bataille's affirmation of excess energy affords him the viewpoint that allows him to expend the anxiety of *needing* a solution to problems.

Not acting from need, however, affords a peculiar power. "I insist on the fact," says Bataille, "that, to freedom of mind, the search for a solution is an exuberance, a

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 39.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

superfluity; this gives it an incomparable force.”²¹¹ This is no collapse into paralysis or nihilism, it is simply a way of affecting the discourse and the way decisions are made. The alternative is posing solutions to problems from a place of too much anxiety and grasping need.

To solve political problems becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety. The meaning of the political proposals to which this book leads, and that I formulate at the end of the volume, is linked to this lucid attitude.²¹²

Bataille’s proposal is thus to direct consciousness to the “point . . . where dry lucidity coincides with a sense of the sacred.” Or, in other words, Bataille proposes as a solution to political problems that we develop an awareness that (1) attends rigorously to the conditions of consciousness’s possibility and impossibility, and (2) opens to being affected in the living moment by the beyond of thought. Consciousness must (not) destroy consciousness.

The fact nevertheless remains that, at points, Bataille’s affirmation of effervescence, like Derrida’s of deconstruction, veers indiscriminately close to affirmations by Christian mystics of God’s gracious and excessive givenness that passes understanding. Whether Bataille likes it or not, it remains possible that the “play of energy on the surface of the globe” actually involves supernatural agents playing with us.

In his final footnote of *The Accursed Share: Vol. I*, Bataille refers to the fact that “the author of this book on economy is situated (by a part of his work) in the line of mystics of all times (but he is nonetheless far removed from all the presuppositions of the various mysticisms,

²¹¹ Ibid., 13.

²¹² Ibid.

to which he opposes only the lucidity of *self-consciousness*.²¹³ Bataille perhaps says too much when he says he is removed from *all* the presuppositions of the various mysticisms. His lucidity of self-consciousness bears striking similarities to Buddhist meditative experiences of nothingness as well as the dazzling noetic darkness of the traditions of mystical theology associated with Dionysius the Areopagite.

Not far indeed is Bataille's living awareness that can become sovereign self-consciousness, aware of the *nothing* that we are, but are nevertheless affected by. Such is the knowledge of non-knowledge, or the "experience of non-experience."²¹⁴ To open possibilities beyond traditions, Bataille sought to distance himself from such notions of God's transcendence as the world's religions would accept. But, his thought comes so close to negative theology and its affirmations of a Gxd given so excessively as to require the destruction of all human conceptual attempts to grasp the otherness of this Gxd as to be possibly mistaken for them. The possibility of indiscretion among these distinctions is one of the many possibilities I see such work as offering for the study of religion.

Bataille's work suggests that religious or mystical experience need only open onto the otherwise-than-thought to open all kinds of possibilities. We should not pretend to settle questions that must necessarily be situated in relation to the movement of life that exceeds them. Whenever we bring religious or mystical experience under the rubrics of our scholarly concepts, such as the constructed and historical category of "mysticism," we have already missed whatever it was we were really trying to study—the felt experience as it was lived, in all of its risk and openness. The point is not so much that religion cannot be studied (brought into conceptual

²¹³ Ibid., 197 n22.

²¹⁴ On this, see Kevin Hart's "'The Experience of Nonexperience'" in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Kessler and Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 188-206.

consciousness) as it should always also be brought into relation with what exceeds our scholarly efforts to understand and appropriate.

If it is truly studying religion, then it must always be taking account of what cannot be accounted for. Hence, it must always rupture to what is other. This openness would also involve the possibility of the scholar of religion, in like manner to Bataille, becoming affected by her subject matter—“the ebullition I consider, which animates the globe, is also *my* ebullition.”²¹⁵ The study of religion will itself be a bit “religious.” The point will be to stay in relation to the unknowable and the impossible—otherwise one is not studying religion.

Such an opening to studying the other of consciousness will mean that “religion” risks being conflated with literature, poetry, art, and limit experiences such as death, trauma, and loss, which seems actually quite fitting for a great many thinkers, such as Ginsberg and Bataille. Thus, not only will this mean that it is possible to interpret Teresa according to eroticism (as Bataille has done), but also that it is possible to interpret Bataille according to mysticism. When he affirms the excess flow of energy, who can deny that he is not affirming the gracious exuberance of God by another name? Thus, one could labor endlessly on the aporia of the perhaps infinitesimal difference between these two—Sartre: “Bataille is a new mystic”; Derrida: “Bataille above all is not a new mystic.”²¹⁶

Religious studies should then be marked by (1) a rigorous analysis that goes to the limits, and (2) an openness to be affected by the beyond-limit. Or, as scholars we should question not only the subject of study but the human subject—ourselves—as well. Which is just the process that Derrida advocates as prayer.

²¹⁵ Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 10.

²¹⁶ See “A New Mystic” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critical Essays*. (Seagull Books, 2010). And “A Hegelianism Without Reserve” in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Toward a conclusion, then, remember that the mystic hope of the apophatic holds that a movement of saying and unsaying will open us to the Wholly Other. Derrida's critique of the potential "metaphysics of presence" in such a movement is that it represses the possibility that arrival at its ultimate goal (God) is not assured. It is always possible that our address to God may miss or become perverted. In prayer, we cannot tell *for sure* (for how else can faith be faith?) whether we are talking to God, to ourselves, or to some other. Structurally, every address opens to other possible unforeseen and unforeseeable addressees and thus involves risk. For this reason, Derrida makes a distinction between the particular address to a specified addressee in praise and the universal address to the other in prayer. Thus, particular faith, like Christianity, always entails a universal faith that is a structural component of every performative speech act.

"From the moment I open my mouth," Derrida writes, "I have already promised; or rather, and sooner, the promise has seized the *I* which promises to speak to the other."²¹⁷ Derrida calls this structure of the promise "the messianic" and differentiates it from every concrete messianism (although it has no existence apart from particularities, and hence is not tantamount to the caricature of William James's common core thesis of mysticism). "To reject this doubtless subtle distinction, inadmissible for Dionysius and perhaps for a Christian in general," Derrida writes, "is to deny the essential quality of prayer to every invocation that is not Christian,"²¹⁸ which would have negative political consequences.

According to Derrida, both apophaticism and deconstruction "by a more or less tenable analogy" exhibit the same "family resemblance" of traits seen "in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination, endlessly multiplying the defenses and the apophatic warnings: this, which is called X . . . 'is' neither this

²¹⁷ Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 84.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

nor that.”²¹⁹ Differing from trace, negative theology “at least claims to not be assimilable to a technique that is subject to simulation or parody, to mechanical repetition,” Derrida argues.²²⁰ How can negative theology hope to protect itself from simulation, repetition, or parody? “It would escape from this by means of the *prayer* that precedes apophatic utterances,”²²¹ By invoking the guidance of God, Christian negative theology thereby secures its destination from the start. “The promise of that presence given to intuition or vision,” makes Derrida uneasy.²²² According to Derrida, negative theology says too much when it promises beyond any other possibility that prayer guides us to God’s presence.

In this work of mystical theology, Dionysius unleashes some of his most radical apophaticism, issuing denials of possible attributions to God. Yet, according to Derrida, “an experience must yet guide the apophasis toward excellence, not allow it to say just anything, and prevent it from manipulating its negations like empty and purely mechanical phrases.”²²³ An experience must undergird, guide, and secure the destination of Dionysius’ negativity. “This experience,” Derrida writes, “is that of prayer.”²²⁴

Derrida thus distinguishes between *prayer* as an address to the “other,” and *praise* as speaking to/of God. Derrida argues that Dionysius can un-God his God by speaking of a “God beyond being” because contained within such a statement is the prior affirmation of God as super-essential deity. “Mystical Theology” must begin with a prayer to the Christian God.

Here prayer is not a preamble, an accessory mode of access. It constitutes an essential moment, it adjusts discursive asceticism, the passage through the desert of discourse,

²¹⁹ Ibid., 74.

²²⁰ Ibid., 75.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other. Vol. 2.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 148.

²²³ Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 110.

²²⁴ Ibid., 110.

the apparent referential vacuity which will only avoid deliria and prattling, by addressing itself from the start to the other, to you. But to you as “hyperessential and more than divine Trinity.”²²⁵

Thus, Derrida goes on to “distinguish at least two traits in the experiences and in the so manifold determinations of what one calls prayer.”²²⁶ First, “in every prayer there must be an address to the other as other.”²²⁷ This form of praying means “asking, supplicating, searching out . . . for the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, and be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call, and even cause of prayer.”²²⁸ This first form of prayer is simply opening to the other. “This first trait,” Derrida writes, “thus characterizes a discourse (an act of language even if prayer is silent) which, as such, is not predicative, theoretical (*theological*), or constative.” From this, he distinguishes Dionysius’ form of prayer: “the encomium or the celebration (*hymnein*).”²²⁹

Rather than speaking purely *to* the other, the encomium, according to Derrida, speaks *of* its addressee. Pure prayer merely opens in speaking to the other, maybe God, maybe any other; praise goes further in predicating at least something of the other, thereby delimiting or demarcating the other in some way, even if in a hyper-way. Between these two, Derrida says,

I will hold to one distinction: prayer in itself, one may say, implies nothing other than the supplicating address to the other, perhaps beyond all supplication and giving, to give the promise of His presence as other, and finally the transcendence of His otherness itself, even without any other determination; the encomium, although it is not a simple attributive speech, nevertheless preserves an irreducible relationship to the attribution.²³⁰

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., 110-111.

²³⁰ Ibid., 111.

Even if the encomium speaks beyond ordinary truth, “but rather a hypertruth that is ruled by a hyperessentiality, in this it does not merge with the movement of prayer itself, which does not speak *of*, but *to*.”²³¹ Diverging at the point of attribution, the encomium says more than prayer.

Would or should Christians deny this? “How can one deny,” Derrida asks, that the encomium qualifies God and *determines* prayer, *determines* the other, Him to whom it addresses itself, refers, invoking Him even as the source of prayer? How can one deny that, in this movement of determination (which is no longer the pure address of the prayer to the other), the appointment of the *trinitary* and hyperessential God distinguishes Dionysius’ *Christian* prayer from all other prayer?²³²

What is at stake for Christians and Derrida in distinguishing between prayer and praise?

Christians want to be able to praise God. Derrida, however, seeks to protect the distinction not in order to deny prayer to Christians, but to enable it for everyone.

Derrida wants to distinguish prayer as an opening to the other that can be engaged in by anyone, regardless of belief or creed. Prayer, as pure opening to the other, must be distinguished from praise of a particular Christian God. Rejecting this distinction denies prayer to non-Christians. Derrida is asserting an essential quality of prayer—openness to the other—that cannot be claimed solely by any one faith.

Derrida argues, then, that the experience of prayer cannot be separated from the experience of impossibility associated with the trace. Negative theologies thus differ from Derrida’s trace by dint of their prior predication of an ultimate presence of God. By this prior predication of presence, negative theologies promise to protect from the effects of the trace. Derrida thus deems negative theologies suspect *to the degree* that they seek to distance the

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

experience of prayer from the experience of trace. “Naturally, the prayer, invocation, and apostrophe can also be mimicked, and even give way, as if despite themselves, to repetitive technique,” Derrida writes.²³³ Prayer can be parodied or parroted, thus it is ever open to other possible unforeseeable contexts and interpretations. This risk is inevitable.

“But if the risk is inevitable,” Derrida further argues, “the accusation it incurs need not be limited to the apophatic moment of negative theology. It may be extended to all language, and even to all manifestation in general.”²³⁴ Prayer, then, is simply attending to the play of *différance*. Perhaps *différance* makes prayer and theology possible. According to Derrida, the multiple directions and possible addressees of the text make the text possible; they are part of textuality (and reality) itself.

“There is a text,” Derrida notes, “because of this repetition.”²³⁵ Hence, the possibility of difference and deferral inherent in the mark or a specific prayer are not to be lamented as loss. Rather, according to Derrida,

Perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy or the—at least apparent—multiplicity of addresses, initiation. If there were a purely pure experience of prayer, would one need religion and affirmative or negative theologies? Would one need a supplement of prayer? But if there were no supplement, if quotation did not bend prayer, if prayer did not bend, if it did not submit to writing . . . [w]ould a theology be possible?²³⁶

In other words, Derrida argues, prayer is a universal structure.

²³³ Ibid., 75.

²³⁴ Ibid., 75.

²³⁵ Ibid., 117.

²³⁶ Ibid., 131.

And such prayer would encompass its own death. “If the possibility of my disappearance in general must somehow be experienced in order for a relationship with presence in general to be instituted,” Derrida argues,

we can no longer say that the experience of the possibility of my absolute disappearance (my death) affects me, occurs to an *I am*, and modifies a subject. The *I am*, being experienced only as an *I am present*, itself presupposes the relationship with presence in general, with being as presence. The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is thus originally a relation with its own possible disappearance. Therefore, *I am* originally means *I am mortal*. *I am immortal* is an impossible proposition. We can go further: as a linguistic statement “I am he who am” is the admission of a mortal. The move which leads from the *I am* to the determination of my being as *res cogitans* (thus, as an immortality) is a move by which the origin of presence and ideality is concealed in the very presence and ideality it makes possible.²³⁷

With the ability to say, “I am,” comes the inability to secure full presence and fend off finitude. “I am” means “I follow” I know not what—whether we follow simply the evolutionary processes of the universe begun at the Big Bang, or the gift of a Creator crying “Let there be light!” my subjectivity follows the other. Even the infinite God who proclaims “I am that I am,” it seems, can come to language and the world only through finitude. Iterability—the possibility of difference and differal—makes consciousness possible at the same time that it makes its constitution as self-presence impossible.

Derrida’s prayer then involves particular distinctions, but it also involves the universal structure of openness to the other. “On the one hand,” Derrida says,

²³⁷ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, 54–55.

a prayer has to be a mixture of something that is absolutely singular and secret—idiomatic, untranslatable—and, on the other hand, a ritual that involves the body in coded gestures and that uses a common, intelligible language. That is the way I pray. And I pray all the time, even now. But there is a problem. My way of praying, if I pray, has more than one edge at the same time.²³⁸

Every prayer has a particular context, yet, as concepts combine with context, things necessarily get left out. Attending to what is excluded or other is the universal part of Derrida's prayer. The edge of suspicion, of disruption, of deconstruction is what may get missed in too sure a prayer of praise. For Derrida, his personal prayer has both simple attribution and the experience of deconstruction.

There is something very childish here, and when one prays one is always a child. If I gather images from my childhood, I find images of God as a Father—a sever, just Father with a beard—and also, at the same time, images of a Mother who thinks I am innocent, who is ready to forgive me. . . . There is another layer, of course, which involves my culture, my philosophical experience, my experience of a critique of religion that goes from Feuerbach to Nietzsche. This is the experience of a nonbeliever, someone who is constantly suspicious of the child, someone who asks, “To whom am I praying? Whom am I addressing? Who is God?” In this layer . . . I find a way of meditating about the who that is praying and the who that is receiving the prayer. I know that this appears negative, but it isn't; it is a way of thinking when praying that does not simply negate prayer.²³⁹

²³⁸ Jacques Derrida in “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Sherwood & Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005): 30.

²³⁹ Derrida, “Epoché and Faith,” 30.

Prayer thus involves the deconstruction of self and of reality. “The skeptical person is part of the faithful person,” Derrida says.²⁴⁰ Like a discipline of religious studies that questions the subject of study and the subject doing the studying, the practice of deconstructive prayer will attend to a dual suspicion: To whom or what am I praying? And, who is the “I” doing the praying?

Just opening an address in general, we open to God or no matter whom. “Wherever in logic there is an absolute presupposition, we can always call this God,” Derrida says in an interview. When I open an address to speak, even in “speaking” to myself by coming to awareness of even my own awareness, I am addressing myself to possibly unknown others. Thus, Derrida continues,

God would be the name of this absolutely unknown indeterminate addressee. The possibility of the address is implied not only in any speech act, but implied in any left trace, left not only by human beings but by any living being. When someone leaves a trace—an animal leaves a trace—not mastering the destination of the trace, then these unknown addressees might be called God. That’s the original religion so to speak, which does not mean that this genesis of religion reduces religion to nothing, but that’s the condition for a relation to what I call God, in all these contexts.²⁴¹

We will thus be suspicious of the how we name whatever we call God and how we name our “selves.” Moreover, we will also strive to open our awareness to unknown others, such as nonhuman animals and the functioning of the material universe. We will question God or any Ultimate or Real we perceive or conceive, even as we question ourselves, and our modes of perceiving and conceiving.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

²⁴¹ Caputo and Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism*, 35.

Derrida said those last words about any left trace—even animal traces—opening the question of a possible address to God in a conference on Augustine, which gives us reason here in conclusion to recall how Augustine famously became a mystery to himself, and we will do this in order to return to how Ginsberg’s inheritance of all these mysterious vibrations exemplifies the deconstructive idea of prayer as openness.

