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THE RETURN OF ANTI-RELIGION:
FROM RADICAL ATHEISM TO RADICAL THEOLOGY

"For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable nonsovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a God who deconstructs himself in his ipseity."

- Jacques Derrida¹

"Postmodern theology" has come of age. It now has its own counter-movement, a new generation of philosophers marching under the flag of materialism, realism, and anti-religion who complain that the theologians are back at their old trick of appropriating attempts to kill off religion in order to make religion stronger. A younger generation has become impatient with Derrida and with all the *soixante-huitaires*, the dead white elders who dominated continental philosophy for nearly half a century, fed up with their so called relativism and postmodern religion. They are tired of hearing about undecidability, religious turns, and the ethics of the other, and they are looking for a more hard-nosed, materialist, realist atheist line of thought. This presents a crisis for continental philosophy whose style of thinking from Kant to the present is being challenged by a new and in my view justified complaint that continental philosophy has been resistant to and defensive about the hard sciences. The crisis is all the more interesting because it has been set off in no small part by the so-called "religious turn:" if religion is where continental philosophy leads us, the argument seems to go, then so much the worse for continental philosophy! The specters of religion have sparked panic selling in

¹Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 157.

the market for continental thinking as we know it. This is an issue that must be addressed. Given the historical violence religion has provoked and the reactionary meanness and stupidity of the Religious Right in American politics today, I am no less anxious about “religion.” That makes it all the more important for me to sort out what I am saying and what I am not, since my own work on Derrida and religion, as Michael Naas points out clearly, is no less informed by protecting what Derrida calls *laïcité*.² I try to work from a position both within and without religion, although the Christian Right considers me something of a resident alien.

Martin Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism* is a closely argued contribution to the recent debate that fits hand in glove with the new counter-movement.³ His book has reinvented Derrida for the younger generation of restless realists and comes as a timely refutation of any attempt to reduce Derrida to an anti-realist or anti-materialist. The book is especially welcome in the light of Meillassoux’s caricature of “correlationism,” which treats continental philosophers from Kant on as “creationists.”⁴ (That is not an exaggeration. I understand the need to kill the father, but one ought at least to make some sense when asked for the motive for the murder. Besides, such caricatures invite an obvious counter-argument: if treating Derrida and Foucault as creationists is where the new realism leads, then so much the worse for the new realism!) Since reinventing things for the future is what deconstruction is all about, RA is to that extent an impressive exercise in deconstruction. If Kant set out to deny knowledge to make room for faith, which left the barn door open to “fideism,” as Meillassoux argues, Hägglund uses deconstruction to pursue the opposite strategy, to deny religion in order to make room for materialism. So while I am happy to affirm the strategic advantages of this book, I am less than happy with its substantive results. In my view it presents a certain deconstruction, and a certain logic of deconstruction, but in an abridged edition of Derrida cut to fit the new materialism, all scrubbed up and sanitized, nothing written in the margins, deconstruction as logic not *écriture*. I wish it well. But in my view not only is the unabridged edition of deconstruction considerably more interesting it also provides the basis for a criticism of religion from within, rather than mounting a frontal attack from without that tries to hammer religion senseless. In deconstruction religion is more than one, and that opens up a possibility never considered in RA, what we might call a religious materialism, a religion without the immaterialism of two-worlds

²Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now on* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 62-80; cf. especially 239n5, in which Naas succinctly states my views on Derrida and religion with a judiciousness that is completely absent from the critics of the religious turn.

³Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); hereafter RA.

⁴Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 18. For robust rebuttals of Meillassoux, see Adrian Johnson, “Hume’s Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux,” and Martin Hägglund, “Radical Atheist Materialism: A Critique of Meillassoux,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 92-113 and 114-29, respectively.

Augustinianism, another Augustine and another religion, which is in fact the unedited view of Jacques Derrida. Interestingly, Meillassoux himself tried his hand at propounding something of a religious materialism,⁵ one that even sounds a bit like the “specter” of a “coming god” in Derrida, but with ridiculous results (a fanciful version of eternal recurrence). His position is especially ridiculous when viewed against the subtle and careful analysis of a certain faith and a certain religion and a certain *à venir* that Derrida provides, an analysis that is unfortunately completely suppressed in Hägglund’s abridged edition of deconstruction.

So I have a lot on my hands here and three tasks in particular: first, to straighten out what I am proposing about deconstruction and religion, since I am taken to task in RA as the bearer of the torch of the religious reading of Derrida; secondly, to contest Hägglund’s rendition of Derrida, which I regard as a torso of deconstruction; and finally to address the larger question that I am raising about a religious materialism. As Derrida was wont to do, I begin by begging for forgiveness, for taking up so much time with this excessively long piece. The reason is—even though forgiveness does not require a reason—that Hägglund’s book merits such consideration (and while I am imposing upon your time I am only occupying an ethereal and paperless space.) Hägglund has proposed a comprehensive interpretation of Derrida which requires not a few good one-liners squeezed into a standard book review but a re-narration of deconstruction as a whole, because a great deal of what Derrida is saying is opposed to the way he is framed in RA, which in particular occludes Derrida’s own contribution to the way in which religion can be reopened under the subtle auspices of deconstruction.

I. Radical Theology: A Completely Different Story

§1. *The Possibility of the Impossible*

When I wrote *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* there were two available ways to think about Derrida and religion, one irreverent and the other very reverent, both of which I steered around. I loved Mark Taylor’s impious proposal in *Erring* of an “a/theology,” which was important as far as it went but I thought finally fell down on the job.⁶ If Taylor had shown brilliantly in the first half of his now classic book what a deconstruction of classical theology would look like, he failed in the second half to remain on the slash of “a/theology,” to sustain the workings of the strange logic of the *sans* in Derrida in which what is struck out also remains *sous rature*. Taylor ended up making it look like

⁵ Quentin Meillassoux “Spectral Dilemma,” available on-line at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/23792245/Quentin-Meillassoux-Spectral-Dilemma> (April, 2011).

⁶Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1885). For an excellent review of the movement from the death of the 1960s through Mark Taylor’s *Erring* to my work, see Jeffrey Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God,” in *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1-24.

deconstruction dances gaily on the grave of the dead God, is not responsible to anything, is not responding to a call or claim, makes no promises and has no faith. I also loved the pious path pursued through negative theology, which is not so much the one that Derrida followed as the one that followed him around wherever he went. However, while Derrida admired negative theology – its tropes and gestures, its “detours, locutions and syntax”⁷ – as a brilliant exercise of several deconstructive strategies *avant la lettre*, he insisted that deconstruction is not negative theology, not even the most negative of negative theologies, which turns on an absolute and silent center, pre-linguistic and extra-temporal. I had made the same point in 1978 when I argued that, whatever fascinating similarities there are when Heidegger uses Meister Eckhart’s word “*Gelassenheit*,” Heidegger is talking about the thoroughly historical and linguistic event of *Ereignis* whereas Eckhart has in mind the wordless, timeless unity of the soul with a hyperessential God.⁸ That applies *a fortiori* to the quasi-transcendental notion of *diffrance*, which is not a highest being, or Being itself, or *Ereignis*, but a quasi-transcendental play of traces.

So I proposed a third path, both pious and impious, neither pious nor impious, laughing through my tears: neither the death of God pursued by Taylor nor Christian Neoplatonic apophaticism, but the circumfessional path, or aporia, inspired by the impudent figure of an atheistic Jewish Augustine. I argued that deconstruction is structured like a prayer, an odd but compelling archi-prayer (*viens!*) which leaves us hanging without a prayer, with the result that deconstruction belongs to the vocative and invocative space and time of prayer. A certain prayer, a prayer for the impossible, which unlike Taylor’s a/theology is structured like a *religion* and unlike negative theology is only *structured* like a religion, but without religion, without the God of classical religion, constituting a kind of khoral or an-khoral religion, unlike the deep anchored unity of the *Seelengund* and *Gottesgrund* in mystical theology. Derrida’s prayer is singularly lost and adrift, *destinarrant*, praying without a prayer, left without a clue. If I knew who I was praying to, Derrida would say, I would know everything.

Derrida famously said that the least bad definition of deconstruction is the “experience of the impossible,”⁹ which I used as the motif under which I launched a full scale reading of deconstruction as religion *without religion*. When I did that, my idea was not to swell attendance at the local church or synagogue. I was speaking of the modes of existence, passion, temporality, and desire that constitute the underlying structure of such an experience. I was not speaking about a First Being, or the Being of beings, or a Hyperbeing called God. I was not speaking of a being called God but of what is being called in the “name of

⁷Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

⁸John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 222-40.

⁹“Psyche: Invention of the Other,” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 15. This is the first place I can find this expression, and it is repeated many times thereafter.

God." That is why I am myself "charged" with atheism by my friends on the Christian Right who want their "faith" to consist in a body of propositional beliefs that pick out a Big Being, and who resist having their confessional creed cut by anything truly circum-fessional. That is why they are enraged when I treat deconstruction as a more radical Augustinianism, a more radical prayer, a more radically wounded word. Like Žižek, I agree the therapy is over when you see there is no Big Other. The possibility of the impossible is not about a Big Being coming to save you by doing the impossible things that you yourself cannot possibly do, but about the future and responsibility. This amazing misunderstanding of my views on this point deforms everything Hägglund says about my work in RA and constituted, as Hägglund says of me in an excellent phrase, the matrix of his systematic misreading of everything I say (RA, 120). Once you "have" an identifiable Big Being like that, once you "know" it, you have undermined the experiential structure (the possible/impossible) under analysis. That is why like Derrida I deny that the impossible *is* God, that God is what the impossible is or means, *simpliciter* or *tout court*. That would collapse the possibility of the impossible into something proper and identifiable. As Derrida said in a commentary on my *Prayers and Tears*:

If there is a transparent translatability [between "God" and "the impossible"] "the faith" is safe, that is, it becomes a non-faith. At that point, it becomes possible to name [the impossible]. It becomes possible because there is someone whom you can name and call because you know who it is that you are calling. Not only can I not say this, but I would not and should not say this. If I were sure that it was possible for me to replace "the impossible" by "God" then everything would become possible. Faith would become possible, and when faith becomes simply possible, it is not faith anymore.¹⁰

That is precisely the point where, much as I love him, I jump the Kierkegaardian ship—when Kierkegaard identifies the "Paradox," which is a structure of passion, desire, existence, and temporality, with the Christian doctrine of Incarnation. That would be like the Messiah actually showing up (which in fact it precisely *is*) and that would ruin everything. For me, the truest form of Christianity is the one in which the Messiah can as a structural matter never show up, or better, in which *we* are the messianic generation, in which it is our responsibility to see that he (or she or it) does, insofar as that impossibility is possible (which is the Paradox for me).

When Derrida argues in "Faith and Knowledge" that the two sources of religion are faith and the desire to keep safe, he is proposing a recipe for an auto-

¹⁰"The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 28. This is an interview of Derrida by Mark Dooley about *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997; hereafter P&T), followed by my response to Derrida, "A Game of Jacks," pp. 34-49.

deconstructive brew because faith is only possible if it is impossible, if it is also unsafe and without faith. Religion without religion turns on a faith without safety, a mad risk of everything on the impossible. But in classical metaphysical theology, on the other hand—for which I and Derrida and the deconstructive repetition of religion without religion are making trouble—God is the possibility of the impossible in a straightforward sense, for whom nothing is impossible, which Jean-Luc Marion describes as the “impossibility of impossibility.”¹¹ The classical doctrine of omnipotence effectively ruins the deconstructive idea of “*the impossible*” and also of “God” for Derrida—and that is why I wrote a book against it, which to my utter astonishment is left conspicuously unread in RA—where I argued that “God” in Derrida, like justice, can only be a weak force (*force faible*). The name of “God” in Derrida is a limit concept, a dream, and as Hent de Vries has shown an “exemplary” one that in our western, Greco-European and Biblical culture has exemplary force.¹² The becoming possible of the impossible in Derrida is not the name of a Super Something or Someone but of an event that goes to the heart of the structure of experience, or of life as life/death. This structure intensifies the possible to the point of the impossible, presses the possible to its possible limits, to its impossible limits, to the limits of the impossible, which makes the possible exceed itself, which pushes it beyond itself, which is why we desire it with a desire beyond desire. This is the event of desire, passion, existence, temporality which is at work *in* and *as* religion and which deconstruction exposes in all its unsafe, unprotected anarchic energy, with all the “might” of the “might be,” not the might of omnipotence. That indeed is what “desire” is, if it is. The “becoming possible of the impossible” is what impasses existence, which holds the possible up against the impossible, which provides the measureless measure—the infinite intensity, the passion—of experience.

I am not arguing (and do not think) that there is a being called “God” somewhere who does or fails to do impossible things. Nor do I argue or think that God is the Being of beings, or a hyper-Being beyond Being in the tradition of mystical theology, or the “God without Being” of Jean-Luc Marion (with whom Hägglund appears to have me confused), a point I have been making ever since I cautioned against confusing *Ereignis* with God and the misunderstanding of which is the source of one of Hägglund’s most egregious misreadings of my work.¹³ Nor do I, God forbid, attribute any such views to Jacques Derrida, nor

¹¹Jean-Luc Marion, “The Impossible for Man—God,” in *Transcendence and Beyond*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 17-43.

¹²Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 76

¹³Hägglund’s misunderstanding of what I have written is so complete that he sets about “correcting” me for my “misunderstanding” of Derrida on this point (RA, 116-17) by simply repeating what I have said for thirty years, ever since I started writing about Meister Eckhart and Heidegger. That this is also the basis of my ongoing disagreement with Jean-Luc Marion is completely lost on him. Far from refuting me, he owes me a footnote. See P&T, §§3-4, especially pp. 45-48; and John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), ch. 10.

thank God did Derrida think I was doing any such thing.¹⁴ I am not theologizing philosophy but deconstructing Christianity, causing a scandal to the pious and a stumbling block to the theologians, re-imagining, reinventing "God," which is why my radical theology is considered radical atheism and a "death of God" by my evangelical friends. I deny that the central narratives of the various religious traditions have any privileged information to offer us about the origin or the ultimate outcome the physical universe or of any alternate universes. If you are interested in the makeup of the physical universe, I think you need to brush up on your string theory. In the place of what I call "strong theology,"¹⁵ I offer a certain "poetics" of the human condition, not a theo-logic but a "theo-poetics," just as Derrida stresses the necessity of his "grafts of poetry upon philosophy, which are anything but confused."¹⁶ I treat religious beliefs and practices like Wittgensteinian "forms of life," Heideggerian modes of "being-in-the-world," Merleau-Ponty's ways of "singing the world," transpiring on what Deleuze (and Laruelle) would call the "plane of immanence." They have to do with the passion, the intensity, the temporality and, yes, the mortality of the human condition. As for cosmic mercilessness itself (Meillassoux and Brassier), that

¹⁴Before I published *P&T* I sent the typescript to Derrida, because I wanted to be sure he did not think I was trying to return him to the religion of his childhood. He responded by saying "vous me lisez comme j'aime être lu, là où les choses restent le plus risquées, le plus obscures, le plus instables, le plus hyperboliques" and added "Je vous en remercie du fond du cœur, et je sais, à vous lire, que vous comprenez mieux que quiconque ce que je veux dire par là..." In the interview with Dooley, Derrida expressed his interest in seeing theology opened up in a deconstructive mode (cf. "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible," pp. 23-24), as he does also in "The Force of Law," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Andijar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 236; *Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida in Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27-50. The latter was an interview that Sherwood, Hart and I conducted with Derrida at a memorable plenary session of the American Academy of Religion in 2002. I introduce this to make it plain that Derrida and I are on the same page about his atheism and my religion. I am happy to support what I say without his *auctoritas*, lest I return the gift to the donor. Indeed in both the "Edifying Divertissements" of *P&T* and in *Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006; hereafter WG) I take deconstruction where "Jackie," "a little black and Arab Jew," cannot go—into a deconstruction of Christian theology, which gives "God" and theology some time (remembering that *donner* also includes *donner un coup*). My point is to show that Derrida and I share a common interest in letting deconstruction re-open and re-invent theology, a project close to the heart of deconstruction, and not least to show that deconstruction has a heart, which is completely at odds with the dismissive atheistic polemics of RA.

