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PRAYER AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD

Metaphysics is onto-theo-logy. Someone who has experienced theology in his own roots, both the theology of the Christian faith and that of philosophy, would today rather remain silent when speaking in the realm of thinking.

- Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics"¹

...if there is no certainty, neither will there be a system of certainties, that is to say a science. From which it follows that there will be no science of life either....As we examine this view closely, it looks to us more like a prayer than like the truth.

- Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*²

I am trying to think while praying, to pray while thinking.

- John Caputo, *The Weakness of God*³

I. PRAYER AS DESIDERATUM: THINKING IN THREES

In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo ventures a theo-logical experiment at its etymological best—using the word of 'God' about, to or by God (*à dieu*). However, he does so not without acknowledging his place in a strand of onto-theo-logical goodbyes (*à dieu*).⁴ Evoking the Name in words, he may immediately come under suspicion of Heidegger's admonition.

But what if this thinking of the Word/Name is characterized as an *event* more comparable to prayer than a closed onto-theo-logical construction?⁵ What if

¹ Martin Heidegger as quoted by Peter Jonkers. "God in France: Heidegger's Legacy," in *God in France: Eight Contemporary Thinkers on God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 26.

² Quoted in Martha Nussbaum. "Love's Knowledge." *Love's Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 261.

³ John Caputo, "A Concluding Prayer—for Theology, for the Truth, for the Event," *The Weakness of God*(Bloomington: The Indiana University Press, 2006), 283.

⁴ "A Concluding Prayer" serves, in some regard, as a tribute to one of his philosophical tributaries, Emmanuel Levinas—namely in the play of adieu. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," *Entre-Nous: On [] Thinking [] of the [] Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁵ Here, Caputo attempts to subvert (or make simultaneous) Novalis' distinction in his *Encyclopedia*, "To pray is in religion what to think is in philosophy." Quoted in

this thought opens another *topos*, a clearing not unlike *khora*, defeating and joining binaries with its irruption,⁶ its be/coming? If prayed, the Name is transfigured: it will be a noun qua verb, an encounter that is an empirical inexperience or nonevent, but no less wounding the 'I' with eschatological im-pendings.⁷

In short, what if *thinking* effects rather than ends *desire*, if vocalized words (to God) and their conceptual grounds (about God) were admittedly incomplete (toward God)? In the latter case, words would be viewed as sacramental traces—an outward sign of a grace not visibly present.

We summon here not only Augustine's notion of sacrament, but also its more reticent kin: a messianism that claims the traces of an infinite in the finite. At stake in both is the preservation of asymmetry—whether it is an infinite grace overwhelming the finite form, or an infinite Other breaking open every closed totality.

In the case of the former, the excess is felt as an overflow that collapses horizons. In the latter, what exceeds the finite is felt as a perpetually receding horizon. It is the difference between the language of beauty and of justice. Both terms converge in the preservation of desire. Like Diotima's tale of copulating Poros and Penia, the excess of beauty and the emptiness of suffering join to yield desire.

If Marion's saturated phenomenon were invited to the same symposium as Derrida's trace, they perhaps could only share silence—an ellipsis lengthened by the desire to chase what exceeds/recedes. Though, privately, they would both admit to the space of prayer...

On either side of the ellipsis of desire is a lip of the wound. Between the upper lip of saturated phenomena (what Marion calls grace⁸) and the lower lip of the receding 'to come' (what Derrida and Levinas would call justice⁹): the space of differance, and a tongue. The tongue, like blood through the wound, moves and never dries nor stills. For to heal the wound would be to close the lips, to seal the secrets and stop the tongue.¹⁰ It would be the end of a different kind of knowledge—not that of gnosis, but that of *sapientia*, a wisdom that tastes and closer approximates the intimacy of the Hebraic *ahav*.

Jean-Louis Chrétien's "The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer," in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 148.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Khora," in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 89.

⁷ See Lacoste's explication of the liturgical encounter of inexperience, of partial parousia as a nonevent that occurs on the margins of epistemological experience as eclipsed by eschatology.

⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, "The Final Appeal of the Subject," *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 144.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Adieu," *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1-13.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 166-169.

But is there a place where the lips might move, the tongue might tell, without also closing the gap? If ‘theology’ in the realm of thinking has proven, for Heidegger, the closure of a leeway where God might enter, how might one speak the name of God? At stake for several post-Heideggerian thinkers is the experience of asymmetry. Asymmetry, in the Platonic sense of analogy, may be our only hopeful return (*ana*) to the Word (*logos*), the Name of God. As Anne Carson suggests in *Eros the Bittersweet*:

*Plato’s analogies are not flat diagrams in which one image (for example, gardens) is superimposed on another (the written word) in exact correspondence. An analogy is constructed in three-dimensional space. Its images float one upon the other without convergence: there is something in between, something paradoxical: Eros.*¹¹

Anne Carson exposes the trick of the two-layered “para” in paradox. In true paradox, the two points in wild tension bulge to require another dimension. No longer are the competing claims superimposed on one another, as if a line folded over in forced matching of end-points. Symmetry cannot suspend desire. Rather, the fold unfolds another point of correspondence. The paradox requires an extension of another *topos* that can hold both the call and response, the experience and corresponding expression.

Here, two points, in their attraction, in order to preserve the distance for their *eros*, invent a point of simultaneous repulsion. Desire staves off the collapse of consummation. So, in order for the abundance of experience (as saturated phenomena) and the infinity of expression (as the deferred ‘to come’) to be uniquely felt, and united in conversation, their contradictions must be permitted. To maintain the central difference and dynamism, a *metaxu* is needed, another dimension.

