

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

NIHILISM: THE POSTMODERN DILEMMA

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

CALGARY, ALBERTA

DECEMBER, 1991

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ISBN 0-315-75190-8

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines several of the perspectives that Friedrich Nietzsche expressed at the end of the nineteenth century. In the first chapter, I examine Nietzsche's work, and specifically, his interpretation of the death of God and the dissolution of a metaphysical conception of the human self. His research and thoughts about language appear to inform his criticism of metaphysics and epistemology. Language, in Nietzsche's view, contains metaphysical presuppositions. God is a linguistic derivation, as is a belief in a substratum or essence that underlies the self or subject. According to Nietzsche, the Christian God and the autonomous self are linguistic illusions. Nietzsche sets in place the ideas and insights that allowed contemporary thinkers to deconstruct the epistemological foundations on which the human being stood as the privileged centre of discourse and understanding.

In the second chapter, I look at the work of the radical death of God theologian, Thomas J. J. Altizer. His own interpretation of the death of God and the death of the self translates into a vision of God as an immanent and total presence. Altizer interprets Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God as the end of the reign of the transcendent Other of human self-consciousness. Belief in a transcendent God was a consequence of the Fall of human consciousness from a primordial Totality into a dualistic (fallen) mode of

consciousness. But with the good news of the death of God, the interior mode of subjective consciousness also comes to an end. Altizer contends that God is now an immanent presence in the world (earth). The Apocalypse is now.

The third chapter concerns Mark C. Taylor's a/theological enterprise. Like Nietzsche and Altizer, Taylor affirms the death of God. He uses Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of language to (re)enact the death of God and the demise of the self. With the deconstruction of God and the transcendental signified, the subject/signifier is then released into the infinite play of differences. And as subjectivity is constituted in language and signs, the subject is subjected to and interpenetrated by impersonal and anonymous forms of discourse and power. The self, as a unified and autonomous bearer of consciousness, dies and is reborn as a subject who lacks a definite identity, but who affirms the process of becoming and the infinite play of the sign. Taylor appears to be advocating a form of active nihilism.

The fourth chapter is a response to postmodern nihilism. By employing the work of John Caputo, I observe the initial openings of a pathway that leads through the nihilistic house of mirrors. It is a course that acknowledges other human beings not as objects to be manipulated, nor as intersections of desire and discourse, but as human persons who live and suffer and die, and who are therefore worthy of attention.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To the friends in my life who have helped keep it interesting.

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## INTRODUCTION

The current interest in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche is easily discerned by browsing through the philosophy section in any good bookstore or university library. Nietzschean studies appear to be enjoying a renaissance among theorists and scholars from the disciplines of philosophy (both analytical and continental), religious studies (Eastern and Western), literature, and Western theology. Although it is unlikely that one could categorize Nietzschean interpretative studies under a single theme, his impact on contemporary thinkers and writers is undeniable.

Standing as he did at the beginning of the twentieth century, Nietzsche foresaw what some contemporary thinkers perceive as a nihilistic current that is today afflicting Western civilization. In this sense, Nietzsche's writings bear witness to the genius of his prophetic voice. His awareness of the crisis of nihilism that was developing in the Western world was, to his mind, the consequence of a loss of belief in the Christian God, and the failure of the metaphysical enterprise. In the first chapter, I deal specifically with Nietzsche and his understanding of the implications of the death of God, and the failure of a system of language, founded on metaphysical conceptions, to accurately portray reality.

In the second chapter, the focus shifts from Nietzsche to the theological enterprise of the death of God theologian,



Thomas J. J. Altizer. His writings, beginning in the 1960's span three decades. Altizer's debt to Nietzsche is enormous. His work could be characterized as a spiritual and mystical response to the crisis of nihilism, and the demise of the Christian world-view. Altizer's work has influenced the work of a number of religious thinkers, including the writings of the a/theologian, Mark C. Taylor.

Taylor's thought, however, was influenced not only by Nietzsche and Altizer, but most markedly by the deconstructive work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930- ), who was himself influenced by Nietzsche. In the third chapter, I examine Taylor's own adaptation of the death of God theme via the deconstruction of the dyadic foundations of the Western philosophical-theological tradition. Although all three of these thinkers (Nietzsche, Altizer, and Taylor) announce the death of the transcendent God of Christendom, each thinker expresses a distinct response to the abyss that is exposed by the death of God.

The concluding chapter represents my own response to the above mentioned thinkers and the demise of metaphysics and God. By conversing with the work of John Caputo, a contemporary philosopher, I attempt to follow a line of thought that I believe marks the beginnings of a passage through the nihilistic shadows that have darkened human existence in the closing years of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER I

NIETZSCHE'S WAY

Since the 1960's thinkers and writers, philosophers and theologians, have demonstrated a strong interest in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). His analysis and understanding of the philosophical and religious paradigm that had dominated the Western world up until the twentieth century both challenged and influenced a significant number of thinkers.

Recurring over and over in Nietzsche's body of work is his critique of the Western philosophical and theological enterprise, and its desire to locate a true world behind the chaos of becoming: "One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world."<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche is reacting against the traditional philosophical-theological paradigm that postulates a "true" world of Being, (metaphysics), or God (religion), existing beyond or behind the "apparent" world of becoming. From Nietzsche's perspective the invention of a "true" world amounts to a denial of the reality of the world as experienced by mortal human beings. He writes: "Reality had been reduced to mere 'appearance,' and a mendaciously fabricated world, the world of being, was

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House, 1967), p. 218.

honoured as reality."<sup>2</sup> The denial of the "apparent" world in favour of the "true" or ideal world is, from Nietzsche's point of view, a consequence of negatively judging life: "Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged life alike: it is no good."<sup>3</sup>

The question of the meaning or value of life has occupied the energies of thinkers for centuries, perhaps since human beings began to reflect on human existence. According to Nietzsche, the human person, awakening to his/her mysterious situation, "surrounded by a fearful void,"<sup>4</sup> suffers from a lack of meaning. "But his [the human person's] problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to his crying question, 'why do I suffer?'"<sup>5</sup> Thus the human mind created gods and metaphysical edifices in a quest for security and meaning in an otherwise frighteningly insecure world.

Western culture's traditional foundations thus lie in a world-view embedded in a hierarchical structure that provided a sacramental map, a cosmological orientation that gave

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, edited and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982) p. 473

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p. 162.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

meaning and purpose to human existence.<sup>6</sup> The human being lived and died in the cosmic eye of God. Life was a journey, a test to be patiently endured. And at death the faithful were rewarded for their sufferings in another realm, a true world, beyond and above the realm of becoming, and the radical insecurity of life.

In reading Nietzsche's body of work it becomes clear that he believed that the philosophical and theological endeavour had attempted to create a substantial world to give life meaning and security. In contrast, Nietzsche argues that existence is impermanent, ceaselessly changing, offering no guarantees, nor any stable grounds on which to find an enduring foundation. The average human mind, recoiling from such meaninglessness and the radical insecurity of the world-as-becoming, had instead imposed unity on the chaos of becoming. Of even the philosopher's motivation, Nietzsche writes: "Death, change, old age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections - even refutations."<sup>7</sup> The resultant need to create a totality, an Absolute truth, is, from Nietzsche's perspective, symptomatic of the presence of that uncanniest of guests: nihilism.

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<sup>6</sup>Ramon Elias Mujica, "My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me? The Death of God from a Cosmological and Psychological Perspective," in Religion, Ontotheology and Deconstruction, ed. by Henry Ruf (New York: Paragon House, 1989) pp. 89-92.

<sup>7</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 479.

### Nihilism

Nietzsche outlines three forms of nihilism in section Twelve of The Will to Power, writing that nihilism is a "psychological state" with three incomplete forms. The first form arises: "when we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged."<sup>8</sup> The meaning sought for could be any conceivable truth or purpose "to be achieved through the process -- and now one realizes that becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing."<sup>9</sup> And without a stable meaning or purpose, how is existence to be justified?

The second form appears when the human being loses faith in a metaphysical or religious ground, a faith which suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity.<sup>10</sup>

But in losing faith in an ultimate ground, Being or God, the human individual loses faith in his/her own value, because "he conceived such a whole in order to be able to believe in his own value."<sup>11</sup> When the world is perceived as a collision of

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<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

accidental forces and human life of no more worth than anything else, the value of human existence is placed in question.

The third form of nihilism is arrived at when the individual realizes that becoming has no purpose or aim, that the true world is a psychological projection, and that there is no overarching nor underlying unity in which the individual can find meaning and value. The world-as-becoming is reality - - this is it! There is, for Nietzsche, no ultimate source of value and meaning, no Being or Truth, to provide solace and an answer, a reason why the human being lives and suffers and dies. The world, and human life, are thus without value or purpose.<sup>12</sup>

In Nietzsche's perception, when the highest values of religion and philosophy are devalued by nihilism, life is lived without the security of Being and God. His response to the seeming absurdity and meaninglessness of an existence stripped of the comforts of faith in God or the philosophers Being is to actively affirm and embrace the world-as-becoming.

Nietzsche finds evidence for the presence of the first form of nihilism in what he believes is the philosophical-theological judgement against this world, the natural world, the world as experienced. Building on this negative view of existence, philosophers fabricated a spiritual world, a source of value and truth, thereby denying the value of this world.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

For Nietzsche, this meant that the metaphysicians and religious believers are nihilists; unconscious nihilists who resist the implications of their beliefs.<sup>13</sup> But these closet nihilists have not yet arrived at the third stage of nihilism which recognizes the ultimate meaninglessness of life. Therefore, they are unable to move beyond passive nihilism and actively affirm the world in all its apparent absurdity.

The three forms of nihilism that Nietzsche uncovers, once he devalues the metaphysical foundations that were formally used to project value onto the world, represent stages of passive suffering that need to be successfully passed through. This passage, together with an accompanying affirmation of the darkness and chaos, leads to a new feeling of power and freedom. For Nietzsche, to affirm passionately the chaos is a sign of courage and power -- "a divine way of thinking."<sup>14</sup> To submit passively to a weary and pessimistic "No" saying, is a sign of a declining and weakening spirit.<sup>15</sup>

Scathingly, Nietzsche mocks the closet nihilists:

Moral: let us say No to all who have faith in the senses, to all the rest of mankind; they are all 'mob.' Let us be philosophers! Let us be mummies! Let us represent monotonous-theism by adopting the expression of a gravedigger!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Alan White, Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 480.

To say "No" to the world, to the sensory experience, and instead seek security in a transcendental realm or in a substantial world-view, is to deny, rather than affirm the world-as-becoming. Following Nietzsche's perspective, saying "No" to the world-as-becoming by creating comprehensive moral and metaphysical structures is to negate life.<sup>17</sup> The method through which the "mummies" build their conceptual edifices, thereby inhibiting and selectively devaluing human experience, is through reason. "Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism."<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche thus denounces the metaphysical search for truth and knowledge that arises out of insecurity and a need for foundations. "When these honourable idolaters of concepts worship something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship."<sup>19</sup> And what is it that the "honourable idolaters of concepts worship" but the claims of philosophical language to represent truth and knowledge! "The 'activity of representation' proceeds from a mental interior that yearns for an accurate reading of external reality."<sup>20</sup> Such an accurate representation is dependent on

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<sup>17</sup>Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche And The Question Of Interpretation (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990) p. 92.

<sup>18</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>20</sup>Calvin O. Schrag, Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 95.



a metaphysical conception of language.

### Language and the Human Reality

Language, as a human creation, is regarded by rationalist philosophers as an activity that purports to represent the truth of reality. In Nietzsche's view, however, language, as a "linguistic designation," is an anthropomorphic creation arising out of the enigmatic urge for truth that possesses the human mind.<sup>21</sup> As Nietzsche reminds us, human thinkers have long used language as if there were an immediate and natural relationship between words and things. At the same time, they based knowledge on a belief in the correspondence between concepts and reality.<sup>22</sup> In criticism of this belief, Nietzsche writes:

Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases - which means strictly speaking, never equal - in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal.<sup>23</sup>

According to Nietzsche, philosophers, in believing that

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<sup>21</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in The Portable Nietzsche, pp. 44-46.

<sup>22</sup>Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche And The Question Of Interpretation, pp. 128-133.

<sup>23</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense, in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 46.

language and concepts provide access to meaning and knowledge, are assuming that their conceptual edifices provide knowledge of the world as-it-is.

Implied in this conceptual stance is a subject-object split, the "I" standing as a thinking being who is separate from the external, objective world. The "I" who thinks (res cogitans), and uses language instrumentally to re-present reality, stands as the foundation for all structures of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>.