“I have become a question to myself,” Augustine famously writes in *Confessions* just after describing his temptation to love the rhythm of hymns more than the words themselves—the embodied feeling more than the mental meaning. Augustine views this ability to be moved by music as a threat because it tempts him into his lower being, causing him to lose his sense of who he is. “I questioned my own sense of reality,” Allen Ginsberg similarly says in describing his altered state of consciousness he experienced while reading William Blake. “And I couldn’t figure out,” he continues, “what the significance of the illuminative experience was.” He wondered “whether it was a kind of traditional religious experience that you might find within (William) James’s book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where there is a sudden sense of vastness and ancientness and respect and devotional awareness or sacredness to the whole universe, or whether this was a byproduct of some lack-love longing and a projection of the world of my own feelings, or some nutty breakthrough.”²⁴² As we have seen, repression of such embodied rhythms has had a very long run in Western history.

Overwhelmingly, “male” reason has been valued over and above “feminine” emotion, with the former associated with the transcendent and immaterial and the latter with the immanent and worldly. The Romantics, like Blake, reacted to this, and more recent thinkers, like the Christian theologian Jean-Luc Marion in his “The Privilege of Unknowing” have also sought to

²⁴² Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 473.

return to rhythmic embodied questioning or embodiment of the question in order to interpret it anew as a resource rather than a threat. “Such avoidance of definition and concept,” argues Thomas A. Carlson of Marion’s effort to valorize unknowing at the heart of the human, “seems to depend nonetheless on a fundamental gesture of exclusion, directed first at the animal, and then . . . at all other nonhuman and nondivine beings—which are termed the ‘world.’”²⁴³ What then, this chapter has asked, would it mean to attend otherwise to the dichotomies of body and mind? Self and other? The more or less human—God or animal?

If we acknowledged their intimate interconnections, what might such an integrated consciousness feel like? “Embarrassing, probably,” says Ginsberg in response to a question about why the full embodied effects of chant, such as of Gregorian chant, have been so resisted in Christianity from Augustine to today. In an interview entitled, “Gnostic Consciousness,” he says people resist such vibratory embodiment beyond intellection

because it’s a whole area of feeling of communal family ritual feeling, which is feared.

And the reason it’s feared is because it’s a breakthrough onto a new consciousness which is not like the social consciousness inculcated by television or radio or newspapers or politics, it’s another animal mammal consciousness that we share, the compassionate consciousness of the mind and the heart that we share with the bald eagles and the blue whales. And since we keep killing all the whales and the bald eagles it wouldn’t be appropriate to voice that consciousness—I mean it would be revolutionary to voice that consciousness, to articulate that consciousness and welcome it to surface front-brain awareness.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Thomas A Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude & Creation of the Human* (Chicago, Ill., 2008), 123.

²⁴⁴ Ginsburg, *Allen Verbatim*, 34.

Welcoming such revolutionary communal consciousness, which we perhaps share with nonhuman animals and the “world,” to fuller awareness—especially through prayer as openness which may involve “mystical visions and cosmic vibrations”—remains an ongoing project whose completion is still coming.

When it comes to the openness of vulnerability, Christian mystics share the same bed as Ginsberg and others outside of orthodoxy. “The meaning of ‘being Christian,’” argues Kevin Hart, “is always ‘being *more* Christian’; there can be no pauses in a life structured by *kenosis* and *epektasis*.”²⁴⁵ If beliefs and practices lead ultimately to a structural opening to what may be more or other, then that structural openness becomes indiscrete—in some sense, it doesn’t matter what beliefs and practices contextualize that openness because the openness can help us move more toward interconnection, thus providing resources for promoting justice and more harmonious living. Or, rather, it is only the contextualization of this openness that matters, but we nevertheless, despite or because of innumerable differences, can meet in the openness of vulnerability to be affected by what may come.

²⁴⁵ Kevin Hart, “Of Love and How,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 723.

Chapter 3

Dying

Yearning for More from Life

It's not exactly true to say it's gone completely out of existence, because the Black tradition keeps the chant going, in the sense that the body chant is still there in jazz and in spirituals, up to the political use of it in "We Shall Overcome"—there still are remnants of Afric chanting and dancing and drumming.

—Allen Ginsberg, "Gnostic Consciousness"

The statement "know thyself" has been taken more mystically from the statement "thou hast seen thy brother, thou hast seen thy God." . . . Such an experience cannot become dogma—it has to remain experiential all the way. It is a probing process trying to find the opening into another.

And it requires exposure, sustained exposure.

—Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*

"I begin," says Howard Thurman in his lecture entitled, "America in Search of a Soul," "with the simple fact that America, however we may define it for ourselves, is an expression of one creative process coming into being more and more as its inner mystery, which is inherent in Life, begins to unfold as process, as laws, as constitutions."¹ For Thurman, the scholar, preacher and mystic who was a spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. and to many of the leaders of the civil rights movement, the formation of the United States, as an all too violent coming together of many peoples, races, and creeds, revolved around

the opportunity to experience community, an inner sense of relatedness defined by the external boundaries within which life is being lived. It was as if the Creator of existence wanted to discover whether or not a certain ideal could be realized in time and space, in anticipation of a time when time and space would be reduced to zero; when the whole planet would be as one little neighborhood in one little town.²

¹ Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 266.

² Ibid, 268.

“This meant,” says Thurman, “that somewhere on the planet there would be a primary unit of human beings being tutored in the graces of communal relatedness, crossing lines of race, of color, or creed, or background, of enforced or restricted neighborhoods.”³ This crossing of lines of time, and space, and race in America for Howard Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Sojourner Truth involves a “weak force” which is carried in their words and that extends beyond the here and now in hope, while also seeking to transform the fleshly suffering of the present moment. The joining rhythm of this spacing between, on the one hand, the here and now, and on the other, of what is to come or to come back beats through the spirituals of African American slaves and what they sing of death and life. The boundaries between life and death, proclaim the spirituals, are ever shifting and ever opening onto new horizons of hope.

We examine Thurman, Hughes, and Truth in this chapter in part because “scholars have neglected,” as Alton Pollard argues, “the mystical flowering of the African Diaspora.”⁴ As a working definition of mysticism, Pollard helpfully offers the following: “*Mysticism is a generic term for intimate discourse and practices that speak to what it means to be human in relationship to the transcendent and the mundane.*”⁵ Along these lines, this chapter seeks to correct the neglect of African American mysticisms through comparing those of Howard Thurman and Langston Hughes, the former more exoteric and transcendent focused, the latter more esoteric and mundane. For Thurman, the mystery of life involves a mystical relation with the transcendent as found in the spirituals, whereas for Hughes it roots us more in the earthiness of the blues. Both, however, suggest that the study of Africana mystics requires an emphasis on embodiment.

³ Ibid, 268.

⁴ Alton Pollard, “African American Mysticism,” in *African American Religious Cultures*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn, Stephen C. Finley, and Torin Alexander, vol. Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4, emphasis in original.

Embodied and visceral, yet preceding and exceeding bodily limitation, a mystery exists between Thurman's spirituals and Hughes's blues that reveals a both/and, neither/nor, a/theistic aspect to much African American religious experience. Moreover, with an additional comparison of Donna Haraway's discussion of Sojourner Truth as a trickster figure who embodies the apophatic, our analysis of embodiment in African American religion will expand not only beyond the boundaries of life and death, but also beyond those between human and animal, organism and machine, material and immaterial.

In putting the mystical in relation to the poet Langston Hughes, I do not mean that he deemed himself to have experienced the salvific power of the Christian God, or any God, per say. Rather, I simultaneously seek, on the one hand, to extend the term beyond its usual evocations of a sense of a presence of something transcendent in order to show its usefulness for understanding mundane material as well, and, on the other hand, to problematize any ultimately neat or final distinctions between the transcendent and the immanent. As with any such duality, the very thought of one activates the other. What is interesting for our purposes is the way the interplay between mystical and mundane may generate a "more" regardless of any final theistic or atheistic import.

By invoking the more here I mean not just to conjure the ghost of William James but also to place us in the context of African American religion according to Anthony B. Pinn, who argues that "black religion at its core is the quest for complex subjectivity, a desire or feeling for more life meaning." Explaining religion as a response to identity crisis, Pinn writes, "in some ways, this may be described as a form of mystical experience, a type of transforming experience that speaks to a deeper reality, guided perhaps by a form of esoteric knowledge," but the most

important defining feature is “this yearning for complex subjectivity.”⁶ Maybe involving mystical experience and esoteric knowledge, African American religiosity certainly yearns for more.

I first began reading Thurman and Hughes as supplements for each other nearly twenty years ago when I was doing youth ministry in that Episcopal Church mentioned in my introduction. Concerned about how so many congregants could take comfort in a Heavenly salvation yet remain apolitical and unconcerned about the suffering of the oppressed, I worried about how an emphasis on a transcendent hereafter anesthetized efforts at transformation in the here and now. Thus, I listened when James Cone said, “If whites were really serious about their radicalism in regard to the black revolution and its theological implications in America, they would keep silent and take instructions from blacks.”⁷ One has only to read the essays at the end of the twentieth anniversary edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, however, to know that Cone himself gains from listening to others. I thus began cultivating the discipline, which still informs my scholarship today, of listening for and to others: listening *for* others means striving to hear what or who may have been missed or marginalized, while listening *to* others means heeding the power of voices from the margins to transform prior misconceptions. As much as possible, then, I would read Thurman to the youth, but also supplement his Christian theology with Hughes and others apart from theism.

The yearning for complex subjectivity as it gets embodied in the spirituals and the blues, I will show, can also be subject to the emergent complexity of the cosmos. Thus, with an emphasis on embodiment comes the importance of relations of time and space. In this, we also

⁶ Anthony B Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 173.

⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 62.

follow Pinn in examining “p(l)ace” as “the setting of parameters and boundaries of focus around time and space so as to mark off opportunities to wrestle with fundamental questions of life.”⁸ What I hope to suggest, however, is that the parameters of the possible may shift along with our categories for it. Realizing that the possibility of error is as common to all humans as our fundamental dignity, we can traverse complex questions through the common ground of admitting our shared ignorance. Even the most ardent atheists and fervent fideists may admit that mystery matters. As Pinn argues, the quest for complex subjectivity is ongoing. Thus, the mystery, which may be interpreted as mystical or mundane, may always be more than our attempts to circumscribe it—or ourselves.

Mystical Mystery: Thurman’s Pulse of Infinite Worth

“When I identify with a man,” Howard Thurman says in his book *The Luminous Darkness*, “I become one with him and in him I see myself.”⁹ For Thurman, seeing oneself in another involves recognizing “*the equality of infinite worth*” as “the truest experience of myself.”¹⁰ Thus, “the statement ‘know thyself,’” Thurman says of the ancient aphorism, “has been taken more mystically from the statement ‘thou has seen thy brother, thou hast seen thy God.’”¹¹ We may see similar wisdom contained in the Hermetic Nag Hammadi text, *Discourse on the 8th and the 9th*, which also records a mystical vision seen with/in another: “Father Trismegistus! What shall I say? We have received this light. And I myself see this same vision in you ‘I see myself!’” (NHC VI 59, 24-29 and 60, 31-61, 1). Whereas the ancient Egyptian insight may be interpreted to involve ascent out of messy materiality, Thurman inflects his

⁸ Anthony B Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

⁹ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1965), 110.

¹⁰ Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, 270. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 111.

experience of infinite worth, which he sees as the core of the religious impulse, with an enlivening sense of embodiment that entails engagement with social justice. Hermetic mystical vision climaxes in silence, but Thurman's mystical experience bodies forth in preaching, singing, and social action.

We may give Thurman's mystical vision flesh through listening to what he has to say in his 1947 essay, "The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death." Thurman delivered it as Harvard Divinity School's prestigious Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man, having been preceded in this honor by the likes of William James, Josiah Royce, and Alfred North Whitehead. Though he had for a long time been reticent to speak on African American practices before white audiences lest he encourage the notion that "black scholars were incapable of reflecting creatively on any matters other than those that bore directly on their own struggle," Thurman chose to make an exception in this case because he hoped that by sharing the survival strategies and creative thinking of the slaves he might "deliver those in another kind of bondage into a new freedom."¹²

"Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!" Thurman quotes from a spiritual. *"Oh Freedom, I love thee! And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, And go home to my Lord and be free."* With this Thurman says it is "obvious indeed . . . that death is not regarded as life's worst offering. There are some things in life that are worse than death."¹³ What the spirituals say about death is that it is neither ultimately definitive nor final. The slaves' songs testify to "the sense of alternative in human experience, upon which, in the last analysis, all notions of freedom finally rest," Thurman writes.¹⁴ While acknowledging death's inevitability, the spirituals also reduce death to a moment in time from the perspective of an immortal soul, thus bringing it under a

¹² Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

measure of control and choice, at least as regards how one spiritually participates in it. “The significant revelation,” says Thurman, “is in the fact that death, as an event, is spatial, time encompassed, if not actually time bound, and therefore partakes of the character of the episodic.”¹⁵ In their power to attain a more ascendant perspective of detachment in regards to death through a view of the afterlife, humans, Thurman argues, demote death to “an experience *in* life.” Thurman explains, “the logic here is that man is both a space binder and a time binder.”¹⁶ Slaves transcended death and their daily suffering through the theology carried in their songs. Their lives were infinitely more than bodily existence and death.

Faced with harsh realities, the slaves found strategies of spirit to survive, even in the face of suffering and death. Contrary to the sanitized social space that largely removes sickness and death from sight with hospitals and mortuaries, the slaves’ sense of space was entwined with death. For us moderns, “our sense of personal loss may be great but our primary relationship with death under normal circumstances tends to be impersonal and detached,” says Thurman. “This was not,” he says, “the situation with the creators of the Spirituals.”¹⁷ Through all the processes of dying and death, the body remained in the homes of the slaves and its passing was experienced by all those who “kept watch” with the sick and the dead. As Thurman describes:

the “death rattle” in the throat, the spasm of tense vibration in the body as the struggle for air increased in intensity, the sheer physical panic sometimes manifest—all these were a familiar part of the commonplace pattern of daily experience. Out of a full, rich knowledge of fact such a song as this was born: *I want to die easy when I die. I want to die easy when I die. Shout salvation as I fly. I want to die easy when I die.*¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Rather than resignation, this hope of salvation when faced intimately with death gave the slaves a reinvigorated power for living. Far from paralyzing action, singing of salvation “gave the mind a new dimension of resourcefulness.” “I had a college classmate,” continues Thurman,

who cleared his throat just before responding to the question of his teacher. The clearing of the throat broke the impasse between his mind and his immediate environment so that he could have a sense of ascendancy in his situation. It was in some such fashion as this that these religious songs functioned. (Of course, they did much more than this.) Once the impasse was broken, many things became possible to them. They could make their religion vehicular in terms of the particular urgencies of the moment. ‘Steal away to Jesus’ became an important call to those who had ears to hear.¹⁹

Like the spacing of his friend’s throat clearing, so clearly connected to the throat rattle of dying, the rhythms of the spirituals punctuated the lives of the slaves providing a sense of ascendancy that put them, if ever so fleetingly, on a heavenly high ground above the present soil of suffering.

“For these early singers,” says Thurman, “Heaven was a place—it was not merely an idea in the mind.”²⁰ “This must be held in mind,” he continues, “constantly. The thinking about it is spatial.” Hence the words of a spiritual: “*In bright mansions above, In bright mansions above, Lord, I want to live up yonder; In bright mansions above.*” “Such an aspiration,” says Thurman, “was in sharp contrast to the dimly lighted cabins with which they were familiar.”²¹ In the spirituals, Thurman says,

The idea at the core of the literal truth in the concept of heaven is this—life is totally right, structurally dependable, good essentially as contrasted with the moral concepts of good and evil. . . . The profoundest desires of man are of God, and therefore they cannot be

¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁰ Ibid., 75.

²¹ Ibid.

denied ultimately. . . . The human spirit participates in both past and future in what it regards as the *present* but it is independent of both. . . . And this is the miracle of [these slave singers'] achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!* . . . To them this quality of life was insistent fact because of that which deep within them, they discovered of God, and his far-flung purposes. God was not through with them. And He was not, nor could He be, exhausted by any single experience or any series of experiences. . . . Men in all ages and climes, slave or free, trained or untutored, who have sensed the same values, are their fellow-pilgrims who journey together with them in increasing self-realization in the quest for the city that hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God.²²

With such a motion and call to all to be fellow pilgrims journeying toward an ever greater realization of the infinite worth of life, Thurman reconstitutes embodiment more expansively than an objectifiable thing. “They made a worthless life,” he says, “a mere thing, a body, *worth living!*”

We might better understand Thurman’s thoughts on embodiment by drawing on Edmund Husserl’s distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, “physical body” and “lived body,” or body and flesh.²³ The contemporary French phenomenologist and Christian theologian Jean-Luc Marion further develops this distinction by arguing, contra the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body, that “flesh . . . gives the *ego* itself.”²⁴ As Marion’s translator Robyn Horner notes: “What individualizes is not thought or bodily extension but the tension between them that is played out

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ For more, see Donn Welton, *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

²⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 100.

in flesh.”²⁵ A body, then, is that which can become objectified and viewed as “a mere thing,” as Thurman says, whereas flesh is that which feels and is capable of suffering. Before any object in the world, I am given to myself in feeling myself through touch and pain. “It is no accident,” Thurman wrote elsewhere, “that the New Testament Greek word for slave is *soma*, which means body, a thing.”²⁶ As opposed to such an idea of subjectivity aligned with body, objectification, thing-ness, and slavery, then, Thurman preaches an idea of self experienced as flesh that precedes and exceeds time-space bounded bodies.