In the relation of two beings, three dimensions are suitable. But what if God is not simply another being? What might the relation between God and man require that both could relate without replacing or reducing distinctions? If God cannot be thought of as another being, can this ‘God’ be saved (safe) as time?

Time precedes and exceeds us, making possible all conceptual holds without retaining them. Like khora, it makes possible the space that is no place. It simply *is* in order to make possible what *becomes*, what *will be*... Time is the concept that the ellipsis marks, the passage of pauses, sustained ad infinitum.

Time is also what allows asymmetry, not the false symmetry of self and other, the synthesis of space and representation—but the diachrony and dialogue: the self + 1 (time in the other), the self + 2 (justice), the self + ... (ongoing vigilance, love). It is no wonder that Levinas would speak of “God in terms of desire,” and ethics as sacramental (“the smallest and most common place gestures [that] bear witness to the ethical.”)¹²

¹¹ Carson, 145.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 83-84.

Time, like Marion's grace, or Levinas' desire, perpetuates becoming. It may simply be the difference between noting the infinite as the ($n + 1\dots$) from the side of the n (the other as addition) or the side of the receding one (the other as an extension that escapes).

If the Name of God is to mark this desire, like time, it must be what penetrates experience of being while not contained by my being. Caputo speaks of the Name of God as an event, a word that permits this asymmetrical interval, intimating a partial presence that perpetuates deferral. In this understanding, God or the infinitely Other exists (or resists) as an event that simultaneously marks presence/absence. In fact, this event evoked in the name of God seems the metaxu between presence and absence.

But as poet Anna Kamienska writes of her lover after his death, "Still so much of his absence around here. It is a form of being too."¹³ If even absence marks presence (the trace, the sacrament), love of God after the death of God will take residence in the absence playing with presence: desire given form in prayer, poetry.

Thus, to speak of the infinite wounds upon the finite, is to speak this paradox of being in relation to time, of humans in relation to a *khora*. It is to return to the desert of desire, where finitude is ever-spliced with the infinite's intrusion. This intrusion of chronos by kairos, may be felt as grace, overwhelming as the wound of beauty that calls us; it may be felt as suffering, incommensurable as the wound of injustice that beckons us. Both moves require time, and space to feel the other as other. The call to beauty, the summons toward justice: both set in motion what they require—the vehicle of desire.

It may be that philosophical discussions surrounding the Name of God after the 'death of God' can occur when thinking looks most like praying, when thinking admits its desire. Marion might suggest this desire as the distance between the idol and the icon. Put another way, the distance can be experienced as Eucharistic—a sacramental taste of the infinite in the finite: the grace that keeps us desirous for presence, the gift that gives us our selves even as we desire an Other.

Certainly, prayer in this sense would begin with the wager that the finite container of a word or name can bear the excess of the infinity it cannot hold. The Name would be witnessed with all its trembling,¹⁴ permitted its movement as well as its infinite accumulations.¹⁵ To keep the nominal from closure would be to permit its mobility, and therefore acknowledge its finite contingencies and its infinite possibilities.

A name that is sacramental—that plunges the infinite in the finite, that effects in part what it expresses—would be an event that opens. It would resemble

¹³ Kamienska, 120.

¹⁴ "...its sense will have trembled," "Sauf le nom," in *On the Name*, 81.

¹⁵ "Every time we say or pray 'come,' we must inevitably draw upon the reservoir of the past, invoking the names we have inherited, lest we have no vocabulary at all with which to pray." "Concluding Prayer," 293.

Chretien's gash made by a God that, like the encounter with the beautiful, leaves one longing for what precedes and exceeds. Or, if you like, an event of beauty (*kallos*) that marks love's unhoped-for call (*to kaloun*) with its unforgettable wound.¹⁶

Derrida and Caputo have opted to use the Name only in so far as it convicts us toward openness, rather than using the Name to convict others of a totalized truth. Consequently, the Name is no longer a means of convicting God with our de-finitions; words cannot convict God of His crime, His wounding love, His absence.¹⁷ Our evidence of God is God's trauma, our scars His traces. Our desire, our hungry forgetting. It as if the event of God's Name weakens Caputo, who in turn realizes that his words to God are not simply misfiring arrows, but rather (in prayer) the whispers ever attended, ever risked.

Here, God as sacramental presence is re-traced to its etymological roots of *mysterion*, mysterious absence conveyed only in secret. The word "sacrament" derives from the Latin word *sacramentum* – historically, the oath of allegiance or a promise given.¹⁸ This 'oath of allegiance' derives from the context of soldiers in battle. When battle images mix with sacramentality there is no doubt some confusion. Tertullian chose *sacramentum* in the third century to replace the original Greek word *mysterion*. *Mysterion* referred to the "secret thoughts of God, which transcend human reason and therefore must be revealed to those whom God wishes these secrets to reach."¹⁹

In this translation between secret given and promise given, Derrida marks his unease. If faith is the trust we place in the Other, will we go to war for our investment? Is there rather a way to carry our investments as secrets – praying as if a lover confessing to his beloved, or a lover keeping safe the name of one she could kill with her confession?

We return to the possibility of thinking as prayer. When Heidegger speaks against confession as conception, he does so with concern for the stranglehold thinking that would subject God to *theos* (Supreme Being) or another phenomenological being (*ontos*). This "God" as name, as ontologically categorized, would be akin to Marion's idol, Levinas' totality, or Hegel's

¹⁶ By characterizing beauty as an event, I also allude explicitly to Bruno Forte's fine summation, "Beauty is an event. Beauty happens when the Whole offers itself in the fragment, and when this self-giving transcends infinite distance....But is this really possible? How can the limitless inhabit what is little? How can the everlasting abbreviate itself without ceasing to be? And how can immensity become small and still exist?" Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theological Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), vii.