But for Nietzsche, the world is flux and becoming, marked by an absence of enduring static truths. The instrumental use of language to represent a static truth or identity implicitly presupposes both a substantial subject and a substantial world enduring through time. But in the becoming of existence, any stable, enduring identity or presence appears as a conceptual illusion.<sup>25</sup> In affirming the world as impermanence and becoming, while denying that concepts have the power to represent a true picture of the world, Nietzsche undercuts the assumption that we can know the thing-in-itself. "We possess the concept 'being,' 'thing,' only as a relational concept."<sup>26</sup>

According to Nietzsche, philosophers, dominated by the

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<sup>24</sup>David E. Klemm, Hermeneutical Inquiry, Volume I: The Interpretation of Texts (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>25</sup>Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche And The Question Of Interpretation, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 313.

will to truth, and seduced by language, believe in being. Thus unable to perceive being amidst becoming, they have sought to dispel the veil separating them from the elusive truth of being. Nietzsche writes:

But since they never grasp it, they seek for reasons why it is kept from them. "There must be mere appearance, there must be some deception which prevents us from perceiving that which has being: where is the deceiver?"<sup>27</sup>

In their determination to reveal the true nature of the world, philosophers found the culprit in the senses. "These senses, which are so immoral in other ways too, deceive us concerning the true world."<sup>28</sup> Because they refuse to recognize that the human body's sensory organs are unable to perceive the essential nature of reality, Nietzsche accuses the philosophers of seeking refuge in reason and its offspring: substance, essence, and being.

But this traditional conception of reality as substantial, static, and objective, is, from a Nietzschean perspective, a nihilistic expression of the desire for stable foundations at the expense of an affirmative, Dionysian response to life and the senses.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 480.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 480.

<sup>29</sup>For Nietzsche, the Dionysian symbolized the joyous and creative affirmation of life in all its suffering and insecurity, destruction and recreation -- the will to life.

### Truth

Nietzsche, in On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense, asks, "whence in all the world comes this urge for truth?"<sup>30</sup> What need is the philosopher-theologian expressing in their search for truth? A world that is in constant flux is unstable, at least from the point of view of satisfying human desires. Happiness and security are thus impermanent, as is the individual's very life. The search for truth thus symbolizes the need for certitude and secure foundations. Equate truth with an ultimate ground of being, and delusion and unhappiness with becoming, and the traditional philosophical need is perhaps clearer. Nietzsche writes:

Man seeks "the truth": a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change, a true world - a world in which one does not suffer contradiction, deception, change - causes of suffering!<sup>31</sup>

But in Nietzsche's mind, the faith of the religious person or the concepts of the philosopher are able to find no stable ground in the realm of becoming. The resultant search for an underlying coherence, as an ultimate ground of truth and value within becoming, is an illusory quest. Truth, an absolute value, is a value which corresponds to an ideal world that,

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<sup>30</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 316.

according to Nietzsche, never existed.<sup>32</sup>

Nietzsche, as a philosopher of becoming, demonstrates a complete lack of patience with the delusory search for being and an objective truth. For Nietzsche, this search is incompatible with the reality of becoming. He writes: "Knowledge and becoming exclude one another."<sup>33</sup> The world itself is characterized by Nietzsche as a mysterious play of energies and forces continually creating, destroying, and recreating this enigma called life.<sup>34</sup> The very nature of life, in Nietzsche's view, offers no underlying unity, no stability from which to conceptually postulate identity and truth. So when Nietzsche asked: "What, then, is truth?" His response is appropriate:

A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>35</sup>

For Nietzsche, truth and meaning, as linguistic concepts created by human minds to impose order on the chaos of existence, are metaphors rather than objective truths.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-14.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 549-550.

<sup>35</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," in The Portable Nietzsche, pp. 46-47.

Language thus appears to have the capacity to seduce the mind into believing that the world is not what it is (becoming), but what it is not (substance). To use the word "becoming" is to risk it being conceptualized, thus nailing "becoming" into a facet of human knowledge that is categorizable and definable, thereby substantializing "becoming."

### Truth as Interpretation

For Nietzsche, truth, then, is an interpretation. Meaning and knowledge are interpretations; even a fact is an interpretation.<sup>36</sup> There are facts, of course, but the fact is dependent on a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. "For this fact has to be interpreted: in itself it just stands there, stupid to all eternity, like every 'thing-in-itself.'"<sup>37</sup> The question is not about facts in themselves, but the interpreted meaning of the fact as it presents itself to the individual human being. What significance and value does the fact hold for human beings? To ask this question is to invite a multiplicity of interpretations, where each person's perspective reflects the value and meaning that the interpreted fact holds for the particular individual.

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<sup>36</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 267.

<sup>37</sup>Nietzsche, as quoted by Alan White, in Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth, p. 48.

Nietzsche, in undercutting any ultimate ground or any absolute authority which determined value and truth, affirms a multitude of perspectives and interpretations. Interpretations arising out of perspectives allow for an ordering of the chaos of experiences and perspectives into new meanings. This liberates the mind from the suffocating embrace of dogmatism by allowing for new thought experiments and new modes of living and experiencing life.<sup>38</sup>

But the belief in a substantial and enduring reality or truth accessible to a conscious subject, who, through the instrumental use of language, is able to re-present reality within,<sup>39</sup> is a deeply embedded "truth" held in human beings' historically conditioned minds. However, there is, according to Nietzsche, no Truth, and no ultimate Author who confers value upon the world-text. When the highest values are devalued, and the world is emptied of ultimate meaning, the individual becomes the source of meanings and values. As a truth, reality is an interpretation, not an objective Truth possessed by an autonomous authority. There is, in Nietzsche's view, no objective reality existing independently of the human interpretation of that reality. From Nietzsche's perspective, a singular truth or perspective is incompatible with the reality of the world-as-becoming.

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<sup>38</sup>Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche And The Question Of Interpretation, p. 184.

<sup>39</sup>Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 145..

To experience, to see, and feel "the world" as Nietzsche felt it, as "a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and flood of its forms,"<sup>40</sup> is a Dionysian moment. Nietzsche's vision, as is evident, is not merely an intellectual apprehension by a disengaged subject gazing out upon an objective and certain truth, but a transformative experience, an ecstatic moment, overcoming the dualities of traditional philosophy. His is a perspective, an interpretation of reality that shatters the illusion of a substantial subject standing over against the objective realm as an enduring and constant presence.

For Nietzsche, good and evil are selective interpretations, and not absolute truths standing in opposition to one another. This is not to deny the respective experiences, but to confirm that all experiences and perspectives are interpretations. The closet nihilists, the metaphysicians and religious believers, have, according to Nietzsche, selectively excluded those aspects of life that they interpreted as being undesirable. They "hierarchized it [life] into the bearable and the unbearable, true life and the enemy of life."<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the nihilist retreats from fully embracing life-as-becoming. The closet nihilist escapes

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<sup>40</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 550.

<sup>41</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 284.



into the "meta-physical," and numbly seeks for release from the fullness and multiplicity of existence. To thus desensitize oneself to becoming and deny the full embrace of life is, in Nietzsche's view, to commit oneself to the substantive illusion of being, grounded in the metaphysical presuppositions of language and reason.<sup>42</sup>

### The Language of the Subject and the Self

Nietzsche also argues that the self or subject, as a unified bearer of consciousness, is a linguistic fiction. Consciousness is not rooted in a substratum. "There is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming: 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed -- the deed is everything."<sup>43</sup> The fiction or fallacy of a "doer" behind the deed, an actor behind the action, a subject standing over an object, is a conceptual construct.<sup>44</sup> But it is this linguistic fiction, the "prejudice of reason,"<sup>45</sup> that creates the concept of a subject, a "doer," which in turn begets the concept of substance.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 483.

<sup>43</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, pp. 267- 269.

<sup>45</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 480.

<sup>46</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, pp. 268-269.

The doctrine of a substantial self or soul found its beginnings in Greek philosophy, and more specifically in Plato, who conceived of the soul as a substantial immaterial entity enduring through time. Christian theology, throughout most of its history, was predisposed to envisioning the soul along the lines of the Platonic doctrine.<sup>47</sup> "The soul," John Macquarrie writes, "has been conceived as a substance, and this has been considered as guaranteeing the unity, stability, and abidingness (or even immortality) of the self."<sup>48</sup> But as I have already described it, Nietzsche considers the concept of a substantial subject, be it the immaterial soul or an ontological self, as a construct of language and reason. Language is a vehicle used to convey personal thoughts and feelings. But at the same time, language, according to Nietzsche, is unable to represent the thing-in-itself.

Nietzsche believes that language misleads, influences, and conditions the conscious mind, ensnaring the human person in the perceptual belief that one is an agent:

Everywhere it sees a doer and doing; it believes in will as the cause; it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego-substance upon all things - only thereby does it first create the concept thing.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), p. 74.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>49</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 483.

The web of language, having seduced the human mind into believing in a substantial ego or self, weaves a net of sedimented concepts across the surface of becoming. The web creates a believable projection: a monadic, autonomous subject standing over against an objective reality.

In Nietzsche's critique of the belief in a subject, Descartes, in addition to Plato, looms in the background.

"There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks": this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as "true a priori" our belief in the concept of substance - that when there is thought there has to be something "that thinks" is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed.<sup>50</sup>

According to Nietzsche, the ego as a substantial and enduring entity is a grammatical error, a consequence of the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions contained within grammar. Nietzsche notes how the "prejudice of reason" captivates human consciousness into conceiving and perceiving "unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, thinghood, being,"<sup>51</sup> whereas these illusions actually arise out of a faith in an ego, a "doer," a monadic subject.<sup>52</sup> For Nietzsche, the subject, as a unified locus of consciousness, an

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<sup>50</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, p. 268; quoted by Alan D. Schrift, in Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation, p. 139.

<sup>51</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols." in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 482.

<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, pp. 268-269.

epistemological ground of immediate certainty, an ontological presence enduring through time, is a product of language. The self, as subjective consciousness, is exposed by Nietzsche as a multiplicity, a plurality of forces, drives, and instincts, rather than a monadic, indivisible unity.<sup>53</sup> It is not Being that preceded being, but ego-consciousness that preceded and projected Being.

### Redemption

The Christian world-view, as well as all the people who practice the faith, are soundly condemned by Nietzsche:

This world of pure fiction is vastly inferior to the world of dreams insofar as the latter mirrors reality, whereby the former falsifies, devalues, and negates reality. Once the concept of "nature" had been invented as the opposite of "God," "natural" had to become a synonym of "reprehensible": this whole world of fiction is rooted in hatred of the natural (of reality!); it is the expression of a profound vexation at the sight of reality.<sup>54</sup>

The affirmation of the Christian reality results in a negation of the world-as-becoming, and a flight into other-worldly projections, a "true" world which will satisfy the fearful longings of the believer. In this context, suffering is understood as punishment for an original sin, the weight of

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>54</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 582.

existence a penance, a trial to test the faith of the believer. The world is negated in favour of God; becoming in favour of being; the material (the body) is rejected in the name of the spiritual.

For Nietzsche, in contrast, life itself is movement, change, and impermanence. That is reality. The constancy lies in the unceasing play of the world-as-becoming. Christianity condemns the world by creating a God who says No to life:

God degenerated into the contradiction of life,  
instead of being its transfiguration and eternal  
Yes! God as the declaration of war against life,  
against nature, against the will to live!<sup>55</sup>

Nietzsche's madman, announcing the death of God,<sup>56</sup> spoke not from an embittered heart, but from a heart overflowing with a love for life. To exclude by creating hierarchies of being, thus negating and denying tragedy, suffering, and the body, is not a loving response, but an expression of a fear of life, of ressentiment.<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche's greatest creation, his affirmative vision, is manifested in Zarathustra,<sup>58</sup> the Dionysian. But for

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>56</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup>When the instincts for life affirming expression are repressed, and a morality is created by saying No to reality and No to the world, the will to life is stunted and twisted, giving rise to hatred, fear, and anger directed against existence. See Nietzsche's book, The Genealogy of Morals, pp. 36-39, for his discussion of resentment.

<sup>58</sup>The creation of Zarathustra, in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, is Nietzsche's expression of the one who has not only passed through the death of God, and who thus confronts nihilism, but advances to the stage of an active nihilism. Zarathustra is he

this transformative vision to be revealed, for the Übermensch<sup>59</sup> to live, God must die:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comport ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?<sup>60</sup>

And with the death of God, so too must the human self, as a unified bearer of consciousness, a substantial being created in the image of God, die.

But it is not a literal death. The self is called upon to die as a substantial being by saying "Yes" to becoming, thus affirming both life and the self as a multiplicity of forces and experiences: love, suffering, pain, and joy. The love of life is unconditional, excluding nothing, embracing and being

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who beheld the insight into reality; he who is empowered to say Yes to existence and the terrible thought of eternal recurrence. And Zarathustra is the teacher of those, such as the Übermenschen, who are able to master the play of forces (becoming) that constitute existence.

<sup>59</sup>The Übermenschen are the superior players, the individuals who have affirmed and mastered the play of forces that both constitute themselves and existence. The Übermenschen are those who have passed through the death of God and the devaluation of the old moralities and values, thus affirming the realization of the world-as-becoming. See the section titled "Of The Higher Men" in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 296-306.