¹⁵In speaking of "strong theology," I am speaking rhetorically and in shorthand and I apologize to the readers of the Scriptures and the history of theology, which are as deconstruction would predict much more complicated and multi-vocal. The same thing goes for what we in the west call "religion," which is more shorthand, as this is a category that needs to be pluralized and contested, a Latin word and largely a European construction that is complicit with modern colonialism

¹⁶Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2007), 31; *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 158.

only intensifies the religious condition (here we owe a footnote to Pascal), just as mortality intensifies the preciousness of life, which is the starting point of my own *Against Ethics* and *Radical Hermeneutics*, where I argued that we make no gains by concealing the “difficulty of life.”¹⁷

In the view I strike, God is not an *ens realissimum* or perfect act (*actus purus*) but the name of an event in which we find ourselves at risk, exposed to what drives us to the limits, to what we desire with a desire beyond desire, to what we love *per impossible*, with prayers and tears. I am always talking about prayer, but for me to pray is to ask for trouble, because God is trouble. “God” is not the name of the perfect constellation and complete actualization of all possible perfection, but of a provocation, a perhaps, a solicitation, an unexpected visitation, an interruption, which calls us to the limits of joy and grief. God is figured not by the blinding sun of Platonism but by the stirring waters of the event, the face of the deep as Catherine Keller argues.¹⁸ God is not the hyperousiological I know not what of negative theology, but a call from I know not where. God is not an unlimited being but a name uttered in limit situations. God is not an ideal of being but the ordeal of an event astir within being, an impatience within the world that pushes the world beyond itself, beyond the horizons of foreseeability, making the world risky and restless with the promise/threat. God is not a pure act but a pure interruption, not pure perfection but pure provocation, not a being but an event, the name of an event whose name I do not know, the name of a secret, of the secret sources and resources of life. The name of God is the name of a stranger who seeks a room in our home, of a coming, an advent, which we are called upon to welcome. Such is the transcendence life permits, not the magical transcendence effected by a being almighty, but the transcendence of the “might be” that stirs impatiently in the event, of the “perhaps” that is restlessly astir in the provocation of God.

§2. A Devilish Mix of Faith and Atheism

In this spirit, Derrida has been my coconspirator, and the conspiracy unfolded in two stages. In the first—*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*—I mingled the gorgeous prayers and tears of Augustine’s *Confessions* with those of a certain “little black and Arab Jew,” producing an atheistic Jewish Augustine, who surprises us by saying he has been praying all his life, kissing his prayer shawl every night, and that nobody, not even his mother or Geoffrey Bennington, knows about his religion, as a result of which, he says, he has been “read less and less well over almost twenty years.”¹⁹ That I took to heart. Here was the core of immanence I sought, an ironic irreligious religion, a prayer to an unknown even

¹⁷John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 1-7.

¹⁸Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹“Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases” in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 154.

nonexistent God, a religion growing out of rightly passing for an atheist.²⁰ The religious pulse vibrates precisely in the “rightly passing for”—in the passion of undecidability—in the mutation of both theism and atheism, launching the work of inventing new parergonal, para-theological categories, where not believing in God does not disqualify the religion.²¹ As I said in “A Game of Jacks:”

My hypothesis in *Prayers and Tears* is that the key to understanding deconstruction is also the key to understanding religion, viz., that *both* are brewed from a devilish mix of faith and atheism, radical doubt and faith, as he [Derrida] says to Dooley. That makes for a delicate and scandalous blend, an exquisite commingling that requires a trained palate. It is easily misunderstood—as the violence with which Derrida is denounced *both* as a nihilist and a negative theologian testifies. It allows deconstruction to seem to the faithful now like an enemy, now like an ally, even as its secular critics will say that it consorts with religious fanaticism.²²

Everything interesting about deconstruction and religion (or a deconstruction of religion, a deconstructive religion, a religious deconstruction) lies in the way it opens the structure of experience by undermining the very binarity of theism and atheism upon which everything in RA is predicated.²³

²⁰Hägglund is completely mistaken, again, to say that I gloss the “rightly pass for an atheist” passage (Circ., 155) by claiming that for me Derrida is merely an atheist about a Hellenistic God, which is a “finite creature,” but not about some other candidate for God, like a Jewish one, which would not be a finite creature (RA, 227n61). I have consistently maintained that the name of God is an effect of the play of traces, that every “God” is a finite creature, a point made before me by Thomas Aquinas (see below, §17). What interests me in this passage is the *play* in the name to which Derrida confesses when he says this. “Rightly pass” means, that is what they say about me and they are right, but there are so many other voices in me that cannot be arrested by this intimidating word, which is what Hägglund undertakes to do by freezing the a/theological effect of deconstruction as “radical atheism.” What Hägglund overlooks in the passage he cites (*P&T*, 334-36), and in *P&T* generally, is that I am arguing that to approach Derrida by way of “negative theology” is to overemphasize the importance of Christian Neoplatonism in Derrida and it has no ear for Derrida’s Jewish side, which is tuned to the sensuous and strange images of God in the Tanach. I am of course pleased to learn from Hägglund that Derrida is not an orthodox Jew, still less a Christian. He is even a bit of an Arab. When Hägglund goes on to sketch the “mortal God” in the rest of that note, he joins me in the project of a constructing a weak theology.

²¹“For there are those who say that what I am doing is really a hidden or cryptic religious faith, or that it is just skepticism, nihilism or atheism. He [Caputo] has never shared these prejudices.” “The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” 23.

²²“A Game of Jacks,” 36.

²³See John D. Caputo, Atheism, A/theology and the Postmodern Condition, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 267-82.

From the point of view of the local rabbi or pastor, Derrida is an atheist, and that atheism has always been irreducibly important to me, an important point entirely lost on Hägglund. Without his atheism, Derrida and I would be lost. If we were saved, we would be lost. I would lose my faith in a religion without religion. If Derrida had at some time been “converted” like Augustine, returned to the religion of his mother, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* would have been ruined. Without this atheism we have to do without the without and we would be immured within the walls of religion, unable to “repeat” the form of life that religion is, the multiple forms that the several religious traditions are, without being drawn into their doctrines and the dogmas, unable to break open their closed confessional circles, unable to put them at risk as so many precarious ways to “do the truth” (Augustine).²⁴ Derrida’s atheism isolates the structure of religion, separates out “religion” as a body of confessional beliefs and practices from *religio* as what was called in the middle ages a “virtue,” a mode of cultivating the excellence (*arete*) of our lives, or what I am calling a mode of being-in-the-world. Seen thus, *religio* is more than one (*plus d’un*), crosses the borders between “theism” and “atheism,” “polytheism” and “agnosticism,” which are largely the categories of the philosophy of religion.²⁵ My hope lies in the reinvention of God (which is why I get angry emails from the Bible Belt), getting past the God of dogma and “religion,” making our way towards “God,” towards what is getting itself said and done under the name of God, for better and for worse, thereby breaking the grip of religion on religion. Derrida’s atheism opens the books of religion, making texts like the Scriptures and Augustine’s *Confessions* available for reading, no longer under either secular censure or ecclesiastical protection (two alternative forms of excommunication, immunization and dogma). Like Derrida, I feel around for the cluster of events that stir within a text like the *Confessions*, repeating religion without its dualist two worlds transcendence-operators—body and soul, time and eternity, this world and the next, etc.—feeling for the pulse or rhythm of the immanence of life, for the life of immanence, for life/death.²⁶ I invited Derrida to Villanova University (a Catholic university, conducted by the Order of Saint Augustine!) in a series of conferences on deconstruction and religion where he could meet “real” Augustinians (*les Catholiques!*), whom of course he held spellbound—to his own surprise but to no one else’s—on the perfectly understandable grounds that we are all in this together, all equally *destinarrant*, with or without “religion”

²⁴Derrida’s work both shocks and emancipates confessional believers by showing that their faith is co-constituted by a non-faith, that they can only “rightly pass” for Christians (or anything else), an exquisite formula worthy of Johannes Climacus, who declined the compliment of being “Christian” on the grounds that he was only trying to become one.

²⁵See the multiple forms atheism can take in Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). To my astonishment, or perhaps not, Hägglund’s pronouncements on atheism, including a central one on what “atheism” (*tout court*) has been before Hägglund, are unsupported by any reference to any actual historical form of atheism.

²⁶In François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2011) the “future Christ” is a figure of immanence rather than a transcendent being come down to earth to authorize the Inquisition and burn heretics.

My hypothesis is that the “religion without religion” which in *The Gift of Death* he attributed to others is also performed in the flesh, scarred on the body, inscribed in the texts of Jacques Derrida himself. *Prayers and Tears* constructs the categories and the images, the tropes and the strategies, of such an ir/religion. I was not, God forbid, assimilating Derrida to Augustine—and to my knowledge no one (including Jacques Derrida) other than Hägglund has suspected me of that. I was unfolding the elements of religion as a form of life, reading religious texts as a meditation upon our mortality-and-vitality, as a certain poetics of the human condition. So when Hägglund explains Augustine and Meister Eckhart to me, I can only be very grateful. Augustine is always ahead of me and I need all the help I can get. But truth to tell I have heard before that Augustine is not Derrida, that Augustine unlike Derrida believes in God and wants to go to heaven. I usually hear this from the theologians who give me (holy) hell for planting the seeds of doubt in Augustine's garden. But it is one of Hägglund's most original theses, a completely unprecedented contribution to the literature, that I was playing Augustine's hand in this poker game. When I examine the completely baffling commentary Hägglund makes on my work I realize that he is all along assuming I am an orthodox two-worlds Augustinian who thinks that a Hyperbeing called God can do impossible things while we humans, alas, cannot. I would say that is a perfect misunderstanding of my work but for the fact that nothing is perfect.

§3. Of the Divine Names

The second stage is *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. That is a book not about Jacques Derrida but about God, about the “event” that stirs within the name of God, inspired by Derrida's remarks on a coming God who would lack sovereignty.²⁷ Here, with a smile on my face but worried that I might lose a friend or two who might stop answering my emails, I spoke of “theology,” a “weak theology”—like a “minor literature” in the Deleuzian sense, where mystics and heretics snipe at the heels of the majority voices. I was persuaded that there were good strategic, performative and deconstructive reasons to call it a kind of “theology,” a “radical theology.” After all, what I was arguing was that theology is not the private property of the “theologians,” not if religion is an immanent form of life, a form of radical experience. Hence, I concluded, a palace coup was in order, a protest movement in which we should all take to the streets and wrest “theology” free from the theologians. But I did so with two hands, with a right hand writing a genuine but immanent theology, and with a left handed Socratic irony, Derridean impishness and Kierkegaardian humor. I opposed this theology to Kierkegaard's hilarious riff on a theology all powdered and rouged sitting in the window waiting for a Hegelian to stroll by. In RA, Hägglund missed the irony and misread *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*

²⁷*Rogues*, 157; cf. xiv-xv, 114; “Epoché and Faith,” 42: “If it is as weak and vulnerable that Jesus Christ represents or incarnates God, then the consequence would be that God is not absolutely powerful.” I pursued Derrida on this point because I think it is one of his most innovative “theological” moments.

with a straight face, tone deaf to the comic-ironic Kierkegaardian tone, missing the Derridean smile, mistaking me for a Vatican diplomat, while not so much as reading *The Weakness of God* at all.²⁸ Had he done so he would have found a creation story without omnipotence and a Lazarus read in terms of "living on," *sur-vie* (around which RA is organized). I am so much enamored of *sur-vie*, I should add, that it is the subject of my next book, a follow-up to *The Weakness of God* entitled *The Weakness of the Flesh*. I read the Resurrection against itself, took the moral of the narrative to be "more life," life-death, and Jesus to be someone who talks the sisters of Lazarus through their grief and helps them find a way of "living on," bringing them *salut* as salutation not as eternal salvation, consoling Mary and Martha who say they are not interested in eternal life for their brother but more time (see WG, ch. 11; RA, 225n39).

Having now finally read this book Hägglund has reopened his campaign headquarters under another divine name so as to continue his campaign to assimilate me to some form of classical transcendence.²⁹ After all, if Caputo is speaking about "religion"—*la religion!* always in the singular—then he must be a two-worlds Augustinian, which is what "religion" "essentially" "is" in RA. Conceding now that I bid adieu to divine omnipotence—an evident act of matricide of my own matrix!—he turns me into an analogue of another matrix, this time of the "pure good," as if I am serving up a divine being with one of the famous divine names amputated, like a God with a patch over one eye. So my God is still quite a good chap but too weak to do any harm even if he wanted to. I repeat, *noch einmal*: I am not saying that God is an innocent but weak being, or a good being who means well even if his means are limited. I am not making ontic, ontological, me-ontological or hyper-ontological claims about a hyper-being or hyper-person called God. (I am running out of ways to explain this.) I take leave of the order of presence, of being and Beings, weak or strong, good or bad, transcendent or immanent, providential or blind, in favor of the *event* of *peut-être*. I am not debating about a being and which properties the being is to be assigned (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) but about an im/probable, im/possible promise/threat, about the experience of the impossible, for which the name of God is one of our best and favorite names, a paradigmatic name, which is my view and the express view of Jacques Derrida.³⁰

²⁸Derrida says that he writes with a mixture of tragedy and laughter and that "Jack [Caputo] understood that he had to do the same with me. He understood that he had to make serious jokes." "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible," 25-26.

²⁹I am referring to a paper Häggund read at a "Derrida and Religion" conference (Harvard University, March, 2010), the papers from which are currently being prepared for publication. A shorter version of the study I am presenting here will appear in that volume.

³⁰"For me, God is precisely the one who would share my desire for the impossible, even if he doesn't respond to, or satisfy that desire. This is a dream." "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible," 29. See Derrida's remarks on the endless fluctuation between God and the impossible (p. 28) and my commentary on this passage in "A Game of Jacks," 38-39. One of the countless things in the Derrida and religion literature that is sold short in RA, ch. 4 is Hent DeVries's important argument that for

The question I am raising is this: what is happening in and under the enormous provocation of that name, what is getting itself said and done there, in the middle voice? Orthodox ears to their credit immediately perk up at this point and object that I keep saying “God,” not God, or the “name” of God, not God. Taking up Derrida’s suggestive notion of a weak force, of an event without sovereignty, I say this event lays claim to us unconditionally but without force, soliciting us, addressing us, haunting us. When it comes to the name of God, it is we who do the answering, in the name, under the name, with or without the name, because this name is endlessly substitutable, and there is no one name at the sound of which every knee should bend. God forbid. That does not make the event a pure good but a pure risk, a risky injunction, because such solicitations may lead us into the worst evils, as the history of “God” testifies. Nothing insures a good outcome, nothing protects us from all the blood that is spilled in this name, under this name, all that is awash in the blood of *pro deo et patria*. The name of God, of justice and democracy, is the name of the promise/threat, of the gift/*Gift*, and all these names are famous for spewing poison and spilling blood.³¹ But had I set out instead from the point of view of “goodness,” I could have named my book *The Radical Evil of God*, meaning the structural possibility of evil inscribed in the name of God (something Boehme and Schelling were pondering on a metaphysical level).³² I singled out “weakness” both because I am interested in the political critique of sovereignty and because the “weakness” of God has a literally crucial purchase in the Christian tradition, in the crucified body of Jesus, in what Johann Baptist Metz calls the “dangerous memory of suffering.”³³ The event is no more “pure good”

Derrida the name of God is paradigmatic of every name, of the name itself, as that which is always already written under erasure, under the logic of the *sans*.

³¹As Hägglund likes to emphasize, promises are made in the face of a threat; threats threaten what we are promised.