¹⁷ Caputo resembles Marion's own claim, "Better still, for Marion, it is not shouting, singing, or dancing, but listening to what 'bountiful beauty bids'...since, as he will argue, the name of God is not a name by which we name but a name by which we are named." John Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 191.

¹⁸ William Everett Johnson. *The Politics of Worship* (Cleveland: United Church Press), 63.

¹⁹ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 181.

Absolute Spirit. This “God” would deserve Derrida’s critiques of logocentrism.

Put another way, this “God” would be subsumed into phallogentrism—the illusions of “sameness” that Luce Irigaray jars.²⁰ In all cases, there exists an impulse to examine the fissures, the pores, the mediated boundaries: beauty in the asymmetrical, integrity in the passage. A yearning to break mimesis’ mirror, to shatter our narcissistic fascination with being made in God’s image, or God being made in our own.

Within Caputo’s project of weak theology, prayer ushers us back to the Hebraic secret of *imago dei*—human beings as “saturated with God’s shadow,” not fully exposed to God’s Absolute Presence as *Causa Sui*.²¹ Prayer is the event where the Infinite’s parousia is felt only as the shadow or trace of God (the hem of the garment, the backside of glory). Prayer marks the terrain that Jean-Yves Lacoste characterizes as the liturgical *topos*.

Lacoste mediates between Marion and Derrida, acknowledging a chiaroscuro encounter with God, neither ineffable fullness nor impenetrable absence. Lacoste’s being-before-God engages the divine on the margins of experience. This marginal space or borderland, for Lacoste, serves as the subversive *topos* of the liturgical encounter or “nonevent.”²² He employs the term nonevent, or inexperience, to convey the admitted absence of conscious perceiving, the insufficiency of phenomenal disclosure.

However, even though the liturgical encounter cannot equal the *parousia* or Absolute appearance, the being-before-God brings all *desire* for the “parousiacal presence.”²³ And this desire seems to make meaning tremble, make phenomenal disclosure move between what is and is not present. Therefore, the liturgical *topos* requires a “dwelling at the limit”—in spaces of prayer and praise for example.

Created by words hurled to God, these terrains subvert our relation to the place of earth, even as they provide a vantage point from which to radically engage the world.²⁴ At the intersecting horizons of the “here-I-am” empirical self and the “yet-to-be” eschatological self, *dasein* neither dwells in the Holy Saturday aporia, nor the Heideggerian Fourfold (*geviert*).²⁵ Appearing before God opens up a “liturgical field,” where one’s vulnerable exposition enables him to

²⁰ Luce Irigaray, “Plato’s Hystera,” *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²¹ This is my own translation of Genesis 1:27; in some way it is an attempt to concede to both the hyper- and hypo- ousia that Marion and Derrida (respectively) debate. In the text, *bara* (usually translated as God’s action of making) in other Biblical occurrences suggests saturation, a fattening or filling to fullness. And *tselem*, which when translated into the Latin denotes image, can also mean in the Hebrew, shadow.

²² Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 46-54.

²³ Lacoste, 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 42-44.

²⁵ Ibid., 16-17.

live now in the fulfillment of God's promises to come. Man takes hold of what is most proper to him when he chooses to encounter God....man says who he is most precisely when he accepts an existence in the image of a God who has taken humiliation upon himself—when he accepts a *kenotic* existence.²⁶

For Lacoste, the being exposed to God and expressing God's image marks both an absence and a presence, a herald living as allusion. Since desire is the child of lack, faith requires kenotic abnegation; but since desire is also the child of plenty, faith requires hope in the fullness of an Absolute.

Though Lacoste resists translating his liturgical phenomenology into the details of worship, he does address how the inexperience of God affects prayer:

...the act of presence that constitutes prayer is accomplished after Easter in the element of *a knowledge that perhaps leaves room for nonknowledge*, but which is not endangered by this nonknowledge. To know is not to understand, and it also belongs to what we should know of God, for our knowledge to be consistent, that God give rise to thought without it ever being possible for its reflections on him to come to an end: he must continue to elude our grasp.²⁷

Prayer therefore seems akin to the being's acceptance of temporality: both as what eludes and comes to us. The knowledge that leaves room for what is yet unknown makes possible the prayer-space. It resembles the khoraic prayer space of Caputo: marked by transient words, infinite placeholders overflowing with what cannot be held.

Caputo's weak theology proclaims two weaknesses: the weakness of words (*logoi*) to contain or definitively constrain meaning, and the weakness of the God who no less risks being subject to our words, human images, because of love (kenosis of Philippians 2:7-8).

These weaknesses are not unrelated. They join in the questions of *poiesis* (meaning made form): God's incarnation, humanity's prayers... Why put in words what cannot be definitively expressed by containers? Why should a God become man and subject Himself to misunderstanding, misappropriation, abuse, crucifixion? Why should an eternal spirit take residence in flesh? Why should the spirit in us wish to articulate what should perhaps be left to groans, or silence?

To get at these paradoxes without collapsing the disproportion, Caputo begins his essay, "A Concluding Prayer," with a word of prayer: a constraint that permits mobility, an end that irrupts an opening without crossing the chasm's difference. Prayer-thinking attempts to maintain the aporia of an encountered alterity. It clears the way, makes possible Derrida's desert: "the uncleared way [that is] also the condition of *decision* or *event*, which consists in

²⁶ Ibid., 194.