<sup>60</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, p. 96.

embraced by the "innocence of becoming."<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this is the meaning of Nietzsche's statement: "Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?"

The idea, the "type" of Zarathustra was a flash of inspiration, a "lightning," that "overtook" Nietzsche during a harsh and rainy winter on the coast of Italy in 1882.<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche's vision of Zarathustra, "a Dionysian relationship to existence,"<sup>63</sup> is a portrayal of the transfiguration of the world and of the human self. The power to affirm one's life, to say "Yes" to all of it, comes not from without, but from within -- a self-overcoming.<sup>64</sup> For the Dionysian vision to emerge, however, the enduring self (as bearer of a unified, transparent consciousness), the substantial subject, needs to be subverted.

Nietzsche believes that the de-substantialized ego or subject is inextricably constituted by primal forces, creative energies, and "the will to power."<sup>65</sup> That is, the subject exists not as a bearer of unified consciousness, but as a plurality of drives, affects, and instincts, moving within a

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<sup>61</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 284.

<sup>62</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 298-302.

<sup>63</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 283.

<sup>64</sup>Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 453.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 550.

multiplicity of forces. The Cartesian subject and the Platonic soul are revealed by Nietzsche as abstractions. The Christian God, the archetype for a solitary, unified consciousness, Creator of the created world, is exposed by Nietzsche as yet another linguistic construction. He writes: "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar."<sup>66</sup>

Nietzsche's statement is enigmatic. But given his project, as long as the human mind is ensnared in the substantive and anthropomorphic projections contained within language and grammar, God, as the ultimate Subject, the divine model for a solitary human subjectivity, will continue to exist. The concept of the Christian God will also continue to attract allegiance and belief until the human mind loses faith in language as a representation of the thing-in-itself. To find redemption from the captivating charm of language (as if words were instruments representing the Truth), is to be liberated from God and Being. The death of the divine Subject, the transcendental sovereign of the universe, allows the new human, the Dionysian Zarathustra, to say "No" to Being and Truth, and "Yes" to the world-as-becoming.

God died: now we want the Übermensch to live.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 483.

<sup>67</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 399.



## CHAPTER II

THE DEATH OF GOD AND RADICAL THEOLOGY

The death of God speaks of the loss of an ultimate source of value and meaning. When God is no longer a presence in human experience the human individual must assume the responsibility for creating meaning and value in everyday experience. But when the human self becomes the centre of existence, and the cosmos a silent void reflecting only the ultimate meaninglessness of existence, the dark shadow of nihilism falls across Western civilization. The loss of the transcendental ground and belief in an ultimate Authority seemingly entailed the collapse of a divinely ordained moral order. In the words of the theologian Thomas Altizer: "God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence."<sup>1</sup>

But Nietzsche believed that the human being had a choice, one that demanded courage and the willingness to sacrifice the morality and values of the collective masses. The individual could actively affirm, totally and without reservation, the meaninglessness of life, or adopt the degenerative comforts of the collective authority. Nietzsche's own response was to will Zarathustra, the teacher of the Übermensch, the one who creatively chose to overcome all prescribed moralities and

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God" in The Death of God, by Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p. 95.

values. In a world where there was no stability, no ultimate teleological purpose, in a world where chaos reigned and nihilism haunted human consciousness, Nietzsche chose to affirm the darkness and the suffering through an act of self-overcoming. In so doing, by way of Zarathustra, he said "Yes" to eternal recurrence,<sup>2</sup> thereby realizing that "The centre is everywhere."<sup>3</sup> In place of a true world of Being, Nietzsche created Zarathustra, who speaks of the death of God and thus creatively affirms the thought of eternal recurrence. But to live without any supernatural meaning or purpose, to create meaning out of the flux and chaos, demands the strength of the Übermensch.

#### Altizer: A Death of God Theologian

Nietzsche has enjoyed a strong influence on a small but influential group of contemporary theologians and religious

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<sup>2</sup>In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche writes that the "fundamental conception" of Thus Spoke Zarathustra is "the idea of the eternal recurrence." p. 295. The thought of eternal recurrence challenges one to affirm the very moment within which the he or she stands, thus affirming the entirety of his/her existence. The thought of eternal recurrence teaches the Übermensch that there is no linear teleology; therefore one renounces all hope and faith in a heavenly afterlife. Time, according to the concept of eternal recurrence, is a circular movement that repeats itself for an eternity. The challenge is to act in the awareness that every action will be repeated eternally.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968), p. 330.

thinkers. The death of God theme and Nietzsche's affirmative creation of Zarathustra, the teacher of eternal recurrence,<sup>4</sup> were embraced by a school of Protestant theologians in the 1960's who then formulated a theological response to Nietzsche's pronouncements. Foremost among the radical theologians influential in this movement is Thomas J. J. Altizer, a thinker and writer who discovered in Nietzsche's Zarathustra a way of formulating a uniquely Christian response to the death of God. Altizer's work is an expression of his attempt to respond to the loss of the transcendent or supernatural realm and to the crisis of nihilism.

Nietzsche is, in Altizer's eyes, a prophetic voice whose thought reflected the currents informing the human realities of his age as well as our own. For Altizer, to live in the modern world is to know the absence of God as a void, as a sense of lack in the modern human's experience of being-in-the-world.<sup>5</sup> But for Altizer, the death of God is an event to be affirmed as an occasion for faith and not despair.

Altizer nonetheless acknowledges that for a Christian to will the death of God entails a risk of a this-worldly damnation, thereby condemning oneself to a living hell. To affirm the death of God means that the contemporary Christian is renouncing ecclesiastical Christianity. But to renounce ecclesiastical Christianity means that the believer is

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, The Death of God, p. 98.

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other.<sup>9</sup> The Christian, who stands as a created and finite self before the transcendent Judge and Creator (the Other), and who believes that his or her condition is one of fallen sinfulness, will invariably feel unworthy and guilty. Sinfulness is a mental state or condition that encourages introspection and self-doubt, a reaction to the voice(s) of conscience that judge(s) the sinner as guilty before both the community and the presence of a transcendent God. To live consciously with an awareness of an invisible and alien presence, and under the power of a god who judges one as an unworthy sinner, is to know the depths and meaning of self-judgement. Altizer writes that

It is those who suffer most deeply who are most conscious of guilt, and those who suffer the least who are free of a bad conscience. Of course, suffering in this sense is not to be identified with mere physical pain, but instead with the creation of a full and active consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

To suffer with the experience of guilt is an expression of a bad conscience. It is an experience that arises due to a feeling or awareness of unworthiness and personal failure. It is a consequence, if we accept Nietzsche's view (as Altizer does), of the repression of the "instinct for freedom," or the "will to power."<sup>11</sup> And for Nietzsche, the "will to power" is the instinctual energy that motivates Zarathustra.

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<sup>9</sup>Merold Westphal, God, Guilt, and Death, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 309.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, p. 87.

The origin of bad conscience, according to Altizer, is the result of the fall of human consciousness, "a sudden fall," dividing light (consciousness) from darkness (drives, instincts).<sup>12</sup> He writes: "It must be a necessary fate, an inescapable destiny, and hence a tragic fall."<sup>13</sup> Morality too, on this reading, was a consequence of the fall of human consciousness into a dualistic mode. The subjective mode of consciousness necessarily establishes a dichotomy between light and darkness, self and other, creation and the Creator. Following Nietzsche, what function would morality or the law serve but to say "No," and thus to deny and repress the darkness (the will to power)? In Nietzsche's view: "God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!"<sup>14</sup>

The Christian, living in the presence of a transcendent Other, thus endures the burden of a guilty self-consciousness, an interior mode of consciousness that is the repercussion of a fall from what Altizer posits as an original Totality. A tension, therefore, exists between the autonomous subject of consciousness, a self-conscious centre, and its transcendental

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<sup>12</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Eternal Recurrence and the Kingdom of God," in The New Nietzsche, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1967), p. 236.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The AntiChrist," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 585.

foundation -- the all powerful Judge and Creator.<sup>15</sup>

In both Nietzsche's and Altizer's view, a guilty humanity is a suffering humanity. The repression of the natural instincts is viewed by these two thinkers as a denial of the human being's life-affirming energies. To walk through life carrying a dull awareness of guilt, and as a direct consequence to repress the natural instincts and energies, is to be afflicted with what Nietzsche phrased as ressentiment.<sup>16</sup>

As Nietzsche knew, in the presence of God, Christians habitually interpret their natural instincts as unworthy and reprehensible, for God stands as the antithesis of the human being's very nature.<sup>17</sup> When human beings deny and repress their instinctual nature or their "will to freedom," the effect, according to Nietzsche, is the advent of a bad conscience. The repression of the flow of the natural and life-affirming energies is maintained by projecting an ideal. This ideal was the image of a holy God: "and in the face of it to feel the palpable certainty of his own absolute unworthiness."<sup>18</sup> For Altizer, the transcendental God, as an Absolute Other, will attract not only the believing soul's love and devotion, but also its hostility and ressentiment.

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas Altizer, Total Presence, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup>See Nietzsche's book On the Genealogy of Morals, pp. 36-39, for his discussion of ressentiment. Also p. 23 of this thesis.

<sup>17</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

Altizer, interpreting Nietzsche's ressentiment, writes:

Always, however, resentment is a flight from life, an evasion of the human condition, an assault upon all life and movement as the way to the dissolution of pain. Resentment progressively lowers the threshold of consciousness, reducing experience to ever narrower spheres, or freezing a given state of consciousness by binding it to a hatred of its immediate ground.<sup>19</sup>

To live in a state of guilty ambivalence towards an opposing other, a power that inhibits and represses the instincts and drives, gives rise, on this reading, to the pain of self-hatred and alienation. Self-hatred and alienation are, in themselves, a state or condition of suffering and dis-ease. They find expression in ressentiment, a hatred or fear directed against existence.

As a solution to this situation, Altizer, like Nietzsche before him, affirms the death of the Christian God. Such a declaration releases the human being from the transcendental ground of guilt and repression.

If we can truly know that God is dead, and can actualize the death of God in our own experience, then we can be liberated from the threat of condemnation and freed from every terror of a transcendent beyond.<sup>20</sup>

For these thinkers, with the death of the Christian God, humanity is released into the immediacy of this worldly existence. There it faces seeming absurdity and nausea, and knows the loss of traditional moral authority. But this can

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<sup>19</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 139.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 141.



also imply, as it does for Nietzsche, a positive self-negation that is achieved by the death of God. However, for Altizer, in contrast to Nietzsche, this death of God and the self herald another type of affirmative vision.

### The Human Self

Traditionally, the human self was viewed as being created in the image of God, the Creator, and the transcendent Subject. But this God, as Creator and transcendent Subject, whose presence and identity were unknowable because of the infinite space and time separating the created world from its Creator, is recognized by Altizer as a projection of bad conscience. "The utter holiness of the Christian God may well be a reverse image of the utter guilt of man."<sup>21</sup> Essentially, this supposition constitutes the unrecognized condition of guilt. The full existential meaning of the condition of guilt was unknown until Nietzsche's madman descended from the mountain and announced the death of the Christian God. With the admission that God is now dead in human experience, the radical Christian is liberated from the threatening power of the absolute Other and its transcendent source.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to affirm the death of the Christian God, and confess that the

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<sup>21</sup>Thomas Altizer, "Eternal Recurrence and Kingdom of God," in The New Nietzsche, p. 236.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 143.

transcendental ground is no longer a reality in human experience, is to acknowledge that the self, created in the image of God, has lost its identity and grounding in a transcendent Other. In effect, the self-conscious subject, by negating the transcendent presence, negates its own mode of consciousness.

Altizer believes that what we understand as self-consciousness had a historical beginning in the birth of Christianity, but is now, in this current age, showing signs of coming to a historical end.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, he interprets the self-conscious self as a theological creation, whose genesis is found in Paul's letters and ruminations on guilt: "That consciousness knows itself as fallen, hence self-consciousness is here a guilty consciousness, or quite simply a bad consciousness."<sup>24</sup> A fallen consciousness knows itself as guilty, yet it is a consciousness which realizes itself as grounded, as an autonomous self, in a hidden and transcendent God. Altizer writes: "Above all, is it not necessary theologically to affirm that a unique and autonomous selfhood is truly the image of an absolutely transcendent God?"<sup>25</sup> However, perhaps the self is not an image or representation of an autonomous God, but rather, the image of God is in reality

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<sup>23</sup>Thomas Altizer, Total Presence, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, The Descent Into Hell, (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 152.

a projection of the autonomous and solitary self.

According to Altizer's understanding, the self is ruled by a bad conscience or a fallen consciousness. The self thus defines itself as unworthy and sinful, aware of its impotence as a finite creature. With the death of God, the self becomes a question mark. With the dissolution of the ultimate ground, the self-conscious subject loses its center and ground. "From this perspective, the death of God is the collapse of an absolute form of consciousness or self-consciousness."<sup>26</sup> The form of consciousness which knows itself in guilty self-judgement is in an ambivalent relationship (coloured by desire and ressentiment) to itself, to creation, and to the absolute otherness of God. And of course, it is this model of the autonomous self as a unique identity known to itself in self-consciousness that the Western world has understood as self-identity. It is, therefore, this image of self-identity that comes to an end with the eclipse of God.