³²When Schelling says that God is not a being but a life, and hence subject to suffering and death [See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 184-85], the radical atheism of RA becomes a prolegomenon to radical theology. When I was invited once to replace *khora* with the God of love, I declined because that would load the dice and remove the risk. See James H. Olthuis, “Testing the Heart of Khora: Anonymous or Amorous,” and my response, “The Chance of Love,” in *Cross and Khora: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo*, eds. Neal Deroo and Marko Zlomisic (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 174-196.

³³It is this “dangerous memory” of suffering and of the dead that I see inscribed in Derrida’s gloss on Luke 9:60 about letting the dead bury the dead (*P&T*, 147). Glossing this text I do not side with Jesus, who is saying something very sassy, especially to Jews (it meant: seek the Kingdom of God first and put everything else second), but with Derrida’s more pious reflection, that this would be the height of injustice. Derrida is inspired not by Jesus but by Walter Benjamin, who said that we are the ones the dead are waiting for—to bury them, to make right the wrong done to them. Absolute life, I say, “constitutes, for Derrida, the very definition of ‘absolute evil,’” which is, “alas, always possible.” When I mark the difference between the impossible that we love and the impossible we may end up with, like the difference between the democracy to come and the National Socialism to come, Hägglund

than “pure evil,” no more “strong” than it is literally “weak,” because it is nothing entitative or ontological, is neither a being nor an agent, neither a substance nor a subject, does not subsist and does not “do” things (or fail to do them) for which it could be praised or blamed. So no matter which of the names Hägglund settles on I have in fact the same view. If “omniscience,” I will defend the cause of the “blindness of God,” or if “necessity,” the contingency of God. In fact, my precise proposal is that the event harbored in the name of God is the “peut-être,” “perhaps,” not the contingency of God but the name of God harboring the force of contingency, not the might of omnipotence but the subjunctive “might” of might-be. As there is an infinity of divine names, this debate could go for some time!

§4. The Beautiful Risk of Creation

In my line of work I am frequently glossing Scriptural texts where the notion of the pure good is in play, which I however analyze as the pure risk. I recklessly expose myself to texts Hägglund seeks to quarantine (the Scriptures), which are dreaming of paradise and the Kingdom of God.³⁴ But my redescription of them should be obvious, as when I entitle a chapter “The Beautiful Risk of Creation,” where I redescribe the benevolence of God in strong theology as the “chance” for the good which is menaced not only on all sides but even from within by evil. I monitor the story of creation by way of a Talmudic gloss which serves as the epigraph of the chapter (epigraphs are important for readers of Derrida). God attempted and failed to make the world twenty-six times (so much for omnipotence). But on the next attempt he succeeded and then exclaimed not “good, good,” as in Genesis, but “let’s hope it works,” which signifies, the rabbi says, that “history is branded with the mark of radical uncertainty” (WG, 55). God could not foresee what was coming, had no power over it, and realized that everything was at the mercy of chance, so he was keeping the divine fingers crossed. Hägglund reads my citation of the literal words of Genesis³⁵—good,

complains (RA, 141-42) that I am denying that the promise of justice is haunted by the threat of injustice, denying that as a structural matter laws which do justice to some sell others short, or that the memory of some is the forgetting of others. Those are matters I point out clearly in other contexts (P&T, 202-205) when the context requires it, and the complaint, like so much else in RA on “religion,” is textually groundless and has simply descended into pure contentiousness in which it takes so much pleasure.

³⁴See RA, 120-21; 223-24n21. There is to be sure an idea of God as “all good” in the Scriptures, but that does not imply an idea that is somehow hard wired to a pure good or possessed of some intellectual intuition of a pure good. As I will show below (§17), God, the good, and the rest of the divine names are all so many effects of the play of traces. That the idea of the “pure good” is inscribed in the play of traces is borne out by (among other things) how much no good God is up to in the Scriptures. See *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergmann and Michael J. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵Hägglund often cites my glosses on the New Testament sayings on the “Kingdom of God” in the “Edifying Divertissements” (RA, 121), where he confuses the text I am glossing with the point I am making and so fails to realize where all this is leading me.

good, very good – and then ignores my gloss, my point – which is the “perhaps,” *peut-être*.³⁶ God rolled the dice and took a chance on the good – and by the sixth chapter of Genesis God regrets (not a familiar divine name) the mess he has created and wipes the world out with a flood and starts all over again. An intemperate Yahweh was the first nihilist. “Good” then means for me a promise, not an ontological pronouncement. Everything in this chapter, in WG as a whole, presupposes the structural inhabitation of the good by its exposure to evil, and the structural chance for good in the most risky situations.³⁷ Creation launches the promise/threat, the beautiful risk, which landed straightaway in Cain’s murder of Abel. I am talking about the chance of an event, not about the adventures of a Hyperbeing named God. By the same token, when Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit, they do not pass from good to evil, but from a childhood innocent of this distinction to a knowledge of it, which is their coming of age, their coming to a knowledge of how things work, which is about what the original Hebrew phrase means. Before they eat the fruit, there is neither good nor evil, because the distinction between good and evil has not yet been launched. What makes this a myth about the origin of human race is their coming to know the play of differences between good and evil, the structural exposure of the good to the possibility of evil; the structural chance for good in the worst evil. What they wanted was a chance to decide for themselves, and the serpent not God was the more truthful player in this scenario. God was the adult in the room, I said, and he conducted himself badly.³⁸

For example, he cites my gloss on the Kingdom saying about the temporality of lilies of the field – as a time which cancels worry about the future – and fails to continue to my gloss, which is *both* to not worry *and* to worry about the uncertain future (RA, 223-24n21). The text says both, have no anxiety, be like the lilies of the field (enjoy the gift, grace or chance of “today”), *and* work out your salvation in fear and trembling. “Tomorrow,” I add, “it may be better or *perhaps* it will be worse.” (WG, 181). I am marking up my copy of the New Testament with the structure of the trace, relentlessly redescribing God as the name of an event, the name of the dangerous perhaps, which my evangelical critics almost never fail to observe but of which Hägglund remain in almost perfect innocence.

³⁶“Creation is quite an ‘event,’ which means it opens up a long chain of subsequent and unforeseeable events, both destructive and re-creative ones, and the creator is just going to have to live with that undecidability that is inscribed in things.” WG, 72.

³⁷“The whole drama of creation follows a simple but bracing law: without the elements, there is no chance in creation, and without chance, there is no risk, and without risk and uncertainty, our conception of existence is an illusion or fantasy. The phenomenological perspicacity of the authors of the creation narratives lies in their provision for the uncertainty and unpredictability of the human drama, including the undecidable link between gratuity and grace.” WG, 74; “The two narratives have a kind of good news/bad news structure: ‘Good, yes, yes, but.’” WG, 75.

³⁸“To sum up this part of the story: the event that rings out in the name of God in the creation stories is to announce a kind of covenant with life that we are asked to initial. We are asked to say ‘yes’ to life by adding a second yes to God’s ‘yes’ (Rosenzweig), to countersign God’s yes with our yes, and that involves signing on to that risk, to embrace what God has formed *and* the elemental undecidability in which God has formed or inscribed it. God does indeed have a plan for creation but God, like the rest of us, is hoping it works.” WG, 74.

For Hägglund, if I am speaking of “religion” and “God” at all I must be on a mission from the Vatican, not describing a religion *without* religion.³⁹ He does not see the extent to which any possible radical or structural evil, atheism, or blindness is not an objection to my radical theology but constituent of it. As I said in *Radical Hermeneutics*, the more you stress the difficulty in things, and the more you show that things are divided against themselves, the more honest will be the results. That is why, on the one hand, in the Bible Belt my radical theology plays like atheism and, on the other hand, I could include Hägglund’s own very sensitive account of “Circumfession” in an anthology of weak theology, perhaps polemically the best response to his criticisms. To conclude that in deconstruction the case for atheism is a case against religion is to miss the point of both atheism and any possible religion in deconstruction, what the logicians call *ignorantia elenchi*, drawing the wrong conclusion. To the extent one can press the case for atheism, to that same extent the ground for a radical religion without religion is prepared. The prayers and tears of this religion offer no protection, keep no one safe, but remind the faithful that faith is structured from within by un-faith. If I did not disbelieve, I could not have faith. If there is, as I claim, a faith and a religion in deconstruction, it is the deconstruction of any such religion or faith as may comfort and protect the faithful. I mine the quasi-structures of experience, the para-structures organized around the structuring and de-structuring effects of *différance* and the possibility of the impossible, which go to the heart of the passion of life, of life/death, whether they go under the name of religion or literature or everyday life. That is why there are stretches of RA which I admire and with which I agree, despite its logocentric and self-certain presentation and the joy it gives itself in dismissing the views of others, where the style of deconstruction and the voice of Jacques Derrida are hammered flat and unrecognizable, where deconstruction is treated not as a subtle reading but as a weapon. For any possible “logic” in deconstruction is but one of its styles—it can be called a logic, Derrida says, “up to a certain point”⁴⁰—but deconstruction is written more *in* fear and trembling than as an attempt to inspire fear and trembling in everyone else. In one sense, I am not mounting an argument for religion against the forces of anti-religion, but for a poetics that cannot be confined to a logic.

Of course, one might speak of a “mystical atheism” in apophatic theology, but this would be in the name of inscribing a zone of sacredness around the unnamable and omni-namable name of God. Eckhart could and did deploy a radical mystical atheism to keep the name of God safe from the idols of theism—“I pray God to rid me of God”—although that earned him the wrath of the Inquisition. That venerable and classical strategy of mystical theology is not what I am about. Like Derrida and unlike Hägglund, I do not trust any discourse not “contaminated with negative theology,”⁴¹ and like Derrida and

³⁹As Derrida said to Dooley, “Don’t forget that Jack Caputo speaks of religion *without* religion.” “The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” 22.

⁴⁰Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.

⁴¹Derrida, *On the Name*, 69.

unlike Hägglund, I heed the non-ousiological voices in mystical theology, voices of errancy, of being lost.⁴² If strong theology is a handbook for being saved, weak theology is a circum-confession of being lost—“without salvation, resurrection or redemption—neither for oneself nor for the other”⁴³—in which there is perversely lodged the saving feature of a genuine search. I am not seeking to be saved by God, but to save God, to save the name of God, *sauf le nom*, “God, for example,” praying more for God than to God, praying for the world in a religion without religion. In deconstruction, we are saved from being saved, just as being lost is the only way to start searching. The unavoidability of being lost, the impossibility of being saved, is the condition of possibility of an aporetic soteriology, which meditates the mercilessness and mortality of our condition. If prayer is a wounded word, as Chrétien argues, there is no more radically wounded word than the prayers and tears of one for whom the very possibility of prayer is lodged in its impossibility.⁴⁴

The atheism of Jacques Derrida is a precious elixir and an irreducible lemma in the dilemma of a religion without religion, without otherworldly transcendence and supernatural dogma. The mortality of our lives, the flux of life-death, clears our head of the ethereal otherworldly bodies emerging from the strong imagination of strong theology, uncovers the mortal bodies of an immanent religion, exposes the religiousness of our mortal flesh, of which the crucified flesh of Jesus—that would be the “essence of Christianity” for me, *s'il y en a—is emblematic in Christian life. One would be harder put to find a more profoundly religious dialogue than the haunting conversation between Derrida and Cixous, two Jewish-Algerian atheists, musing over their mutual mortality (a conversation now made more poignant after the death of Derrida in 2004), started forty years ago when he was commenting on the manuscript of her first book entitled nothing less than *Le Prénom de Dieu*. Theirs is a meditation on faith and life, on faith in life, on life inhabited by death, on faith inhabited by un-faith, on life-death, a faith in life made all the more intense by the specter of death and un-faith, he believing, on his side, that in the end we die too soon, while she, on her side, had more faith in life. He, on his side, would like to be on her side, would like to believe that she is right. That in fact is what “belief” means, what we love, what we like to think —coming from “lief,” “like” or “love” (*lieben*) (as in “I would as lief do this as that”). To believe is to believe, to love what we believe and to believe what we love. He would believe if he could, if he could believe her, while she on her side also knows what he knows against her belief. Would that he might (*puissé je*) believe her, where that subjunctive might is all the “might” (*pouvoir*) he has available, the might not of power but of might-be, the being of may-being, the possibility of the impossible:*

⁴²P&T, 6-12; *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), ch. 10.

⁴³*Learning to Live Finally*, 24.

⁴⁴Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer,” trans. Jeff Kosky in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

As for me, I keep forever reminding her each time, on my side, that we die in the end, too quickly. And I always have to begin again. For she “because she loves to live” does not believe me. She, on her side, knows well that one dies in the end, too quickly; she knows it and writes about it better than anyone, she has the knowledge of it but she believes none of it...
 And I say to myself, on my side: “Would that I might [puissé-je] believe her, I wish I might [puisse], yes, I wish I might believe her...”⁴⁵

II. Radical Atheism

So what’s the difference? Once it is clear that “radical theology” communicates with and even presupposes a certain “atheism,” what, if any, is the exact nature of this disagreement? Why do we not have here simply two different ways of stating Derrida’s religious materialism?

Put in its most general terms, I think Hägglund wants to redescribe deconstruction as a logic of materialism—which I do not simply reject—but at the cost of a certain religion, which I certainly reject. He presupposes that there could not be a materialist theology or a religious materialism, something that while never considered by Hägglund is common currency in theology today. As anyone literate in theology quickly discovers, RA is uninterrupted by any familiarity with theology and its history, and still less with the history of atheism. I need only mention the well-known debate between Žižek, and Milbank over Milbank’s claim that Christianity is the true materialism.⁴⁶ In the process Hägglund sets out to systematically deny what he calls religion in order to make room for materialism, to decontaminate deconstruction of a completely unproblematised and easy essence called religion, to erase every “trace” of “transcendence” and exorcize the specters of “God” from deconstruction. As a result he puts out a brisk but abridged edition of Derrida (not to mention religion) cut to fit his own radical atheism, which as I hope to show is a torso of deconstruction deeply at odds with the style of deconstruction, at odds with a style of thinking that denies that style and substance can be cleanly parted. I, on the other hand, cultivate the unabridged polyvalence and multivocality of the unabridged edition, making room for the name of God in deconstruction and inviting its widespread contamination by religion, by all the religions and religions without religion, and I am happily haunted by all its ghosts. That being said, I am not taking back what I said at the start: I do welcome Hägglund’s timely presentation of a certain realist-materialist Derrida and the way he makes it clear that *differance* is not an immaterial spirit but requires a material substrate, that the “play of traces” cannot take place except as spacing-timing.

⁴⁵Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...*, 2; cf. p. 36. See Hélène Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 179.

⁴⁶Slavoj Žižek, and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

A good deal of the good that could be done in RA is undone by suppressing Derrida's axiomatics of the beyond, of the *super, epekeina, hyper, über, au-dès*.⁴⁷ all of which are analyzed in terms of what Derrida calls the *à venir*, thereby suppressing the whole order of hope, expectation and aspiration in Derrida's spectrality, which Derrida describes as his "hyperbolic ethics," and this because of Hägglund's fear of contamination by Augustinian dualism. It is instructive to note in this regard Derrida's response to Christopher Norris's proposal that deconstruction is a "transcendental realism." Derrida says that deconstruction has "always come forward *in the name of the real*, of the irreducible reality of the real—not the real as an attribute of the *thing* (*res*), objective, present, sense-able or intelligible, but the real as coming or event of the other...In this sense, nothing is more 'realist' than deconstruction."⁴⁸ Derrida is certainly dedicated to dealing with what is real, with what there is (*il y a*), but he is not satisfied to say that the real is the simply present, so he always has an eye on what is real beyond the real, on the real that is not yet real, on what is coming, on the *peut-être* and the *s'il y en a*. Derrida displaces the simple primacy of the sensible-real in two ways, first, by seeing to it that the sensible-real too is the effect of the trace, and secondly, by seeing to it that the real is always haunted by the specters of the *arrivants* and the *revenants*. That is why I have described deconstruction as an "hyper-realism" (WG, 113 ff.) or, let us say now in the light of this debate, an hyper-materialism, an open-ended materialism, just as Žižek thinks that matter is all, but the all is a non-all, and as Malabou describes a "reasonable materialism" that does not turn life into a cybernetic or neurological program.⁴⁹ Derrida, Žižek, Malabou and I are all "materialists" in the sense that we do not think there are two worlds, one in space and time, the other transcending space and time. So where I speak of a "poetics" not a logic, Malabou emphasizes a transformational "plastics," and Žižek introduces "parallax shifts."