When faced with life’s suffering and inherent inequality, Thurman feels “that I am stripped to what seems to me to be the literal essence of my own pulse beat in which the sense of equality is grounded—that is the sense of my own self . . . My own self as distinguished from your self. My own self, of infinite worth and significance. This may be, perhaps, the only authentic equality that there is.”²⁷ This sense of “my own self” as an equality of infinite worth involves a differentiation from others and owning of one’s value while also entailing the value of “your own self” and the infinite worth of others.

In the struggle to affirm one’s own worth, however, we all too easily ignore or marginalize the worth of others, yet Thurman’s “equality of infinite worth” demands intersubjective recognition. Hence Thurman’s most enduring metaphor of “those whose backs are against the wall” from his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. “The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What

²⁵ Ibid., xvii.

²⁶ Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, 281. Though the Christian New Testament often uses the Greek word *sarx* to refer to the body, *soma* also appears for body and slave as Thurman notes.

²⁷ Ibid., 269–70.

does our religion say to them?” Thurman asks as his guiding question.²⁸ He answers by saying that the God of Jesus identifies with those who suffer and transforms death into life.

Though Thurman’s language in terms of gender is clearly outdated, his call to attend to the poor, the disinherited, and the dispossessed, a disproportionate amount of whom are indeed women, still resonates today. And his theology of flesh, with flesh as that which feels and is capable of suffering, carries to all who suffer, crossing race, class, and gender barriers, and, even species barriers—for nonhuman animals clearly are capable of great suffering as well. To all, Thurman’s infinite worth speaks of the transcendence of suffering and death. Thurman’s theistic vision, then, is embodied as the universal motion of hope in a hereafter that turns suffering to joy and death to life. For Langston Hughes, to whom we now turn, Thurman’s heavenly hope beyond death was, however true, nevertheless insufficient to honor all of life’s mysteries.

Mundane Mystery: Hughes’s Beat of the Earth

Though Langston Hughes loved the spirituals and wove their rhythms into his poetry and prose, he felt more drawn to the blues because they honored the earthiness of life and love and pain and sorrow in a way that the spirituals lacked. “There’s great beauty in the mysticism of much religious writing,” said Hughes once in an interview, “and great help there, but I also think that we live in a world . . . of solid earth and vegetables and a need for jobs . . . and housing.”²⁹ For Hughes, the spirituals need the blues.

As to his own personal belief, whether theistic or actually atheistic, Hughes kept it secret. In his poem titled, “Personal,” Hughes writes:

In an envelope marked:

²⁸ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1976), 13.

²⁹ James A. Emanuel, “The Christ and the Killers,” in *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Henry L. Gates and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 175.

Personal

God addressed me a letter.

In an envelope marked:

Personal

I have given my answer.

Recent scholars have remarked that Hughes's ultimate personal secret could well have been homosexuality. Such a secret definitely could be a reason Hughes never felt fully comfortable singing the spirituals, which show a curious lack of sexuality, as a believer, despite his sympathy for their sentiments.³⁰ "I was saved from sin," Hughes writes in his autobiography, "when I was going on thirteen . . . But not really saved."³¹

At a big church tent revival, Hughes was taken by his Aunt Reed and "placed on the mourner's bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus."³² It seems Hughes expected his conversion experience to be palpable and embodied.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus Came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her.³³

Then, as the "preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon," and "the whole building rocked with prayer and song," Hughes "kept waiting to *see* Jesus."³⁴ Hughes had expected Jesus to show up, but he didn't come.

³⁰ See John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar, *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes* (University of Missouri Press, 2007). And, Arthur C. Jones, "Black Spirituals, Physical Sensuality, and Sexuality: Notes on a Neglected Field of Inquiry," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony B Pinn (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

³¹ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 18.

³² Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

He remained on the bench even after all the other young “sinners” had gone onto a platform to be saved. Then came a horrible moment of peer-pressure with the whole church calling him by name, “Langston, why don’t you come? Why don’t you come and be saved?” “I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long,” Hughes writes, “so I got up.”³⁵ As a mature writer, Hughes transmutes his failed conversion experience from youth into the powerful short story, “Big Meeting” that displays intimate knowledge of the enlightening power of camp meeting spirituality, while at the same time identifying with those left out in the dark.

The narrator of “Big Meeting” is a black, teenage boy sitting outside a nighttime tent meeting looking in.³⁶ Eventually two white people pull up in a car to watch as well. Inside the tent, the community of believers passionately performs a reenactment of the crucifixion such that Jesus becomes identified with those under the tent, particularly in their suffering and pain. At the climax of the story, in a swell of cries of joy and pain from the crowd, the preacher proclaims, “*they lynched Him on the cross.*”

“In song I heard my mother’s voice cry:” says the narrator, “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?*” . . .

The answer, of course, is that, yes, they were there, because they just saw it happen in front of them through communal, embodied performance. The story continues:

“Let’s go,” said the white woman in the car behind us. “This is too much for me!” They started the motor and drove noisily away in a swirl of dust.

“Don’t go,” I cried from where I was sitting at the root of the tree. “Don’t go,” I shouted, jumping up. “They’re about to call for sinners to come to the mourners’ bench. Don’t go!”

But their car was already out of earshot.

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Langston Hughes Reader* (New York: Braziller, 1958), 66–76.

And the story ends with the narrator saying, “I didn’t realize I was crying until I tasted my tears in my mouth.”

Hughes leaves us tasting tears while outside the tent yet hoping to participate in the transformative motion of liberation from oppression and in the reconciliation of the races. Though he could not share Thurman’s hope in a transcendent hereafter, Hughes’s short story shows he did have his own kind of embodied hope that cried out in the dark, and that through this shout could lift the body and soul.

Hughes again encodes his own failed conversion experience in a poem he calls “Mystery.” Except, here the teenager is a girl. The first stanza sets up his ironic religious vision:

When a chile gets to be thirteen
 And ain’t seen Christ yet,
 She needs to set on de moaner’s bench
 Night and day.

Then, after interspersing verses from the spirituals with his poetic verse, Hughes ends with a stanza that we might almost see as his own personal proclamation:

The mystery
and the darkness
and the song
and me.

There is a mystery to life, Hughes intones, in the meaningless suffering and the unspeakable joy of knowing the flesh of another. There is a darkness in the skin of his people and in the hearts of those who lynch them. There is a song that cries in despair. And in hope. And there is perhaps the greatest mystery of all—*me*, in the midst of all of this. In the midst of mystery, the voice

embodied in this poem speaks of being caught up in all that is—the joy and the pain—and not overcome. There is something there, something more, something that only the wail of a blues note held long can capture. Longing for more in face of life’s mystery, it cannot be held for long. It can only cry—in mystery.

Hughes does not disdain the heavenly hope, he just worries it leaves important realities of life out in the dark. “Working all day all their lives for white folks, they *had* to believe there was a ‘Hallaluian Side,’” Hughes writes in his short story.³⁷ And yet there is also an earthiness unilluminated by the light of the spirituals. The blues speak of sex, and death, and despair more truly than any Jesus song Hughes heard howled in the tent meetings of his youth. Giving voice to the enfleshed feeling of sorrow and taste of tears in the mouth is what I think Hughes believes the spirituals and the blues could perhaps together accomplish. It is not as if one merely rounds out the other; rather, it is in the spacing between the spirituals and the blues and a rhythmic interchange between them, with jazz-like meanderings and interweavings, that they together communicate the deep mystery.

For all the emphasis on a transcendent and ultimately inclusive community that Thurman sees in the spirituals, Hughes feels the need for the blues to honor the solitary soul of the city dweller. Much as Pinn suggests that scholars should unsettle the dominant metanarrative of African American religion as theistic and Christian through studying nontheistic humanist religious practices, so do I think Hughes seeks to honor the blues as a way to give voice to those outside the glow of the identifiable Christian tent. In his essay, “Songs Called the Blues,” Hughes writes:

³⁷ Ibid., 71.

The blues and the Spirituals are two great Negro gifts to American music. The Spirituals are group songs, but the Blues are songs you sing alone. The Spirituals are religious songs, born in camp meetings and remote plantation districts. But the Blues are *city* songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against the lonely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can't sleep at night. The Spirituals are escape songs, looking toward heaven, tomorrow, and God. But the Blues are *today* songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you're troubled in mind and don't know what to do, and nobody cares.³⁸

Scholar Stephen Tracy maintains that “despite the differences between spirituals and blues that Hughes enumerated in ‘Song Called the Blues,’ he saw a greater inherent bond that transcended what he saw as the superficial discordances between the blues and spiritual and gospel music.”³⁹ Different though they were, Hughes saw a transcendent union between them.

I wish to suggest that this bond or union between the spirituals and the blues, however, was not some higher synthesis that Hughes realized in his writing, but rather the very spacing between the spirituals, with their emphasis on the heavenly hereafter that could yield such hope and strength for the journey, and the blues, with their emphasis on the here and now and its very real suffering and pain that seems to have no possible sublation. The bond between the spirituals and the blues beats between hope and sadness. The blues, says Hughes, “are sad songs, with a kind of triumphant sadness, a vital earthiness about them from which life itself springs.”⁴⁰ The

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Steven C. Tracy, “Langston Hughes: Poetry, Blues, and Gospel--Somewhere to Stand,” in *Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence*, ed. C. James Trotman (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 56.

⁴⁰ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays Vol. 9* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 200.

vital earthiness of life itself springs forth as humans sing the blues in the face of sadness and death.

Whereas Thurman articulates the strategy for living by which the singers of the spirituals dealt with death by relocating themselves in a Heavenly hope, Hughes voices a different view of death, seen perhaps most poignantly in his poem, “The Weary Blues.”⁴¹ For Hughes, even if individual bodily death is really the end, the rhythm of life nevertheless runs forward through the blues. The bodily heart might stop but the song beats on.

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

“I got the Weary Blues

And I can’t be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And I can’t be satisfied—

I ain’t happy no mo’

And I wish that I had died.”

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed.

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

Even with the ambiguous ending where the player may be dead or sleeping as a thing, even if there is a cosmic collapse with the extinguishing of star and moonlight, still the song has been

⁴¹ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vantage, 1994), 50.

sung. Sorrow has been shared and lifted with the notes in the air. Though the body dies, the blues may rise.

Whereas Thurman affirms infinite worth, Hughes values the finite. Hughes affirms the body in the here and now—without even a hope of the transcendent. As Pinn argues, “some enslaved Africans sang spirituals celebrating the ontological and existential synergy between the divine and the human, best represented through the immanence of the divine in Christ; others signified this perspective and gave their full attention to humanity through the language of the blues, in which metaphysical assertions are met with suspicion and immanence is of primary concern.”⁴² Song and poetry, though, generate their own transcending movement whether or not there is a true transcendent realm. Thus, “in terms of textual effects,” writes literary theorist Kevin Hart, “it little matters whether one is responding to the transcendent or the transcendental.”⁴³ What Hughes reminds us, however, is that these effects go right to the bone. Words matter, both in the sense of worth and of causing material effects. Whether or not there is a God or anyone to hear, there is still the mystery of the blues that beats on through Hughes’s texts. Just reading the writing, we in a sense taste the tears in our mouths. Hoping beyond hope, the blues cry even if no one is listening. And, for Hughes, I maintain, that somehow transforms today’s pain.

Mystery Matters: Heeding Haraway’s Truth

“The language used by the oppressed in developing their stories,” argues Pinn, “has a materiality of its own that renders the gods true.”⁴⁴ For Thurman, the transcendent is signaled

⁴² Pinn, *The End of God-Talk*, 150.

⁴³ Kevin Hart, “The Experience of Nonexperience,” in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 199.

⁴⁴ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 179.

through the fleshly hope in a heavenly hereafter; for Hughes, the transcendental effects of song and poem affect our embodied existence so as to transform the here and now. The foregoing p(l)acing of Thurman and Hughes, and the spirituals and the blues, suggests that the materiality of embodied life involves us in undecidable mystery in regards to the immanent and transcendent and the effects that affect us. The capacity to hope in heaven creates real ascendancy in regards to the suffering of flesh, and the power to be affected by text and song generates real transformation right down to the bone. In a sense, the ultimate ontological status of the Ultimate Mystery is suspended at the level of embodied life.

What matters, Pinn writes, is that the words and actions portrayed by African American religion “point to modes of consciousness that imply *more*—more possibilities, more complexity, more vitality.”⁴⁵ Defining the life of the human being in contrast to the materiality of stones or the transcendence of gods, however, even of our own creation, establishes a hierarchy that may have negative effects. The desire for more may also devolve into the base urges that fuel capitalistic consumerism. How might we see the worth of the human without securing a definitive more, which we so easily convert to dogmatism and violence, or requiring a less, which we disparage?

“Such a sense of worth,” writes Thurman near the end of *The Luminous Darkness*, “is not confined by narrow limits of the self so that worth may be determined by contrast with something or someone of less worth. . . . Such a sense of worth is rooted in one’s own consciousness which expands and expands until there is involved the totality of life itself.” According to Thurman, the know thyself of humanity, then, “is to feel life moving through one

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and claiming one as a part of it.”⁴⁶ When claimed by fleshly life, though, we are caught up in a mo(ve)ment of more that may have no end.

Historically, however, the movement ends with Man, with his story being the beginning and end of history.⁴⁷ As with Thurman’s inclusive language that still excludes women, the totality of life has all too often meant the exclusion of the feminine. But heeding those whom Thurman refers to as having their backs against the wall, or hearing Hughes when he poetizes about a girl going on thirteen, we should attend also to what women—those “inappropriate/d others”—might say about this inclusive motion to involve the totality of life. “Feminist humanity,” argues Donna Haraway in her essay, “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, And Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape,” cannot be communicated through the still masculine historical discourses, but rather “must have another shape, other gestures. . . . Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a name.”⁴⁸ Instead, Haraway argues that “feminist humanity, must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility.”⁴⁹ And she turns to Jesus and Sojourner Truth as trickster figures who may well embody this form of (dis)figuration.

A theorist of posthumanism, Donna Haraway uses Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century ex-slave, abolitionist and women’s rights activist, to articulate a different though not discordant version of community from Thurman’s with which we opened this chapter. This idea of community entails a radical negation of a universal human while still desiring some such

⁴⁶ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 98.

⁴⁷ Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

figure. Such community requires tricky language and trickster figures. “I think,” she therefore writes,

“we”—that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history—need something called humanity. It is that kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called “that which we cannot not want.” We also know now, from our perspectives in the ripped-open belly of the monster called history, that we cannot name and possess this thing which we cannot not desire. Humanity, whole and part, is not autochthonous. Nobody is self-made, least of all man. That is the spiritual and political meaning of poststructuralism and postmodernism for me. “We,” in these very particular discursive worlds, have no routes to connection and to noncosmic, nongeneric, nonoriginal wholeness than through the radical dismembering and displacing of our names and our bodies.⁵⁰

Human community, then, according to Haraway, should not and cannot be centered around masterful subjects. She thus reads Jesus and Truth as trickster figures who destabilize any certain subject in order to move in hope toward something new. “My focus,” she writes, “is the figure of a broken and suffering humanity, signifying—in ambiguity, contradiction, stolen symbolism, and unending chains of noninnocent translation—a possible hope.”⁵¹ This possible hope, however, resists final articulation because its actualization remains always to come.

“From the start,” argues Haraway in regards to the hermeneutical gymnastics in which we must engage when dealing with ancient texts about Jesus or various narratives about Sojourner Truth, “we are in the midst of multiple translations and stagings of a figure of suffering humanity that was not contained within the cultures of the origin of the stories.”⁵² We must grapple with transmission history, which always involves distortions, contortions, and omissions. The telling

⁵⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 51.

and retelling of these tales generate endless transcriptions and translations. With such mountains of textual material, “we are, indeed, peoples of the Book,” whether we want to be or not, Haraway argues, “engaged in a Derridean writing and reading practice from the first cries of prophecy and codifications of salvation history.”⁵³ Lacking pure origins when dealing with translations of ancient texts, transcriptions of performed speeches, or even the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives, we need trickster figures to challenge our too sure narratives.