The death of the self that Altizer recounts resonates with Nietzsche's description. It is a form of selfhood that exists as an unchanging, autonomous center of consciousness. It is a transcendent identity, detached and contained within the interiority of a centered selfhood.<sup>27</sup> It is "a unique self-consciousness which is both the mirror and creator of its

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 155-160.

world."<sup>28</sup> The death of God, and the negation of the transcendent ground calls out the death of the centered and autonomous self. The death of this autonomous self in turn implies that guilt and the weight of bad conscience, as well as all moralities and ideals hostile to the life-affirming impulses and instincts, have become irrelevant and meaningless.

The radical Christian, as well as the Western world, is therefore called upon by Altizer to wager that God is dead, and to join the quest for a new form of faith and identity that renounces all images and ideals representing a transcendental ground.<sup>29</sup> The act of renouncing and thereby negating the God of Christendom allows for a Yes-saying to the world, to life, and to the experience of this and every moment. As Nietzsche knew, "The 'kingdom of heaven' is a state of the heart."<sup>30</sup> The kingdom that the Christian expectantly longs for, as a future compensation for the trials endured in this life, is right here in this very moment. "It is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere."<sup>31</sup>

So for Altizer, instead of repressing the life-affirming instincts and negating worldly existence, the Christian is

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<sup>28</sup>Thomas Altizer, Total Presence, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 141-142.

<sup>30</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The AntiChrist," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 608.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 608.

called to an ultimate Yes-saying: "a total affirmation of our actual and immediate existence."<sup>32</sup> Altizer discovers in Nietzsche's vision of eternal recurrence<sup>33</sup> a way to compensate for the emptying of the heavens by creatively affirming a new immanence. This is realizable only if the human being will pronounce allegiance to the here and now rather than to a transcendent beyond. The death of the transcendent God is completed in the dissolution and death of an autonomous selfhood.

### The Descent into Hell

Altizer, as a Christian theologian, accepts the premise that there was an original Fall that severed human consciousness from the primordial ground of the Kingdom of God. "As a consequence of the movement and actuality of the Fall, alienation and estrangement penetrate the center of reality, as the primordial Totality becomes divided and alienated from itself."<sup>34</sup> As a consequence of the fall, the solitary self was created. Altizer envisions this self as constituted by a differentiated consciousness centered in a fallen transcendence. With the appearance of a solitary selfhood, an original experience of the immediate presence of

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<sup>32</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 145.

<sup>33</sup>See p. 27 for a description of eternal recurrence.

<sup>34</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Descent Into Hell, p. 183.

the Sacred was lost. To a fallen mode of consciousness, God then becomes envisioned as a transcendent Subject, an Absolute Other. Altizer contends that Western consciousness thus lost touch with the reality of this transcendent and sacred presence. The transcendent God became instead an absent presence, a presence known in human experience as nothingness.<sup>35</sup>

As the Christian God grew more distant, until it was finally absorbed into the infinite depths of space and time, the human experience of the reality of God was lost. The autonomous self found itself recoiling from a nothingness within and facing an abyss without. The death of God, and the negation of the transcendental ground, thus left an empty subjectivity in its wake.

A fallen consciousness, differentiated and estranged from Altizer's primordial Totality (the Kingdom of Heaven), knows itself in a guilty solitude. And with the loss of the transcendental ground and the power of the Absolute Other, the human being confronts only the groundlessness within human consciousness. This groundlessness thus tends to appear as the chaos and horror of our world, and is reflected, on Altizer's account, in the seemingly meaningless current of nihilism sweeping through Western consciousness.<sup>36</sup> But, as Altizer

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 187-190.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 142-144.

suggests,

This vision, however, allows us to peer into the abyss and thus to perceive the ultimate ground of No-saying: for guilt and resentment are rooted in the interior reality of chaos and emptiness.<sup>37</sup>

For Altizer, it is this vision of inner chaos, as a realization brought on through the darkening of the heavenly light, that reveals the dissolution of the autonomous and unified self. And it is this awareness of the dissolution of the ground of the autonomous self that Altizer calls "the historical realization of the descent into Hell."<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, Altizer seems to be suggesting that this reality, this world, is Hell. And Hell is the realm where the experience of God is unknown. From Altizer's point of view the modern Western world appears to have lost all contact with the transcendent God. Ours is a world where God has died in human experience. But, for Altizer, this is not the final word.

#### A New Immanence

Altizer's solution to this devastation rests on his reinterpretation of the New Testament account of the death of the historical Jesus. Altizer believes that the Crucifixion itself represents the death of the transcendent God. Thus the literal death of God was a manifestation of a divine movement

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Descent Into Hell, p. 154.

from transcendence into this-worldly immanence. The Incarnation of Christ actualized the kenotic<sup>39</sup> self-emptying of the transcendent God into the elements of life and existence.<sup>40</sup> Rather than seeing the Incarnation as the belonging of the resurrected Christ to the transcendent Kingdom of God, Altizer reverses the movement, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is realizable in the here and now. "It is precisely because the Kingdom is dawning here and now that its call and demand assumes a totally immediate and radical form."<sup>41</sup> The dawning of this Kingdom presumably demands a negation of a "true" or absolute world, and a total affirmation and commitment in faith to this-worldly existence.

Accordingly, a dualistic and autonomous mode of consciousness, transcendently grounded consciousness, must therefore be rejected. The negation of every image of a transcendental ground, and of all primordial images of an original Totality, is a negation of the Fallen mode of consciousness that conceives of itself as separate and distinct from the world. Altizer writes:

Only the dualistic form of the modern Western consciousness, which is grounded in the absolute distinction between the subject and object of consciousness, instills us with the seemingly

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<sup>39</sup>Kenosis is the self-giving or self-emptying of the Christian God as He pours divine energy and Being into existence.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 134-135.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Descent Into Hell, p. 145.



irrevocable sense that the world or reality stands wholly outside of consciousness itself.<sup>42</sup>

The dissolution of the autonomous self, of a subjective identity standing wholly apart from an objective world, effects a transformation of the human being's experience of reality. But to attain this new vision and faith-experience demands that the individual totally affirm the seeming chaos and meaninglessness of existence.

Altizer's interest in Nietzsche, and in particular in Zarathustra's Dionysian celebration of existence and experience, can be understood in light of Altizer's concern with overcoming the subject/object dichotomy prevalent in Western consciousness. "In its initial form, Nietzsche's vision of the Eternal Recurrence records the chaos of a world that has fallen away from its original center."<sup>43</sup> This center for Altizer is an original and fallen Totality. With the dissolution of the transcendental ground, the boundaries distinguishing an autonomous and solitary subjectivity from an original Totality disintegrate. Zarathustra says: "For me - how should there be any outside-myself. There is no outside."<sup>44</sup> The negation of the transcendent God of Christendom, and the kenotic emptying of the heavens into the

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<sup>42</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Response," in The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response, ed. John B. Cobb, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press) p. 143.

<sup>43</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 142.

<sup>44</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 329.

radical immanence of this-worldly existence, dissolves the dualistic structures of consciousness separating the human subject from the world and the divine. According to Altizer's reading, the divine becomes totally incarnate as a radical immanence. It is a total presence emptying the self of a dualistic and interior mode of consciousness.

Theologically, in Altizer's view, sin is understood as separation from God, living as if one were the center of existence. This is, from a theological perspective, a form of self-idolatry.<sup>45</sup> As long as humanity lives with a feeling of separation between profane existence and a sacred realm, it inhabits a fallen mode of consciousness -- living in sin. Dualistic consciousness is a consequence of the fall from a primordial Totality. "From this point of view, everything that a fallen man envisions and conceives of God was a fallen form of God."<sup>46</sup> The separation between an autonomous subjectivity and a reality that stands outside of a consciousness that perceives itself as the center of existence is theologically understood as an existential expression of sin. This is, in effect, a result of the fall into a dualistic experience of perception and thinking. But for Altizer, as a radical Christian, once the dualistic mode of consciousness is overcome, a new perception of the divine reveals itself.

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<sup>45</sup>John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, p. 264.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas Altizer, Descent Into Hell, p. 180.

Radical Christianity and Total Presence

According to Nietzsche's reading of the Gospels, a reading that Altizer uses for his theological purposes,<sup>47</sup> the good news that Jesus proclaimed is that: "'Sin' - any distance separating God from man - is abolished; precisely this is the 'glad tidings.'"<sup>48</sup> For Altizer, Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God erases the transcendent from human consciousness and experience. But while Altizer accepts Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of the transcendent God, he also overturns Nietzsche's stance by affirming the living reality of the divine as a total presence.

The Incarnation, for Altizer, assures the radical Christian that Christ is a living presence in the here and now of existence. But in the process of emptying his/her experience of the transcendental ground, the radical Christian must pass through the darkness and chaos of the modern historical experience. Yet it is a darkness that needs be embraced. For this is the way through the dissolution of consciousness. It is a way that passes through the negation and death of a dualistic (fallen) mode of consciousness. To attain this way, the radical Christian is called upon to

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<sup>47</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 176-200.

<sup>48</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The AntiChrist," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 606.

sacrifice the transcendent God. He or she must therefore abandon all hope in an other-worldly Kingdom of Heaven and totally affirm a fallen perception of reality.

Only an acceptance of a negative or fallen reality can make possible a *coincidentia oppositorum* that is a coming together of the dual reality of the sacred and the profane. It is precisely this *coincidentia* of the opposing realms of the sacred and the profane that makes possible Christianity's celebration of the Incarnation as an actual and real event, an event that has occurred and does occur in concrete time and space, and an event effecting a real transformation of the world.<sup>49</sup>

Altizer calls upon all Christians to give a resounding "Yes" to reality and the human experience. To give their energy and awareness to the chaos and darkness of contemporary existence in such a way is to die to guilt and sin in the search for ways to understand and celebrate the radical immanence of Christ. This affirmation of reality is a negation of a dualistic mode of consciousness that distinguishes the profane from the sacred. The Incarnation, in Altizer's view, is the event that shattered the dichotomy and released a total energy that dissolved the opposites. Once more, heaven and earth, God and His creation, and the sacred and the profane are unified.<sup>50</sup>

Nietzsche, through his study of the psychology of the "Redeemer," knew that the life and practice of Jesus was the way to God. Nietzsche, thinking about Jesus, wrote:

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<sup>49</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "The Sacred and the Profane," in The Death of God, p. 149.

<sup>50</sup>Thomas Altizer, Total Presence, p. 65.

He broke with the whole Jewish doctrine of repentance and reconciliation; he knows that it is only in the practice of life that one feels "divine," "blessed," "evangelical," at all time a "child of God." Not "repentance," not "prayer for forgiveness," are the ways to God: only the evangelical practice leads to God, indeed, it is "God";<sup>51</sup>

Reconciliation with a transcendent God is an illusion according to radical theology. The reality of the divine is in the here and now. It is only through an affirmation, a Yes-saying to the moment, that the human being attains the realization of the blessedness of the divine. This realization dissolves the boundaries separating a self-conscious inwardness from an objective and external reality.<sup>52</sup>

Altizer sees Zarathustra as a counterpart to Nietzsche's understanding of the historical Jesus. He asks, "Is Zarathustra the resurrected Jesus?"<sup>53</sup> While Jesus came to announce the dawning of the Kingdom of God, Zarathustra arose to speak the words: "God died: now we want the overman [Übermensch] to live."<sup>54</sup> This Übermensch: "this victor over God and nothingness - he must come one day."<sup>55</sup> The Übermensch is anticipated by Nietzsche as arising to rescue reality from

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<sup>51</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The AntiChrist," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 607.

<sup>52</sup>Thomas Altizer, Descent Into Hell p. 169.

<sup>53</sup>Thomas Altizer, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectics of the Sacred, p. 191.

<sup>54</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 399.

<sup>55</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, On The Genealogy of Morals, p. 96.

the legacy of the god-ideal, thereby redeeming humanity from "the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism."<sup>56</sup> Zarathustra is the first heroic spirit possessed of the creative strength essential to overcoming the transcendent God, nihilism, and the fallen mode of dualistic consciousness. Altizer writes:

Could we say that the "glad tidings," both of Jesus and Zarathustra, are the announcement of the death of God? Surely the death of God abolishes any distance separating God and man, and with that abolition, sin and guilt disappear.<sup>57</sup>

In the moment when guilt and sin are overcome; self-consciousness comes to an end. With the dissolution of self-consciousness, the transcendental ground disappears, and the world in all its fury and chaos, creation and destruction, manifests itself. The passage through the death of God opens before the radical Christian, who must now affirm the spectacle as it unfolds. This affirmation involves proclaiming "Yes" to the emptiness and darkness, "Yes" to the groundlessness, and await the epiphany of light in openness and faith.<sup>58</sup>

The epiphany of light Altizer envisions is a compelling image. It is a this-worldly voyage through what he understands as the nihilistic darkness and madness of Hell. His is a

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>57</sup>Thomas Altizer, "Eternal Recurrence and Kingdom of God," in The New Nietzsche, pp. 139-140.