²⁷ "A Concluding Prayer," 141 (the italics are mine).

opening the way, in (*sur*)passing, thus in going *beyond...*²⁸ This desert, negative theology's words can only recall or archive in the oscillating motion of decisions. Prayer as passing, as going beyond, seems something more than the competing claims of apophysis-kataphasis. Prayer evokes a third...

II. PRAYER AS HAESITATIO: THINKING IN BETWEEN

What might this prayer-thinking look like? If we were to track its movement, it might initially resemble negative theology's aphorisms. Caputo seems to suggest that it is writing and erasure, so that the Name of God might be safe from its own death. He writes that in prayer, or the event of the Name:

we are preparing for a future for which we cannot prepare, to take leave of our oldest and most revered names... That is why I concede that I write and pray with both hands, that even as I am trying to save the name of God with my right hand I am also conceding with my left that this name is not safe. I profess the name of God while making a confession that what is coming might be called something else, anything except (or "save") God. Sauf le nom.²⁹

This explanation of thought-prayer, as a sort of sought-saying, tries to both use and rescue the Name of God—to both rest in and wrest from the containers of words. It participates (without altogether eluding) the double bind that Derrida articulates in his lecture, “Faith and Knowledge.” He articulates religion as doubly bound in the paradox of: *religio* (abstract scruple) and *relegere* (gathered many).³⁰

God abstracts from experience while attracting our every expression. We confess God as holy—wholly other, “unscathed” by any concrete claims, concepts, or *tekne* of being. And yet, this God asks the currency of belief—“fiduciary,” fidelity, credit, trust.

One might ask: how can I invest (believe in) no-thing, no-being? If I must not invest my this-worldly ideologies into some-Thing, some-One, where might I aim my hope, my faith, in that which exceeds ontological expression? Launch it into the desert space of *khora* and expect that wherever it lands is yet a lapse into the intelligible, the sensible?³¹

Caputo’s prayer-thinking may seem a kind of hesitancy, a hyperawareness of lack, an insecurity with propositional truth. The effects of the Enlightenment’s reductions, the violence of heedless certainties, have chastened us. Now, the Name that once entitled the burning of heretics has become a coal so cool that it can hardly cleanse the lips of Isaiah (unless we crack it open or ignite it privately). The scourge of the Name is blunted, just in case it falls into the wrong hands, or is used for the most atrocious causes. It may be, as Derrida

²⁸ “Sauf le nom,” 34.

²⁹ “A Concluding Prayer,” 294.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” *Religion*, ed. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

³¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html> (accessed online February 1, 2011).

suggests, that to “lose the Name,” or to loosen it from its event, “is quite simply to respect it: as name.”³²

Respect can take the surname of fear, but it can also take the mannerisms of distance, closely bordering on indifference. If the Name marks one who is not only feared, but also loved—not for what its name represents, but for Who It Is, Was, and Will Be to Come (the event of God)—how should this shape its handling, its use, its lasting, from age to age? If the Name is an event that comes and goes—presence underwritten/undergone by absence—what does it matter that it occurs at all? What is the significance of the trace, the Derridean signifier whose mystery remains insofar as one of its faces is turned toward God?³³

There seems a discernible difference between the “something else that is taking shape, something, I know not what”³⁴ and the possibility of nothing happening at all. There must be a difference between the emptying of sense (senselessness, dangerous desensitization) and the kenosis of love: the surrender, the relinquish, the deferring to the Other.

Love’s emptying might ask us to abandon all. Pseudo-Dionysius asks us to “leave behind every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven”³⁵ to approach the darkness of a Love that surpasses understanding. Kierkegaard’s Abrahamic knight of faith abandons all aesthetic and ethical standards for the call of an irreducible Other. Derrida’s admired Silesius strives “to become nothing [in order to] become God.”³⁶ In each case, to use the name faithfully in love is to abandon it, to make way for “giv[ing] that which it does not have, that in which and prior to everything, may consist the essence, that is to say—beyond being—the nonessence of the gift.”³⁷

For Chrétien, the voice in prayer enacts this gift. The human voice opened by prayer’s event guts out a space, “a place where the world returns to God. It gives what it does not have—which does not mean that it gives nothing—and it can itself only because it is not in possession of itself.”³⁸ The human voice—dispossessed and non-possessive—becomes like khora in prayer, in the sense that it is “over there but more ‘here’ than any ‘here’.”³⁹ Its abandonment, its forsaking is for the sake of an Other: the otherness of self, the possibilities of the neighbor, the yet-to-come of God’s kingdom. For every self-denial the finite makes before the Infinite Other, it is not simply praying with both hands—it is giving the upper-hand to God.

³² Jacques Derrida, “Sauf le nom (post scriptum),” in *On the Name*, Ed. By Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 58.

³³ Though George Steiner’s notions of sacramentality prevent him from acknowledging the benefits of deconstruction, he quotes Derrida, “the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God.” George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 119.

³⁴ “A Concluding Prayer,” 294.

³⁵ “Mystical Theology,” 136.

³⁶ “Sauf le nom,” 43.

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ “Wounded Word,” 174.

³⁹ “Sauf le nom,” 56.

The prayer's gift goes beyond the give and take of negative theology or even the excess and recess of Post-Heideggerian metaphysics. Here, prayer exceeds or subverts thinking because thinking provides a discourse *on* language, on the surfaces of saying—it can only “suspend desire...[it] leaves without ever going away.”⁴⁰ Though Caputo does not dissociate thinking from praying, he distinguishes prayer as a thinking *with* and *because of* desire, in the Name of Desire—thinking overtaken by desire, by a thirst in search, too desperate to discard the Name and too daring to deny it altogether.