Let us look at this disagreement in more detail.

§5. By the Impossible

Let us begin *by* the impossible. I was not the first to say that.⁵⁰ I am just countersigning it because it is also how I begin, or how I hope things begin in me, in us all.

By the impossible. In deconstruction, everything happens *by* the impossible. *Par l'impossible* everything begins. In deconstruction, "*the impossible*" is less a noun than an action-word, a process, an event, designed to track *how* things happen, plotting a kind of dynamics or kinesthetics. Things come to pass *by* the

⁴⁷Derrida, *On the Name*, 64.

⁴⁸Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 96.

⁴⁹Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with our Brain*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 69.

⁵⁰*Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 6 (hereafter: GT).

impossible, so that deconstruction is first and foremost not a “theory,” not a “methodology,” not a “logic”—but a performance, and it is not a garden variety performance but a *per-ver-formance*, because it subverts the protocols in virtue of which performances are possible, lest the results be *pro forma*. In deconstruction, we are trying to make something happen, or rather to let it happen, which means to minimize the conditions that block things from happening while maximizing the conditions that allow them to happen. That of course is risky business, on the venerable conservative principle that the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t. But deconstruction is conservative only in the very odd sense that it thinks that the best way to conserve something is to put it at risk.⁵¹

Deconstruction was conceived in impossibility, conceived *by* the impossible. Its inaugural moment, the aporia that launched a thousand texts, was to find the name for the conditions under which names are formed, which is clearly impossible, circular. For as soon as you open your mouth, or turn on your computer, language has always already begun, always already been underway. If in the beginning was the word, then there is no word that is old enough for the beginning, no word that won’t be too late. As Derrida said, “the condition of all linguistic systems” cannot “form a part of the linguistic system and be situated as an object in its field.”⁵² So Derrida’s first recourse was a neologism, *diffrance*, coining a word that was neither a word nor a concept (nor a logic). At least, as Rorty wryly pointed out, that was only so the first time he said it, after which, in virtue of the very condition he was pointing out (iterability), it “caught on” and became a word, a famous one that ended up in the dictionary.⁵³ As soon as it came to be, it began to annul itself. So *diffrance* is a failure, an instructive, brilliant, exquisite structural failure, a famous and felicitous failure, a *felix culpa*, a parasite of great precision on an already existing word which it tried to reinvent. This was followed by a succession of other almost as famous failures—*pharmakon*, supplement, hymen, etc.—whose failure was singularly instructive. *Diffrance* and its successor forms keep trying to say what you cannot say (or to think what cannot be thought, to do what cannot be done, to go where you cannot go, etc.), which means to evoke something that gets itself said or done or thought precisely *by* this failure. That is why Derrida likes the Talmudic gloss that the Messiah fails to show up as a structural matter, that the *whole point* of the “Messiah” is not to show up but to generate a tradition of expectation. This failure is its heart, the source of its endless creativity, the way the absolute “secret,” which means not only unknown but unknowable, is the source of the endless reinterpretation of literature and as such a *felix culpa*. A felicitous fault, a happy failure, without regret, melancholy or sorrow, with no Lacanian lamenting over the loss of the phallus, a happiness which allows the event to happen, where what happens here is the history of reading. This failure is

⁵¹Jacques Derrida, “A Roundtable,” *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 8.

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 60. Hereafter OG.

⁵³See John D. Caputo, “Parisian Hermeneutics and Yankee Hermeneutics,” *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 84-124

otherwise known as a joyful repetition forwards, a repetition which produces what it repeats.

Deconstruction is *l'invention de l'impossible*, where the impossible is the *only* thing that can be “invented,” the only thing worthy of the name, where *invention* means in-coming—like a missile heading for our camp (the explosive part of Malabou’s “plasticity”)—the breaking-in of the impossible upon the circle of the possible. Deconstruction is the in-coming of the *tout autre* upon the circle of the same, *tout autre* meaning so wholly other that, given the present horizon of expectation, it's impossible. Deconstruction happens in the gap between the impossible which we never get to and the attempt, the gamble, the roll of the dice, the reading, the reinvention, etc. On this point, it is pointed out to Derrida that deconstruction invites a dangerous comparison to mystical theology. But Derrida is making a point about the transcendental and mystical theology about the transcendent. The first, last and constant word of Meister Eckhart is that there is no word for God, that God is nameless. But Meister Eckhart belonged to the “Order of Preachers,” and he was the most renowned “preacher of the word” of his day, and a linguistic genius of such proportions that he is numbered among the creators of the German language. He constantly preached that of God we cannot say a thing, that anything we say of God is not true, while it is what we do not say that is true. That secret God was the secret of his linguistic success, his linguistic excess, but of course that success consisted in joyous, unremitting holy failure.

Deconstruction is a bit of a poker game, a wager, a bet, that the future is always worth more (see below, §10). Whether it is or it is not, whether things turn out well or not. It breathes the air of a bet on the future, a calculation of the incalculable, rolling the dice on the impossible. On that point, I have said, deconstruction is like a prayer where you damn well (if I may say so) better be careful of what you are praying for because you may get it, which is a venerable axiom of the spiritual masters. Deconstruction is love because the impossible is the only thing you can truly love. If in order to avoid taking a risk, you decide to love only the possible, then you take the risk of coming up with something that barely deserves the name of love and of ending up as what Johannes Climacus called a “mediocre fellow.” Everything in deconstruction is subordinated to the wager, the risk, which proceeds from love, a love of the game, a love of the future, from a dance with the dangerous perhaps. Deconstruction is scary business. It was conceived in a night of love with the impossible and it was born in the middle of a poker game.

§6. Ultratranscendental Aesthetics

Hägglund is interested in developing Derrida’s proposal in OG, 290 of a new, let’s say, a third transcendental aesthetic. Husserl had criticized the original Kantian version on the grounds that it was restricted to preparing the ground for scientific objects, so Husserl proposed a new version that would accommodate the life-world of pre-scientific experience that is the ground of scientific objectivity, a point that Heidegger took up in *Die Frage nach dem Ding*. Going one step further, Derrida proposes that *differance* itself, as the anonymous (hence pre-

subjective) transcendental field in which everything, both scientific and pre-scientific, both objective and subjective, is "constituted" (is an "effect" of the "trace"), represents the most radical transcendental aesthetics of all. Hägglund hooks this text up with an earlier passage (OG, 60-62) where the word "ultratranscendental" is coined, and speaks of an "ultratranscendental aesthetics," which is a perfectly acceptable thing to do. But Hägglund uses ultratranscendental to stress the ultimacy of the "space-time of the trace," a *ne plus ultra* spatio-temporality, the inescapable horizon "from which nothing can be exempt" (RA, 10). When Kant established the transcendentality of space and time, Kant made room for faith in things in themselves, which opens the door to what Meillassoux calls "fideism." Hägglund uses the word "ultratranscendental" to close that same door, to say that space and time go all the way down and are not mere appearances, which is the point at which RA and *After Finitude* are very much on the same page.

Hägglund's mistake is to think that Derrida is primarily engaged in offering a theory of time, instead of what is going on in and through time, in the event which takes place in and as time. Derrida is not primarily interested in "time," which is a classical philosopheme, but in the weak force of the *à venir*, which makes the future (*l'avenir*) and hence time-effects possible. The very force of the ultra-transcendental in Derrida undoes precisely what Hägglund is trying to do with it. To see this, let us look more closely at this earlier passage in OG, 60-62 where we will see that Derrida's point is quite different than the one Hägglund is trying to hammer home. By that, I hasten to add, I do not mean that Derrida has any doubts about the "reality" of space and time. I think he simply assumes that the "phenomenal-noumenal" debate has been displaced by phenomenology, that the *Ding an sich* is deconstructed by *die Sache selbst*, which he in turn further deconstructs as implicitly presupposing a notion of being as (the living) present. But he has quite different concerns in this passage. The "transcendental" in the expression is not Kant's but Husserl's, and the issue is Hjelmslev's notion of pure linguistic form and has nothing to do with Kant's distinction between appearance and reality. Derrida is registering our debt to the "formalism" of Hjelmslev who in a manner beyond de Saussure has truly isolated all material considerations from linguistics (psychological and metaphysical prejudices favoring the phonic over the graphic substrates) and identified the pure immanent form of linguistic difference as such. But this "decisive progress" is threatened by "scientivist objectivism," which is "another unperceived or unconfessed metaphysics," so it is in order to avoid "falling back into this naive objectivism that I refer here to a transcendentality that I otherwise put into question." This pure linguistic form must be protected from empiricism by transcendental reduction, meaning "the phenomenological reduction and the Husserlian reference to a transcendental experience," but it cannot simply be left at that, inasmuch as a pure transcendental *arche* would always be for Derrida a species of metaphysical presence that he consistently criticizes.

The point of the analysis is to establish the unique status of *diffrance*, which must be in some sense transcendental, for it "cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form a part of the linguistic system and be situated as an object in its

field." But it is an odd kind of transcendental condition for it lacks originary unity and does not impose formal unity on a multiplicity of data. It is itself a multiplicity, a point that Husserl himself actually recognized when he said that the truly transcendental absolute is not absolute at all but a flux.⁵⁴ It is at this point that the term "ultra-transcendental" is introduced in opposition to "pre-critical," or as Derrida says as a "beyond-of" the transcendental as opposed to a "short-of." Derrida, we might say, is distinguishing the "post-transcendental" (= "ultra-transcendental") from the "pre-transcendental" (or the "post-critical" from the "pre-critical"). Pure linguistic form must be raised to the level of transcendental experience, but this must itself be further understood as post-transcendental or ultra-transcendental, beyond the transcendental. "But to see to it that the beyond does not return to the within is to recognize in the contortion the necessity of a pathway (*parcours*)," which must leave "a track in the text," otherwise the two will be indistinguishable. That means that the "value of the transcendental *arche* must make its necessity felt, before letting itself be erased," which requires the "passage through *form*," announcing then a kind of two step, first transcendental reduction of the form, then the erasure, the "ultra-transcendental." This results in the transcendental *sous rature*, the archi-trace, a trace which is at once both an origin that is not a unitary origin and a trace that is not a mere copy, not an after-effect or image of an original. So the archi-trace cannot break with transcendental phenomenology but neither can it be reduced to it, and it is never a question of choosing between them. This archi-trace is *differance*, the quasi-originary tracing or spacing, the play of traces, the anonymous quasi-transcendental field in which everything is "constituted" in what might be called an "ultra-phenomenology"—including among its effects philosophemes like "space" and "time"—as well as "trace" and "origin," "empirical," and "transcendental" themselves, not to mention "matter" and "materialism," "real" and "realism," "idea" and "idealism," "God" and "world," and even, as Rorty pointed out, the very word "*differance*" itself, *once* it is coined and repeated. The list of course is endless.

If there were something like a law in "deconstruction" this "ultra-transcendentality" is the law, meaning "the necessity of the pathway (*parcours*)," the *passage through the transcendental* to a displaced quasi-, post-, or ultra-transcendental, which always leaves its tracks in the text it passes through. The ultra-transcendental is reached if and only if the transcendental has made its necessity felt pen-ultimately. So whenever deconstruction is at work—in linguistics or psycho-analysis, ethics or religion, politics or the university, etc.—the result will be a displaced ultra-transcendental, which must not be confused with its empirical correlate. "Without that track, abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions," these empirical correlates, like empirical "traces," will be indistinguishable from their ultra-transcendental counterparts. What is here being called "ultra-transcendental" is the operation elsewhere found under the name of the *sous rature*, paleonymy, or the logic of the *sans*, which also explains why Derrida mimes Heidegger's *Durchstreichung* of Sein and its archaic spellings

⁵⁴Husserl speaks of the inner time flow as "what is ultimately and truly absolute," Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. Fred Kersten (The Hague: Kluwer, 1998), §81, p. 193

(*Seyn*) (OG, 44). Like Hägglund I organize everything in deconstruction under the rubric of the quasi- or ultra-transcendental, which I like to call a “weak” transcendental, but I do so with considerably different results.

Derrida’s “ultra-transcendental aesthetics” is not an effort to put everything under a materialist lockdown, to insist that everything is caught in the flux of time, but an argument that every constituted unity is a provisional effect of the trace and structurally exposed to re-envisioning, and that goes for the “real” itself, and for “time,” and for sensible being itself, for spatio-temporal unties, like mountains and kitchen tables – no less than for ideal objects like triangles and the name of God. So if anything deconstruction moves in the opposite direction of materialism, trying to protect *differance* from empiricism, to avoid “falling back” into scientism, objectivism, and linguistic formalism, and to insist that the track through the transcendental must always be felt. It has nothing to do with arguing that “nothing is exempt” from space and time. Derrida is arguing that the archi-trace as the pure play of spacing itself enjoys a kind of exemption from the effects it itself produces (until of course it is “named” and “repeated”) and so cannot “form a part of the linguistic system and be situated as an object in its field.” Each time we draw upon the “an-archic energy” of the “archi-trace” the “system” is shaken, solicited and recharged and new, unpredictable, *neological* effects are produced. The point is not a relentless logic of coming to be and passing away in space-time but a poetics of the free or open ended play of unformalizable linguistic effects (and not only lingusitic), or the “quasi-transcendental” exemption of the sister/Antigone from the absolute eagle of Hegel in *Glas*,⁵⁵ which is the version of the word that would acquire more currency in Derrida’s texts.

§7. Infinite Finitude or Finite Infinity?

The mutation that time undergoes under Hägglund’s hand shows up in his repeated characterization of it in terms of what he calls “infinite finitude,” that is, the endless flux of Hegel’s bad infinity, endless and pointless temporalization, one moment after another of an unpredictable future, which makes use of Derrida’s early comparisons of *differance* to a certain bad infinity (RA, 92-93) in order to oppose it to the good infinite of the absolute *Geist* making its way home by way of odyssey through the contingency of events. Derrida is certainly emphatic about the constitutive unpredictability of the future, and certainly has no time for a notion of time guided by the positive infinity of the *telos* of the *Begriff*. But it goes too far to claim this so called infinite finitude is all or even primarily what the future means for Derrida, which is why these early references to Hegel play no further role in his writings.⁵⁶

⁵⁵*Glas*, trans. Richard Rand and John Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1986), 151-62a, where the word “quasi-transcendental,” which largely replaces “ultratranscendental,” is introduced at the end of a sentence split by an 11 page break. See my *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 95-101.

⁵⁶Furthermore, Hägglund misuses these texts to his own end. He tries to enlist Derrida’s remark that in SP, 102, “infinite *differance* is finite,” in the service of his own

Derrida certainly contests the idea of a positive infinity in Descartes and Hegel, as Häggglund says, and Derrida shows that Levinas' odd version of this idea is undermined by Levinas' own view that we encounter this infinity in language, "Bonjours," which is always already a finite-historical horizon. For Derrida the *tout autre* comes relative to a preparatory horizon of expectation. This is said contra Levinas, who thinks that any horizon would compromise it, but it is also Levinas' view that the coming of the other takes place within the finite horizons of language, which is why Levinas cannot avail himself of traditional negative theology and say that the *tout autre* is "ineffable." This horizon is shocked by the arrival of the *tout autre*, but not absolutely (absolute alterity would not come at all), but not merely relatively, in which case it would just be more of the same. The resolution of this dilemma lies in what Levinas calls not *l'infini* but *l'indefinition*, that is, the process by which the other person is constantly absolving itself from the relations in which it is entered. So Derrida shows not even Levinas thinks the *tout autre* is simply absolute (*tout autre*); it is a relation composed of terms that tend (but do not succeed) to absolve themselves from the relation, a "proximity" *co-constituted* by "distance," an aporia that never ceased to fascinate Derrida and was always a model for him of the possibility of the impossible.