<sup>58</sup>Thomas Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, p. 146.

passage through the interior ground of human consciousness. This is a passage into an absolute solitude where paradise lost is the final realization of paradise itself.<sup>59</sup> This, for Altizer, is a realization that is fulfilled in the dissolution of an interior form of consciousness. It marks the end of an autonomous and self-conscious individuality. Altizer's passage is a movement into a solitude where the "I" vanishes, and a total presence is manifest. In this total presence, the death of God is consummated, and finds expression as an immanence that reverses all previous forms of consciousness.

Thereby a distinctively and uniquely Western self-consciousness has ended, and with that ending consciousness realizes a new anonymity, an anonymity in which all boundaries disappear, and in which nothing whatsoever is manifest and real which can be known and named as consciousness and consciousness alone.<sup>60</sup>

With the ending of a fallen consciousness and a selfhood grounded in a reciprocal relationship to a transcendent Other, an energy is released that ends all oppositions and dualities. It is an energy that knows itself as a total presence.

The realization of a total presence that negates all images and names identifying a transcendent God, completes Altizer's eschatological vision. This is a vision that he

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<sup>59</sup>Thomas Altizer, Total Presence, pp. 107-108.

<sup>60</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "The Beginning and Ending of Revelation," in Theology At The End Of The Century, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) p. 97.

proclaims as the Apocalypse.<sup>61</sup> The Apocalypse unveils and thereby reveals the hidden primordial Totality. The nomadic wanderers, the prodigal sons and daughters of God, then reawaken to the immediacy of a total presence.

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<sup>61</sup>See Thomas J. J. Altizer, History as Apocalypse, (Albany: State University of New York, 1986).



## CHAPTER III

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO TAYLORThe Final Flourish

Altizer's death of God theology has greatly influenced Mark C. Taylor's post-death-of-God a/theology; indeed, Taylor, commenting on the impact of Altizer's work, writes: "the most influential proponent of the death of God theology is Thomas J. J. Altizer."<sup>1</sup>

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, in Altizer's theology the death of God is not an occasion for despair but for celebration. Altizer is rejoicing at the good news that the death of God advances an awareness of the presence of the divine in the here and now. As also noted in the previous chapter, the self, which was known through a reciprocal relationship to the transcendent Other of human consciousness, also necessarily comes to an end. The dissolution of the ground of individual selfhood speaks of the ending of a distinct mode of consciousness and identity. The death of the One is the death of the other/self. In Altizer's apocalyptic vision, the death of an individual center of consciousness issues forth in a rebirth of a universal consciousness -- "a total and immediate presence."<sup>2</sup> Altizer's "No" to the

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<sup>1</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Tears, (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, Total Presence, p. 107.

transcendent Other, and to the subjective mode of consciousness, is a "Yes" to the Apocalypse, a realization of a total presence that negates all dualities and all otherness.

But it is also possible, as Mark Taylor suggests, to read the death of God as the "impossibility of presence," rather than as the immediate dawning of the presence of the divine.<sup>3</sup> Taylor, while both affected and impressed by Altizer's body of work, contends that the death of the transcendent God is not necessarily the (re)birth of a total and immediate presence, as is Altizer's view. Instead, it reveals an incurable wound.<sup>4</sup> Employing the insights of contemporary deconstructive, structuralist, and poststructuralist thinkers, Taylor reinterprets the divine as a style or form of writing.<sup>5</sup> This writing is released from a relationship between word (signifier) and material concept or referent (signified). It is a writing informed and deformed by the death of the transcendental signified. As will become clearer later in this chapter, a semiotic analysis of the meaning of the signified

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<sup>3</sup>Mark Taylor, Tears, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup>Mark C. Taylor, "Nothing Ending Nothing," in Theology at the End of the Century, edited by Robert P. Scharlemann (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>The disappearance of the transcendental signified from the perspective(s) of a deconstructive a/theology means that writing is no longer bound to a representational structure of signification. Therefore, an a/theological writing deconstructs the binary terms (sacred and profane, identity and difference, etc.) -- the exclusive opposites on which theology has traditionally erected its hierarchical foundations. Also see p. 72, this thesis.

annihilates the very idea of the presence or absence of God.

Taylor writes:

Though Altizer is our most important death of God theologian, he has not thought the death of God radically enough. To think the death of God in all its radicality is to confront the impossibility of presence and the inescapable absence of apocalypse.<sup>6</sup>

In light of his comments about Altizer, Taylor's own a/theological project may be viewed as his quest to think through, in an even more radical fashion, the death of God.

Taylor's most important and central work, which established him as an a/theologian, is Erring (1984).<sup>7</sup> It is influenced and informed by an amalgam of thinkers and writers: Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Derrida. In it, and in all of his subsequent writings, Taylor systematically presents his interpretation of the death of God. He completes the process by deconstructing the modernist conception of God, as well as of the autonomous self. Taylor's work builds on Altizer's accomplishment, leading into a postmodern a/theology of the death of God.

### The World of the Logos

Prior to the modern turn from the self to the subject, the created world is held to be a meaningful order. As I

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<sup>6</sup>Mark Taylor, Tears, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup>Mark C. Taylor. Erring (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

argued in the first chapter, in this view meaning and truth, in harmony with divine providence, are discernable in the world. The world is a copy or a sign reflecting an original or true world behind the material realm. God, as the transcendent Origin, is thought to be the First Cause of all things. God's thought, as mediated through his Logos, brought the world into being and is guiding the course of human history from its origin to the end of time -- the dawning of the Kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the world is God's text, a logocentric narrative, "consonant with God's thought and speech,"<sup>9</sup> a sign signifying the presence of its transcendent Author.

In reading the descriptions of classical Christian theism, Taylor concludes that God, in this conception, is one with Himself:

Utterly transcendent and thoroughly eternal, God is represented as totally present to Himself. He is, in fact, the omnipresent fount, source, ground, and uncaused presence of presence itself.<sup>10</sup>

The task or vocation of the Christian living in the premodern world, as Taylor understands it, is to achieve a self through a relationship to God. In Taylor's words, the "self is made in the image of God and consequently is also one, i.e., a centered individual."<sup>11</sup> Taylor likens the process of attaining

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<sup>8</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.81.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

unified selfhood to one of imitation.<sup>12</sup> The vocation to be fulfilled by the Christian believer is that of a unified self. It is an attainment realizable through a mediated relationship to God by means of scripture and ritual, and by imitation of the way of Jesus Christ. "By representing the presence of God to humanity, the Logos [Christ] reveals the self to itself."<sup>13</sup> The human person, by following the example or the ideal of Christ, achieves an identity (modelled on the identity of God) and becomes present to itself as a self. In Taylor's words: "the self is actually an image of an image, an imitation of an imitation, a representation of a representation, and a sign of a sign."<sup>14</sup> In attempting to become a self through a relationship to God, the human person achieves self-identity, and thus reflects divinity.

Within the theological enterprise, as Taylor interprets it, the divine Word is the locus of truth and meaning. The Word is God's Logos, the ground of the created order. Taylor writes: "The divine word is that through which everything is originally created and by which all things are judged."<sup>15</sup> The created world and all things in heaven and earth are therefore signs expressing the thought-presence of the transcendent Author.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

God-language, as written in scripture and theology, is traditionally believed to both reflect and express the thought-presence of the transcendent Author, the Origin and Cause of meaning and truth. Scripture represents an extra-linguistic presence that exists prior to and independently of the world. The world, therefore, is dependent on the presence of the transcendent God. The Word, emanating from the mind of the divine author, represents a transcendental signified as absolute presence, a stable center that bestows meaning and identity to its creations. It follows, then, that the created order and the self are but signs where signifiers pointed towards a transcendental signified that guarantees identity and presence.

### The Inward Turn

In contrast, to be alive in the closing years of the twentieth century is to live in the aftermath of the death of God. The death of God, from the standpoint of radical theology, was and is a monumental event for Western culture -- an event whose implications are as yet being drawn out.<sup>16</sup> To live in the wake of this occurrence is to be alive in what Taylor refers to as the postmodern era. The term "postmodern" is not uniquely Taylor's, but has been used since the 1960's

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<sup>16</sup>By no means is the death of God an event that is universally accepted by Western society. Belief in God, and in the Christian religion, is not at all uncommon.

in architecture, art, literary theory, and continental philosophy.<sup>17</sup> However, for Western theologians, as Taylor suggests, the failure to confront the death of God has made it difficult for theology to approach the postmodern.<sup>18</sup> The postmodern age, according to Taylor's analysis, opened with an awareness of an incurable wound: "This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death - a death that 'begins' with the death of God and 'ends' with the death of ourselves."<sup>19</sup>

The death of God is not a recent phenomenon peculiar to the twentieth century, nor did the awareness of God's demise suddenly appear or disappear in Western consciousness. Nietzsche's declaration, coming as it did on the eve of the twentieth century, gave expression to a movement or an awareness whose roots lie in Renaissance humanism.<sup>20</sup> But the

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<sup>17</sup>Postmodernism is a notoriously difficult term to define. But while modernism stressed identity, referential inwardness, and representational truth, postmodernism decentres these modernist ideals, and in the process attempts to draw out the consequences of the end of modernism. Postmodernism marks the end of modernism.

<sup>18</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>20</sup>The Renaissance humanist, Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1492), was to formulate the new conception of the dignity and place of the human being in his "Oration on the Dignity of Man," writing: "We have placed thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe what is in the world." In The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 225.

actual denial or forgetting of the transcendent God began, according to Taylor's understanding, in the historical period known as the Enlightenment (the eighteenth century).

Following Taylor's reasoning, the death of God is a consequence of Western humanity's struggle or attempt to free itself from the oppressive foundations and structures on which Western culture traditionally rested. The individual was dominated by the authority of church and state. This is an authority legislated, so to speak, from above. In an effort to achieve personal autonomy and freedom from guilt and the stifling weight of authority, and fired by confidence in human reason,<sup>21</sup> the oppressed revolted.<sup>22</sup>

According to Taylor's analysis, an intellectual revolution begins with Reformation theology and Luther's emphasis on the centrality of the individual's salvation. This revolution marks a shift towards an emphasis on the self. It is a human-centered movement that finds further expression in Descartes' own radical turn inwards to the foundations of the cogito.<sup>23</sup> "In the Cartesian cogito, the 'I think' is destined to lie beyond all doubt in principle because it is

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<sup>21</sup>Taylor quotes Kant's declaration ("Have courage to use your own reason! - That is the motto of enlightenment.") as an expression of the Enlightenment's critique of authority, a critique that translates into the individual expressing his or her autonomy from the bonds of authority. See Erring, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20-24.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.



present to itself in the act of thinking."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, as human consciousness is increasingly subjectivized (a shift that would take generations), the world is objectified. Thus the self gazes out upon the world from the sovereign isolation of the Cartesian ego, secure on the foundations of the cogito. This objectification of the world is presumably a result of Descartes' res cogitans defining itself as subjective identity (a disembodied mind) which distinguishes itself from everything other than itself.<sup>25</sup>

Although Descartes is clearly not rejecting God, his influence on the development of critical thought and subject-centered reason is profound. In the generations that followed Descartes' inward turn, increasing numbers of thinkers begin to reject the vision of the world as a sacred whole (a rejection of a theocentric model). This move displaces the hierarchical realms of both the social order and the cosmos. As another contemporary philosopher, Charles Taylor, suggests, the human person begins to attend to the subjective processes of thought.<sup>26</sup> Human reason is granted a growing respect and veneration. But with a growing respect for reason and human autonomy, the human self comes to know and identify itself solely in subjective consciousness. The inward turn to the

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<sup>24</sup>Gary John Percesepe, Future(s) of Philosophy (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Deconstruction in Context, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>Charles Taylor, Human Agency and Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). p. 224.

foundations of the cogito implies that meaning and identity, rather than being sought for in a relationship to a transcendent God, or in His created order, may then be found in the subjective processes of human reason. The subjective recesses of the mind gradually become the new center and ground of identity and truth. A new paradigm of the self gradually emerges. In Mark Taylor's words: "As God created the world through the Logos, so man creates a 'world' through conscious and unconscious projection."<sup>27</sup> The death of God ushers in a new Copernican revolution that establishes human consciousness as the creative center of the universe.

Taylor contends that, with the decisive turn to the self, an era of tremendous political, cultural, and intellectual upheaval occurs, eroding the foundations of traditional Western culture.<sup>28</sup> "Social rebellion reflects and is reflected by intellectual revolution."<sup>29</sup> The turn toward self-centered consciousness is a move that radicalizes not only conceptions of the human person, but of the objective world. This revolution in consciousness occurs over a period of several hundred years, and during its evolution leads to the emergence of atheistic scientific methodologies, as well as to the death of the transcendent God. The work of Nietzsche can be viewed as the culmination of this movement.