Prayer requires true dialogue, a vocative vulnerability before the other that alters (or wounds) the self. But prayer is not mere conversation between beings, or the undecidability of perpetual trial (negative theology). As Chretien notes, the self-manifestation before the divine “does not merely bring to light what was there before it; it has its own light: that of an event, the event wherein what is invisible to myself illuminates me in a fashion phenomenologically different from a conversation with myself or an examination of consciousness.”⁴¹ There is a certain vulnerability, as Lacoste would note in the event of exposition, that makes prayerful thinking distinct from the ambiguity of negative theology.⁴²

Prayer is not content with the “double bind” monologue of negative theology that hangs onto the “edge of language.”⁴³ Negative theology stands on the edge, ready to jump, debating with itself in “two powers, two voices...declaration without appeal...without waiting for any response...soliloquy.”⁴⁴ All along, an Other waits, extending a hand into the *gelassenheit*.

Thus, a negative theology that is too attached to cleverness and not grounded in love might resemble the *gelassenheit* as Heidegger appropriates it: the let be that opens into the abyssal chasm of no-thingness that reduces dasein to silence. In contrast, the *gelassenheit* gesture of prayer asks, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” It is not simply abandonment; it is trust. It approaches Kierkegaard’s love as faithful angst, an incommensurability that clears the way for Love’s intervention, God’s self-revelation.

III. PRAYER AS CONFESSION: THINKING IN LOVE

This abandonment is not a permanent void; rather, it demonstrates the Eckhartian notion of leaving behind beings not because they are insufficient, but because they are allusions, traces, references to love.⁴⁵ Here Derrida

⁴⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁴¹ “Wounded Word,” 154.

⁴² “But in the element of the a priori as in that of freedom, it is our exposition to the Absolute—our ‘soul’—that constitutes the site of the liturgical experience. We are sufficiently free to open up the space for a divine visitation, and our freedom thereby establishes a transcendental possibility that it disentangles from its ambiguity.” (Lacoste, 64).

⁴³ “Sauf le nom,” 60.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

⁴⁵ Caputo’s distinguishes between Heidegger’s flight from beings and Eckhart’s flight from the sensible world. In *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, Caputo suggests that Heidegger preserves Being’s purity by cutting it off from entities

would echo that the Name, like any other limited being, “record[s] the referential transcendence...a prayer, too, a testimony of love, but an ‘I love you’ on the way to prayer and to love, always, on the way.”⁴⁶ To record and reference what transcends is to hold in language the shadows.

Again, it is holding what cannot be possessed, or paradoxically owing what exceeds economics.⁴⁷ Prayer is not symmetrical exchange (“the most formal economical” expression of negative theology) but rather disproportionate conversation; the call of the Other will always exceed and precede the self as response.

This paradoxical notion of outstripping economics by “giving what one does not have” attracts Levinas’ ethics as an *a priori* obligation to give to the other one’s life. It also underwrites Derrida’s quasi-ethical exposition in *The Gift of Death*. Here, death is not the gift that can be given or taken; my death is my responsibility and also the possibility that institutes “giving and taking....In the name [of death] giving and taking become possible.”⁴⁸ Because of the Name of Death, giving and taking can be an event.

But how to reconcile the *Name of Death* (the event that makes possible even as it resists economy) with a prayer in the *Name of God* (the event that makes possible exchange, even though it offers no-thing)? What distinct gifts do they bear—what events do they make possible? Is there not a difference between the gift of death that makes us responsible and the gift of life that turns us toward—makes us desire—kenotic love?

Let us return to Caputo’s text, where weak theology meets the Death of ‘God’ and the Name of God, summoning and subverting both by the event of prayer. He summarizes: “A theology of event, then...neither guarantees the future of the name nor manages to proffer a new name in its place but prepares us prayerfully, *per impossible*, for the coming of something unforeseeable.”⁴⁹ Just as the particularities of our death, its event of gifting, is unforeseeable, this God, this Name bound in the finitudes of words and contingencies of concepts is, for Caputo, yet unknown.

So why should one bother to pray or relate to an unknown that is conceptually as indistinguishable, as mysterious as death? In Caputo’s theology, prayer serves an undeniable desire while also easing our anxiety of mis-naming: we long for a God, but we do not wish to mess up, mis-read, misappropriate, mis-take. Theology of the abused.

(beings). According to Caputo, Eckhart’s flight from creatures or creation is a move made in love. He writes, “It means that the soul no longer takes creatures as if they are something of themselves but only in reference to their primal being as ideas in the mind of God.” John D. Caputo. *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 144.

⁴⁶ “Sauf le nom,” 68.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s “Self-Giving,” in *Epilogue* (San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 44.

⁴⁹ “A Concluding Prayer,” 294.

If a Name resembles Khora, and the event resembles death—both would fail to account for the particularities of love. As Chretien might critique, “One cannot describe prayer without describing the power to whom it is addressed.”⁵⁰ Caputo would shirk at Chretien’s use of potency—but what of his point’s *potential*. There is, after all, a difference between acknowledging one’s deficiencies before a Wholly Other, and claiming that the Wholly Other is powerless. There is a difference between sheer limping and receiving my name’s blessing along with my limp.

Even Derrida suggests that prayer is an attempt to surpass negative theology.⁵¹ Prayer, like God, cannot be thought, it must occur in particularities. It is not enough to simply “ask nothing”—prayer must also, simultaneously, “[ask] more than everything. It asks God to give himself rather than gifts.”⁵²

But to pray this gift is to ask God’s giving: phenomenal revelation in the incarnation, kenotic destitution in the crucifixion, and the spirit’s indwelling at the ascension. It does not, of course, assume that God has given Himself definitively in these ways—nor does it preclude desire. To ask for God’s presence as gift is not to discount desire felt in God’s absence; rather, to ask for givenness, for the coming presence, is to swallow khora and vocalize one’s faith, one’s indeterminate hope, in prayer.