About Jesus, the incarnate God representing a challenge to the power structures of then and now, Haraway argues that “this figure of the Incarnation can never be other than a trickster, a check on the arrogances of a reason that would uncover all disguises and force correct vision of a recalcitrant nature in her most secret places.”⁵⁴ Confounding expectations, Haraway’s Jesus saves because he is a religious, political, and social revolutionary, flouting our attempts to domesticate him. “Jesus came,” she writes, “to figure for Christians the union of humanity and divinity in a universal salvation narrative.”⁵⁵ “But,” she continues, such union cannot be figured within the neat confines of a clean body or clear story because “the figure is complex and ambiguous from the start, enmeshed in translation, staging, miming, disguises, and evasions.”⁵⁶ Thus, the “Ecce homo!” or “Behold, the man” of the Christian Testament also testifies to “the original mime, the actor of a history that mocks especially the recurrent tales that insist that ‘man makes himself’ in the deathly onanistic nightdream of coherent wholeness and correct vision.”⁵⁷ Jesus came, then, to show that the essence of humanity is always yet to come.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ For another enticing reading of Jesus’s ambiguity, especially of his sexuality as liberative, see “The Apocryphon of the Beloved,” by Jeffrey J. Kripal in *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29–59.

Likewise, the very language of Sojourner Truth's tale overturns and confounds our attempts at coherent representation. We still feel the force of her famous question: "Ain't I a Woman?" Yet, contorted through various dialects that were not her own, the transcriptions morph and alter according to the needs and audiences of the transcribers. From an imagined universal slave dialect, to a more palatable "white" English version or a perhaps more appropriately rendered Afro-Dutch-English which approximated her likely background, "Ain't/Am Not/Ar'n't I a Woman?" is a question we cannot stop asking, and its very contours on our tongues makes us tremble. "The change in the shape of the words," Haraway argues, "makes us rethink her story, the grammar of her body and life. The difference matters."⁵⁹ How we embody speech matters—it is greatly important and makes a difference materially, psychologically, and socially.

Silencing a man who protested her ability to speak at a women's suffrage convention, Sojourner Truth used her body as speech to carry the force of her words:

Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have plowed and planted and gathered in to barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?⁶⁰

Haraway writes that "Sojourner Truth's famous lines from her 1851 speech in Akron, Ohio, evoke the themes of the suffering servant in order to claim the status of humanity for the shockingly inappropriate/d figure of New World black womanhood, the bearer of the promise of humanity for womanhood in general, and indeed, the bearer of the promise of humanity also for

⁵⁹ Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

men.”⁶¹ The body and words of Truth bear a promise for us all, and her refrain still echoes today, calling for an answer.

Yet, Haraway asks, “why does her *question* have more power for feminist theory 150 years later than any number of affirmative and declarative sentences?”⁶² “What is it about this figure,” she continues, “whose hard name signifies someone who could never be at home, for whom truth was displacement from home, that compels retelling and rehearing her story?”⁶³ In answer to her own question and Truth’s, Haraway offers that perhaps it is the very specific ways in which Truth resists specificity that still reverberates through history. “The essential Truth would not settle down,” writes Haraway, “that *was* her specificity.”⁶⁴ Truth for Haraway represents “a never-settled universal” whose story unendingly upends its hearers.

Truth’s speech deploys a spatial metaphor of overturning, attributing power to the oppressed. Turning the tables on the Adams of the world, Truth says of Eve: “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again!”⁶⁵ Indeed, she upends the meaning of the incarnation, moving the power from a male body to a woman’s. “That little man in black there,” she says referring to the clergyman who resisted her remarks, “he says women can’t have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn’t a woman!” Yet, Truth counters: “Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.” Called by a religious vision and given her new name directly from

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 54.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Sojourner Truth, “Modern History Sourcebook: ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’, December 1851,” accessed August 10, 2013, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

God, Sojourner Truth offers embodied testimony to a mystical force that empowers the powerless.

As recounted in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, she once had her own big camp meeting experience in which her singing of the spirituals enacted non-violent resistance.⁶⁶ When a group of vigilantes came to disrupt a revival meeting at which she was the only African American to speak, Truth climbed a hill and began to sing one of her favorite and most familiar songs:

It was early in the morning—it was early in the morning,
 Just at the break of day—
 When he rose—when he rose—when he rose,
 And went to heaven on a cloud.

In a wonderful example of non-violent active resistance, her heavenly hymn subdued her hearers, and they trickled away without hurting anyone.

Just as non-violent resistance enacts a spiritual judo, using the power of the oppressors against them, so too do Truth's singing and speaking perform an overturning of power relations. But I do not hear Truth as calling for simply an overturning such that women would then seize the power, or even simply exercise the same type of power that men previously enjoyed. Instead, I hear her as proclaiming a radical upending such that earthly power as it has been exercised by dominators would be transformed.

Paradoxically, those who are oppressed can exercise a power of overturning. To the extent that the master must exercise power to dominate the slave, or the man the woman, power accrues in passivity because the man master must have the slave woman to be what he is as

⁶⁶ Sojourner Truth, "The Narrative of Sojourner Truth.," accessed August 10, 2013, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/truth/1850/1850.html>.

oppressor. Without that dominating difference, his control collapses. What Thurman's movement heavenward, Hughes's movement to the blues, and Truth's call towards upending give us to think, I suggest, are that differences and spacing can be helpful in our formation of a better future. The trick, it seems, is not to allow ourselves to become arrested in a frozen moment, but rather to keep on moving in concert with an ongoing process of perpetual overturning.

As we have seen, a Hegelian system of totalization tends toward an ultimately absolute and stable unity that takes all difference into itself. The process I am describing here using the spacing between Thurman's spirituals and Hughes's blues, as well as Truth's overturning, involves embodying differences otherwise. In other words, they must be deconstructed. "Very schematically," Derrida writes: "an opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g., speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination."⁶⁷ Deconstruction thus points out the primary metaphysical mode of the pairing of two terms and the privileging of one over the other. With this exposure of hierarchal duality and the dependence of one on the other, deconstruction flips the hierarchy, but then keeps on going.

Contrary to what many believe, deconstruction does not end with the hierarchy overturned. "To remain in this phase," argues Derrida, "is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system."⁶⁸ Deconstruction does not get going just to overturn. "Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing—put into practice a *reversal* of the classical

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1st ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 21.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system,” Derrida explains.⁶⁹ Exposing and flipping dualities or differences, and then *displacing* them: “it is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes.”⁷⁰ The deconstructionist, then, desires a perpetual movement of overturning in order to critically intervene in oppressive systems. And as Thurman, Hughes, and Truth show, such processes are not merely linguistic or logical, but also embodied and emplaced.

Such processes of displacement, however, can be accused of relativism. In her essay on Truth, though, Haraway argues that such processes of perpetual displacement do not equate to relativism. “While contributing fundamentally to the breakup of any master subject location,” she writes, “the politics of ‘difference’ emerging from this and other complex reconstructings of concepts of social subjectivity and their associated writing practices is deeply opposed to leveling relativisms.”⁷¹ They escape such a charge through their “commitment to transformative social change, the moment of hope embedded in feminist theories of gender and other emergent discourses about the breakup of masterful subjectivity and the emergence of inappropriate/d others.”⁷² They elude relativism through transformative hope in emerging modes of being in the world.

Haraway also acknowledges, however, that such practices with their frustratingly paradoxical and overly complex language use are seen by many as suspiciously arising at just the same time that formerly marginalized figures have come to the fore and begun to speak and write. As Barbara Christian writes in her important essay, “The Race For Theory,” such abstruse theorizing

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 57.

⁷² Ibid., 57–58.

is repulsive to me and is one reason why I raced from philosophy to literature, since the latter seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as sensual as I knew it was. In literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged.⁷³

Since theorists such as Derrida and Haraway are deeply invested in just such integration of feeling and knowledge and overcoming of a split between abstract and emotional, I intend this chapter to demonstrate how mystical and mundane modes of undoing can be embodied in poignant and powerful ways, and may arise from contexts far removed from high level academic theorizing or ancient theologizing.

If the counter-cultural embrace of ancient forms of mystical undoing and the academic critiques of race, class, and gender were contemporaneous, co-emergent movements,⁷⁴ then perhaps when we hear charges that deconstruction or posthumanism are tools of repression, emphasizing our *animality* at a time when so many who had been formerly excluded have been finally included in *humanity*, we might hear not so much some secret conspiracy of elites protecting their positions as see the unavoidable functioning of the dialectical dynamics that reappropriate and repress otherness. To engage in enlivening practices of undoing we need trickster figures “who might trouble our notions—all of them: classical, biblical, scientific, modernist, postmodernist, and feminist—of ‘the human,’ while making us remember why we

⁷³ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft (New York: Routledge, 1995), 459.

⁷⁴ See, Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture,” *Common Knowledge* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 98–112. Especially pages 111–12.

cannot not want this problematic universal.”⁷⁵ Haraway’s Truth calls for endlessly negating our too restrictive naming in order to affirm that which we cannot name, yet cannot not want.

We should rightly hear the echo of apophaticism in Haraway’s words because she cites such traditions herself as a path by which she came to such layered meanings in her writing that her sentences would question themselves. “When you ask how I came to this,” she says in an interview, “I think that is actually something I inherited out of my theological formation. . . . particularly by Roman Catholic theology and practice.”⁷⁶ Being formed by her reading of St. Thomas, who himself was formed by Dionysius the Areopagite, whom he quotes over one thousand times, Donna Haraway seems to be yet another inheritor of mystical theology, albeit otherwise. As she recounts,

there was a particular theological frame, which was very powerful for me. . . . in particular, the idea that as soon as you name something and believe in a name, there is an act of idolatry involved; the idea that the names of God are always finally deeply suspect; the idea that spirituality has a much more negative quality to it; the idea that if you seriously are trying to deal with something that is infinite, you should not attach a noun to it, because then you have fixed and set limits to that which is limitless, and the whole point of God is about a kind of eternal totality that is not the totality of a system. It is not a systemic totality. It is a different kind of totality. It is unnameableness.⁷⁷

And, for Haraway, this process of naming the unnameable extends beyond the boundaries of the human.

The trickster figure for which Haraway might be most known is that of the cyborg.

Haraway chose the cyborg as another disfiguring “figure that collected many things, among them

⁷⁵ Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 60.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 334.

the way that post-World War II technoscientific cultures were deeply shaped by information sciences and biological sciences, by the implosion of informatics and biologics.”⁷⁸ As a non-negative figure whom she opposed to the goddess, Haraway’s cyborg “was the way of conceiving of us all as communication systems, whether we are animate or inanimate, whether we are animals or plants, human beings or the planet herself, Gaia, or machines of various kinds.” A cyborg world with a “common ontology of everything as communication-control-system . . . made me very angry and anxious, but interested me in more positive ways, too.”⁷⁹ Theorizing the figure of a cyborg, Haraway sought to affirm “not simply the human-machine aspect of cyborgs, but also the degree to which human beings and other organisms have a kind of commonality to them in cyborg worlds.”⁸⁰ Thus, she explains, “it was the joint implosion of human and machine, on the one hand, and human and other organisms, on the other, within a kind of problematic of communication that interested me about the cyborg.”⁸¹ The cyborg, then, in one figure names the unnameable involved in her three “boundary breakdowns”: human/animal, organism/machine, physical/non-physical.

We should then read Haraway’s Truth as a trickster figure who refigures humanity so differently as to encompass the unnameable even beyond the currently recognizable differences of man and woman, human and animal, organism and machine, physical and immaterial. What this would mean, I argue, is rethinking Thurman’s inclusive movement of cultivating a “consciousness which expands and expands until there is involved the totality of life itself” ever more expansively. “To feel life moving through one and claiming one as a part of it,” then, would be to feel caught up in a process which may have no end, and which involves not only

⁷⁸ Ibid., 322.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

people of other races, sexes, classes, and creeds, but also other animals, plants, and overall ecosystems enmeshed systemically in physical environments that may grow, expand, and change along with our awareness of them.

Mystery matters—mystery makes it important to say our names even as we unsay them because they circumscribe a reality that cannot and should not be fully contained, and mystery causes material and physical effects. As we have seen, the spirituals do not actually fully exit the immanent to attain the transcendent, nor do the blues avoid the transcendent in the midst of their immanence. Both are sung by people who are at once passively formed by outward socio-historical processes and simultaneously actively forming those very processes. These formed-forming, outer-inner, transcendent-immanent dialectical modes of embodying dualities generate something “more.”

Thus, differing interpretations of the mystery of embodied life are possible: mystical and mundane. Between the two a mystery remains that moves us. Perhaps the very categories through which we know reality—perceptual and conceptual—might change, grow, expand themselves, as well as revise previous modes of engaging reality. If we live differently, with different interests, we might discover different realities. Granted, the givenness of reality exerts causal pressures that we must negotiate, but our modes of engaging these may evolve. If the very categories through which we participate with the world might be transformed, we might move toward more and more expansive and different views. The mysterious More makes us keep on going. As Hughes said of the singers of the spirituals and the blues, whether happy or sad, “you kept on living and you kept on going. Their songs had the pulse and the beat of people who keep

on going.”⁸² We must die, then, to all of our present perceptions and conceptions in order to live and keep on going into what may come.

Seeking to help America move forward after the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American adolescent who was shot while walking home, President Barack Obama on July 19, 2013, gave brief remarks on race relations from the podium of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room that further our theme.⁸³ “We have to be vigilant,” the President said, “and we have to work on these issues.” But we also have reason to hope because as the generations move on, relations are getting better. “Kids these days, I think,” said the President, “have more sense than we did back then, and certainly more than our parents did or our grandparents did.” And, with his final words, President Obama returned to the theme of his famous campaign speech on race in which he distanced himself from the controversial preacher The Rev. Jeremiah Wright. That speech was titled, “A More Perfect Union.” In harmony with our thinkers of this chapter, President Obama declared in his recent speech “that along this long, difficult journey, we’re becoming a more perfect union—not a perfect union, but a more perfect union.”

Appending the adjective “more,” of course, necessarily implies a critique of the present form of our union in favor of a structurally future state. To form a more perfect union, we must always work on forming, reforming, and even, as Haraway argues, deforming our unions—whether mystical or political. Perhaps we may also perceive such perpetual movement in Hughes’s poem, “Promised Land,” with which we will end this chapter. Although we hear his ironic religious critique, perhaps we might also perceive his respect and participation in a quasi-

⁸² Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays Vol. 9*, 209.

⁸³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin | The White House,” accessed August 11, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>.

religious hope, which I believe all of our thinkers here share:

The Promised Land
Is always just ahead.
You will not reach it
Ere you're dead.
But your children's children
By their children will be led
To a spot from which the Land—
Still lies ahead.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 592.

Chapter 4

Democratizing

The Democracy to Come is Love

It was love to which God sacrificed his divine majesty. . . . Who then is our Saviour and Redeemer? God or Love? Love; for God as God has not saved us, but Love, which transcends the difference between the divine and human personality. As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God, and, in spite of the predicate of love, we have the God—the evil being—of religious fanaticism. . . . God is the mirror of man.
—Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*

God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. . . . A *female* god is still to come.
—Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*

Take the example of democracy, of the idea of democracy, of democracy to come . . . its path passes today perhaps through (across) the aporias of negative theology
—Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*

If mysticisms expose all language and images to negation, and democracy upholds, as Derrida argues, "the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name,"¹ then the mystical and democratic traditions share, in form if not content, similar trajectories and problems.

In her book *Democracy Begins Between Two*, Luce Irigaray, writes: "I wonder how a relationship as two can be practiced without being reduced to the desire to appropriate and to consume, but involving, on the contrary, an ability to relate to the self in order to perceive and contemplate who the other is, and also to be able to feel oneself as oneself, female or male, as well as the attraction to the other, male or female." She argues that between two, "there is a rhythmic pulse which beats between going out towards the other and returning to the self, between extending oneself as far as the other and returning to dwell within the self, between coming out into the light and going back into the darkness, into the invisibility of interiority, into

¹ Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 87.

the mystery of alterity.” What this mystery of alterity means for ethics and politics is the topic of this final chapter.

“What I am trying to do,” says Irigaray in an interview, in faithfulness to the work I have dedicated to the liberation of women, and first and foremost to my own liberation, is to define a relationship between two within sexual difference which is able to overcome the flaws and lacks characteristic of such a relationship in our History thus far. A task of this sort, as I already indicated at the time of the publication of *I Love To You*, is a political one in the service of democracy. A real democracy must take as its basis, today, a just relationship between man and woman. A distorted relationship between them gives rise to many forms of antidemocratic power. Unless we can transform this, the most everyday element of our lives, we will never bring about change across the world. . . .

The foundations of democracy have, therefore, to be renewed as being-two, on the basis of a just relationship between two beings.”