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<sup>27</sup>Mark Taylor, Erring, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

### The Death of the Self

Nietzsche exemplifies the mode of consciousness that bears witness to the transference of the traditional attributes of the transcendent God to the human self. "Through a dialectical reversal, the creator God dies and is resurrected as the creative subject."<sup>30</sup> The death of God, as Taylor suggests, liberates the human self from the shadow of a transcendent Other. The self reclaims as its own a presence and power, and thereby achieves freedom and an autonomous identity.

God, as Taylor describes Him, is traditionally conceived of as causa sui, that is, self-creating, self-present, and self-enclosed.<sup>31</sup> These are the very attributes that humanistic atheists appropriate as their own. And with this inversion of the divine with the human, "the problem of mastery and slavery is relocated rather than resolved."<sup>32</sup> The human self, in appropriating the divine attributes, becomes a center unto itself. It is a center that dominates, represses, and excludes otherness (difference) in an attempt to secure a unified identity. As Taylor phrases it: "Not radical enough to reject completely the notions of center and centeredness, the

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<sup>30</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Deconstruction in Context, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

humanistic atheist removes one center, God, in the name of another, humanity."<sup>33</sup> The world, no longer the manifestation or sign of the thought-presence of the divine Author, becomes the property of the human species.

The denial of God rested on the need of the self to assert itself in the world as an autonomous identity and become master of itself. But as Taylor's analysis demonstrates, this death of God, as proclaimed by Altizer, marks the end of a human self created in the image of the transcendent God. In rebelling against authority, an authority that was linked by some nineteenth century thinkers to the divine Author,<sup>34</sup> the transcendental ground of Being that confers selfhood is supplanted by an autonomous subjectivity.

Confronting a world where the material manifestations (signs) of God's transcendent presence have vanished, the humanistic atheist is compelled to seek knowledge and certainty through the instrumental use of reason and language. As the center of meaning, like a lamp of creativity and reason shining upon the objective world, the autonomous subject is free to impose meaning on the materiality of the world. The universe no longer presents itself as a source of a transcendent meaning, nor as the text or signs of the thought-presence of God. Instead it is re-presented via signs in the subjective mind of the observer. The subject, therefore,

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

creates and transforms the world through the use of reason and language. This means, in short, that the subject constitutes language.

Language is an instrument, a tool of rational thought, a means of gaining knowledge of the world as an objective process. A word meant what it signifies. Therefore, a creative human consciousness gives language meaning, so that the word represents an idea or an object in the material world. Taylor writes: "In different terms, the modern subject defines itself by its constructive activity."<sup>35</sup> The writing of words is tied in with the theory of the representational nature of language. The written word thus depicts an idea in the writer's mind, or an object in the world. The subject gives the word meaning. By re-presenting the objects of consciousness to itself in language, the autonomous subject names itself as the center of meaning.

In Taylor's reading, this revolution in consciousness initiates a revolutionary struggle to overturn the foundational structures of a traditional Western theology. But in the wake of this struggle, the seeds are sown that will inevitably cause the death of the autonomous subject. What follows is Taylor's view of the legacy that modernism gave birth to. He writes:

By denying God in the name of man, humanistic atheism inverts the Creator/creature relationship

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<sup>35</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Altaarity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xxii.

and transforms theology into anthropology. Posthumanistic a/theology, by contrast, maintains that this inversion, though it is necessary, does not go far enough.<sup>36</sup>

### The Derridean Influence

Taylor's work may be viewed as a post-death-of-God a/theology. His a/theology works to effect a deconstruction of the binary terms of self and other -- the "asymmetrical hierarchy" that has traditionally formed the basis of Western theology, philosophy, and culture. In Taylor's view, modern thinkers, in reversing the Creator/creature relationship, simply invert, and do not subvert (deconstruct), the hierarchical economy of domination.

A post-death-of-God a/theology, by contrast, works "to effect a dialectical inversion that does not leave the contrasting opposites unmarked but dissolves their original identities."<sup>37</sup> Using the insights of twentieth-century art, linguistics, literature, and philosophy, Taylor re-reads Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche in his endeavour to think after the death of God, and thus attain a perspective on the postmodern era.<sup>38</sup> Taylor's central approach is, however, a critical deconstructive re-reading of the philosophical

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<sup>36</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

foundations of Western theology. By employing the deconstructive critique of language, as exemplified by the foremost deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida, Taylor charts an path through the theological framework. This erring/erratic path dislocates the network of binary terms that ground theological thought.

Primarily an approach to the text, and to writing, deconstruction is a contemporary critique, which dismantles the entire philosophical-theological tradition from within. In Taylor's words: "Once terms undergo deconstructive analysis, they cannot simply be reinscribed within an oppositional system that previously had defined and constituted them."<sup>39</sup> According to Taylor's a/theological re-reading of Western theology, the whole enterprise rests on a fabric of relationships that establishes identity by excluding difference. The exclusive logic of the Western metaphysical tradition is represented in binary terms. The Western metaphysical tradition allows one term to rule over its opposite. As Taylor explains it: "Invariably one term is privileged through the divestment of its relative."<sup>40</sup>

The theological tradition, at least until deconstruction, is a complex and interwoven structure based on the assumption that the word (signifier) points beyond consciousness to a timeless idea or referent (signified). Taylor argues that

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

Although not immediately evident, this pattern of signification is tied up in the ontotheological network. God, or His substitute, appears either covertly or overtly to be the final meaning of the word. Put differently, God, is, in effect, the "transcendental signified" that grounds the structure of signification.<sup>41</sup>

The transcendental signified, though not necessarily named God, is privileged over the signifier. Derrida writes: "The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth."<sup>42</sup> The signifier is presumed to be related to a transcendental signified. Yet the signifier is subservient to the signified, in the same way that the created order is subservient as a reflection of a thought in the mind of the transcendent God.

But Derrida's work, following Nietzsche's view of language as non-representational, interrogates the everyday commonsense notion that assumes a referential connection between the word (signifier) and the concept or referent (signified). It is Derrida's critique of language that Taylor adopts and that enables him to launch his own a/theological project.

### The Loss of the Signified

As trained philosophers, both Derrida and Taylor are in dialogue with the Western intellectual tradition. In this

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>42</sup>Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. 14.



tradition, the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is particularly influential for the deconstructionist project. The most crucial point is Saussure's recognition that the connection between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, not absolute. The signifier is "arbitrary in that it actually has no connection with the signified."<sup>43</sup> The signifier, from Saussure's point of view, is not intrinsically related to an extralinguistic concept or meaning. A sign's meaning is dependent on the temporal network within which it is situated. Christopher Norris, one of Derrida's most sympathetic commentators, writes:

For it is a major precept of modern structural linguistics that meaning is not a relation of identity between signifier and signified but a product of the differences, the signifying contrasts and relationships that exist at every level of language.<sup>44</sup>

Deconstruction, following Saussure's work, is primarily a critique of language, questioning and subverting the relationship between signifier and signified. In this process it shatters the metaphysical foundations of Western thought.

While Saussure's work merely revealed the differential character of concepts, as defined by their relations to other concepts within the language system,<sup>45</sup> Derrida introduces a

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<sup>43</sup>Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," in Deconstruction in Context, ed. Mark C. Taylor, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup>Christopher Norris, Derrida (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p. 85.

<sup>45</sup>Gary John Percesepe, Future(s) of Philosophy, p. 40.

non-concept, a neologism, différance,<sup>46</sup> into this metaphysical edifice. Différance dislocates and defers the coincidence of identity and meaning with the sign, questioning the basis of identity and difference, presence and absence. Différance is subversive, disturbing and playing with oppositional concepts, subverting by exposing and releasing the differential movement that shatters the illusion of the plentitude of identity. Yet it performs this activity without being subject to the same displacements. In Derrida's scenario, the signifier floats freely, as a trace lacking any reference to an original truth or presence.<sup>47</sup>

Rather than being viewed as oppositional concepts existing within a binary network, identity and difference, presence and absence, signifier and signified, are decentered and deferred. Identity, previously conceivable only as a univocal presence in the present, is now presented as a concept dependent on a network of differences. Identity becomes inscribed in difference. Différance, from a deconstructionist perspective, ensures that the transcendent boundaries that privileged the signified, and arrested and enslaved the signifier, are breached. The signifier, under the tutelage of différance, is released from "the self-referential

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<sup>46</sup>Différance, which does not play the role of a word or a concept, leaves room for the substitution of other "words," such as trace, spacing, or supplement, etc.

<sup>47</sup>See Derrida's important essay "Differance," trans. Alan Bass, in Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3-27.

unity of the concept."<sup>48</sup>

In this view, the sign, then, is neither present nor absent, but an effect of the play of differences. "In itself the sign is nothing."<sup>49</sup> Within the deconstructive schema, the sign is emptied of the plenitude of meaning. Inscribed by traces of signs, bound within a mirror play of signification, the sign signifies a deferred presence -- a non-presence that, according to deconstruction, announces a breach in the metaphysics of presence. The quest for the truth of a self-identical presence behind the realm of becoming is disrupted by deconstruction, irrevocably. The liberated word, from Taylor's perspective, enacts the kenotic emptying of all absolute self-presence and unified identity.<sup>50</sup>

With the deliverance of the word from the reign of the transcendental signified, Taylor decrees the death of God in a deconstructive reading of scripture. The death of God (the transcendental signified), in an a/theological posture, marks the end of a referential system of writing that gives priority to the signified over the signifier.<sup>51</sup> In Taylor's view, the divine is no longer conceivable as a transcendent presence, nor, for that matter, as an immanent presence (a total presence). The divine is, in effect, desubstantialized. As

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>49</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 173.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., pp. 172, 120.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 105-106.

realized by Taylor, the divine becomes the mirror play of signification -- a writing of the word that is without grounding in an original presence.

From an a/theological stance, then, the word "God," neither refers to nor describes an extralinguistic presence or absence. Instead, it is displayed in a constructive structure of signs. In this reflecting web of interconnected, interrelated signs, each sign bears traces of all the other signs embedded within the theological matrix. Within the province of signification, "signs represent objects produced by the creative imagination of the creative subject. What appears to be an independent object is really a construction of the subject."<sup>52</sup> This suggests that in an a/theological context, the transcendent God is a creative construction, an intellectual projection. Therefore, within the milieu of a deconstructive reading and writing, the liberation of the sign from the reign of the transcendental signified not only re-enacts the death of God, but buries all memories and traces of the transcendent God of Christendom.

#### A/theology

There is not, from the perspective(s) of deconstruction, a prelinguistic nor an extralinguistic reality to which human consciousness has unmediated access. Taylor, employing

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<sup>52</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Tears, p. 213.

Derrida's insights, states that "the signifier is the signified."<sup>53</sup> There is, then, no stable presence, no Reality that lies beyond the play of the signifier that human consciousness can know. Taylor writes: "Consciousness, therefore, deals only with signs and never reaches the thing itself."<sup>54</sup> The sign is always a sign of a sign,<sup>55</sup> which suggests that the subject's awareness and knowledge of reality is constructed through language and signs.

With the death of the transcendental signified and the promise of the plenitude of presence, the signifier floats freely in a play of differences. The dream of enjoying the full identity of the self as a conscious presence known in the present through the re-presentation of its signs, is, according to deconstruction, deferred. To privilege the sign as the creative product of an autonomous and subjective consciousness presumes a self-identical, disengaged center. But consciousness, as Nietzsche postulated, and Derrida and Taylor concur, is itself the play of forces and differences. In their view, then, we cannot conceive of a self present to itself, centered in the transparency of consciousness. There is no substantial presence existing prior to play of signification.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>56</sup>Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, pp. 16-17.

With the loss of a stable presence or truth representable to a subjective center of consciousness and identity, the subject, however, does not completely disappear, but is resituated in language. In replying to a question about the subject, Derrida, responding to Richard Kearney, is quoted as saying: "The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language."<sup>57</sup> The locus of meaning and identity has been displaced from subjective consciousness onto the anonymous structures of language and discourse. In effect, the autonomous, self-identical presence of the subject is deferred and displaced. Identity, the property of the sovereign individual, is erased and decentered in the interplay of identity and difference.<sup>58</sup> The subject, emptied of self-identical presence, is relocated in the interlocking webs of differential connections and intersubjective relations that constitute language.

The self, whose death Taylor traces, following Nietzsche, Altizer, and Derrida, is displaced by the notion of the "subject."<sup>59</sup> In Taylor's language: "The disappearance of the

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<sup>57</sup>Jacques Derrida quoted by Richard Kearney, "Derrida," in Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, trans. and ed. by Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 125.

<sup>58</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, pp. 141-143.