So when Levinas speaks of a "positive infinity" he is using a Cartesian *trope* (Med. III) in order to signify the positive ethical dignity of the other person as an unreachable and unplumbable depth, not a mere negativity or absence. The *tout autre* is both infinite (= we will never reach the "other shore") and positive (= what is on the other shore is not negative but a speaking subject). But it is not God! The *tout autre* is on this point "like" God, an "image" of "God." Levinas was not removing the *tout autre* from relation or time, and he was not saying the *tout autre* is an actual infinity in the classical metaphysical sense, be that Plotinian, Cartesian or Hegelian, which is how Häggglund misunderstands him. In classical terms, the *tout autre* is a potential infinity, *indefinition*, always *becoming* infinite, an infinite becoming, always already withdrawing itself from the relationships into which it is always already entered. The other person is a "good" infinity in the Kantian sense that the other person is worthy of moral

idea of infinite finitude (RA, 220n14). But Derrida is saying nothing of the sort. In the context Derrida is reading Husserl against himself, arguing that ideal objects are the effects of difference (or repetition), which Husserl also says, as against the more dominant view that Husserl usually takes, which is that that difference is the effect of ideal objects, that is, that ideality makes repetition possible. It is the latter view that Derrida is contesting, that ideal objects are given and difference is derivative, so that we can only approach ideal objects asymptotically, *ad infinitum*, through infinite deferral or difference, as Ideas in the Kantian sense. Against (but also with Husserl), Derrida insists that ideal objects are produced by repetition. But repetition (difference) itself depends upon the repetition continuing indefinitely, from generation to generation across the history of geometry, that is, after my death. Thus "infinite différence" (meaning deferral *ad infinitum*) is "finite" because the constitution of "infinite deferral" depends upon imagining my death. Derrida is explaining the historical constitution of ideal objects through difference or repetition, not singling out endless destructibility as is Häggglund.

respect (not in any classical metaphysical sense). He was not literalizing “eternity” but rather ruthlessly demythologizing it, transcribing it into ethical terms and lodging it in the depths of ethical time.⁵⁷ That means that “positive infinity” is not a metaphysical term in the *classical* sense (which Levinas demythologizes) but in an ethico-phenomenological sense, meaning that we have no access in principle to the speaker behind the speaking subject (which Husserl called *ganz anders* in *Meditation V*), a Husserlian point to which Levinas attached ethical not merely epistemic significance. That is why Levinas came to emphasize, under the prodding of Derrida, what he had said about *le dire* and *le dit*. That too is why Robert Bernasconi, who appreciates that Derrida is not making war on Levinas and that deconstruction is not a weapon with which one hammers opponents senseless, and who is another of the bodies strewn on Hägglund’s battlefield, is among the most sensitive of commentators on the very subtle Derrida-Levinas relationship, as opposed to Hägglund who is brutally hammering away at his own concoction of Levinas as a Neoplatonist with a theory of life after death. Calling the *tout autre* a “positive infinity” is a Cartesian and Neoplatonic trope—and every time Levinas employs such tropes Hägglund bites!⁵⁸—to signify the unencompassability and the unforeseeability of the other person (we never know what the other will say or do next!), a sense of the “other” and of the “future” that Derrida learned from Levinas and always admired and finally amplified in his own motif, *tout autre est tout autre*. After delimiting what Levinas says about the positive infinity of the *tout autre* Derrida expanded it, adapting the notion to his own purposes, which he never abandoned. Derrida would even say that when he read Levinas he found it hard to disagree with anything (which is of course another trope).

But Derrida certainly has no horse in the race between a metaphysics of being as positive infinity and a metaphysics of becoming as bad infinity, which is the race that Hägglund is trying to stage in RA. For when Derrida speaks of the future he does not say *futur*, meaning a mere, sheer infinite temporalization, and if he says *l’avenir* he does so by stressing the *à venir* in *l’avenir*, and the *à venir* in turn comes from the *viens*, the “come.” It is the *à venir* that concerns him, not “time.” The very structure of the to-come is variously characterized as an injunction, an imperative, an appeal, an impetus, a force, a call which calls for our response, and for which we ourselves call, engaging in an appellatory play modeled after Heidegger’s *Was Heisst Denken?* Everything, as we will see below, begins in the

⁵⁷Hägglund is conflating two different distinctions: the classical distinction between potential and actual infinity (a mathematical series or the divisibility of a continuum versus God) and a positive and a negative infinity (in Descartes and Hegel but adapted idiosyncratically by Levinas). The *tout autre* is a potential but positive infinity, and even then in a very phenomenological sense; it is a trope. In terms of classical metaphysics, the *tout autre* it is a finite mortal who ends up dead as door-nail in a wooden box in the grave with no “immortal soul,” as finite as finite can be, dust to dust.

⁵⁸But no such care is taken in RA to see what Levinas was getting at behind his Neoplatonic and Cartesian tropes. For a much more balanced presentation of Derrida’s relationship to Levinas’ notion of a positive infinity than is to be found in RA, see my P&T, 20-26.

call, *viens* (see below §14) and it is exactly this call that silenced in RA. That is why when Derrida says the future is always worth more—a point that enjoys a quasi-transcendental status and is not contingent upon our fortunes in empirical time, in the constituted effect of time—Derrida means the call or promise is worth more than what has been delivered thus far in the empirical course of time. When Derrida talks like that, Hägglund concludes that Derrida is losing track of his own argument, which simply means he is not making Hägglund's independent argument (see below §10) since Hägglund and Derrida have rather different ideas of time and approach the question of time quite differently. The temporalization of the future takes place for Derrida as an *experiential, appellatory* and *injunctive* force or structure: it is related to us as a call, an injunction, a solicitation, an appeal, and we are related to the future in terms of responsibility, hope, expectation and desire. The future for Hägglund, on the other hand, is simply the endless roll of the waves of the empirical time of a bad infinity which is an occasion for caution and barricades. I am not saying there is no such thing at all in Derrida. What it corresponds to in Derrida is the unforeseeability of the future, which is irreducibly important to him, but that it is part of a larger analysis of time thought in terms of the *viens* and *à venir*. In the language of ultra-transcendental aesthetics, a bad infinity is but one of the constituted effects of *differance*, and only one, and not the point about time that deconstruction is organized around. The "*à venir*" is a structure of experience and responsibility. It is not time but something going on in time. It is not a bad infinity but a finitely constituted but open-ended call—and in that sense not an infinite finitude but rather a finite infinity—structured by a horizon of expectation that is always and already vulnerable to being shattered. Hägglund flattens the movement of temporality in Derrida by silencing the call which always calls from "beyond" the horizon of expectation, silences the claim of the "*à venir*" and the necessity of passing through the transcendental to what is beyond. Hägglund reduces the dynamics of the ultratranscendental back to the endless and leveled off roll of space and time and of the materiality of one or another spatio-temporal substrate, which, as we will see next (§7-8), is a prerequisite for reducing deconstruction to description. Hägglund's ultratranscendental means reality is lodged without remission in waves of spatio-temporal being, coming to be and passing and away. The next step is to say, as he does, that this quasi-transcendental condition of experience is the principle of essential being, that "being is essentially temporal (to be = to happen)" (RA, 32), which is a bridge too far as I will show below (§17).

Hence, what Derrida means by the ultra-transcendental undermines the central assumption of RA and Hägglund's conception of an ultra-transcendental aesthetics. As an ultra-transcendental, *differance* is an account of space and time but it is not identical *with* space and time in any of its "transcendent" versions. In this sense, as I have been saying, deconstruction is not a philosophy of time at all but of the quasi-transcendental conditions under which time-effects are possible, where "time" is a species of presence that appears in various metaphysical forms, as an imitation of eternity, a succession of now points, a form of intuition, a bad infinity, etc. *Differance* is not time but, as Derrida puts it, *differance* provides what in traditional philosophy is called "the 'originary constitution' of space and

time" (*Margins*, 8). *Différance* does not mean spatio-temporal being—which is the fate it suffers in RA—but in the language of traditional philosophy a “constitutive, productive, and originary causality” (*Margins*, 9), a constitutive spacing-and-timing, spatializing and temporizing, the constitutive interval between the moments of time and of the constitutive distance between the *partes extra partes* of space, a play of “retention and protention of differences, a spacing and temporization” (*Margins*, 15). As an ultra-transcendental structure, *différance* is not spatio-temporal being but it includes spatio-temporal being among its constituted effects, or rather all the varieties of space and time that can be constituted, and the test of the notion is its power to accommodate any and every version of constituted space and time. That includes the bad infinity of time, which is one more constituted effect of *différance*. Ordinary time, Newtonian time, Einsteinian time, cultural variations in the experience of time, the time of physics, the time of history, *chronos* and *kairos*, all the bizarre and barely intuitible or unintuitible versions of space and time in contemporary theoretical physics—all these are so many constituted effects of the play of traces, of the weave of differences. For example, one of the most important features of Derrida’s play of traces is the ability of the trace to operate in the absence of intuitive fulfillment. That means that the advanced theoretical constructions of contemporary physics, which can be mathematically formulated but not intuited—there are “picture” theorists and “equation” theorists—are exactly the sort of results that deconstruction predicts. Indeed, there is nothing about *différance* that says that “the arrow of time” could not in principle run in the opposite direction, that the curious case of Benjamin Button would not be so curious, or that there might not be a universe in which what we think is “earlier” would count as “later,” so long as we could mark the difference between before and after.⁵⁹ The multiple senses of time as constituted effects of *différance* are precisely what the “ultra” in Derrida’s “ultra-transcendental aesthetics” makes possible, and that famous misspelling spells trouble for RA.

Hägglund’s view of the future as a bad infinity, a dark stretch of unforeseeable time, as an infinite finitude, is drawn from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and *Philosophy of Nature* not Derrida (RA, 209-10n5). Hägglund’s future is dangerous, unknown, uncertain, indifferent, maybe-better-maybe-worse, which we have every reason to fear, about which we should take all due precautions. Derrida’s future turns on the *à venir*, where the *à venir* is what is coming and it is coming because it is calling, and it is calling because we are calling for it (below, §14). The *à venir* does not mean a stretch of time but a valorized axiological appellation or summons, which is the very idea or structure of the to-come.⁶⁰ In that sense, I am claiming, deconstruction is not a theory of time at all, but of what is going on in and through and with time. The *à venir* is not spoken of in the indicative or

⁵⁹See Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* (New York: Dutton, 2010), ch. 7 “Running Time Backward.”

⁶⁰Permit me to refer the reader to my “Temporal Transcendence: The Very Idea of *à venir* in Derrida,” in *Transcendence and Beyond* eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), to which Derrida had the kindness to refer in *Rogues*, 37.

descriptive but in the optative, jussive, subjunctive, as an imperative or exigency, what is coming in the sense of what longs to come, what we long to see come although we cannot see what's coming (*voir venir*), what is coming with all the might of the might-be, the weak force of the *peut-être*. For Derrida the *à venir* is not a stretch of time but a promise, a claim, a call, an injunction, a exigency, a source of hope which as such is structurally inhabited by despair, a despairing hope against hope, a promise that is made against a threat, which lends the moment infinite intensity. The *à venir* is what is to come not factually but optimally, what we are hoping for, what we desire. We have every reason to protect ourselves against the future in Hägglund, while for Derrida the future is our hope even as it is dangerous, which is the passion of life. The to-come is the promise that lets itself be heard, that gets itself said, always in the middle voice, that lays claim to those who dare to use words like "democracy" or "university" here and now, in the urgency of the moment. It does not "exist" but it makes itself felt. It calls but it does not exist except insofar as it heard and responded to, which means existence is our responsibility, which is why Benjamin says *we* are the messianic generation, the ones the dead were waiting for.

The future for Derrida is not what Hägglund calls an infinite finitude. There is a *fundamentum in re* for what Hägglund is saying inasmuch as for Derrida the future is an unforeseeable course of coming to be and passing away. But it is more than that and more importantly what could be called a finite infinity, that is, an open-ended and undeconstructible call that elicits a finite and always deconstructible response, which is why Derrida can talk about our infinite responsibility. In a hyperbolic ethics, we address "infinite responsibility" with finite responses. The to-come is infinite not with the infinity of Christian Neoplatonism but with the infinity of grammatology, the infinity of an infinitive, open-ended while endlessly contracted and determined in the finitude of the moment. The time of infinite finitude is an irreducible component not in a positive infinity in the Hegelian sense but of an open-ended infinitival infinity in the deconstructive sense, the time of the to-come, the to-come of time, the "*à venir*" of *l'avenir*. Derrida's infinity is not metaphysical but grammatical. The *à venir* does not possess the positive infinity of Augustine's Divine Providence or of Hegel's absolute *Geist*, which is the metaphysical correlate of Augustine, but the infinity of the undeconstructible, of an open-ended expectation and promise. An infinite finitude is the endlessly destructible course of time. A finite infinity is the undeconstructible to-come which charges time and the moment with all its finite urgency. Deconstruction may well be described as a process of infinitivizing the concepts it analyzes, so that the discussion is never merely about the finite empirical reality of "democracy," for example, but about democracy *in the infinitive*, in the *to-come*, opened up in terms of its future, of its hope and promise, which has nothing to do with denying its threat since every promise is co-constituted by a threat. To deconstruct a concept is to turn a noun into an infinitive, to expose in a finite name an infinite-infinitival promise, which is never safe from an infinite threat.

If the undeconstructible to-come is a promise, and the promise is the impossible, that means the promise is never fulfilled. But if the impossible is nothing

negative, but rather that by which things happen, then there is nothing negative in this never-fulfilled. There is nothing sad or melancholy about it, no Lacanian castration, no Augustinian dolor over the City of Man. It is a more joyous repetition forward, as Kierkegaard would have said, taking joy in the repetition which produces what it repeats. *The unfulfilled does not mean the loss of an ideal but the never finished production of the idea to come*, the on-going genesis of something coming. "Democracy" does not have a "meaning" but a history and we are in the midst of producing that history. There is no more sadness at this unfulfilled promise than there is in musicians whose deepest joy is found in the realization that every time they go back to Mozart they realize all they have missed, that Mozart is always ahead of them, that there is no paradigmatic performance, only an endless joyous repetition. In French *répétition* can mean "rehearsal," repeating in order to get it right, but in a deconstructive rehearsal trying to get it right begins by understanding that the performance that gets it right, let us say the Messianic performance (or reading of "Hamlet," etc.), is structurally to come, and this because it never exists. It insists but it does not and never can exist. Its incompleteness is the condition of possibility of its joy, so that everything turns on keeping open the future-of music, of democracy, of the university, of God—optimally, jussively, imperatively. In order to keep alive its infinite-infinitival expectations, deconstruction is not written in the indicative or descriptive or constative but in what the grammarians call the *modus irrealis*, and this irreality is the mainspring of its ultra-realism.

Accordingly, the true "infinity" of "God" in deconstruction is not found in the classical metaphysics of infinite being but in the open-ended infinitival promise set off by the paradigmatic name of God, the God to-come, the coming God, the unforeseeable effects of the trace of "God," whose meaning is its iterability, its future, its to-come. That is what *The Weakness of God* sets out to explore.