Renewing democracy around a just relationship of political subjects as being-two, we will see, involves recognizing the subject as ever always already *at least two*. Moreover, in the perpetual effort to form a more perfect union, we must strive also to recognize and respect those whom we necessarily and unavoidably sacrifice to secure our well-being. For Irigaray, this means recognizing the hidden sacrifice of women.

“The Divinity of woman,” says the contemporary philosopher Luce Irigaray in her book *Sexes and Genealogies*, “is still hidden, veiled.”² To help unveil this hidden feminine divine, she draws on Mircea Eliade’s and René Girard’s analyses of society as founded on sacrifice “to

² Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 71.

inquire whether, under the sacrificed victim, another victim is often hidden.”³ With most sacrifices performed by men, Irigaray asks, “could it not be argued that the hidden sacrifice is in fact this *extradition*, this ban on women’s participation in religious practice, and their consequent exile from the ultimate sources of social decision making?”⁴ I will show that Irigaray, through the sacrifice of sacrifice, offers resources for re-thinking politics without patriarchal dogmatisms and religion without a God who requires such sacrifices.⁵ With her reclamation of marginalized Marian movements and her more recent comparative moves to Eastern traditions, Irigaray invites us to (un)know a God without God.

Though many remain squeamish about Irigaray’s relatively unrepentant quasi-essentialism, she nevertheless helps us unveil the hidden history of how women, sacrificed by society and religion, “remain elsewhere.”⁶ Much as masculinist scholarship needs her feminist supplement, however, so does Irigaray’s analysis need to account for more differences beyond gender. Despite Irigaray’s move to sacrifice sacrifice, I argue that through Judith Butler’s critique of Irigaray and Jacques Derrida’s reflections on “the unrecognizable,” we glimpse the unavailability of sacrifice and the importance of maintaining an outside to whatever differences we may presently perceive in order to help us ever always progress in forming more perfect unions. And for Derrida, this process means trying to talk to ghosts.

³ Ibid., 76.

⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁵ On sacrificing sacrifice, see Jacques Derrida, *Points . . .: Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 279. And, Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially 76: “Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility . . . imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman? A woman’s sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other?”

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 76.

The Sacrifice of Sacrifice

Irigaray links the hidden sacrifice of women to a hidden history. “Most of the gods of the *universe*,” she says, “start out as goddesses” who “are obliterated or displaced when the universe is taken over by the men-gods, especially by Zeus and his son Apollo.”⁷ “This domination,” she continues, “of the cosmic world by the gods by means of the couple of a unique God-Father and an all-powerful son, erases the fact that mothers and daughters once presided as goddesses over the solar seasons and, together, protected the fertility of the earth in its flowers and fruits.”⁸ Identifying women with nature and appropriating it for use and exchange among themselves, men efface the contributions of women’s labor, in all its senses. “To achieve a different social order,” Irigaray argues, “women need a religion, a language, and a currency of exchange, or else a nonmarket economy.”⁹ As a step towards this different order, Irigaray says, “it is crucial that we rethink religion, and especially religious structures, categories, initiations, rules, and utopias, all of which have been masculine for centuries.”¹⁰ Thus, rethinking religion and society based on sacrifice may help unveil the hidden history of the sacrifice of woman and a feminine divinity.

Irigaray sees potential resources for rethinking religion apart from sacrifice as inscribed in a historically marginalized mode of participating in the Eucharist. “As I understand it,” she says, “the Eucharist means: I am going to be immolated, I give you something other than my flesh to share together—fruits of the earth that I have blessed and sanctified—before the sacrifice occurs, so that my body returns to life and is not dead when you consume it in my absence.”¹¹ If one seeks to follow this Eucharistic history, Irigaray argues, “the error would come from

⁷ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 80.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 78.

perpetuating the sacrificial instead of inaugurating a new way of sharing with the divine.”¹² Just this error occurs, she says, with the exclusion of women from the priesthood, an exclusion that “flouts the whole tradition of revelation according to which the spirit that will found the Christian order is first incarnate in Mary.”¹³ Veiling the tradition in which the divine is incarnate in a woman’s body “seems like a real and symbolic act of sacrifice.”¹⁴ Not perpetuating the sacrifice of a body, Irigaray looks to the Christian tradition and seeks resources for seeing women and women’s embodied pleasure as sites of divine incarnation.

Unveiling and re-imagining this tradition accounts for Irigaray’s much discussed fascination with medieval women mystics.¹⁵ “If the Word was made flesh in this way,” she writes in her famous essay *La Mystérique* in which she mimes medieval mystic speech, “. . . it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance, which can at least be recognized.”¹⁶ For Irigaray, such recognition would involve Feuerbachian processes of projection, namely that humans cast their dreams and nightmares, their fragility and materiality, onto a screen called divine that mirrors back to them the consummation of their hopes and the eradication of their fears.¹⁷ “According to Feuerbach,” Irigaray says, “no affirmation of gender or humanity is possible without a God.”¹⁸ As human creatures, we need to see such a God or Gods in order to know ourselves and live. And, to affirm gender, we need a God without merely

¹² Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 78.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See especially Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 200.

¹⁷ For a creative reading of Feuerbach for contemporary religious theory, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 59-89. For an excellent introduction to Feuerbach’s philosophy of religion, see Van Austin Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 81.

masculine mastery—we need a female divine defined without being the other of man, merely his narcissistic reflection and nothing more. God must mirror humanity with the difference of gender. “Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness.”¹⁹ Citing Feuerbach, Irigaray argues that projecting a God, whether such a God exists apart from our projections or not, is essential for life.

To articulate this project, Irigaray turns to mystic speech because “it is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of discourse while remaining within the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence . . . for to speak *of* or *about* woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition.”²⁰ Irigaray holds a theory of language akin to the negative theologies of mystics, except with woman playing the role of God, always exceeding and destabilizing any conceptual strategies to circumscribe her.²¹ “In other words,” she says, “the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.” Irigaray seeks the outside of masculinist rhetoric and logic, desiring to uncover and unleash the hidden, repressed, and sacrificed feminine energy that would necessarily mean the unsettling of prior positivist pretensions to attain full, phallic mastery through logic.

¹⁹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 67.

²⁰ Irigaray *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 78.

²¹ See Ann-Marie Priest, “Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology, and Luce Irigaray,” *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 83, no. No. 1 (Jan) (2003): 1–23..

Irigaray does not, however, claim to rival man with an alternative logic of woman, but rather she seeks to take up “male” rationality into a process exposed to its sacrificed elsewhere. Attempting to move otherwise, women “should not put it, then, in the form ‘What is woman?’ but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as a lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side.”²² And, miming the discourse of mystical theology that unsays all positive affirmations with negations, and then negates the negations, taking flight into an excess of speech that seeks to move beyond what words can say, Irigaray says that in the quasi-mystical speech of her feminist philosophy, “nothing is ever to be *posited* that is not also reversed and caught up again in the *supplementarity of this reversal*.”²³ “To put it another way,” she continues, “there would no longer be either a right side or a wrong side of discourse, or even of texts, but each passing from one to the other would make audible and comprehensible even what resists the recto-verso structure that shores up common sense.”²⁴

Her speech is *quasi*-mystical because, unlike mystics, Irigaray does not assert the divine as an ontological ground, but rather, following Feuerbach, she sacrifices such a theistic God to the demands of a perpetual process of subject formation. Humans have an outside, she says, but the beyond human need not be a big Being or anything other than what or whoever exceeds understanding and representation, which has heretofore been dominated by the masculine. We must, however, project our hopes and fears onto a screen she still calls divine in order to fill this void of our elsewhere. Thus, for Irigaray, medieval women mystics’ speech is an exemplary moment that perhaps allows us to hear a feminine divine other.

²² Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 78-80.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

But it is not only speech that fascinates Irigaray. “If you read, or read again, the text ‘The Mystérique’ in *Speculum*,” Irigaray says in her recent essay, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” “you will remember that the guide on the path of the mystics is touch: an immediate touch that is still lacking in mediations and is thus often hurting, cutting, striking, or dazzling.”²⁵ This intense and even violent language arises, according to Irigaray, from the need of women to extricate themselves from their enclosure within a Western metaphysics “dominated by the light of the logos, by a logic ruled above all by a mental economy.”²⁶ Through controlling and grasping concepts and discourse, Western philosophy and culture have hidden the intimate connections to the natural, the body, and the feminine. Practiced primarily by men, sacrifice serves as a way of usurping women’s procreative power and overcoming man’s shame before the semiotic, fluid natality that destabilizes his subjectivity. Escaping to the mental, sacrificial logic focuses on mortality or being-towards-death and attempts to gain control over finitude through forgetting the maternal and natural. To balance the mental, one needs to touch and be touched.

Embodiment—touch—shows the affective force in Irigaray’s interest in mystical experience.²⁷ In addition to Angela of Foligno and other mystics, Irigaray alludes in *La Mystérique* to Teresa of Avila and her mystical vision of being pierced by a burning dart, which in turn alludes to a long history of references to arrows, woundings, and intimacy in mystical theology. As we saw in Chapter Two, which bears coming again back to here, Teresa herself recounts that “at times an arrow is thrust into the deepest and most living recesses of the heart in such a way that the soul doesn’t know what has happened or what it wants.”²⁸ She describes the

²⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” in *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence*, ed. Gillian Howie and J’annine Jobling (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 24.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Here is Irigaray’s attempt to bypass Kantian strictures with her “sensible transcendental.” See Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasies*.

²⁸ Teresa, *Life* in *Collected Works*, 251.

pain as “so great that it made me moan,” and says in such visions, “the Lord carries the soul away and places it in ecstasy.”²⁹ In her essay, Irigaray refers to the “*strange . . . economy of this specula(riza)tion of woman*, who in her mirror seems ever to refer back to a transcendence. Who moves away (for) who comes near, who groans to be separated from the one who holds her closest in his embrace. But who also calls for the dart which, while piercing through her body, will with the same stroke tear out her entrails.”³⁰ Because of their differing morphology and their economic and sociological investiture in the sacrifice of women, men miss seeing this “specula(riza)tion of woman.”

Irigaray specifically targets Jacques Lacan as a man who misses Teresa’s mystic pleasure because of his myopic focus on Bernini’s statue of Teresa’s mystic ecstasy, and his reduction of it to orgasm. In her essay, “Così Fan Tutti,” Irigaray taunts Lacan when he says,

the right to experience pleasure is awarded to a statue. “Just go look at Bernini’s statue in Rome, you’ll see right away that St. Theresa is coming, there’s no doubt about it.” In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculpted by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? For where the pleasure of the Theresa in question is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling.

But how can one ‘read’ them when one is a ‘man’? The production of ejaculations of all sorts, often prematurely emitted, makes him miss, in the desire for identification with the lady, what her own pleasure might be all about.

And . . . his?³¹

Irigaray faults Freudian and Lacanian analysts for not opening to the feminine other. They do not see or hear what falls outside of the exclusively male order of signs. Failing to either heed history

²⁹ Teresa, *Life*, 252-53.

³⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 201.

³¹ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 90-91.

or open to the unexpected, such analysts hold that “the unconscious is no more than something you have already heard.”³² A Lacanian analyst (and thus a “male” analyst, whether male or female) hears only what he wants and expects to hear. “In other words,” Irigaray argues, “given *your* universal—the Lacanian code—one knows *a priori* how you will interpret ‘the most particular of the desire of the subject.’”³³ Irigaray prescribes, however, that authentic analysis should hear what has never been heard, namely that “the unconscious is desire which is trying to speak of/to itself and, being analysts, you have to listen without excluding anything, even if listening to everything does call *your* desire into question, even if it does mean that *you* risk death . . .”³⁴ Excluding nothing, an authentic analyst will be open to the death of his/her desire.

For men, this openness will mean relinquishing the desire to repress the feminine and to interact in only a male ordered world and society. For women, this will mean speaking in tones other than the masculine or the frustrated cry of hysteria. In order for women to speak and relate *as* women, the repressed other of masculine consciousness—feminine sexuality—must be honored. “Consciousness,” repressing its other that cannot be controlled, delimited, or kept from oozing, “still imposes such names to signify that other scene, offstage, that it finds *cryptic*.”³⁵ For authentic relations, women must look to the speculum, thus allowing themselves relation with themselves.

Irigaray advocates the speculum as literal and metaphorical tool of self-realization because “any other instrument, any hint, even of theory, pulls me away from myself by pulling open—and sewing up—unnaturally the lips of that slit where I recognize myself, by touching myself there (almost) directly.” Looking into the curved mirror allows woman to see herself and

³² Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 81.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁵ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 191.

gives a “rapturous vision.”³⁶ The presence of God, albeit perhaps a projected presence, can only be experienced for and by women, according to Irigaray, if they open to authentic relation with themselves and with each other, outside of, apart from, or other than the male order (which would include Lacanian psychoanalysis and Western philosophy). Thus, as a practical way to cultivate a divine in the feminine, Irigaray offers the emphasis on the lips, both the female vaginal lips, as in her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and also the lips of the mouth, especially in contemplative and meditative practices emphasizing breath.³⁷

“In a phallocratic historical time such as ours,” she says, “we often forget the value of feminine lips touching each other and of the silence that accompanies such a gesture.” For Irigaray, “the lips can represent the threshold of the feminine self, which allows a woman to remain within herself when her lips touch each other, and open to the outside when her lips relinquish this position of self-affection.”³⁸ Western culture and philosophy have overmuch involved words and multiplying discourses. Indeed, “for Hegel, the end of our journey ought to be a gathering of all possible discourses.” In contrast, Irigaray turns East saying “for the Buddha it ought to be becoming able to reach silence.” “Of course,” she continues, “silence does not then amount to a lack of words but to the safeguarding of that which has not yet been manifested, of that which has not yet appeared, of that which does not yet exist.”³⁹ Citing the research of the linguist Roman Jakobson, Irigaray argues “that the letter *m* is used by the baby to designate the mother in many languages,” thus, when chanting *aum*, “which requires one to close one’s lips,” one feels oneself touching oneself, one’s lips touching one another. Irigaray feels that in chant

³⁶ Ibid., 200.

³⁷ On breathing and air, see also Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

³⁸ Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” 16.

³⁹ Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” 19.

breathing—with the interplay of vowel and consonant, the opening and closing of one’s lips—lies the hope of a potentially transformative embodied discipline.

As a practice for cultivating an awareness of our common maternal origin, chanting with a focus of attention on the lips commemorates the self’s constitution in relation to the (m)other:

Breathing is both the initial and the final gesture of natural and spiritual life. As such, this gesture is the most basic and the most elaborate that human beings share. In this era of mixed cultures, that is to say ours, breath is what allows us to coexist beyond the diverse traditions to which we belong. It’s useful to return to breath in order to rise above the challenge of our time spiritually.⁴⁰

At the first moment of coming into the world, we inhale, until finally we exhale in giving ourselves over to death. The hope of natality and the mourning of mortality are both encompassed in Irigaray’s discipline of breathing. “The attraction that exists between man and woman on the level of breath is very precious,” she says, “because, in humanity at large, there are only men and women of different ages.”⁴¹ In discussing humanity, Irigaray emphasizes sexual difference because she sees it as offering a privileged path to maintaining difference itself and a relation to the other.

She argues that the sacrificial “historical perspective that maintains that only one subject exists—presumed neuter and universal, but elaborated starting from the necessities of man—has to be overcome to reach a culture of two subjects: one masculine and one feminine.”⁴² These two subjects are irreducible because partial—man and woman are defined as a duality. One is ever always a gendered subject, and being a human subject means having a gender that is one of at least two. To be two “gives us a relational base from which we can build a new humanity, a

⁴⁰ Irigaray, *Why Different?: A Culture of Two Subjects*, 180-81.

⁴¹ Irigaray, *Why Different?: A Culture of Two Subjects*, 180-81.

⁴² Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” 14.

worldwide humanity, form the most basic to the most elaborate of the body's life and the soul's life."⁴³ Recognizing otherness opens us to the reality that we are ever already two.

Or, more accurately, recognizing that we are gendered subjects opens us to the reality that we are *at least* two. Irigaray says, "as soon as I recognize otherness of the other as irreducible to me or to my own, the world itself becomes irreducible to a single world: there are always *at least two* worlds."⁴⁴ Recognition of otherness, however, need not be limited to two. Indeed, Irigaray posits that what is needed is "probably a trinity."⁴⁵ Yet, the Christian Trinity has historically been portrayed in dominantly masculine terms. As Mary Daly famously writes,

"The Processions of Divine Persons" is the most sensational one-act play of the centuries, the original Love Story, performed by the Supreme All Male Cast It is "sublime" (and therefore disguised) erotic male homosexual mythos, the perfect all-male marriage, the ideal all-male family, the best boys' club, the model monastery, the supreme Men's Association, To the timid objections voiced by Christian women, the classic answer has been: "You're included under the Holy Spirit. He's feminine."⁴⁶

Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa, whose Trinitarian theology along with that of the other Cappadocians, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, so influenced Eastern and Western orthodoxy, uses some striking male metaphors to discuss the Trinity, as we saw in Chapter Two.