<sup>59</sup>It is important to distinguish between the two notions of the subject. It was Descartes who established a conception of the disengaged subject who stands in binary opposition to an object. However, Michel Foucault redefined and decentred the

self-identical individual, however, is at the same time the appearance of the subject that is formed, deformed, and reformed by the play of differences."<sup>60</sup> With the death of God and the emptying of the cosmos of all transcendental signifieds, the autonomous and sovereign self, centre of meaning and rational consciousness (cogito), also disappears. For Taylor, it appears that once the center is decentered, a deconstructive discourse exposes the non-identity of the self. In a non-mystical sense, the self forgets itself.

Inscribed in language and discourse, in the play of signification, the decentred subject is, in Taylor's conception, a trace that transgresses the boundaries of the dualistic divisions that separate subject from object, body from mind, and subject from subject.<sup>61</sup> Taylor is thus able to declare that the solitary self, "which defines itself in and through opposition to, and transcendence of, other isolated subjects,"<sup>62</sup> is finished.

In accordance with the a/theological stance, the death of God transmutes the incarnation of the signified into a signifier, being into becoming, and the sacred into the

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conception of the subject as an autonomous unity of consciousness by suggesting that subjectivity was constituted by external and impersonal forces. See Foucault's article, "What is an Author?," in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 101-120.

<sup>60</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 137.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 136-137.

profane. This is a movement that decentres the exclusive identities of binary opposites, rather than uniting them as one. The interplay of the opposites "produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once: a medium located between the two terms).<sup>63</sup> Across this medium, in Taylor's view, the opposites interact, entering a matrix of relations, a plurality of forces and energies that constitute the eternally recurring milieu of the word.

Freed from a transcendental signified, from longings for a stable identity, from a signified presence that stabilizes the self/signifier, the subject, according to a/theology, is liberated into a carnival of anonymous play. The subject is constituted, inhabited, and spoken by the anonymous, impersonal, yet intersubjective structures of language. In itself, the deconstructed self, now a subject, is a shifting, erring intersection of identity and difference, interiority and exteriority, life and death. For Taylor, the subject is liberated, as is the signifier, into the unending play of differences that is writing.<sup>64</sup> It appears that for Taylor, the death of the transcendental signified is his a/theological version of grace.

The a/theological revelation is that there is no presence, no permanence, and no truth behind the realm of appearance (signs). Because our understanding and awareness of

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-116.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., pp. 134-138.



the world is always mediated through signs or the play of appearances, the world for Taylor is nothing more than a refracting surface of signs upon signs upon signs. If this is the situation, then Taylor is re-interpreting Altizer's Dionysian embrace of the world of appearance. Taylor's embrace, in contrast to Altizer's affirmation of a total presence, reveals nothing behind the mirrored house of signification. The nothing that Taylor writes of "is neither the no thing that is the fullness of being nor the absence of things that is the emptiness of nonbeing."<sup>65</sup> Taylor's nothing leaves us with nothing.

Taylor is an interesting thinker -- but to what fate does he finally abandon us?

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<sup>65</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Theology at the End of the Century, p. 67.

### CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here? The prophetic voice of Friedrich Nietzsche has long since announced the death of God and the call to overcome human existence. In the wake of these momentous proclamations, the foundations of metaphysics are crumbling. The postmodern age opened by announcing the end of modernism and confirming the death of the metaphysical subject. In fact, it appears that postmodernism is announcing the death of everything, leaving Western culture straddling an abyss. The world has become an enigma. No longer are we able to confidently claim a privileged stance, a solid foundation on an Archimedean cogito from which to view the whole. The whole has been fractured along with the cogito, split into a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. The decentred subject is revealed not as a monadic center of consciousness, a self-sufficient unity grounded on the principles of reason, but has given place to a process inhabited by the other(s) -- anonymous forces and impersonal structures. The philosophical quest for the true representation of reality, an extra-linguistic presence, appears to be dissolving in an anarchistic play of appearances, of signs without identifiable destinations. Are we then to assume that we are lost in a postmodern labyrinth?

### The Postmodern Turn

Nietzsche was and is, undeniably, a pivotal figure in the history of Western thought. Mark Taylor concluded that Nietzsche is "one of the greatest prophets of postmodernism."<sup>1</sup> In Nietzsche's wake, the metaphysical and epistemological foundations on which Western philosophy and theology traditionally built their systems have now begun to decompose. The human subject, formerly the unified ground of epistemic certainty, is decentred and dispersed. Following deconstructive thinking, the sovereign subject has been resituated; its epistemological foundations deconstructed and disseminated. Language is now perceived as the locus of meaning. And meaning is deferred in the infinite play of the sign. In this sense, language has become self-referential. The radical skepticism of the deconstructive effort has undermined the sacred bond between the word and the world. We now live, in the words of the eminent literary critic, George Steiner, "after the Word."<sup>2</sup>

In a recent book, Steiner writes: "Fundamental breaks in the history of human perception are rare."<sup>3</sup> Steiner believes

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<sup>1</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

that Western culture is now undergoing a process of metaphorical and perceptual transformation, a process that is discernable in our discursive practices. In light of Nietzsche, deconstruction, and a/theology, Steiner's point is well taken.

To question the claims of reason and language to mirror reality is, of course, an implicit acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge. The skeptic interrogates the beliefs that have assumed the status of absolute knowledge. The covenant between word and world has been broken. That is, there is no longer an integral connection between grammar, logic, and the naked reality that the word was once believed to represent faithfully to a knowing subject. With the breaking of that seal, the certainties of absolute knowledge withdraw.

But with the breakup of the old order, Who are we? And where are we going? Perhaps there is no answer other than an awareness that we do not know. The death of God not only foretells the death of the self, but opens a void, an emptiness into which the modern world is disappearing. Mark Taylor, in a review essay on Thomas J. J. Altizer, asked: "Is the absence that haunts the modern world truly a presence, a total presence that marks the end of history and the realization of parousia?"<sup>4</sup> For Altizer, the answer is yes. Whereas, for Mark Taylor the answer is less certain.

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<sup>4</sup>Mark C. Taylor, "Altizer's Originality: A Review Essay." Journal of the American Academy of Religion, LII/3 (1984) p. 569.

While the certainties of absolute knowledge founded on the self-certain ground of the cogito have vanished, Altizer nonetheless realizes an absolute presence in the void that characterizes his understanding of the post-death-of-God age. But Altizer is a personality with pronounced mystical leanings. For him the dissolution of a subjective consciousness standing over an objective realm does bear a marked resemblance, at least to this reader, to mystical conceptions of the enlightened or awakened state of consciousness (nonduality). Taylor, however, sees a strong Hegelian strand to Altizer's dialectical thought. This dialectic reconciles identity (subjectivity) with difference (other), thereby overcoming duality in a unifying vision of the divine in the here and now.<sup>5</sup> But it is a vision, a realization of a total presence, that is attained only when the ground of an autonomous subjectivity is absolutely negated. The human being thereupon attains a realization of the divine as absolute identity in which he or she participates. This, for Altizer, is universal salvation. But to overcome duality and the subject-object dichotomy demands a total affirmation of human experience. It is, in short, a Dionysian ecstasy.

Altizer takes Nietzsche very seriously, finding a salvific path through Nietzsche's expression of the Übermensch. But the irony here is that Nietzsche stated there

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 571-572.

is no path, no way. When Zarathustra asks: "This is my way: where is yours?," he challenges his followers to find their own way: "For the way -- that does not exist."<sup>6</sup> Yet, Altizer, in his obsession with the absence of God, discovers in Nietzsche's Dionysian celebration of the world-of-becoming, a celebration or affirmation that denies nothing except denial. It provides a way or path through the abyss into a realization of the total and immediate presence of the divine. The self dies, but only to be reborn in a universal presence and not as an autonomous subjectivity.

Altizer appears to have overcome, at least in theory, what G. B. Madison refers to as the "essence of modern thought from Descartes to Sartre: dualism."<sup>7</sup> The being that is reborn in Altizer's version of the death of the autonomous subject has overcome duality and alienation, and the tension between identity and difference. For Altizer, the overcoming or transcendence of the subject-object duality is predicated on his interpretive understanding of Nietzsche's Dionysian affirmation.

Nietzsche's infamous proclamation of the death of the metaphysical subject of humanism<sup>8</sup> influenced not only Altizer's theological project, but Mark Taylor's a/theological

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<sup>6</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," trans. Walter Kaufmann, in The Portable Nietzsche, p.307.

<sup>7</sup>G. B. Madison, The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in The Portable Nietzsche, p. 379.

work. But while Altizer envisions the human being overcoming duality (the subjective mode of consciousness), Taylor draws upon Derrida's deconstruction of the self who stands over the world as a self-presence present to itself in consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Altizer's theology, Taylor's a/theology is derived quite specifically from the deconstruction of both the subject and language. This move, however, did not originate with Derrida, who was himself building on Nietzsche's original critique of language and consciousness.

The self, who in turn produces language and meaning, is perceived by Nietzsche as a linguistic fiction, a fallacy of reason. The self is, in reality, a product of language.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche's insight, complemented later by Saussure's work in linguistics, and furthered by Derrida, has had a profound influence on the decentering of consciousness. The subject can no longer be conceived of as a unified ground of rational consciousness, but rather as a process inscribed and reinscribed in the play of language, a play that shifts the center of gravity from consciousness onto the structures of language.

The subject-object dichotomy, a linguistic illusion in

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<sup>9</sup>The self, as noted earlier in the thesis, is a theological conception, and must be distinguished from Descartes' disengaged Cartesian subject who stands over against the objective other. The self, on the other hand, is presumed to have ontological foundations; that is, to be an essential and substantial being.

<sup>10</sup>See first chapter of this thesis, pp. 14-15.

Taylor's a/theological model, is disseminated in a complex network of relations, in an acknowledgement of the interdependence of identity and difference. In contrast to Altizer's theological vision, Taylor's a/theological matrix views presence and absence as intermingling in the textual play of language. The autonomous subject no longer, in current postmodern theory, enjoys a privileged foundational point from which to view the whole. The foundations have shifted. The subject is not constituting language, but is instead constituted in anonymous linguistic networks.

The languages of scripture, narrative literature, philosophy, and art, rather than representing an original truth or presence, are revealed as a textual play, reflecting only itself. They have lost their authority.<sup>11</sup> According to postmodern theorists, we now enter a labyrinth of mirrors, the surfaces of the labyrinth reflecting the viewer and the text in an infinite series of perspectives.

Religion and the great humanist meta-narratives of progress and emancipation, with their power to order human lives and to shape ethics and morality, have, according to postmodern theorists, been displaced. We now know that God is dead. And yet to announce the end of metaphysics and the death of the subject, is perhaps a theoretical move, rather than a literal account.

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<sup>11</sup>John O'Neil, "Postmodernism and (Post)Marxism," in Postmodernism - Philosophy and the Arts ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 78.



What has been done to overcome humanity? Nietzsche's account of the the Übermensch is, without doubt, highly influential. Yet, Altizer's Dionysian version of "a presence transcending all interior and individual identity"<sup>12</sup> presumes a great deal, one that a mystic may intuit, though not necessarily agree with. In contrast to Altizer's theology, Mark Taylor's theoretical account substitutes the disseminated word for the human being.

Taylor is suggesting that human consciousness and existence are totally constituted in linguistic structures. The self who has been overcome is itself a trace, a disseminated sign, that disrupts self-presence and univocal identity. And as there is nothing outside of the textual play of language, the subject is therefore condemned to a house of mirrors. In Taylor's view, we are trapped and imprisoned in the labyrinth of language, with no inside nor outside. There is no exit.

### Caputo's Ethic of Otherness

What is so ironic (perhaps) about living in the aftermath of the death of God and the deconstruction of language, metaphysics, and the self/subject, is the recognition that the postmodern era remains dominated by concentrations of power and control. Metaphysics continues to exercise a considerable

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<sup>12</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, Total Presence, p. 107.

weight and authority in the contemporary world. John Caputo writes:

The metaphysics of the will-to-power stamps our age, marks our epoch, dominating all the phenomena of our time - political and social, scientific and artistic. We are in danger of being swept up in an enormous totalitarian and totalizing movement which aims to bring every individual, every institution, every human practice under its sway.<sup>13</sup>

Caputo is contending that the scientific-technological world-view, as a totalizing structure of control and mastery founded on the principle of reason, still commands our age.

In his book, Radical Hermeneutics, Caputo analyzes and deconstructs the principle of reason as the will-to-power. But aside from the theoretical work of deconstruction, Caputo perceives the principle of reason as alive, embedded in our institutions, technologies, and corporate powers. Reason has assumed authority. Caputo writes: "What we call reason today is a central power tightly encircled by bands of military, technical, and industrial authorities which together make up the administered society."<sup>14</sup> The ideal of autonomous reason (the creed of the Enlightenment) has found itself housed and grounded in the administrative structures of our age.