Consequently, the transcendental, or ultra-transcendental, character of *diffrance* undermines the starting point of RA. Hägglund writes:

I argue that the so-called desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within. The notion of survival that I develop is incompatible with immortality, since it defines life as essentially mortal and as inherently divided by time. To survive is never to be absolutely present; it remains after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet. I argue that every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being left for a

future that may erase it. This radical finitude of survival is not a lack of being that is desirable to overcome. Rather the finitude of survival opens the chance for everything that is desirable and the threat of everything that is feared. (RA, 1-2)

There are several things wrong with this argument, all the result of treating time as transcendentally real course of infinite coming-to-be and passing-away, instead of treating temporal experience as an open-ended and constituted effect of the trace, which is what an ultra-transcendental aesthetics would require. First, to be precise, I do not think that “the structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time,” but, in an ultra-transcendental aesthetics, it is exactly the opposite: the constitution of time follows from the structure of the trace. If the structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, then time is already constituted and the trace is derivative, not originary. The trace would follow after something that it is tracing, which is the traditional concept of the trace; the trace would be tracking or “record-keeping.” But the transcendental trace is originary; it produces what it traces; it constitutes time, that is, temporal experience, as its effect. Deconstruction is not a philosophy of time but of the quasi-transcendental conditions under which time-effects are produced. Without the trace, there would be coming to be and passing away (*numerus numeratum*), but not the marking of “time,” not the constitution of temporal experience, which is the constitutive marking and sustaining of before and after (*numerus numerans*). The trace preserves the before and joins it with the after, which opens the space of “experience,” of what Heidegger called the *Zeitspielraum*. The trace is the opening of experience but it is not the creation of being. The spacing of the trace constitutes effects like “being,” “creation” and “of” so that we can speak of the “creation of being.” *Différance* produces what it traces; it does not trace what has already produced itself, including time itself. The experience of time is constituted by the trace; the trace does not follow from or follow upon time. Time, in all of its shapes and forms, including the bad infinity of Hegel, is a “transcendent” effect, while the trace is transcendental, and Derrida’s point is that this transcendental is a quasi-transcendental, open-ended. To privilege time over the trace, is to privilege the transcendent over the ultra-transcendental, an absolute temporal being over the ultra-transcendental constitution of the experience of temporal being. One is entitled to hold such a view, of course, but that is to abandon “ultra-transcendental” aesthetics and to take up an ontological or metaphysical conception of space and time which Derrida would consider “pre-critical.” If this seems like an esoteric technical point, its significance lies in my next point.

Secondly, there is what I would call an “unconfessed metaphysics” in this argument, except that Hägglund has confessed it, that to be is to be in time, that time is all in all, since time is transcendent being and indeed all the transcendent being there is. Indeed, if time is all in all, then one wants more time, because time is all there is. But if one does not accept that presupposition, namely, the definition of time as all in all, then one might very well want something else, something that is that is not subject to time. The desire for immortality is not contradicted from *within* by temporal experience; it is contradicted from *without*,

by imposing the conditions of temporal experience upon eternity. It is not contradicted from within because the desire for eternity does not include the premise that time is all in all among its axioms. The desire for immortality would “dissimulate” a desire for more time only if there are independent grounds for establishing that time is all in all, that time is the absolutely necessary condition of possibility of being in general, not a condition of experience. If there are independent grounds for establishing that time is all in all, *différance* is not one of them, for *différance* is a condition of experience, not a metaphysical principle.

In the language of phenomenology, that would make time absolutely transcendent, not transcendental or ultra-transcendental, which I think is what happens in RA under the rubric of infinite finitude. But that would abandon the transcendental reduction, not pass through it, and so it would abandon a transcendental or ultra-transcendental aesthetics. To treat time as transcendentally real instead of treating temporal experience as a constituted effect of the trace is no part of an ultra-transcendental aesthetics. Both the notion of time and the desire for immortality proceed from assumptions that stand free of the definition of time as all in all. All that time requires is the process of marking off before and after, and Derrida’s claim is that for the constitution of time, we require the work of the trace, and further that the workings of the trace are not themselves rule-governed in the manner of a closed formal system. That says nothing whatever about whether there might be something outside of our temporal experience or even whether there might not be a temporal experience outside ours that is quite different from ours, one *where the future is not a threat*. That is not an a priori or conceptual contradiction in terms; it is simply not part of our experience of time. Hägglund’s view of desire requires an ontological or metaphysical conception of time, which is no part of an ultra-transcendental aesthetics, as the latter is an account of the conditions of experience. Even on Hägglund’s terms, if deconstruction is purely “descriptive,” then it is describing our experience and has nothing to say about anything beyond experience. There is more to say about this, of course, and I will return to this point in §§17-18 below, in reference to Hägglund’s view that *différance* is a principle not of experience but of absolute being (RA, 2-3, 32).

Once again, I hasten to add, contra Meillassoux, that the theory of constitution is the theory of the constitution of *experience*, not of the *creation* of the world or the origin of being in the metaphysical sense. It is an account of experience (*Erfahrung*) not of our own subjective *Erlebnisse*; it is an account of our experience of the *world* not of some subjective buzz. Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida all claimed that experience is temporal all the way down, and that experience is experience of the world. Experience is not “merely subjective” even as the trace is not the Demiurge or a creating God. I will come back to this below, but for the moment my only concern is with the meaning of the “ultra-transcendental.”

The ultra-transcendental spells even further trouble for Hägglund when he argues that deconstruction is governed by a “logic.” That claim about an inexorable logic is isomorphic with Hjelmslev’s claim that linguistic effects are governed by pure form which Derrida thought would close down their future

and make everything programmable. (Still less, as we will see, can deconstruction be governed by a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive, a contestable and highly deconstructible distinction (difference) which belongs to an inventory of the most regular, regulated and standardized effects of the play of difference.⁶¹) Deconstruction is not a logic but a grammatologic, the study of the full length and breadth of grammatical effects, of logical effects, of theological effects, literary effects, of temporal and spatial effects, and all the rest, all the way up to and including especially a-logical effects, from “green is or” to James Joyce, from atonal music to scientific, social, ethical and political revolutions. Deconstruction can no more be “arraigned” before a logic that can *différance* be included as an object in the field of its own effects. The quasi-transcendentality of *différance* insures that *différance* is not governed by a logic but rather that logic is one of its effects. As Derrida says, the “play” of the trace means it is no more governed by a “philosophical-logical discourse” than by an “empirical-logical” discourse (*Margins*, 7). *Différance* is neither logical nor illogical but the ultra-transcendental condition under which logical systems are constructed. If *différance* were brought to bear upon logic one of its principal effects would be to predict that alternate logics will always be possible. It would also predict—and if this is not where the word came from it is a happy coincidence—the formal “undecidability” of logical and mathematical systems, which once seemed “impossible” to “logic,” to “la” *logique*, in the singular. One of its principal effects on time and space is to predict the possibility of alternate times and spaces.

Deconstruction is an account of why there could be no such thing as a governing “logic,” in the singular, no more than there can be “religion” or “theology,” in the singular. Seen thus, the ultra-transcendentality of *différance* makes it plain that deconstruction itself occupies the place of *the impossible*, because it is structurally in the position of having to name the condition under which every name, the name in general, is produced, so that as soon the word *différance* is coined, as soon as it is “present,” it begins to annul itself. It is coined in a moment of structural madness but in that very moment it is reinscribed within the sanity of the economy of its own effects, and that impossibility accounts for Derrida’s endless reinvention of deconstruction, as if there were one, which is driven by a desire beyond desire for the impossible. That is why there is an irreducibly performative, or per-ver-formative, aspect to deconstruction. In the end, it is not a theory of something, not even a theory of time, but an attempt to do something, to stage an event, or rather to let an event happen.

These are complex issues and I do not want to be mistaken. The merit of Hägglund’s account is to show that *différance* is not an immaterial being or a transcendental form and that its effects are always spatio-temporal effects. It “takes place” only by being “materialized,” and it is materialized only in a material substrate, only by spatially inscribing time and temporally inscribing space (RA, 27). There is no place for deconstruction to “take place” than space

⁶¹See *Psyche*, p. 13 for Derrida’s attitude towards such distinctions.

and time. I embrace that point, which I think Derrida was arguing, for example, when he pointed out that by that calling upon the “danger” of “writing” to explain the “origin of geometry” Husserl implied that the constitution of “ideal” objects requires a material-technological substrate. That does not undermine ideal objects but it does undermine the dualism of ideal and material, soul and body, *physis* and *techne*. *Différance* is formally indifferent to the distinction between phonic and graphic or any other material substrate (thus far Hjelmslev), but it is not indifferent to the material substrate in general, as Hägglund emphasizes. As a process of spacing and temporizing it constitutes spatio-temporal effects, including “space” and “time” in general. The effects of its (quasi-)formality are found, as it were, only in the materiality of space-time. But for Derrida *différance* of itself cannot be situated as an object in its own field. *Différance* is not a spatial or a temporal thing (*res*). It is not the infinite flow of time or the spread of space. In the language of the tradition, it is, not a *quod* or a *quid est* but a *quo*. *Différance* neither is nor is not, is neither ideal nor real, is neither a form nor a material substrate, is “not more sensible than intelligible,” is not a matter of matter or materialism, of form or formalism or of idea or idealism, just because it supplies the quasi-condition, “before all determination of the content,” under which all such differences are constituted.⁶² This is the part of Derrida that Rorty objected to—because it sounds too much like “philosophy” and Rorty wanted Derrida to just make fun of philosophy. The constitutive force of *différance* lies in the invisible (or inaudible) play of differences *between* visible (or audible) things (*Margins*, 5), the “pure movement which produces difference” (OG, 62), like the constitutive spacing between “ring, king, sing,” the interval, the space, the slash between them. It “is” the between “itself,” *s'il y en a*. It is, as such, the difference as such, which as such does not exist. So it is as inadequate to say Derrida is a materialist or a realist as to say he is an idealist. The less confusing thing to say is that he is not an anti-materialist or an anti-realist, even as he is not an anti-idealistic, and to bear in mind the “open-endedness” of the ultra- or quasi-transcendental to the polyvalent effects that can be inscribed in *différance*.

§8. Unconditional, Undeconstructible

Before I move on to Derrida’s “ultra-transcendental ethics,” or “hyperbolic ethics,” I want to flag two other crucial notions that go to the heart of deconstruction that undergo a systematic recoding and a symptomatic abridgement in RA. In each case, the goal is the same, to reduce deconstruction to operating out of a given empirical space and time and close down what I will call the axiological or hyperbolic space and time in which deconstruction transpires, which is the space of the call and the response, in which the reinvention of the ethical and the religious, indeed of everything (the aesthetic, the political, etc.), takes place in Derrida, in virtue of its axiomatics of the impossible.

⁶²OG, 62; *Margins*, 6.

(a) When Hägglund speaks of the “*unconditional*” in Derrida he stops short with the unconditional in the sense of “the spacing of time” (RA, 25), the “coming of time” (RA, 42), the “exposure to what happens” (RA, 43), the vulnerability of the moment to the unforeseeable future—all irreducibly important, to be sure, but he omits the unconditional *claim* of the future *upon* the moment, the spectral urgency of the *injunction* that comes to us from the future, the *promise* of the future, which is lodged in the force of the *à venir*. This claim (appeal, call, injunction), which calls for a response and opens up the axiological space that Hägglund wants to close down, is what Derrida calls the “*unconditionals*,” nominalized, in italics and in the plural, like the gift, forgiveness, hospitality “—and by definition the list is not exhaustive; it is that of all the *unconditionals*,”⁶³ or “the unconditional injunction,”⁶⁴ “the desire and the thought, the exigency of unconditionality, the very reason and justice of unconditionality,” “the demand, the desire, the imperative exigency of unconditionality,” “the exigency of an unconditional justice,”⁶⁵ “unconditional ethical obligation,”⁶⁶ what elicits from us a “desire beyond desire”—for the unconditional gift, or justice, or democracy to come, etc. The future cannot be reduced to its unconditional unforeseeability, as Hägglund attempts to do, because it is no less constituted by the promise that the future holds out (and holds back) from us, by the unconditional call that is visited upon us, and that calls for our response.

The difference between the two senses of unconditionality is the difference between existence and non-existence, reality and irreality, being and beyond being, or perhaps better, between being and perhaps, *être* and *peut-être*, *il y a* and *s'il y en a*. The mark of anything unconditional in the sense Hägglund occludes is that it always comes under the apposition, “*s'il y en a*.” The spacing of time, the unconditional exposure to the future, to the unforeseeable and the surprise, is real; it exists; it always exists, always and everywhere, at every moment, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, just as Hägglund insists. It is not a matter of choice or desire and it does not ask for our consent; it is simply an inescapable vulnerability to time and tide. But (to take but one example) “the unconditional university, the university without condition,” which means the unconditional right to ask any question, is unreal; it “should be *without condition*” (Derrida’s italics), it should exist, but it “does not, *in fact*, exist, as we know only too well” (WA, 202).⁶⁷ The unconditional university does not exist; it *calls* in vocative space and awaits our response. It is *de jure* an “invincible force” but it has never existed, which is why its invincibility is “hyperbolic,” “impossible” and “weak” (WA, 206), invincible without being a being or an agent — which is the model of the weakness of God as unconditional without force of which I make use in WG. Far from being something that “must” exist (RA, 31), this

⁶³Paper Machine, 79.

⁶⁴Rogues, 90.

⁶⁵Rogues, 135, 142, 151 respectively.

⁶⁶Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume I, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 209), 110.

⁶⁷Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202.

unconditional *never* exists—it belongs to the infinitival structure of the “to-come” which comes from the call—but can only solicit our “faith,” elicit the profession of faith of the professor, an unconditional commitment to the truth. The unconditional does not exist but calls upon us as an *arrivant*, something to-come, laying claim to us, provoking our faith and evoking our desire. The unconditional university is not a *must* but a *maybe*. It is but a weak and irreal force in a purely vocative and spectral space—which is why the call also includes the re-call of the dead, who also do not exist—that is menaced on every side by the real all too real “powers” of the “sovereign” nation-state, of market capitalism, of the media, religion and culture at large (WA, 204-05). The unconditional university is a weak but unconditional force without sovereignty, a weak force without force, without the wherewithal to enforce itself. “[I]f this unconditionality, in principle and *de jure*, constitutes the invincible force of the university, it has never been in effect. By reason of this abstract and hyperbolic invincibility, by reason of its very impossibility, this unconditionally exposes the weakness or the vulnerability of the university...its impotence...it is a stranger to power...” (WA, 206). Of course, to speak of its invincibility is to affirm in a certain way the sovereignty of the university, a certain sovereign independence, which is the “double bind” of sovereignty:⁶⁸ every time we delimit sovereignty we imperil our own freedom. So the sovereignty of the university suffers from a severe disadvantage, a fatal flaw, for a sovereign—it does not exist. If this sovereign right is sovereign without existence, that really means it is an “unconditional without sovereignty” (WA, 235).