Though not entirely susceptible to Daly's parody since he destabilizes any one analogy as inadequate to reflect the incomprehensible God, and articulates a complex process of spiritual purgation that involves alternation between seeker and sought, active and passive, masculine and feminine in a perpetual ascent into intimacy with the divine, Gregory nevertheless goes so far as

⁴³ Irigaray, *Why Different?: A Culture of Two Subjects*, 181.

⁴⁴ Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, X, emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 81.

⁴⁶ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 38.

to analogize the Trinity along the lines of the male body.⁴⁷ As we saw in Chapter Two, in his *Fourth Homily on the Song of Songs* he likens the Trinity to an archer (Father), arrow (Son), and ointment or poison on the arrow's tip (Holy Spirit). And, says Gregory, "as soon as the bride receives the arrow of love, the imagery shifts from archery to nuptial delight."⁴⁸ Thus, the imagery shifts from the wound of the arrow to orgasm in the bridal chamber, with Christ as the Father's penis and the Holy Spirit as semen or lubricant. Given the explicit violent and sexual nature of Gregory's bridal mysticism here that was later taken up by Teresa and others, there should be little wonder why so many theorists connect mysticism, death, and orgasm (*la petite mort* or "little death"). Irigaray argues that, as was the case with Lacan, what gets missed in all this predominantly male imagery, theology, and theorizing is women's bodies and women's pleasure.

Offering a clever riposte, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to Nyssa's masculine, martial, and marital imagery, Irigaray offers her own gloss on that same chapter from *The Song of Solomon* at the close of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas."⁴⁹ In this essay Irigaray examines Levinas's discussion of responsibility to the other as involving only the relation to the other man—thereby excluding woman's pleasure.⁵⁰ "The *Song of Solomon*," she says in her last

⁴⁷ See Sarah Coakley, *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003). And, Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 153–67.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Fourth Homily on The Song of Songs*, M.852/J.128.

⁴⁹ For more on Irigaray's efforts to destabilize such male imagery, see Amy Hollywood's fascinating article on how Irigaray valorizes vaginal imagery in the Christian tradition: "'That Glorious Slit': Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ's Side Wound" (Krier and Harvey 2004).

⁵⁰ For more on Levinas's treatment of femininity, see Derrida 1991, and Chanter 2001. In thematizing the other, Levinas also excludes the animal. See "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" in Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 71. See also, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)" by John Llewelyn, in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas* (Continuum, 1991). "Facing the Other Animal: Levinas" in Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (Columbia University Press, 2008). "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question

sentence, “bears the trace of the woman as lover for it says, and repeats: ‘do not awaken (my) love until *she* please’. She, the lover, remains a subject in the act of love.”⁵¹ Since “we have no female trinity,” Irigaray argues elsewhere, what is needed is that “a woman’s subjectivity must accommodate the dimensions of mother and lover as well as the union between the two.”⁵² Of sexual love, Irigaray writes: “in this relation, we are at least three, each of which is irreducible to any of the others: you, me and our work [*oeuvre*], that ecstasy of ourself in us [*de nous en nous*], that transcendence of the flesh of one to that of the other become ourself in us [*devenue nous en nous*], at any rate ‘in me’ as a woman, prior to any child.”⁵³ This “at least three” gestures toward Trinitarian notions of lover-beloved-love that Augustine dismissed as an adequate analogy for the Trinity because of its all-too-explicit connections to messy embodiment and original sin.⁵⁴

In contrast, Irigaray writes, “if there is a fall, it is located in the reduction of the feminine to the passive, to the past tense and to the object of man’s pleasure, in the identification of the woman with the beloved.”⁵⁵ The desire for mutual recognition requires dethroning the purely Father God. “Without relationships between both natural and spiritual mothers and daughters, that are relationships between subjects, without cultural recognition of the divinity of this genealogy, how can a woman remain the lover [*l’amante*] of a man who belongs to the line of a

of the Animal” by Cary Wolfe, in Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003). “On Being ‘The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany’: Dwelling on Animals after Levinas” by David Clark in Jennifer Ham, *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1997). “Lost Dog, or, Levinas Faces the Animal” by H. Peter Steeves, in Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater, *Figuring Animals* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). And, of course, Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (Fordham Univ Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 188.

⁵² Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 63.

⁵³ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 180.

⁵⁴ See Sarah Coakley, “The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality: A Neglected Nexus in the Father and Beyond,” *Bulletin Centro Pro Unione* N. 58 (Fall 2000): 14.

⁵⁵ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 185.

Father God? And does not the latter need a Mother God?” Irigaray asks.⁵⁶ Further, she connects the Divine to the kind of sex in which women and men can authentically recognize the other as “other,” and yet also be joined together by a third that is their relation before any child. Much as she taunts Lacan, she plays with Levinas who says justice is the relation to the other:

Who is the other if the divine is excluded from the carnal act? If these gestures of ultimate relations between living humans are not a privileged approach to God, who is he? Levinas has little taste for mysticism. What is the link between this lack of interest and his conception of sexual difference? In other words, is mysticism not linked to the flesh in its sexual dimension? But outside of mysticism, who is God? What is God? What is the point of flesh without mysticism?⁵⁷

Irigaray argues that this sacrifice of an active feminine divine exiled women mystics such as Teresa of Avila from themselves, which “can explain why she was only passive in meeting with divine grace.”⁵⁸

Irigaray hopes that “perhaps we could today prepare or pave the way for grace in a continuous manner, a manner that includes both passivity and activity, a manner in which passivity will be actively cultivated to open ourselves to receive grace, all sorts of graces, coming from different sources, with different intensities and impacts on our life.”⁵⁹ To become divine, Irigaray offers the practical disciplines of contemplative breathing and non-patriarchal sexual relations.⁶⁰ She says, however, “I am far from suggesting that today we must once again deify ourselves as did our ancestors with their animal totems, that we have to regress to siren

⁵⁶ Ibid., 186

⁵⁷ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁸ Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁰ Of interest would be a comparison with Julia Kristeva’s “underwater, trans-verbal communication between bodies.” See Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 182.

goddesses, who fight against men gods.” “Rather,” she continues, “I think we must not merely instigate a return to the *cosmic*, but also ask ourselves why we have been held back from becoming *divine women*.”⁶¹ So, should this questioning process mean destroying the old order and murdering the male God(s)?

“Is it a matter of killing?” Irigaray asks. “That,” she says, “is not the goal. To reveal that murder has been committed means not killing but rather putting an end to the hidden crime, aggression, and sacrifice.”⁶² It is necessary “to respect nature in its cycles, its life, its growth; it is important for us to recall that events in history, that History itself, *cannot and must not conceal cosmic events and rhythms*.”⁶³ Instead, she says, “what is sacrificed is henceforward the all-powerfulness of both one and the other.” Irigaray advocates a new sacrificial mode that “opens things up whereas the old immolation habitually led to the creation of a *closed* world through *periodic exclusion*.” Instead of enclosure within one gender, Irigaray articulates a differing human subject who opens to its feminine elsewhere through sacrificing prior misrecognitions. “This new sacrifice,” she says,

if sacrifice it be rather than a discipline, means that the individual or the social body gives up narcissistic self-sufficiency.

*Perhaps that means recognizing that we are still and have always been open to the world and to the other because we are living, sensible beings, subject to the rhythms of time and of a universe whose properties are in part our own, different according to whether we are men or women.*⁶⁴

⁶¹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 60.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 87, italics in original.

Recognizing this openness to the world and the other means engaging in a new sacrificial mode or discipline that involves not only uncovering the hidden sacrifice of women but also sacrificing sacrifice itself.

Preserving the Outside: Who or What Haunts the Human—More or Less

Though, as Irigaray shows, we should strive to avoid sacrificial modes that efface women, we nevertheless cannot avoid sacrifice altogether. The sacrifice *of* sacrifice, like the paradoxical logic of the word *without*, simultaneously and by turns deploys and negates that from which it takes off. Striving to sacrifice sacrifice, we must still perform a sacrifice.⁶⁵ Even the grammar betrays us. Irigaray's discipline or new mode of sacrificing, however, ameliorates the unavoidable sacrifice through engaging in perpetually new recognitions, and new (as well as ancient) rhythms. This new mode would involve unceasingly uncovering what or whoever remains hidden that we unavoidably sacrifice in order to maintain our social and psychic orders.

Exceeding gender, however, the sacrificial structure entails more than the hidden history of the sacrifice of women. As Irigaray notes, “under the sacrifice of animal or human is hidden the sacrifice of the plant and the disappearance of the goddesses of natural fertility.”⁶⁶ The controlling virility of patriarchy also sacrifices nature and its diversity of plants and other living organisms. In striving evermore to uncover such hidden sacrifices, it is thus not a question of *not* sacrificing—whether humans, histories, animals, or plants—but rather of who, what, and how we sacrifice. For we, as finite creatures, sacrifice whether we want to or not, even if just by choosing to spend time doing this and not that, to use our resources of time, treasure, and talents here, and

⁶⁵ For more on the “paradoxical writing of the word without (*sans*)” see Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 133.

⁶⁶ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 81.

not there (e.g. spending or sacrificing time and the other by writing a dissertation and not working for the poor, or trading on Wall Street).

Whenever we give preference to a particular person or animal, nation or cause, we necessarily sacrifice those others to whom or which we are not giving our time and attention. Even in choosing to feed a particular starving person or animal, one is not feeding those others. In attending to one, I sacrifice the other. When we recognize the other as another person, worthy of dignity and respect, we are also packaging into that recognition huge amounts of concepts that necessarily impose a certain violence on the otherness of that other. We project our own conceptions of what it means to be human onto the other. As Irigaray even says, “it is up to humanity to go beyond that which already exists, including what we consider humanity itself.”⁶⁷ We must allow for who or what may challenge or change even our surest assumptions about ourselves and our others.

“Irigaray does not always help matters here,” writes Judith Butler, “for she fails to follow through the metonymic link between women and these other Others, idealizing and appropriating the ‘elsewhere’ as the feminine.” “But,” she asks, “what is the ‘elsewhere’ of Irigaray’s ‘elsewhere’?”⁶⁸ After the sacrifice of sacrifice, whether the sacrifice of human, animal, plant, or history, what is called for will be the discipline of striving to recognize the unrecognizable to come.

In regards to Irigaray’s marking of the feminine as the outside of Western reason, Butler argues, “there is no singular outside.” Recognitions such as self and other “replicate themselves through what they exclude, through not being the animal, not being the woman, not being the slave, whose propriety is purchased through property, national and racial boundary, masculinism,

⁶⁷ Irigaray, “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” 15-16.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 49.

and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁶⁹ Though we should strive to uncover the hidden sacrifice of women, Butler argues, “there will be no way finally to delimit the elsewhere of Irigaray’s elsewhere, for every oppositional discourse will produce its outside, an outside that risks becoming installed as its non-signifying inscriptional space.”⁷⁰ Whatever we recognize as constituting the here and now, whether our identities, sexualities, societies, religions or Gods, something else remains elsewhere, excluded, and hidden. Masculinist reason dismisses such exclusions as the necessary accidents of recognizing the Real, but, as Butler warns, we should not so easily succumb to an easy acceptance of such sacrifice. “The task,” she says, “is to refigure this necessary ‘outside’ as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome.”⁷¹ Although sacrifice is unavoidable, we may be more or less violent, more or less inclusive, more or less recognizing of whoever or whatever remains outside of reality’s regnant parameters.

“Of equal importance” to our perpetually striving to overcome exclusionary violence, Butler argues in her own quasi-negative theology, “is the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability, illuminating the violent and contingent boundaries of that normative regime precisely through the inability of that regime to represent that which might pose a fundamental threat to its continuity.”⁷² According to Butler then, “radical and inclusive representability is not precisely the goal.” It is not as if through careful attention to gender, race, and class, we can finally include every formerly marginalized position. Such claims for total inclusivity reproduce the totalizing master discourse

⁶⁹ Ibid, 52.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁷¹ Ibid., 53.

⁷² Ibid.

of masculinist reason. Butler argues, “to include, to speak as, to bring in every marginal and excluded position within a given discourse is to claim that a singular discourse meets its limits nowhere, that it can and will domesticate all signs of difference.”⁷³ The need is not so much to develop an ever-expanding litany of differences, as the need for a perpetual process of attending to what or whomever we unavoidably sacrifice when we decide what matters to us. Butler urges us to attend to the other others that ever always remain elsewhere. Acknowledging the unavoidable outside to our awareness helps us hear whatever or whoever may have been missed or marginalized.

Though, in upholding an outside beyond language and representation, Butler may appear to some to really be speaking of the hidden God beyond being of whom negative theologians have spoken for millennia, she is, rather, merely acknowledging the generative resources of epistemic openness. Lacking non-circular grounds of verifying our senses or the functioning of whatever epistemic process we may yet have, uncertainty in our circumscription of phenomena seems key. Paradoxically, uncertainty seems the surest safeguard of ethics. We can never be certain so we must always be careful. Thus, the constitutive opacity of the human calls for openness to others. Realizing that the possibility of error is as common to all humans as our fundamental dignity, we can traverse complex questions through the common ground of admitting our shared ignorance. This shared place of unknowing is not far, yet also infinitely distant, from the “darkness of unknowing” that resides in the midst of the mystical traditions of unsaying.

Differing interpretations of this constitutive unknowingness are possible: mystical or mundane. On the one hand, we have mystics like Teresa of Avila speaking of loving God by

⁷³ Ibid.

“knowing through unknowing,” and, on the other, we have theorists like Judith Butler saying, “that we are compelled in love means that we are, in part, unknowing about why we love as we do.”⁷⁴ The one deals with a mystical or negative theology of dazzling darkness, the other with the mundane realization that we do not know everything and that a dizzying doubt seems always to haunt even our surest certainties and self-identities. As Butler says,

the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human,” the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation.⁷⁵

Given life amidst a constitutive opacity, the human is marked by both capacity and incapacity. As finite and fallible human beings who nevertheless exercise substantial creative and destructive power, we find ourselves possessed of or by agency as well as dispossessed by the unavoidable passivity of affectivity.

The interplay of agency and passivity in the human necessarily generates indeterminate zones of a “more” as that which exceeds our grasp and control, like death or God, and a “less” of whatever or whoever falls under our ability to manipulate, like animals, minerals and the environment. The “more” we call supernatural, sovereign, or divine, and the “less” we call natural or beastly. Lamentably, we all too often map the masculine onto the former and the feminine onto the latter. We wage wars about the more of gods and sovereign states, and we turn the natural into technology and visit unspeakable violence on animals, ecosystems, and on other human animals we deem as less-than-human. All too often, we fail to recognize those who differ

⁷⁴ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 103.

⁷⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 8.

from us along whatever categories—religion, race, class, gender, species—as deserving the full dignity of humanity. In such misrecognition, we demean not only others but ourselves.

In concert with Butler, Derrida argues, in yet another version of a quasi-negative theology, that recognition of the other must open onto the otherwise than human.

“Deconstruction consists,” argues Derrida, “in identifying the sacrificial logic even if it is hidden.” He also admits, however, that “sacrifice is unavoidable.”⁷⁶ Thus, the mo(ve)ment of awareness must traverse the impossible task of striving to recognize the unrecognizable.

“The ‘unrecognizable’ [*méconnaissable*],” writes Derrida, “is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human. . . . So long as it remains human, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about.”⁷⁷ When unveiling whatever or whoever remains hidden that we sacrifice in order to constitute our present reality, it is necessary to remain vigilant in seeking to recognize the unrecognizable who may come (back). Which for Derrida means learning to speak with ghosts. *Revenant* in French not only means ghost, but as the present participle of the verb *revenir* (to return, come again or to come back) it takes meaning from the verb *venir* (to come) which gives meaning to the noun *l’avenir* meaning the future. When Derrida plays on the word ghost, then, he alludes to the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence that unsettles neat distinctions between past and future, present and absent. In our last body section, let us examine what still haunts not only our politics and religions, but also our religious studies. As ever, we are striving to welcome what may come.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Questioning God*, ed. Caputo, Dooley, Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 67.

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign: Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 108.

How to Speak With Ghosts

“If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts,” Derrida says in his book *Specters of Marx*, “. . . it is in the name of justice.”⁷⁸ Derrida begins his book with a promise. He begins by writing or quoting the spoken oath to secrecy given by Hamlet and his men before the ghost of his father.

Hamlet: . . . Sweare.

Ghost [beneath] : Sweare.

[They swear]

Hamlet: Rest, rest perturbed Spirit! So Gentlemen,

With all my loue I doe commend me to you;

And what so poore a man as *Hamlet* is

Doe t’expresse his loue and friendship to you,

God willing, shall not lacke: Let us goe in together,

And still your fingers on your lippes, I pray.