In some way, there is no room for fear in love, though there is much room for mystery. Perhaps Caputo’s prayers are an attempt to fear the not yet known; but in doing so, he romanticizes the deferral as the space for desire. Can there be a prayer that, like love, is restless until it finds rest in the Lover? This rest is not ease, it still includes Caputo’s suggestion that we perpetually “prepare the way” of the Lord, of the yet-to-arrive or lately departed guest.

But this is not to say that prayer is beyond apophantic truth claims. As Derrida points out, Pseudo-Dionysius “prays to God, not mammon.”⁵³ So perhaps we cannot wear (as we prepare) Christ’s excuse, “[We] know not what [we] do” or ‘we know not who is coming.’ We may not know in full at any given moment who is coming, but does this mean that we do not determine the preparations of our house based on certain expectations of the guest yet to come? Prayer, as Chretien would suggest and Caputo would exemplify, is a preparation of the space (khora) and the home (ousia)⁵⁴: “Lord

⁵⁰ “Wounded Word,” 149.

⁵¹ He writes, “Emptiness is essential and necessary to [negative theologians]. If they guard against this, it is through the moment of prayer or the hymn.” Derrida seems to suggest that prayer is what keeps them from ultimately living their apophysis as Husserlian *crisis*—the “forgetting of the full and originary intuition.” “Sauf le nom” 50-51.

⁵² “Sauf le nom,” 56. Prayer guards against the emptiness of forgetting by replacing it with the kenosis of prayer’s faithful devotion. It is a kenosis in living (faith, hope, love) that betrays in some way their apophatic attempts at a sort of pseudo-intellectual-kenosis.

⁵³ “Apostles,” 190.

⁵⁴ I suggest ousia as home based on Heidegger’s own early gloss in his 1924 lecture, “Dasein und Wahrsein.” He returns to the Aristotelian use of *ousia* as one whose essence or being is “household, property, that which is environmentally available for

teach us to pray'...or also, 'I believe! Come and help my disbelief!'"⁵⁵ The space is our grace, the home is our selves—where God knocks, or if need be, breaks and enters, in the night.

IV. PRAYER AS HOME(COMING): THINKING AS WELCOMING

We might thank Derrida that Marion's notion of God's saturating grace resembles khora: breaking the binaries of judgment, irreducible, untranslatable, anarchic. In this sense, khora perhaps retrieves its etymological connection with the pre-Socratic *khthonios*: the place beneath the surface of the soil that marks the grave as well as abundance. This khora space that resembles the khthonic place is neither beholden to the categories of good nor evil, neither being nor nothing. It is a reception that does not absorb, an embrace that does not consume. Perhaps this is why Derrida frames khora as that which

receives, so as to give place to them, all the determinations, but she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties, she does not possess anything as her own. She 'is' nothing other than the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed 'on' her, on the subject of her, on her subject, right up against her subject, but she is not the *subject* or the *present support* of all those interpretations, even though, nevertheless, she is not reducible to them. Simply this excess is nothing, nothing that may be and be said ontologically.⁵⁶

Derrida's definition of khora closely resembles his discussion of the Name of God as illuminated by Silesius. In "On the Name (Post-Scriptum)," Derrida dangles Silesius' question: "What is God's own proper? To pour forth in creation,/ To be the same in all times, to have, want, know nothing." The first line speaks of a God who is through being, as if poured through the strainer of creation (or Marion's "screen" of being) to be taken back up again into Himself, untainted by or dispossessing of being. Therefore, this God has no property (*ousia*). Like khora, this God is the very ground that is non-place, non-event that makes possible all other events.

Khora is without desire. As Derrida states in correcting Marion's saturating God, "The khora does not desire anything, does not give anything. It is what makes taking place or an event possible. But the khora does not happen, does not give, does not desire. It is a spacing and absolutely indifferent."⁵⁷ Thus, when Derrida's khora begins to resemble Silesius' God, it is no wonder that

use." John van Buren, *The young Heidegger: rumor of the hidden king*(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 225.

⁵⁵ "Wounded Word," 148. This entire essay on the phenomenology of prayer should be read between the lines of Caputo's efforts, especially as it begins by delineating prayer as an encounter, an event, made to "appear and disappear" with even the "weakest and most dilute" forms of religiosity...namely Supervielle's poem-prayer, "How surprised I am to be addressing you,/ My God, I who know not if your exist."

⁵⁶ "Khora," in *On the Name*, 99.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida as quoted in John Caputo, "Apostles," 216.

Derrida's God is space, is difference—that which holds nothing, but is held open for God knows what.