The unconditional university is just like justice in itself, if there is such a thing, namely, an unconditional claim without force, which is why Derrida calls the university the “justice of thought” (WA, 208). As we cannot make justice strong (because it does not exist), we must make the laws just (because laws do exist). Such a university makes a special, let us say a spectral, presentation of itself in the “humanities,” above all in philosophy and literature, Derrida’s favorite examples, but no less in history, law, “theory” (an American epithet), linguistics, psychoanalysis (WA, 208), and “departments of theology or religious studies” (WA, 230). Of course, in a way the whole idea of an unconditional university is a certain (weak) theology. The entire lecture, from its opening lines, is about faith, the act of faith, the “confession” of faith, of “faith in knowledge,” that constitutes the “profession” of the university’s “professors” (WA, 209), who have a vocation, who answer a call. Not the theology that belongs to the “powers,” like the mundane “religion” that threatens the freedom of the unconditional university, but what I am calling the “weak” theology of a religion without religion that turns on a “faith” in what solicits us unconditionally, which in the university is “truth.” The unconditional university requires *laïcité*, protection from the worldly force of institutionalized religion. Still, it is not “secular” (that is, itself one of the mundane “powers” of the world) but faith-based (that is, inspired by an unconditional faith in something unconditional which does not in fact exist). The word “profess” means literally to publicly declare an oath, and it was first used in the middle ages where it meant to make or “profess one’s vows” as a

⁶⁸Beast and Sovereign, 300-302.

member of a religious order. It means to take a pledge, to make a promise, to commit oneself (WA, 214-15) to “the principle of the unconditional resistance of the university,” to assume “an ethico-political responsibility” (WA, 218). Unconditional academic freedom should be “protected by a kind of absolute immunity”—“even if the protection of this academic immunity...is never pure, even if it can always develop dangerous processes of auto-immunity” (WA, 220). To be sure, the deconstructive point is never either to cultivate the quasi-religious purity of the absolutely immune interior (the sovereign freedom of the unconditional but unreal university), nor simply to succumb to or accommodate the exterior forces of reality, but to live on the boundary of the possible and the impossible, the within and without, the real and the unreal, to negotiate the difference between what calls to us unconditionally and the real financial and political conditions under which the university exists, *both* to respond to the unreal-unconditional-call *and* to take a stand or position of real-unconditional-exposure-and-risk in the real world. We must respond to a “double injunction,” a demand coming from both sides, from that of the gift and that of the economy, of the impossible and the possible, of the unconditional and the conditioned, of the incalculable and the calculable, for we live in the distance between the two.⁶⁹

(b) The “*undeconstructible*” undergoes a parallel recoding and abridgment (RA, 25, 40-42, 105). There are two senses of “*undeconstructible*” in Derrida, both of which come back to what is deconstructible, which always means what is constituted by *différance*. First, *différance* itself is not deconstructible for Derrida, and this because it is too early for deconstruction, because it is the condition under which any such construction takes place in the first place; that is the sense of *undeconstructible* that Hägglund recognizes (RA, 143-44). But Derrida first introduced the word “*undeconstructible*” in “The Force of Law” in reference not to *différance* but to justice: “justice in itself, if such a thing exist, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible.”⁷⁰ He said this not because justice is synonymous with *différance*, which it is not, but because justice is *never* constructed but is rather always *calling for* construction (in laws) and therefore also in the very same voice calling for the deconstruction of any law that is in fact constructed, which is how justice brings its weak force to bear upon the real force of the law. What has never been constructed cannot undergo deconstruction, which is the second sense of *undeconstructible*. Of course, the empirical words for what we call justice, in the several natural languages, are historical constructions and therefore deconstructible, but “justice in itself, if there is such a thing,” does not exist and so cannot be deconstructed. Justice in itself if there is such a thing is not a construction but a call, the weak force of a call, what calls without force. It is a promise of an event, a call for an event. Hägglund keeps a good distance from this second sense of *undeconstructible* in Derrida, because he thinks it makes the *undeconstructible* into a positive infinity, either a Kantian ideal or a pure good, both of which sound like “God” which sends Hägglund heading for the door. But the *undeconstructible* is not a pure ideal or a pure good but an unconditional

⁶⁹See *Given Time*, 30; *Rogues*, 29: the structure of the “to come” does not defer the experience “or even less the injunction” of democracy, the “urgent” “injunction.”

⁷⁰“Force of Law,” 243.

call or injunction, an unconditional but dangerous demand, a pure promise which cannot be insulated from a pure threat (where “pure” implies a pure call that does not exist). Nor is the undeconstructible an “essential meaning” clothed in the materiality of a word, which is Žižek’s misunderstanding of my view of the event.⁷¹ The undeconstructible is neither a regulative ideal that monitors empirical words in natural languages, nor an essential meaning that animates corporeal words, but a dangerous injunction—like “give” or “go” or “come”—and a dream set off by language, by what is getting itself promised in words like “justice” (gift, etc.), *par l'impossible*. It is not an “inaccessible Idea” (RA, 43) but it is an incessant injunction which gives us no peace, a kind of dangerous prayer, the source of the restlessness of the *cor inquietum*.

§9. Ultra-transcendental Ethics

The mutations Hägglund has introduced into deconstruction have a direct payoff in one of the central claims made in RA:

The ultratranscendental description of why we must be open to the other is conflated with an ethical prescription that we ought to be open to the other. However Derrida always maintains that one cannot derive any norms, rules or prescription from the constitutive exposition to the other. (RA, 31).

Deconstruction is treated as a strictly “descriptive” and not “prescriptive” undertaking, as if deconstruction could possibly be accommodated by resurrecting such a contested deconstructible empiricist distinction. Deconstruction is taken to simply describe the ultrareal-ultratranscendental-ultra-empirical-unconditional, never venturing “through” or “beyond,” a claim used throughout to undercut the ethical and religious, which for Hägglund would always be or depend upon the “beyond” in the sense of Augustinian dualism. Deconstruction is an “ultratranscendental description” of our inescapable vulnerability to an unpredictable future, which means “there *must* be finitude and vulnerability, there *must* be openness to whatever or whoever comes,” and there cannot be any normativity or prescriptiveness about it, no need for an injunction to stay “open” or go “beyond,” as we have no other choice anyway. We are open to the coming of the future whether we like it or not, held fast in an unconditional (spatio-temporal) fix.

But this is deconstruction *ad usum dauphini*, cut to fit the rigorous logic which is driving RA, whether Derrida wants to come along or not. Hägglund’s radical atheism only requires so much Derrida and no more. This is a fiction of such unrelieved proportions as to put Hägglund at odds with virtually every major commentator on Derrida, not to mention with Derrida himself, whom Hägglund feels obliged to correct from time to time for straying off message, that is, for straying from Hägglund’s hypothesis. The long list of distinguished

⁷¹Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 256-60.

commentators on Derrida attacked by Hägglund are being attacked because they agree with Derrida instead of Hägglund, which is confirmed every time Derrida himself is chided for not agreeing with Hägglund, for being “misleading,” which means leading somewhere else than Hägglund is headed. When, according to this code, Hägglund speaks of serious misunderstandings of Derrida, that is normally to be decoded as serious disagreements with Hägglund. Reading this book is like having a problem with the reception of a TV program: you can tell it is Derrida speaking but there is something wrong with the audio, the voice is funny, because Hägglund so often draws conclusions opposed to the ones made by Derrida. To his credit, Hägglund gives his reader fair warning of the plan he is about to execute right at the start (RA, 11-12), and a lot of the book reads just like that, an execution where deconstruction is the weapon of choice. Hägglund at least seems to be enjoying himself.

The “pure description” hypothesis is best read as an intellectual experiment, or a counter-factual conditional, meant to make Derrida presentable to the new materialism: suppose, without taking into account the length and breadth of the texts of Jacques Derrida, we read deconstruction as a work of pure description. Then the result, or one result, would be RA. That result is a torso, a text cut off each time deconstruction is about to makes its point, the tip of Derrida’s stylus blunted by the head of Hägglund’s hammer. To be sure, Derrida devotes a good deal of patient work to analyzing concepts and to describing what he thinks there is (*il y a*) but his heart lies in what there might be (*s'il y en a*), in what is coming, in the to-come, and in call to for it to come (*viens*). RA is a novel book and it is brilliantly argued and it does pick up a thread in Derrida, a “logic,” and as Derrida says, deconstruction is a logic “up to a certain point” (GD, 49). But without this qualification deconstruction is reduced to a onto-logic or logocentrism, which at times threatens to become a metaphysics of becoming, a metaphysics of non-identity and bad infinity. That is almost unavoidable when a logic is introduced to dominate the alogic, the para-logic, the neologic, the “aphoristic energy” of a genuine grammatological performance, or per-formance.

What is distorted by emphasizing our unavoidable exposure to the unforeseeable future is our “responsibility” to and for the future, which we certainly *may avoid*. While we cannot avoid being exposed to the future, we may or may not evade our responsibility. We are not merely exposed to the future in Derrida but laid claim to by the future, called and solicited by the future. We are not merely laid claim to by the future, but filled with expectation for the future, praying and weeping like atheistic Augustinian Arab Jews over the future. We are, Derrida says, in a well known image, like a blind man, who cannot see what is coming, but feels about for the future with his stick.⁷² After all, if you swallowed a bottle of pills and spent the rest of your life comatose you would still be radically vulnerable to the unforeseeable future, which is hardly Derrida’s point. A

⁷²This is the guiding trope of *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

person who is kept alive only by life-sustaining equipment would be terribly vulnerable and even responsive to the coming of the *tout autre*—someone might pull the plug or there might be a power failure—but not at all *responsible* to the coming of the *tout autre*. Vulnerability is not responsibility and deconstruction is about responsibility. Telling us that we are structurally exposed to the future and to the coming of the other and that is the end of it is like telling people who complain that the system taxes the poor excessively and gives the rich a break and who therefore call for a change in the laws, that there's no need to call for change because things are going to change whether you like it or not. They must change. Even if nothing changes except that now it is a moment later, that's a change. Even in doing nothing something is done. True, but not true enough, and not exactly the point, and it is certainly not Derrida's point. While it is perfectly true that we are unavoidably exposed to change and an unpredictable future, the powers that be in any field of endeavor have accumulated an enviable record of blocking off and minimizing change and maximizing the *status quo* and hanging on by their teeth to power. But the beginning, the middle, and the end of deconstruction is to deny clouture its victory, to reverse and displace, to intervene and interrupt, to pray and weep over the future, so to speak (and so I do speak). Deconstruction is per-ver-formative.

To be sure, Hägglund does not deny that Derrida has a central theory of responsibility, which he treats in terms of “discernment,” the concrete decision in the singular situation, which I think is quite right and what I have been arguing against Richard Kearney these many years, ever since I proposed the idea of a “meta-phronesis” in *Radical Hermeneutics* (RH, 262). But Hägglund’s descriptive approach leads him to reduce responsibility, to abridge it, to a matter of keeping our heads up and watching out, for we may be assailed at any moment by the unforeseeable future (RA, 89). Responsibility is reactive, watching out for our own hides lest we be consumed by the unforeseen. If life were not so unpredictable, he says, we would not need to worry about responsibility all the time. That is certainly true, but those are not quite the terms in which responsibility is framed by Derrida, which is focused not on me but on the coming of the other, and which while taking full measure of the threat of the future has its heart set elsewhere, on keeping the future open—which means keeping our beliefs and practices, our traditions and our institutions, open to the future. By responsibility Derrida means not the necessity I am under to watch out for my own hide, nor even “a decision that I *can* take, the decision *in my power*,” but rather the decision of the other in me, in other words, a “response” to the other.⁷³ If I am responding to the other in me, it is because I am first all being called upon by the other. What Hägglund’s descriptive account does is to minimize if not to outright deny the call, claim, solicitation and promise of “coming of the other” (*l’invention de l’autre*), which is the call of the future, evidently for fear that this will land us all back in church or paying tithes to a positive infinity out there somewhere. Our response comes in response to a call—“*come (viens)*” “*go where you cannot go*,” “*give (donne)*”—which calls from a future to which we are called, and from the dead whom we are called upon to

⁷³Paper Machine, 87.

recall. It is the structure of the call that I treat as so many non-confessional “prayers” of an atheistic quasi-Jewish heretical, even “sinful” Augustinianism *sans* Saint Augustine.

Now we come to a central point and a central point of disagreement between Derrida and Hägglund. *Should we say, then, we “ought” to be responsible to and for the future, and that Derrida’s “ethics” is to “prescribe” just that – “always and everywhere to stay open to the future?”* Hägglund thinks not, and again that is narrowly correct, correct as far as it goes, for it would be a sad outcome for deconstruction’s “come” to end up coming up with a new *rule*. But everything that is interesting about deconstruction turns on the next step, the way that Derrida eludes standard form ethical normativity or prescriptiveness. He does this not, as Hägglund does, by retreating to the descriptive-factual-empirical situation, but rather by making use of *his own* notion of the ultra-transcendental described in OG, by *going-beyond-by-passing-through the transcendental*, by going through the prescriptive (ethical) to the “beyond,” to an ultra-prescriptive, an “ultra-responsibility” or “hyper-responsibility” beyond the prescriptive, an ultra-transcendental ethics he calls hyperbolic ethics. Otherwise, if you drop the “passage-through” when you go “beyond” the transcendental you will fall “short-of” the transcendental (OG, 61) into the empirical or descriptive, which is exactly what Derrida warns us about Hjelmslev and into which Hägglund rushes headlong eyes wide open. If this all sounds familiar, it should, since it also repeats according to a dynamics of its own the path to Moriah depicted by Johannes de Silentio: through ethical universality to religious singularity instead of retreating to the aesthetic (which is the fate of Constantine Constantius). That famous Biblical story—in religion—was the subject of one of Derrida’s most interesting books,⁷⁴ where Derrida reinvents deconstruction—as a religion without religion—by inclining Kierkegaard and Levinas towards each other, about which Hägglund observes Abrahamic silence. That is also why I think that, while Derrida’s topics of choice have changed over the years, he has not altered the basic structure of his thought, which is the passage through the universal to the singular, and why I for one have never said there is a “religious turn” in any structural sense, just a change of topics.⁷⁵

Let us take a closer look at this. On the one hand, there is to be sure a descriptive element in deconstruction. First of all, there is a general descriptivity that is to be found in what Derrida calls the auto-deconstructive, an element in deconstruction that runs on its own, an automaticity which leads Derrida to say that it is not he who is doing the deconstructing but that things are auto-deconstructive of themselves, having been woven from deconstructible cloth, while he, Derrida, is like the first reporter on the scene, reporting back to the rest of us on what he observes. Deconstruction, he will say, is what’s happening, what’s going on all around us every day, and he is just reporting back to us about it. I have called that, using a Kierkegaardianism, the “armed neutrality” of deconstruction, and that makes for something like a “descriptive” element in

⁷⁴The *Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷⁵See Derrida, “The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” pp. 26-27.

deconstruction.⁷⁶ However, in saying that, it is of the utmost importance that we understand that the descriptive/normative distinction is part and parcel of a system of distinctions—fact/value, is/ought, real/ideal, constative/performative, subjective/objective (and also theism/atheism), etc.—which it is the whole point of deconstruction to undermine, which is why I added the bit about “armed.” These inherited distinctions are all just part of the “already constituted” or what Derrida calls the “given category of the event” (RTP, 164), standard-form ways of thinking about empirical events. As we have learned from philosophers of science from Kuhn to Hacking, and from Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy, facts are a function of the framework that picks them out. All facts come laden with theories and all theories come laden with historical values. So any possible Derridean “description” would have passed *through* the phenomenological critique of empiricist theories of description (or Quine’s critique of its dogmas, which is an excellent bit of deconstructing in its own right) and so would start out by rejecting the idea that to describe is to reduce a value to a fact or to produce an immunized value-free fact, which is in Quine’s words one more “metaphysical article of faith.” It is impossible to “describe” what is of interest to deconstruction. The democracy to come is being enjoined, not described; in fact, having no unveiled truth or essence, it cannot be described (*Rogues*, 29). Derrida’s “description” of the auto-deconstructible is profoundly richer and more complex and troubled than the “description” inscribed within the “descriptive/normative” binary, just the way the “empiricism” of Aristotle is richer than Humean empiricism. No adequate “description” of human experience for Aristotle could possibly exclude the search for *arete* and the principles of excellence that are always already enjoined upon us by the *polis* which has brought us forth.

Furthermore, it is also perfectly true that when Derrida discusses a concept like forgiveness he will often say he is doing just that, analyzing a concept in its unconditional purity, so that we do not confuse forgiveness with something else, like reconciliation. When he analyzes unconditional hospitality, he is not recommending that sovereign states have no immigration laws and that everyone should be granted entry no matter who or what their intentions. Nor is he saying that there should be no sovereign states or no sovereignty anywhere, which would among other things abolish our own freedom. To draw those conclusions would simply be to create new rules, more normative universals, which is expressly what deconstruction is not about. Derrida is thinking in terms of the singularity of responsibility, of how to respond to what is uniquely demanded of us in the singular and always more or less unprecedented situation, which he signals under the sign of the “negotiation” of idiosyncratic circumstances. Sometimes he sounds like a French version of analytic philosophy, making a micrological conceptual and linguistic analysis of ordinary language. The analytic philosophers, stampeded by Searle and a lot of notoriety in the Anglophone press, have missed that side of Derrida entirely.

⁷⁶*Prayers and Tears*, 12-19.