The time is out of ioynt: Oh cursed spright,

That ever I was borne to set it right.

Nay, come, let’s goe together. [*Exeunt*]

—Act I, Scene V⁷⁹

“Oh, Marx’s love for Shakespeare! It is well known,” Derrida notes. He opens his book on Marx with this scene from *Hamlet* because “even though Marx more often quotes *Timon of Athens*, the *Manifesto* seems to evoke or convoke, right from the start, the first coming of the silent ghost, the apparition of the spirit that does not answer, on those ramparts of Elsinore which is then the

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xix.

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters*, 3.

old Europe.”⁸⁰ This spectral scene also dramatizes many of Derrida’s most central thoughts: iterability, the promise, the secret, testimony, and a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.⁸¹ Were there time, perhaps we could address all of the relevant issues staged by this opening scene, but we must commit ourselves to asking what it may mean to address oneself, especially as a scholar of religious studies, to a ghost.

“Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio”(Hamlet, Act I, Scene I). “As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals,” writes Derrida, “scholars believe that looking is sufficient.” “Therefore,” he continues,

they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter. Herein lies perhaps, among so many others, an indelible lesson of Marxism.

There is no longer, there has never been a scholar capable of speaking of anything and everything while addressing himself to everyone and anyone, and especially to ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts—nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (“to be or not to be,” in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation.⁸²

⁸⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.

⁸¹ “*The time is out of joint.*” This also serves as the epigraph for the book. Derrida uses this phrase to index his analyses of metaphysics as the presence-to-self of hearing-myself-speak or as time construed in terms of modalized presents: past present, actual “now” present, and future present. Among other things, this is something Derrida interrogates in *Specters*.

⁸² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 11.

As an “indelible lesson of Marxism,” Derrida offers the possibility of addressing ourselves to who or what may come (back) from beyond the oppositions that define our reality and demarcate our scholarship (real/unreal, living/dead, present/absent, etc.). What Derrida’s discussion of Marx gives us to think is that scholars, especially scholars of religious studies, must address ourselves to who or what, perhaps, lies beyond the normal conceptions of consciousness, or so we shall see.

As we saw with James, religion, when reduced to its most basic, refers to the other of consciousness. And, again, according to Derrida, religion really reduces to, springs from, or relies on a kind of faith. Actually, so does reason. Derrida directs our awareness to the realization that the conditions allowing for communication ever already occur in an *a priori* context of trust or faith in the mysterious power of the address to be understood possibly at some other place and time (“trust me, I am speaking to you”). The possibility of this address, however, means that we are promised also to the possibility of difference and deferral as well. To be means to be promised or exposed to the possibility of ghost-like reappearance at some other place and time. (Think again of *The Matrix*.) Thus, structurally the promise, the address, the ghost, and faith are all entailed in the very respiration of the speech-act of coming to consciousness. The possibility of building such “over-beliefs” as either religion or reason entails, then, the ether of faith and the possibility of ghosts. If the movement of everyday consciousness occurs in my inner intimacy as hearing-myself-speak or feeling-myself, then its very respiration occurs in the context of a prior affirmation of trust or faith. Thus, to consciousness, trust is irreducible.

Which, of course, Descartes realized before Derrida, and Augustine before him. Positing the possibility of being deceived about one’s sense of existence by an evil demon, Descartes expended absolute doubt through the indubitable experience of doubting itself. Doubting gives

the minimum certainty of the awareness or experience of doubt. For doubt to exist, there must be an experiencer to suffer it. Hence, the classic *cogito*—"I think, therefore I am." Doubt of existence is expended through the experience of doubt. Similarly, in regards to his own possible demon of doubt, Augustine said, "if I am deceived, I am. For he who does not exist cannot be deceived. And if I am deceived, by this same token I am' (City of God, 11:26). It must be said that Augustine was undoubtedly drawing on his Greek heritage, which included Aristotle and Plato. And, they were drawing on their heritage of language and world, which drew on . . . which drew on . . . God?

Negative theologians have argued that if God only enters the scene to stop the infinite regress of the question of existence, then *that* "God" is not the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather the dead god of purely human speculation. When the *living* God gets subordinated to human conceptions, then religion, say the negative theologians, veers into the demonic, or succumbs to "onto-theology," as Heidegger would say—God cannot just be first cause and big Being confined to the categories of our being. Divine transcendence and the transcendental limitations of our existence through which we may experience that transcendence are indeed in tension, but this does not mean we cannot experience any transcendence. Indeed, understanding religion as opening to whatever may be "more" allows for both theological and a-theological notions of transcendence or the sacred. Such is the spectral notion this section attempts to adumbrate.

The very conditions, then, of consciousness's possibility entail faith. No judgment or statement can circumscribe this faith. Faith is the very condition of possibility for consciousness that simultaneously entails the impossibility of consciousness ever becoming its own ground. Consciousness finds itself ever already operating in the context of faith. This faith that is

consciousness's other may not be encapsulated in any formula, creed, language, or idea. Nevertheless, it affects us and enters experience. Indeed, the irreducible difference between consciousness and its other, between its conditions of possibility and impossibility and its sense of itself, constitute experience itself and our very "selves."

Thus, we have at least two elements to hold in tension: (1) consciousness as movement of language, representation, and identification, and (2) consciousness's other as who or what may come (back) from beyond reality's regnant oppositions. Bringing the first to an awareness of the other transforms consciousness from a restricted to a general economy: it opens it to the point beyond which its efforts to form reality into identifiable phenomena give way to loss. To engage in this movement of awareness is to be "religious," or rather to have "faith" in the sense I am defining it—although this may be a completely a-theological mode of religiosity, positing no supernatural agency. This other to consciousness opens us to a fragile faith in that which is more or other than our everyday concerns, founded as they are on preserving our well-being, our fragile egos, or our financial bottom lines. Of course, our financial system functions on faith as well, with the fiat system backing our capital accumulation. Which brings us back to Marx.

"Whether they wish it or know it or not," Derrida writes, "all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism."⁸³ "Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least," Derrida says, "except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*."⁸⁴ We now turn to a discussion of what this inheritance might mean for a scholar of religious studies.

If Derrida were to offer advice to such a scholar, I believe he would say that she should engage in *at least two* very Marxist movements: (1) an anti-idolatrous critique of systemic

⁸³ Derrida, *Specters*, 91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

oppression, and (2) emancipatory praxis. Indeed, one could read his *Specters of Marx* as offering just such advice. Recall that, in fact, what Derrida actually offers to scholars in that book as “an indelible lesson of Marxism” is the need to address oneself to ghosts:

Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the ‘scholar’ of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the “there” as soon as we open our mouths.⁸⁵

To a discussion of what this may mean, and thus to understand what Marx might mean for the particular study of ghosts that is contemporary religious studies, we now turn. I will show that a certain Derridean interpretation of the Marxist inheritance offers the scholar of religious studies a way through the chimerical impasse created by some of the stark alternatives (secular vs. sacred, natural vs. supernatural, and/or immanence vs. transcendence) that haunt the field.

“A spectre is haunting Europe,” Karl Marx announces in the first words of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Not confined to Europe or the *Manifesto*, specters also seem to haunt Marx’s works at some of the most interesting moments. For instance, in *Capital*, when Marx analyzes “the mystical character of the commodity,” he sees it as involving “nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form

⁸⁵ Ibid., 176.

of a relation between things.”⁸⁶ To make sense of such an exteriorizing of social relations such that objects take on life and appear to interact with one another independent of human agency, Marx makes a spectral move. “In order, therefore,” Marx says, “to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion.”⁸⁷

If we *must* make recourse to the religious analogy to communicate the “mystical” power that commodities take on, Derrida argues, “we should therefore not see in that only effects of rhetoric, turns of phrase that are contingent or merely apt to convince by striking the imagination.”⁸⁸ Precisely at the moment when and where Marx is trying to explain away that what we see (commodities relating to one another) is not what is in fact the case (rather, fetishism masks the underlying social relations), he needs religion.

“The mystical character of the fetish,” Derrida argues, “in the mark it leaves on the experience of the religious, is first of all a ghostly character.”⁸⁹ The present-yet-absent, absent-yet-present, there-yet-not-there quality of the ghost seems intimately entwined with Marxist analysis. Try as Marx may to conjure it away, the ghostly character still haunts. If a lesson of Marxism is that we should suspect reality to be otherwise than appearance, how do we know when suspicion should stop? Does not such suspicion imbue all appearance with a ghostly character of what may come (back)? In our studies, should we allow ghosts to (re)appear?

Of course, for Marx, once the underlying social contradictions creating the need for religious projections are resolved, the religious illusions themselves will disappear. In contrast to Feuerbach, Marx thinks that the human projection of superhuman divine agents arises not from mere thought but from social contradictions. According to Marx, Feuerbach correctly analyzes

⁸⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 165.

⁸⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 165.

⁸⁸ Derrida, *Specters*, 148.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

that the religious must be reduced to the secular, but fails to go further and note “that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis.”⁹⁰ This reduction to the secular “must, therefore, in itself be understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice.”⁹¹ The critique of religion, then, will uncover and entail a critique of society.

The implication of Marxism for practitioners of religious studies would thus be the same as for those of philosophy: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”⁹² A religious studies scholar working in this spirit of Marxism must not merely *describe* the religious by looking beyond its appearances to the social contradictions giving rise to those appearances, but must also seek to *change* the conditions creating the need for religion in the first place. For a religious studies scholar, this Marxist inheritance would mean critiquing religion until it goes away.

Indeed, according to Marx, “the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique.”⁹³ And, “the foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion; religion does not make man.”⁹⁴ People do not make it up from nothing for nothing, but rather to deal with the alienation arising from the conditions of this world. “The wretchedness of religion,” writes Marx, “is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions.”⁹⁵ And

⁹⁰ Karl Marx. *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1844, 2004), 122.

⁹¹ Marx, *German Ideology*, 122.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹³ Karl Marx. *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Jolin & O'Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970; ISBN 521078369); p. 131.

⁹⁴ Marx, *Critique*, 131.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

then comes the famous quote: “It is the opium of the people.”⁹⁶ In context, we see that this diagnosis is not nearly so negative as many make out. Like opium, religion not only conjures illusions, but also provides consolation. The goal of the critique of religion, however, would be to wean people off the religious opiate by alleviating the conditions that cause one to desire such an escape.

To understand the critique that can alleviate the class conditions that cause the need for the religious projection, we need to understand surplus value. As Ernest Mandel explains, “surplus value is nothing but *the difference between the value created by the worker and the cost of maintaining him.*”⁹⁷ When working longer hours than are necessary for their subsistence, laborers create value, according to Marx. Labor power thus creates value that gets imbued in objects over and above their original use-value. “This increment or excess over the original value,” writes Marx, “I call ‘surplus value.’”⁹⁸ At some point in the system, someone has to enter the mode of production with only her or his labor power to offer.

A capitalist then buys this labor power and appropriates the surplus value, thereby alienating the worker from the products of the worker’s labor. A capitalist mode of production is thus fueled by exploitation: the capitalist makes money by exploiting the worker. For capital to accrue, the capitalist must derive more value from the object produced than he pays the worker in wages. “As soon as a considerable surplus has been formed,” Mandel notes, “the possibility appears for a part of society to give up productive labour, obtaining leisure at the expense of the remainder of society.”⁹⁹ Expropriation of surplus value in capitalism fattens the capitalist and alienates the worker. Religious projections arise, then, from this alienation. Resolve the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ernest Mandel. *Marxist Economic Theory: Volume One* (New York: Modern Reader, 1962, 1970); p. 88.

⁹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 251.

⁹⁹ Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory*, 39

alienating conflict between social classes through total revolution and one dissolves the need for the religious projection.

In capitalism, however, this conflict does not appear as such. Instead, commodity fetishism conceals the underlying reality. “Value,” says Marx, “does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.”¹⁰⁰ The social production of value gets obscured as people see value not as something they produce and invest in objects through labor power, but as something inherent in the objects themselves, independent of the processes of production. And, now we return to religion.

“There,” says Marx, “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.”¹⁰¹ As it is in religion, “so it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.”¹⁰² Here, in order to explain the entirely human, and thereby natural and material character of commodity fetishism that obscures class conflict, Marx needs the superhuman, supersensuous analogy to religion.

In Marx’s analysis, even something so ordinary as a wooden table takes on a supernatural life of its own when it passes from possessing the use-value of a simple object to being possessed by the exchange-value of a mystical commodity. “So far as it is a use-value,” says Marx, “there is nothing mysterious about it.”¹⁰³ The table’s use-value reflects clearly the human labor power invested in it, “but as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which

¹⁰⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 167.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 165.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 163.

transcends sensuousness.”¹⁰⁴ As Derrida points out, this English translation attempts to conjure away a bit of the ghostly in Marx’s German:

“This woody and headstrong denseness is metamorphosed into a supernatural thing, a *sensuous non-sensuous* thing, sensuous but non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible (*verwandelt er sich in ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*). The ghostly schema now appears indispensable.”¹⁰⁵

The “phantasmagoric” (*phantasmagorische*) form of the commodity mystifies the underlying reality, not reflecting back to humans the true image of their social and material interrelations of labor power.

Instead, as we have said, value appears as a natural feature of the object itself. Marx’s analysis, however, shows that this *natural* appearance is anything but. “The specular,” thus, “becomes the spectral at the threshold of this objectifying naturalization,” argues Derrida.¹⁰⁶ Apparently, Marx’s mirror stage (like Lacan’s and so many others’) reveals the difficulties in attaining and/or maintaining a pure image. Much as he does with speech/writing, signifier/signified, etc, Derrida unsettles the rigid distinction between use-value’s clear reflection and exchange-value’s mystified deflection. As Derrida sees it, “use-value is in advance contaminated, that is, pre-occupied, inhabited, haunted by its other, namely, what will be born from the wooden head of the table, the commodity-form, and its ghost dance.”¹⁰⁷

Far from leveling the distinctions, however, Derrida cautions that “the commodity-form, to be sure, *is not* use-value, we must grant this to Marx and take account of the analytic power

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Derrida, *Specters*, 151.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 160.

this distinction gives us.”¹⁰⁸ Derrida argues, rather, that one affects the other, even before the first use. On the one hand, according to Marx, “commodities,” destined for exchange, “must be realized as values before they can be realized as use-values.”¹⁰⁹ But, “on the other hand, they must stand the test as use-values before they can be realized as values.”¹¹⁰ Here, Marx’s own circular slight of hand hints at the haunting that is there originally and essentially. “To haunt,” Derrida says,

“does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.”¹¹¹

Derrida’s “hauntology” here harkens back to his analyses of iterability that traverse his entire corpus.

To be means to be promised to possible repetition, difference, and deferral. We should thus link his analysis of the commodity ghost that haunts use-value to that of the trace that unsettles any thing’s singularity. Indeed, Derrida says, “the effort to think the trace is inseparable, and has from the outset been literally (I could marshal very many explicit indications of this; they have been accumulating for thirty years now) indissociable from an effort to think spectrality.”¹¹² So we see that “the ‘mystical character’ of the commodity is inscribed before being inscribed, traced before being written out letter for letter on the forehead or screen of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

¹⁰⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 179.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 179.

¹¹¹ Derrida, *Specters*, 161.

¹¹² Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 268n73.

commodity.”¹¹³ With the possibility of its use by others or its being used again, even if only its use as an orienting concept for a marxist analysis, use-value, according to Derrida, “in its originary iterability . . . is in advance promised, promised to exchange and beyond exchange.”¹¹⁴

This promise exceeds “the simple opposition of presence and absence, actuality and inactuality, sensuous and supersensible.”¹¹⁵ With this deconstruction, “*another* approach to differences must structure (‘conceptually’ and ‘really’) the field that has thus been re-opened.”¹¹⁶ “Far from effacing differences and analytic determinations,” Derrida argues, “this other logic calls for other concepts.”¹¹⁷ For our purposes, the other concept that Derrida offers in *Specters of Marx* to the religious studies scholar to think is that of the ghost: “one has to realize that the ghost is there, be it in the opening of the promise or the expectation, *before its first apparition*.”¹¹⁸ To understand what he means here, we must exorcise a little more Marx.

Allow me to quote a long passage from *The German Ideology* (which Derrida also quotes) that further illustrates Marx’s spectral logic. “In it,” Derrida says, “Marx advances that belief in the religious specter, thus in the ghost in general, consists in autonomizing a representation (*Vorstellung*) and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding (*reale Grundlage*).”

In religion people make their empirical world into an entity that is only conceived, imagined, that confronts them as something foreign. This again is by no means to be explained from other concepts, from “self-consciousness” and similar nonsense, but from the entire hitherto existing mode of production and intercourse, which is just as

¹¹³ Derrida, *Specters*, 161.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 162.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

independent of the pure concept as the invention of the self-acting mule and the use of railways are independent of Hegelian philosophy. If he wants to speak of an “essence” of religion, i.e., of a material basis of this inessentiality, then he should look for it neither in the “essence of man”, nor in the predicates of God, but in the material world which each stage of religious development finds in existence (cf. above Feuerbach).