It is this God that Caputo is attempting to pray toward—that is to say, it is this God that Caputo desires and summons when he prays. But it asks a simultaneous desire and denial: a praying with both hands in an attempt to follow T.S. Eliot's admonition, and perhaps Derrida's deferral, "I said to my soul be still and wait without hope/ For hope would be hope of the wrong thing;/ Wait without love/ For love would be love of the wrong thing."⁵⁸ Caputo's "come" reaches back into the "reservoir of the past" more than it is comfortable projecting the future.⁵⁹

And yet, the future is not disregarded, it is simply un-regardable (perhaps not unlike Marion's invisible presence at the edge of visibility, the icon). Caputo's desirous "come" desires nothing in particular, but resembles the "first yes" of Silesius, of Derrida, "inscribed deep in our consciousness."⁶⁰ At best, it is an excess of nothing that we cannot definitively hold, that rather, holds us. In this way, the first yes is the thirst of desire. And perhaps, on this point, Derrida and Caputo join St. Augustine, in the desert of desire, to pray, "Desire is praying always, even if the tongue is silent. If you desire always, you are praying always. When does prayer nod off to sleep? When desire grows cold."⁶¹

Our part in prayer is to evoke a space as wide as the expanse between past and future, as wide as prayer's invitation of the infinite into the finitudes of beings. In prayer, we are to resemble time's invitation to space. Where negative theology attempts to create this open invitation—only prayer as an event and not simply its archive succeeds. Prayer may snap negative theology's linguistic tug of war (or shake its apophaic arras).⁶² Prayer may function as the surface that the Divine brushes; negative theology can only come in after to dust the fingerprints or trace, highlighting and erasing its evidence.

Prayer's concession, its "Oui, oui," gestures to a God who is the "first yes" perhaps only acknowledged as such in the pragmatics of praise and prayer.⁶³ As that which precedes and exceeds the flirtation of negative theology (withdrawing and overflowing language), prayer erupts as this third-dimensional space created between the said and unsayable, the mortal and the God, the finite and the infinite.⁶⁴ This space concedes and conditions

⁵⁸ T.S. Eliot. "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets> (accessed online March 7, 2011).

⁵⁹ "A Concluding Prayer," 293.

⁶⁰ "A Concluding Prayer," 289.

⁶¹ Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, Vol. 3 (New York: New City Press, 2007), 130.

⁶² As T.S. Eliot writes, "Houses live and die: there is a time for building/ And a time for living and for generation/ And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane....And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto." T.S. Eliot. "East Coker," *Four Quartets*, <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets> (accessed online March 7, 2011).

⁶³ "Apostles," 197.

⁶⁴ In this way it resembles Anne Carson's account of the *topos* that erupts from the paradoxical tension of Socrates. "Plato's analogies are not flat diagrams in which one

the coming; as such it more resembles khora than the Heideggerian “chaos which also opens the yawning gulf of the abyss.”⁶⁵ The prayerful space does not drown out desire; its non-space/non-event *topos* takes on the aporias of the desert while not shunning our desire.

Lacoste grounds the human experience of an exceeding God in the relational expanse of liturgy—not simply worship, but rather any encounter of the Absolute Other at the margins of experience. One phenomenon that marks this liturgical relation (for Chretien and Lacoste) is prayer: *the non-space that permits the finite to call the infinite*. But how to exist as prayer—an inquiry that calls upon and responds to the Divine—while rooted in time, in space? It may imply the summons of a reverse prayer, an incarnation: *the infinite entering space in order to call the finite*. The infinity of human words to God meets the finitude of God’s Word among humanity.

In prayer, we form the world with our words, holding the earth within the orbit of our mouth. The being-before-God does so in prayer’s topological formlessness, its kenotic claim, “come” (a transposing of God’s “let there be.”) Prayer permits a Genesis 1 topology, but instead of God calling out, hovering, we respond, our words hovering over the surface of His depths. Prayer allows us an ekstasis that is radically interior (“an absolute transcendence that announces itself within”).⁶⁶

Derrida, Ricoeur, Levinas, Irigaray, and Marion account for this asymmetry in their own ways: each trying to preserve the disproportion of call and response that Heidegger noted in his later writings on language.⁶⁷ Is God a secret half-heard and ever halving in retreat (Derrida) or an excess abundantly given (Marion)?

In either case, the surplus or the deficiency of the call requires the patience of time, the vigilance toward the other that prayer cultivates. Whether inundated with sound or straining to hear its softness, both actions (a response in themselves) require an attuned deciphering, a sifting and lifting of what is given, humbled always by what is with[/]held.

Marion frames God as the [w]hole—that which exceeds, shines through the irruptions of phenomenal givenness. Derrida frames God as the w[hole]—the spaces gaping in our systems, necessarily left open for God’s coming in the messianic fulfillment. Levinas might call this hole the rupture or tear of subjectivity, of totalities, in which the face serves as a placemarker for the Divine, its trauma and its trace. In Marion’s terms, this would be the icon

image (for example, gardens) is superimposed on another (the written word) in exact correspondence. An analogy is constructed in three-dimensional space. Its images float one upon the other without convergence: there is something in between, something paradoxical: Eros.” Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 145.

⁶⁵ “Khora,” 103.

⁶⁶ “Sauf le nom,” 70.

⁶⁷ See Jean-Louis Chretien’s exploration of Heidegger’s later works in “Call and Response”—his first essay in *Call and Response*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

shining through the idol, burning its contours by speaking through, saturating the phenomena that we are tempted to reduce.

In turn, when trying to combat this superabundant asymmetry of Marion's hyperousia—Derrida frames the gift as hypo-ousia. Ousia, before its troublesome rendering as the Latin substantia, etymologically roots in practical notions. Heidegger strained Aristotle's metaphysics through his practical ethics, recalling ousia as "household, property."⁶⁸

I recount this to state that all notice an *umheimlichkeit*-houseguest has broken, entered, and left being. How they account the traces of this guest and its coming may in the end be denominational differences or hermeneutical preferences. What resonates in their expressions is the noted de-centering. Prayer seems this in-breaking's anamnestic enactment; its sacramental remembrance.