Caputo moves beyond the textual strategies of deconstruction to expose what he feels are the constellations of power still dominant in the everyday world of Western culture. Nonetheless, he also writes as a philosopher of flux

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<sup>13</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 233.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

(becoming), attempting to undermine these edifices and structures that freeze the contingency and play of life. While Mark Taylor's approach is primarily theoretical, Caputo's is practical. Taylor's concern or interest is in the deconstruction of the philosophical structures of domination that Western society has traditionally rested upon. Caputo, in contrast, applies the deconstructive theory to the actual structures of power. Thus he is engaged with the present era and the hierarchical edifices that have frozen what he refers to as the free play of reason and life.

Caputo senses a danger in the systematic structures (governments, corporations, mass-media, etc.) that have come to dominate so many aspects of human lives. He writes: "For us the powers of organization and manipulation have grown so vast that they threaten to run out of control."<sup>15</sup> The fear that Caputo expresses centers on the sophistication and the authority that is conceded to the scientific-technological powers. He discerns that the technological powers are, in a certain sense, greater than the human minds who control (or are controlled by) these manifestations of the principle of reason. He fears that humanity and the eco-system may be in grave danger. The peril that Caputo feels arises out of his awareness that a metaphysical system is in place, a metaphysics of power and objective control.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 260.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

Like Taylor, Caputo portrays the offspring of the Enlightenment project as the autonomous subject. The world became an object of the rational subject. Caputo believes that metaphysical thinking -- that is, an instrumental, technological reason -- reduced beings (i.e., peoples and the natural world) to objective values that were manipulated, used, and destroyed in accordance with the willful self-assertion of the autonomous subject.<sup>17</sup> But, as he points out following Heidegger's work, the will-to-power of the modern subject led to a growing objectivism, a power that is still contained, despite the theoretical critique of deconstruction, in the constellations of authority organized around the principle of reason.

Taylor, following the work of both Nietzsche and Derrida, deconstructs the autonomous subject, and leaves the deconstructed subject in a labyrinth from which there is no exit. He writes: "The maze through which the erring trace [subject] wanders is never-ending. This endless labyrinth is, in effect, an abyss."<sup>18</sup> In Taylor's purely theoretical interpretation of Nietzsche and Derrida, the disseminated word is made flesh. The subject neither acts nor chooses. The erring subject wanders aimlessly, possessed and dispossessed, forever entangled in a complex network of relations -- a

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 245-246.

<sup>18</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, p. 168.

subject without destination or hope.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, Caputo (a self-acknowledged philosopher of flux), following Nietzsche, Derrida, and Heidegger, has a more practical agenda. His project is to liberate reason into the play of ideas and différance. This move accepts and celebrates diversity and motion, protests against unrestricted authority and those powers that exclude, oppress, and marginalize the face of the other. He sides with the subversive, the renegade poet who does not press reason into the service of a will-to-power or a controlling authority, but who allows things, people, trees to be as they are.<sup>20</sup> S/he who can allow things to be as they are, to watch the unfolding of life without the compulsion to control and dominate (in the name of reason), is, on Caputo's reading, undoubtedly a subversive influence.

But Caputo is making no claim for himself as a privileged point of insight into the workings of life and death. For Caputo, the metaphysical systems that we erect as flimsy planks across the flux are only trustworthy if they allow life to flourish and grow in all its multiplicity of forms and expressions.<sup>21</sup>

For Mark Taylor, the deconstruction of the modern world exposes an irrevocable loss that releases the signifier from its grounding in an absolute presence. The subject is hung up

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

on a linguistic clothes line, so to speak, and the world emptied of stable meaning or presence. Life, for Taylor, becomes a nihilistic carnival, the body an intersection for creative and destructive forces and powers.<sup>22</sup> Caputo, in contrast, is no nihilist, active or passive.

Indeed, Caputo challenges the reader to take a leap of faith and leave the seeming solidity of the ground (the exclusive principle of reason), and land in the radical insecurity and contingency of the flux.<sup>23</sup> Reason is a worthy tool, but its claims and pretensions to universality are a form of arrogance. In his experience, "There is a sphere of poetizing and thinking which forever eludes rationalization, reason giving, rendering reasons."<sup>24</sup> Caputo's view of poetic thought, inspired by Heidegger, allows for a spiritual dimension of human experience, a realm of becoming that infiltrates and disrupts rule-governed calculative thinking. The play is that domain, a sphere of thinking and writing that challenges the assumed authority of a dominating principle of reason. Caputo's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence -- i.e., the authority of reason bound within the institutions of power -- is, for him, an ethical choice. It is a choice that allows for and encourages the expression of other ways of living and being in the postmodern epoch.

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<sup>22</sup>Mark C. Taylor, Erring, pp. 158-169.

<sup>23</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 224.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

Caputo has moved beyond the position that Mark Taylor presents. Taylor's position has nothing to say of a poetic modality, nor of the play of thought and reason as it dances within and outside the sphere of authority. For Taylor, reason remains bound within the anonymous structures of discourse and language. These structures reflect only the internal characteristics of the linguistic system. In this age of "after the Word" (Steiner) words do not represent a reality out there. But Caputo is not satisfied to merely disperse texts and theory. He also steps forth into both the social world and the realities of personal relationships. He is a thinker who seeks to disrupt the totalities of power -- those hegemonic structures that have assumed domination under the reign of the principle of reason. Caputo's own spiritual leanings leave him sceptical of structures that attempt to limit the play of ideas and life-expressions by stilling its discomforting movements. He writes:

The thought of the flux, it seems to me, makes us wary of power, of the will to impose a scheme which we know to be no more than a fiction, at times a useful fiction, at times a dangerous one.<sup>25</sup>

The choice to upset, expose, and deconstruct the hierarchical edifices, and the metaphysical presuppositions that support an economy of exclusionary privilege (the binary oppositional scheme), is an ethical movement. For Caputo, it is an ethics that acknowledges otherness, disseminates the opposites, and

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

allows difference(s) into the debate as it unfolds in the boardrooms and the marketplace.<sup>26</sup>

Caputo approaches the other with a reverence that is mystical and appreciative, open and compassionate. His is a postmetaphysical religious faith. It is a faith that is open to the mystery of life, to the play of the flux, and, most significantly, open to "the face of suffering."<sup>27</sup> He stands contrasted against Mark Taylor's a/theological temperament. If anything, for Taylor, the other dissolves in the interplay of identity and difference, presence and absence. Caputo, on the other hand, finds etched in the human face the interplay of presence and absence, life and death, and love and suffering - powers and experiences beyond our rational control. To look into the human face is, in Caputo's view, to glimpse the depths and mystery of that which eludes our conceptual systems.<sup>28</sup>

But it is the face of suffering, for Caputo, that exposes us to the uncertainty, the contingencies and limitations of our existence, and our inability to know absolutely. "Suffering exposes the vulnerability of human existence, its lack of defense against the play of the flux."<sup>29</sup> Life is to

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 260-261.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 273-278.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 276. Caputo's attentiveness to the human face is a route that he acknowledges as having been developed by Emmanuel Levinas in his book Totality and Infinity.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 278.



be lived, regardless of the foundations we construct beneath our feet, in flux. And this is not easy. There are no assurances, no lifetime warranties. The metaphysical structures, the hierarchized meanings erected against the radical insecurity of flux, are, for John Caputo, illusions.

The fundamental issue for Caputo is the question of who and what we are. What do we do when we are deprived of the metaphysical methods and structures of meaning that were used to interpret our existence?<sup>30</sup> Who are we? Who is John Caputo?

Who is speaking here? Not just an "I myself," which is a fiction of meta-physics, but a complex of repressed desires, the structure of discourse, a set of historical presuppositions, an unconscious - all of these and who knows what else.<sup>31</sup>

This is, evidently, not a singular, univocal voice. Nor a self-identical presence. Perhaps a mask or masks, a "per-sona." Caputo writes: "Per-sona: the depths which rush under the surface, the deep resonance and rumble - of who knows what."<sup>32</sup> Most emphatically, this is not a stable identity. But neither does Caputo, looking back to Taylor, appear to suggest that the subject is a mere nothingness, a surface without depth. There is a voice behind the mask whose words speak not from nothingness, but from within flux. A non-identity inhabited by difference, yes, but it is a human voice that speaks through the per-sona, a voice that speaks of lived

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

experiences, a voice that tells stories. Or is it a voice speaking from beyond the flux?<sup>33</sup>

### Postlude

In the postmodern space, we have encountered seemingly disparate 'realities.' There is the recognition that the postmodern subject is neither a self-identical presence nor an autonomous subject who uses univocal words to describe an objective field of knowledge. Instead, in light of Taylor's theory, the subject is revealed as a plurality of forces, whose subjectivity is decentered and reconstituted in anonymous linguistic networks.

While the subject has been thus decentered, its experience mediated and conditioned through the discourse of complex communication systems<sup>34</sup>, the multi-national totalities (media networks, institutions, corporations, and governments, etc.) are extending their influence and control according to the exclusionary principle of reason. These constellations of power are turning language against itself, creating an anonymous and anti-humanist discourse that is impervious to contextualization.<sup>35</sup> This objective realm, at least according

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>34</sup>See Mark Poster's recent work, The Mode of Information (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup>John O'Neil, Postmodernism - Philosophy and the Arts, p. 73.

to Caputo's Heideggerian interpretation, appears to be spreading and thus consuming the personal realm of subjective and inter-subjective freedom.<sup>36</sup> Logically, if the subject is decentered and its experience mediated through the media and the anonymous discourse of the objective totality, it follows that the subject's perceptual experience is in danger of becoming unified with this objectifying discourse. The postmodern man and woman may be in the process of becoming the postmortem subject.

What is necessary for postmodern peoples is that they find a way to name their experiences and move beyond the one-dimensional surface of the house of mirrors. However, to change world-views by initiating major perceptual shifts is a daunting order. Yet, to embrace Nietzsche's Dionysian affirmation of the world-of-becoming, as interpreted by Taylor, resounds like a belly flop into chaos. To learn to live with the contingencies and insecurities inherent in human existence demands a letting-go of an "ego-logical metaphysics."<sup>37</sup> This repudiation of a metaphysics grounded on the principle of reason and a willful subjectivity does not necessarily imply that we embrace a nihilistic perspective, active or otherwise. If anything, as both Caputo and Derrida recognize, the other asks that we recognize the call of that which is other than oneself.

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<sup>36</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 289.

Taylor's a/theological work has little to say about the call of the other. But then he is inferring that there is nothing beyond language. Taylor is advocating an active nihilism, which is very Nietzschean, but is perhaps a misinterpretation of Derrida. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida claimed:

The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a 'referent' in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language.<sup>38</sup>

Derrida refuses to be labelled a nihilist. He states that to view deconstruction as leaving us stranded and bound within language is, in itself, an indication of the agenda of "certain political and institutional interests - interests which must be deconstructed in their turn."<sup>39</sup>

Derrida would appear here to understand the deconstructive work as focused on an interrogation of the institutional methods of reading texts.<sup>40</sup> It is in this vein that Caputo is using deconstruction to undermine the hierarchical powers that dominate Western culture. The deconstruction of an "ego-logical" metaphysics challenges the hegemonic discourses of the constellations of power. Caputo's

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Kearney, "Derrida," in Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, pp. 123-124.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

is a political and an ethical choice -- a response to the appeal of the other.

For John Caputo, in acknowledging the other, one enters into a dialogue with the being whose face draws one towards the mystery that permeates the life-world.<sup>41</sup> Through dialogue and the narration of personal stories, meaning and understanding arise. Kearney, in a recent book, asserts that meaningfulness enters our lives in the encounter with the other, and not from the depths of a solitary consciousness.<sup>42</sup> It is at the intersection between self and other, be it the human face or the text, that the experience awakens meaning and understanding, and thus a new awareness of ourselves and the world we live in. Dialogue is essentially an act of disclosure, to ourselves and others. The act(ion) of disclosure opens the human person to himself or herself and to another human being.

In allowing oneself to encounter the other, a reciprocal process of mutual respect is initiated, experiences are named and shared as experiences of humanness. In the naming of experience, a story is narrated and heard. It is a story of a life where seemingly disparate events are given form and identity. The chaos of life is unified in light of that fundamental encounter. But it is laughter, in Caputo's view,

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<sup>41</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, pp. 274-275.

<sup>42</sup>Richard Kearney, The Wake Of Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 387.

at ourselves and our suffering, that makes us human and keeps us open to the mystery. Because a life is never lived in isolation, but within a community and a culture, stories are told and heard. The resultant laughter allows one to let things be,<sup>43</sup> and awakens the human being to the interpersonal interrelatedness of human existence. There is no "I" without a "we."

If there is to be a perceptual shift, it is one that is centered on the giving of one's attention to the human face, the face of otherness. It is a shift away from the narcissistic mirror that a/theology leaves us facing, towards an awareness of the personal narratives that bind us together in the human community. This is a community that we share with all the sentient and insentient forms constituting the planet Earth. Perhaps out of an awareness of the human story, this richly complex and interwoven pattern of diverse narratives, an ethics of caring will emerge.

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<sup>43</sup>John Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics, p. 292.

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