All the “spectres” which have filed before us were concepts. These concepts — leaving aside their real basis (which Stirner in any case leaves aside) — understood as concepts inside consciousness, as thoughts in people’s heads, transferred from their objectivity back into the subject, elevated from substance into self-consciousness, are — whimsies or fixed ideas.¹¹⁹

“If one follows the letter of the text,” Derrida explains, “the critique of the ghost or of spirits would thus be the critique of a subjective representation and an abstraction, of what happens *in the head*, of what comes only out of the head, that is, of what stays there, in the head, even as it has come out of there, out of the head, and survives *outside the head*.”¹²⁰ This ghostly survival outside the head, however, makes all the difference. Like Ginsberg with Blake, the possible transference of consciousness outside the head and across time and clime can alter states—of consciousness or nations.

According to Derrida, “nothing would be possible, beginning with the critique, without the surviving, without the possible survival of this autonomy and this automatism outside the head.”¹²¹ Survival apart from the head, the living, productive head (and thereby succumbing to

¹¹⁹ Marx, *The German Ideology*, Section 16, Chapter III.8, found at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_German_Ideology/Section_16/Chapter_III_8. Accessed 4.17.2009.

¹²⁰ Derrida, *Specters*, 171.

¹²¹ Ibid.

the promise of possible repetition, contamination, etc.) makes all this possible. “Now, all *this*,” Derrida says,

this about which we have failed to say anything whatsoever that is logically determinable, *this* that comes with so much difficulty to language, *this* that seems not to mean anything, *this* that puts to rout our meaning-to-say, making us speak regularly from the place where we want to say nothing, where we know clearly what we do not want to say but do not know what we would like to say, as if *this* were no longer either of the order of knowledge or will or will-to-say, well, *this* comes back, *this* returns, *this*, insists in urgency, and *this* gives one to think, but *this*, which is each time irresistible enough, singular enough to engender as much anguish as do the future and death, *this* stems less from a “repetition automatism” (of the automatons that have been turning before us for such a long time) than it gives us to think all *this*, *altogether other*, *every other*, from which the repetition compulsion arises: that every other is altogether other.¹²²

We will unpack Derrida’s phrase “*tout autre est tout autre*,” or, as it is enigmatically formulated in English, “every other (one) is every (bit) other,”¹²³ in a moment, but for let us explain a little further what the *this* Derrida refers to above could possibly be.

What he means is that the possibility of an address opens us to any and every other—other contexts, but also anyone who could possibly read, hear, see or interpret our words or mark. Perhaps even God. “It is a question of the addressee, that is, the other,” says Derrida.¹²⁴ “Even if I know that I’m addressing you,” Derrida says, “I know that because my language is intelligible,

¹²² Ibid., 172-173.

¹²³ Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. David Wills trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); p. 87.

¹²⁴ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 35.

to some extent, it can be addressed to others.”¹²⁵ This opening to others required by language, experience, and consciousness, Derrida argues, opens us to the possibility of ghosts as well. And God. Even if there are no ghosts or God. “God exists,” declares Derrida,

to the extent that people believe in God. There has been a history, and there are religions. For me, religions are the proof that God exists, even if God doesn’t exist. That’s the question. Even if I were able to demonstrate, against all canonical proofs of the existence of God, that God doesn’t exist, it wouldn’t demonstrate that God doesn’t exist, because religions exist, because people believe in God. . . . So that’s enough. That’s God’s existence to me. Not simply Christian God, Jewish God, the Islamic God—*something* exists which is named God differently, with different meanings, with different images, with different rights, rituals.¹²⁶

Thus, *this something* which we may name God, but which may go by other names, activates or makes possible our survival and our critiques of religion. Even if it is nothing.

“But something happened,” Derrida continues, even if you follow Freud, as a neurosis. Perhaps it’s a human neurosis, but human neuroses attest to the fact that something has produced this neurosis. That’s God. God is the name of this pathogenic power that produces neurosis, psychosis, paranoia, wars, peace, love, and so on and so forth. Isn’t that enough? God exists even if, and especially if, he doesn’t exist, because how powerful this nonexistence should be to produce such extraordinary phenomena in what is called man.¹²⁷

This God, or neurosis, or possibility, then, of survival, of being communicable across time and clime, of iterability, this is what Derrida calls “the messianic.”

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

What precedes or exceeds this structure of messianicity, or what comes or comes back because of this structure, must by definition be totally other than what can appear within the confines of a delimited consciousness, which would then be subject to that structure as being communicable, spectrally, across time and space. His phrase then, every other (one) is every (bit) other, “is also the axiom of what I call messianicity.”¹²⁸ Derrida explains, “it means simply that every other, without or before any determination, any specification, man or woman, man or God, man or animal, any other whatever is infinitely other, is absolutely other.”¹²⁹ Even as we recognize the other as another man, worthy of dignity and respect, we are packaging into that recognition huge amounts of concepts that necessarily impose a certain violence on the otherness of that other person. We must allow for who/what may challenge and change even our surest assumptions about the other.

Once we acknowledge and respect authentic otherness, however, we are responsible for and to that other because “what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other,” says Derrida, “immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice.”¹³⁰ Recognizing otherness and responding to a particular other means sacrificing the other others. Thus, not only is sacrifice unavoidable, but in recognizing otherness we must also sacrifice sure recognition of the distinction between religion and ethics. “If every human is wholly other,” says Derrida, “if everyone else, or every other one, is every bit other, then one can no longer distinguish between a claimed generality of ethics that would need to be sacrificed in sacrifice, and the faith that turns towards God alone, as wholly other, turning away from human duty.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Jacques Derrida, in “Discussion with Richard Kearney” after Kearney’s essay “Desire of God” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed Caputo & Scanlon (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 1999), 135.

¹²⁹ Derrida, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 135.

¹³⁰ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 68.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

Here Derrida takes Abraham's unique sacrifice of his son out of his particular faith in the Wholly Other and radicalizes it to also simultaneously represent the most mundane sacrifice at every moment of our ethical duties for others. "As soon as I enter," says Derrida, "into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others."¹³² When acting in the particular moment, such as feeding starving strangers or our cats, whether we want to or not, we offer the "gift of death" through sacrificing our obligations to those other others:

I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably. . . . every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day.¹³³

Every moment of every day whenever we forsake other possible courses of action and respond to a particular place, time, and situation, we sacrifice others. Father Abraham, that seminal figure of sacrifice in the great monotheisms, was willing to sacrifice his son for the sake of the Absolute Other. Yet, so do we all when we decide in a singular moment to respond this way and not that. At once, the sacrificial moment is the most particular and singular, yet also the most universal and mundane.

Thus, "the other is God or no matter whom, more precisely, no matter what singularity, as soon as any other is totally other [*tout autre est tout autre*]," Derrida declares.¹³⁴ This carries the dual implication that (1) the particular other is other than me and I cannot fully circumscribe

¹³² Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 68.

¹³³ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 68-69.

¹³⁴ Derrida, *On the Name*, 74.

that otherness into my grasp, and (2) the particular other represents all the other others, thereby reminding me that in attending to this one, I have forsaken the others.

The messianic, then, involves “absolute hospitality, the ‘yes’ to the *arrivant(e)*, the ‘come’ to the future than cannot be anticipated.”¹³⁵ Messianicity is waiting for the other—the other beyond expectation, anticipation, invitation, or any possible identification. Messianicity is the ghostly “other concept” that Derrida gives us to think in *Specters of Marx*. A scholar who takes this other concept into account,

would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility. Better (or worse) he would know how to address himself to spirits. He would know that such an address is not only already possible, but that it will have at all times conditioned, as such, address in general. In any case, here is someone mad enough to hope to *unlock* the possibility of such an address.¹³⁶

Again, the opening of the promise of an address in general Derrida calls the messianic, rather than a particular messianism of one of the world’s religions, because it is a universal structure of experience—“this universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice—that is what I call the messianic structure.”¹³⁷

Derrida poses the question of revelation in relation to this structure. “The problem remains—and this is really a problem for me, an enigma—whether the religions, say, for

¹³⁵ Derrida, *Specters*, 168.

¹³⁶ Derrida, *Specters*, 12.

¹³⁷ John D Caputo and Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (Fordham Univ Press, 1997), 23.

instance, the religions of the Book, are but specific examples of this general structure, of messianicity.”¹³⁸ He delineates two possible options between which he cannot decide. First,

There is the general structure of messianicity, as the structure of experience, and on this groundless ground there have been revelations, a history which one calls Judaism or Christianity and so on. That is a possibility . . . You would have to go back from these religions to the fundamental ontological conditions of possibilities of religions, to describe the structure of messianicity on the groundless ground on which religions have been made possible.

Or, second,

The other hypothesis—and I confess that I hesitate between these two possibilities—is that the events of revelation, the biblical traditions, the Jewish, the Christian, and Islamic traditions, have been absolute events, irreducible events which have unveiled this messianicity. We would not know what messianicity is without messianism, without these events which were Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ, and so on. In that case singular events would have unveiled or revealed these universal possibilities, and it is only on that condition that we can describe messianicity.

Derrida acknowledges he cannot decide between them and suggests that “some other scheme has to be constructed to understand the two at the same time, to do justice to the two possibilities.”¹³⁹ We have seen that spectrality may be this other scheme. And ghosts are everywhere, anytime, universal. For Derrida, the “messianic structure is not limited to what one calls messianisms, that is, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, messianism, to these determinate figures and forms of the

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Messiah.”¹⁴⁰ Derrida warns that its universal character should not get reduced to any particular messianism because “then you are reducing the universality and this has important political consequences.”¹⁴¹

A scholar of religious studies, then, seeking to inherit a Derridean inflected spirit of Marxism would seek to be open to “the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*. We believe that this messianic remains an *ineffaceable* mark—a mark one neither can nor should efface—of Marx’s legacy.”¹⁴² If appearance may always conceal or distort reality, then we must hold open whatever appears to what may come, to what may change our vision, challenge our assumptions or be otherwise than our expectations. In short, we must try to talk with ghosts.

Finally, I wish to point out that delimiting subject matter for the study of religion necessarily entails a reference to something more than human, oftentimes supernatural agency. What Derrida’s analysis of Marx and the messianic gives us to think, however, is that such a “more” need not be mapped along a strict divide between natural and supernatural, with the former calling for materialistic, objective analysis and the latter calling for spiritualistic, theological faith. Such neat distinctions are impossible. We cannot take up residence in either camp without possibility of the other coming to visit. One haunts the other.

As Derrida shows, we must grapple with ghosts whether they exist or not “(of course they do not exist, so what?).”¹⁴³ In light of Derrida’s reading, then, I would say that Marxism actually offers not two, but at least three mo(ve)ments to the study of religion: (1) an analysis of the social and material forces that cause alienation, especially those that are otherwise than

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Derrida, *Specters*, 28.

¹⁴³ Derrida, *Specters*, 174.

appearance, (2) writing and praxis that seek emancipation from these oppressive forces, and (3) an opening to whoever or whatever may come that is otherwise than who/whatever has been encompassed or concluded by the other two. The third, of course, entails a critique of the others that may give rise to hesitation in the mo(ve)ment.

“This messianic hesitation,” says Derrida, “does not paralyze any decision, any affirmation, any responsibility. On the contrary, it grants them their elementary condition. It is their very experience.”¹⁴⁴ Otherwise, we are mere automatons, implementing a program. Thus, responsibility means the call for deconstruction never ceases (and ever arises). There will be no justice without this. Deconstruction can help the scholar of religious studies to talk with whatever ghosts may come (back).

“Enter ghost, exit ghost, re-enter ghost.” –Hamlet

Conclusion—The Unrecognizable: Unknowing the More or Less Human

Unsettling the more or less human through sacrificing sure recognition of the so-called “more” (Divine, Angel, Sovereign) and the so-called “less” (Beast, Animal, Matter), the perpetual process of striving to recognize the unrecognizable spans not only the divine and human divide, but also the human and animal. “Must not this place of the Other be a-human?”

Derrida asks. “If that were the case,” he continues

the a-human, or at least the figure of some divinanimality (to say it in one word), even if it were pre-sensed via man, would be the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, foreclosed, denied, tamed, sacrificed ground of what it grounds: namely the symbolic order, the human order, the law, justice. . . . This is one of the reasons why it is so

¹⁴⁴ Derrida, *Specters*, 169.

difficult to hold a discourse of mastery or transcendence with respect to the animal and simultaneously claim to do so in the name of God, in the name of the Father or the name of the Law. The Father, the Law, the Animal, etc. the sovereign and the beast—should one not recognize here basically one and the same thing? Or, rather, indissociable figures of the same Thing?¹⁴⁵

Here we glimpse Derrida’s nearly “negative zootheology,”¹⁴⁶ which is no mystical theology because, like Irigaray and Butler, he is attempting to show the exposure of the human to its other(s), not address himself, however humbly, to a hidden (W)Ho(l)ly Other. Although he allows for that possibility.

For Irigaray, Butler, and Derrida, then, our present idea of the human must ever always open to as yet unrecognizable others. We should thus perhaps not only sacrifice our surest certainties in the hierarchical ordering of the more or less human, but also unknow the human itself—not to become inhuman, but to show and know that we are not now, nor have we ever been the humans we think we are,¹⁴⁷ and, through this unknowing of the human, to rethink technology and passivity to become more responsive in our inter-relationships with others—whether other humans, other religions, or other animals, ecosystems, or whatever others may come—even, perhaps, the Wholly Other.

“If anything divine is still to come our way,” says Irigaray, “it will be won by abandoning all control, all language, and all sense already produced, it is through risk, only risk, leading no one knows where, announcing who knows what future, secretly commemorating who knows

¹⁴⁵ Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign: Vol. I*, 127.

¹⁴⁶ Derrida, *The Animal*, 6.

¹⁴⁷ For more, see Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

what past.”¹⁴⁸ She advocates that we commemorate the past other than by celebrating a bloody sacrifice of a human or animal body that hides the sacrifice of women and nature. We must engage in a new sacrificial mode that involves not only uncovering the hidden sacrifice of women but also striving to sacrifice sacrifice itself. As necessary as Irigaray’s feminine supplement to masculinist philosophy of religion may be, then, it is itself in need of a more expansive analysis beyond just gender difference—one open to race, class, species, religious and other unrecognizable differences to come. Even ghosts.

Whether in our theologizing or democratic theorizing, we need a mirror that reflects our being and becoming—as Irigaray says, “the mirror should support, not undermine my incarnation.”¹⁴⁹ Yet, the screen called divine should not only reflect the human species writ large, but also gesture beyond to humanity’s excluded elsewhere—to plants, animals, and further to what or who may come. The cosmic mirror may perhaps reflect the essence of a hidden God—origin and end; incarnate in, yet infinitely transcendent from, the world—or some other ineffable Reality, as the vast testimony of mystics across the ages gives us reason to wonder. But it also may simply reflect the structural opacity and openness of the human. A democratic body politic built around this openness would then ever strive to welcome other unrecognizable bodies yet to come.

Such a democracy would welcome whoever may come. Much as mystics pray to unknow themselves and their God, so would citizens ever revise their ideas of citizenship and nation. And perhaps inheritors of Christian negative theology have the most reason to practice political modes of undoing, in addition to their mystical ones. “More than any other form of democracy,” Derrida argues,

¹⁴⁸ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 53.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

more than social democracy or popular democracy, a Christian democracy should be welcoming to the enemies of democracy; it should turn them the other cheek, offer hospitality, grant freedom of expression and the right to vote to antidemocrats, something in conformity with a certain hyperbolic essence . . . of *democracy itself*, if “itself” there ever is, if there is a democracy and thus a Christian democracy worthy of this name.¹⁵⁰

If a Christian idea of justice, according to Matthew 25, would mean caring for the least among us—“Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.”—and, if, as the story describes, believers and nonbelievers alike in the time to come ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you . . .?” then that future wonder should spur us to present questioning—“Who is least?” Such a questioning process could have no end until kingdom come. A Christian justice, if there is such, should involve recognizing God in or as the perpetual process of opening to what or who may come.

Politically, sexually, and mystically, then, perhaps the processes of forming more perfect unions must involve sacrificing sure recognition of ourselves and our others. If uncertainty and unknowingness haunt the human, then we must, at some moment, sacrifice sure recognition of ourselves and whomever or whatever we deem as other. Perhaps, then, our mirror should reflect our own essential hiddenness from ourselves. Maybe our indeterminate nature, or common core of no common core, means that we should sacrifice not only sacrifice, but also sure recognition of any and every other, perhaps even a divine Other. Such is not the love of sacrifice, but the sacrifice of God to Love.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 41.

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