John Caputo begins his "Concluding Prayer" by enacting prayer: de-centering the self, relinquishing any tight-fist conceptual choke on thematized truth.⁶⁹ He opens by opening himself before the reader, before the Other of an unseen, though not unsolicited audience. Stepping forward, revealing himself: nearly every sentence beginning with "I am" until the halting, "But." Suddenly, as if hitting a wall we did not anticipate and one he cannot see,⁷⁰ the retreat, the backstep of apophysis, "confess[ing]": "none of us...know who we are."⁷¹ It is as if he experiences the wounding encounter of alterity. Chretien would mark this event as a call that "recalls us [even as it is] a promise that keeps us beholding...giv[ing] us speech only by gripping us by the throat."⁷²

This simultaneous encounter that is both gift and grip founds the event of prayer, a prayer that has made Caputo prey.⁷³ Theology as an event or

⁶⁸ John van Buren, 225.

⁶⁹ As he writes, "The event for me is not an object, but a matter for prayer," "Concluding Prayer," 283.

⁷⁰ "Hence the ill-advised decision to speak about God, which I would not have done were I not provoked (by who knows what)." Ibid., 284.

⁷¹ Ibid., 283.

⁷² "In calling us the call does not call us alone, but asks of us everything that voice is capable of saying...In his fourth ode, Claudel affirms it: "When I hear your call, there is not a being, not a man,/ not a voice that is not necessary to my unanimity." He pursues: "Yet when you call me, not with myself alone must I answer, but with all of the being that surrounds me,/ A whole poem like a single word in the shape of a city within its walls, rounded like a mouth." Such a yes, even when proclaimed by all things and all voices, would still be insufficient. It would still not amount to more than a mere "hosanna in the window-discarded day,"...The call that recalls us is also a promise that keeps us beholding; it gives us speech only by gripping us by the throat." *Call and Response*,32.

⁷³ Caputo writes, "I am praying to God, preyed upon by God, turned to God—by God." This rhetoric echoes Chrétien's description in, "A new characteristic is added to our description of prayer: the manifestation of self to the other by the word, that is, agonistic speech that struggles for its truth, is an ordeal, a suffering God, a passion for God, a theopathy. Prayer is prey to its addressee. In measuring itself by God, prayer is speech that has always transgressed all measure, exceeded any ability to measure itself and know itself completely. In collapsing beneath him, prayer, like all lovers' speech, bears the weight of giving itself, that is to say, of losing itself." "The

encounter is a way of acknowledging the presence of an alterity without rendering that presence as “understandable”, or denying its “perceptible” absence.⁷⁴ Again, God finds a safer ana-logy with time than with being. The “event” is a way of *doing* what negative theology can only cleverly posit in aphorisms. For as Anne Davenport recalls, in conversation with Chretien:

Prayer eludes the parameters of objectivity, it has the bewildering character of “an event, with light from elsewhere.”...The event of prayer, which manifests itself as a wound and as the suffering of a gift, cannot be constituted by the ego as its object. A paradigm for religious phenomena, prayer...manifests what in itself is undecidable: we suspect that “only a thought of love” harbors in its depth what thought as such is unable to master.⁷⁵

Or, as Derrida might have it—prayer provides the dancing interplay, the unsettled, asymmetry that stretches consciousness, torn and wounded until the soul bleeds through, crying upon God at the margins of experience, in and on “the edge of language”—across the precipice that looks down on khora, the aporias of speech. Nevertheless, it is a God calling in absentia, in the opening, asking for a decision, a word as an event that ushers in justice by first stirring the voice, trembling the tears. Finitudes break under the “infinity” of ‘God’.⁷⁶ ‘God’ on the way to God: beyond what can be said or summoned by the voice.

And yet, in prayer, the voice that calls to God unearths. By virtue of the prayer’s rupture and the addressee’s alterity, the voice is poised and hovers over where even the clever aphorisms of negative theology dare not go...though they may hurl themselves across, “over there, toward the name, toward the beyond of the name in the name. Toward what, toward he or she who remains—save the name.”⁷⁷ Apophatic theology, like deconstructed metaphysics, hurls its words by wounding them, nearly prayer-like, hoping that in the scars the “impossible takes place.”⁷⁸

The question remains: is prayer simply the house, the space, that is no space, but that God no doubt enters? Though we lock our doors in thinking or tear our walls in deconstructing, we anticipate the Lord who asks us to seek, knock, that his door will be opened into us, unto us.

Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer,” 161. A version of this essay appeared long before Caputo’s *Weakness of God*, in Chrétiens’ “La Parole Blessée” (Paris: Criterion, 1992). The resonance is too striking to be ignored.

⁷⁴ See Pseudo-Dionysius’ advice to Timothy, “my advice...is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge.” “Mystical Theology” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 135. This gestures toward Plato’s distinction of the sensible and intelligible—of which khora is neither, presenting a third genus. See Derrida’s “Khora,” 89.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Anne A. Davenport’s “Translator’s Preface,” to his book, *Call and Response*, xiv-xv.

⁷⁶ “A Concluding Prayer,” 294.

⁷⁷ “Sauf le nom,” 59.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60.

This is the same Lord, who upon returning, stands among us saying, “Peace be with you,” even “though the doors were locked.”⁷⁹ Thus, the event of the coming Name, for Caputo, can be intimated by the “name of God [which] is the name of an event, of an event that comes calling at our door, which can and must be translated into the event of hospitality.”⁸⁰ Perhaps, in this sense, prayer-thinking, not unlike poetry, can provide a space for the philosophical wagers (and theological visitors) of hermeneutical hospitality.

⁷⁹ John 20:26.

⁸⁰ “The Event of Hospitality,” *The Weakness of God*, 269.