Here we should proceed with caution, for while it is of the utmost importance to have as clear a concept as possible of the gift or forgiveness or hospitality, these pivotal concepts in deconstruction are in the end *not concepts*. Deconstruction is the deconstruction of the concept, of any concept, of the concept in general, of the very concept of a concept, for any concept will always be the effect of the play of traces and if it grows too strong it will arrest the play. But then what is justice? What is the gift? What is hospitality? Again and again he says they do not respond or submit to the form of "what-is," of the *quid est*. He is not Socrates or an Oxford analyst seeking definitions. A definition, which is what answers to the what-is, would always provide some stable form of presence (or presence of the stable form). These quasi-transcendentals are not quiddities, essences, forms, ideas, ideals, or concepts, which is what they are in the language of standard-form philosophy, in the inherited metaphysical tradition, and that is why they cannot be described, and why, having no form, they cannot be trans-formed from descriptives into prescriptives or normative universals.

So what are they if we cannot ask what they are? I go back to what I said above about the infinitival infinity of the concept: to analyze a concept in its purity is to expose its infinitival infinity, to attach the coefficient of the "to-come" to the concept. Take the case of the "democracy to come." This is not an ideal essence which is being asymptotically approximated in the existing democratic states. In the expression the "democracy to come," he says, the "to come" is more important than the "democracy."⁷⁷ That is because "democracy" is not a concept but a *promise*, not an essence but an *injunction*, not an ideal but a *call*, which is what is ringing in the "*à venir*." Over and above a description, and beyond any prescription, something is getting itself promised and enjoined in the word "democracy"—in the middle voice, there is no one doing this or making this promise. *Die Sprache spricht*, language speaks, and language promises (*verspricht*). Viewed in these terms, my democratic friends, there are no democratic states and, my friends, there are no friends or democrats. Democracy is not an "essence" that gets "existence" in the empirical word "democracy"—and the same thing goes for "gift," "hospitality," etc., all the "unconditionals"—but an "exigency," not a dream that vanishes at daybreak when language awakens but the awakening and dreaming of language (WD, 151), a dream or a promise that has been launched by language itself, a dream awakened by language, a desire that has been set off by language itself. "Democracy" is or harbors an injunction that calls or solicits us beyond the stable limits of the present, beyond the bounds of the possible, so that when we hear the word "democracy" (or "justice" or "gift") we are not cognizing an essence but coming under the influence of an injunction, of a call, a solicitation. The "truth" of the unconditionals is not the truth of a concept or a proposition, nor the truth of the preconceptual or prepropositional unconcealment on which propositions rest, but the truth of the *facere veritatem*, the truth which happens in the event, the truth which gets made or done in the madness of the "moment," which is a

⁷⁷ *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews: 1997-2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 182.

"response" but not an instance of a concept. The "truth" of the "gift" belongs to the order of the injunction *give*, the "truth" of hospitality to the order of the injunction "come," the truth of "justice" is call for justice that disturbs every law, the truth of the impossible in general, of any movement, is "go, where you cannot go." So we should not ask what they *are* but what *happens*, what is being promised, what is going on in these names? *Was heisst?* in all the senses Heidegger explores—what is calling, who is calling, what's being said, who is being called? What is coming? What is to come?

§10. The Future Is Always Worth More

To see what Derrida—as opposed to Hägglund—is getting at, let's look more closely at what Derrida means by the "future" and to do so, let us look more closely at his analysis of "unconditional hospitality" and of "unconditional forgiveness."

(a) As is well known, Derrida distinguishes two figures of hospitality, unconditional and conditional. As I said above, the unconditional does not exist because the conditions under which it would exist have been removed. Having removed those conditions, what is left over is the pure concept of hospitality, "the very idea" of hospitality, regardless of the circumstances in which it is "put into practice" (PM, 66). When Hägglund discusses things like this in Derrida, he pins everything on the point that whether the *tout autre* unexpectedly knocking at my door is "good" or "bad," an orphan in need or an axe murderer, is structurally unforeseeable and undecidable. Hägglund stakes his case for descriptivity by concluding that the *tout autre* is not the "good" as such, has no claim on us as such.⁷⁸ From the *tout autre* "no norms or rules can be derived" (RA, 232n4; 31). The *tout autre* is the object of an ethically neutral and purely "descriptive" account. "Hospitality" has a purely descriptive sense; it merely means we never know who is knocking on the door, so Derrida is using this word, which sounds very hospitable to ethics, merely to describe our "violent exposure" to the unforeseeable and to warn us to take all due precautions against the coming storm. I need to take the trouble "to establish conditions of hospitality, to regulate who is allowed to enter" lest I be done in (RA, 104), which is a good example of Hägglund's knack for turning Derrida upside down. That is at worst exactly the opposite of what Derrida is getting at and at best a half-truth which serves Hägglund's point but blunts Derrida's.

⁷⁸In RA, 85, Hägglund conflates this with the "non-ethical opening of ethics." But these are two different things. The nonethical opening of ethics is archi-writing (OG, 139-40), *différance*, opening the space in which one can constitute ethical and legal categories, like good and bad, legal and illegal; that pre-ethical "violence" or archi-writing is what Levy-Strauss missed in his Rousseauizing of the Nambikwara. Archiviolence (= archi-writing) is to be distinguished from "the common concept of violence" (OG, 112). From this Hägglund illicitly concludes that the relation to the other cannot be "ethical" as such.

Open any of Derrida's texts on hospitality—*tolle, lege!*—and you will find him saying what he says in *Paper Machine* (66-67). The distance between unconditional and conditional hospitality, he says, describes the space of the “terrible ordeal” in which concrete decisions about hospitality are made and hospitality is “put into practice.” He is discussing the “ethics of hospitality,” which is found in every culture, he says, but is “never the same.” The principle of unconditional hospitality “*ordains, even making it desirable* [my italics], a welcome without reservations or calculation, an unlimited display of hospitality to the new arrival.”⁷⁹ But no given community can fail to “betray” this desire, since no one can be commanded to not “protect a ‘home,’ presumably, by guaranteeing property and ‘one’s own’ against the unrestricted arrival of the other.” That’s the part of Derrida Hägglund can use. The part he leaves out is the rest of Derrida’s thought. These “conditions” are established not merely to protect us against the threat, as Hägglund suggests, but also in order to “put...into practice” and actualize our “desire” for unconditional hospitality and to do so “in the name of the unconditional”:

The two meanings of hospitality remain irreducible to one another, but it is the pure and hyperbolical hospitality in whose name we should always invent the best dispositions, the least bad conditions, the most just legislation, so as to make it as effective as possible. This is necessary to avoid the perverse effects of an unlimited hospitality whose risks I have tried to define. Calculate the risks, yes, but don’t shut the door on what cannot be calculated, meaning the future and the foreigner—that’s the double law of hospitality...We often forget that it is *in the name of* unconditional hospitality, the kind that makes meaningful any reception of foreigners, that we should try to determine the *best* conditions, namely particular legal limits. (PM, 67)

If unconditional hospitality were an unbroken rule (or prescription) it would have “perverse effects,” so we are asked instead to lay down the conditions of hospitality *in the name* of unconditional hospitality. We are ordered (“ordain”) and we “desire” unconditional hospitality, but we realize we must “suspend, if not betray” (PM, 66) this desire. Thus the relationship between conditional and unconditional hospitality is the relationship between an actual mundane juridical or ethical practice (rules, laws) and that in the name of which we undertake this practice, the name we are trying to make real, to honor in the “best” way, to “betray” in the least bad way, the name we love and desire. So too the deconstruction of the law is made possible by the undeconstructibility of justice, in whose name the law is deconstructed. Unconditional hospitality is not a

⁷⁹ *Paper Machine*, 66-67. Hägglund then proceeds to further conflate hyperbolic hospitality with the “non-ethical opening of ethics” (RA, 105), which it is not, for by the latter Derrida means *diffrance* or *archi-écriture* as the quasi-transcendental condition which makes it possible to inscribe the laws and prohibitions of ethics, the non-ethical violence which precedes ethics, but he does not mean the hyperbolic excess in whose name they are inscribed.

neutral descriptive but a hyperbolic ultra-ethical injunction, a desire beyond desire in whose name we are acting, whose influence or force the laws we draw up should always reflect. We are referred by Hägglund to *Rogues*, 172-73n12 where Derrida says that unconditional hospitality does not belong to the “ethical,” “political” or “juridical”—suggesting that Derrida is simply neutrally “describing” an unpredictable future. In fact, Derrida is pointing out that these two different orders are irreducible to each other and that the order of conditions is to be organized in the name of the unconditional. So when we actually consult this text and follow up the further references Derrida gives us in the notes it is clear that when Derrida speaks of unconditional hospitality he is not saying that it is a non-ethical “descriptive” but that it is “hyper-ethical,” the “hyperbolic” injunction “in whose name” we “should always” construct ethical and political laws. Derrida’s attitude toward hospitality, like his attitude toward the future in general, is hopeful and welcoming, Hägglund’s is fearful and protective. For Hägglund, the future is a bad infinity, unknown and dangerous, for Derrida, the future is dangerous but it is always worth more, a *beau risque*, the possibility of the impossible.

(2) “Pardon, yes, pardon” (QG, 21). That is how Derrida’s essay “To Forgive” begins, asking for forgiveness, for the impossible. It begins *by* the impossible. It begins *performatively*, which tells us something about the “concept” of forgiveness. As soon as I open my mouth, Derrida says, I am asking for forgiveness—for taking up your time, for making you listen to me in my own language, under my own terms, for all the shortcomings of what I have to say, for going on at excessive length. So he thanks us for listening to him and begs our forgiveness for his “perjury,” his “hypocrisy.” It would be also very hypocritical if this were just a bewitching strategy meant to win and woo the favor of his audience. Forgiveness itself, *s'il y en a*, like justice and like the gift, does not belong to an “economy,” is not a calculation, an investment hoping for a return. Forgiveness is given unconditionally, which is why it is not to be confused with “reconciliation.” Reconciliation is too often an “economic” movement in which forgiveness is offered teleologically, for the purpose of establishing peace—in politics it is called offering your hand in friendship while also holding your nose. Forgiveness is to be offered unconditionally, in which case it would be offered without regard to whether it brought peace or war. He is not against reconciliation, of course, but he just does not want it confused with “pure” forgiveness, which must be given, if it is to be loyal to its “concept,” without the expectation of return, of earning good will, or producing peace, and without the usual conditions imposed by the traditional philosophy and theology of forgiveness. If the offender expresses sorrow, promises to offend no more, and promises to make amends, then we veritably *owe* the offender forgiveness and it would be unjust to withhold it. The offender has earned it, is entitled to it, and it is a fair exchange, which of course means there is little or no gift in this forgiving. So we must be very clear about what forgiveness is and make a careful analysis of this concept, the result of which is to expose its aporetic quality. If the offender is truly sorry and deserves forgiveness, or if the offense is merely “venial” (QG, 30), forgiveness has not yet begun. Forgiveness begins by the impossible. Forgiving is forgiving unconditionally, which means only when it is

faced with forgiving the unforgivable—someone who has done something unforgiveable, is not sorry, does not ask for forgiveness, and has no intention of stopping. That is when forgiveness, which is impossible, *the impossible*, begins. We must undertake a careful analysis of the concept, looking for all the world like an “analytic” philosopher analyzing ordinary language. Why? Not because Derrida has taken a sudden swerve towards Oxford philosophy but because:

...there is in forgiveness, in the very meaning of forgiveness *a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will) that demands that forgiveness be granted*, if it can be, even to someone who does not ask for it, who does not repent or confess or improve or redeem himself, beyond, consequently, an entire identificatory, spiritual, whether sublime or not, economy, beyond all expiation even. (my italics) (QG, 28)

So we analyze this concept to see what forgiveness *is*, but to see what it *is*, is to see that it is not a *what-is*, an essence, but “*a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will)* that demands that forgiveness be granted.” We analyze this concept in order to isolate not its essence but its voice, not to describe it but to isolate its pure call. We analyze this concept in order to isolate its infinity, the pure infinitival infinity of the to-come, from the concrete finite responses we make to it, the finite conditions under which it exists. We analyze this concept in order to hear all the more clearly what it is calling. It is in the name and under the force of that call to-come that we put it into practice, perform it, bring it into the world and the mundane conditions of the world, which are the conditions of its existence. The more sensible, the more possible forgiveness is, the more it slips into an economy and the more forgiveness is annulled. The more impossible it is, the less sense it makes according to the traditional concept, the more mad its moment is, the more it is loyal to itself. Forgiveness is not an essence to which existence must be added, or an idea in the Kantian sense to be empirically approximated, but a call demanding a response, a desire we desire to actualize, an impetus by which we allow ourselves to be moved, a force (a weak force) to which we submit, an appeal which we answer, *facere veritatem*. We are responsible for making forgiveness exist.

Then should we always and everywhere forgive unconditionally? No. Derrida is not saying that. The pure voice of forgiveness, which is the call “forgive,” is not and does not translate into a rule. “[W]hat I am trying to do here,” he says, is to write a “‘hyperbolical ethics,’ or an ethics beyond ethics” (QG, 29), not to come up with a set of ethical rules or prescriptions (which is exactly the same thing Levinas would say). Without forgiveness, we close the future down and lock ourselves in a cycle of retribution, but sometimes, in the singularity of the situation, the most responsible thing to do is to withhold forgiveness. In any given situation, the offender might be rushing to his own destruction, closing down his future and the future of all around him, and in the particular situation the best way for the offender to assume responsibility for his life, and for us to act responsibly toward the offender, and so to keep the future open, is to withhold forgiveness. In the forgiveness to come, the to-come is more important

than the forgiveness. For in the end, that is, in a hyperbolic ethics, it is not forgiveness or the withholding of forgiveness that matters, but the future, keeping the future open. "Forgiveness," "hospitality," the "gift"—and all the other "unconditionals"—are the figures under which the *à venir* calls upon us, under which it comes to us. These words coming toward us from the various historical traditions are the determinate historical forms in which the force, the desire, the impetus, the movement, the appeal (call it what you will) of the *à venir* makes itself felt. Forgiveness, *s'il y en a*, means the forgiveness to come, *à venir*, with all the (weak) force of the appeal of the *à venir*, which calls upon us, which calls to us, which calls for us to recall the dead, to keep the future open.⁸⁰ The *à venir* is not simply the unpredictable time of the future in a bad infinity but an imperative, an injunction, a solicitation, a call. Now there are many things you may call Derrida's analysis of hospitality and forgiveness—a "hyperbolic ethics of the to-come" is the least bad one, for my money—but a "pure description" is not one of them.

That is why there will always be structural gap between the injunction, which comes in an unconditional or unqualified voice—"come," "go," "give," "forgive," "promise"—and our response. That gap is not Lacanian sadness but a joyous way to keep the future open. To codify that call closes the future down as far as it is possible to close it down, for nothing can finally or completely close it down, as Hägglund is quick to point out. What we can close down is our responsibility to the future, even as it is no less true that no response can ever take the measure of the immeasurable demand to give (GT, 29-31). Thus "gift" or "hospitality" or "forgiveness" are more or less provisionally stable unities of meaning in the several natural languages, effects of the play of traces, which most certainly admit of conceptual and etymological analysis but are not exhausted by it, are not contained by their conceptual form, are not finally concepts which we can arraign before our interrogatory powers. We cannot demand to know their "what-is" because what happens in and under these names is the promise of an event. The concepts of democracy or justice, of gift and forgiveness, contain what they cannot contain (the to-come). Deconstruction is the experience of the impossible, which means of the event, which means that something is happening in these concepts, something promises to happen, and that promise is never fulfilled, like a Messiah who never shows up. Events are not instances or instantiations of concepts. Events are the instant or the moment when the impossible happens, which means when the horizon of expectation is shattered.

That means that over and beyond this moment of the auto-deconstructive (the "must be") in which we are unavoidably lodged without having asked for it,

⁸⁰"As much because it gives as because it receives, from the past that it recalls and from the hope it calls forth [*appelle*], through its recall [*rappel*] and its calling forth [*appel*], it belongs to the element of the gift—and thus to the element of forgiveness, of a forgiveness asked for or a forgiveness granted..." Derrida, "To Forgive," in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 36.

there is also the rest of the deconstructive story, the work of our deconstructive “responsibility,” which we *may or may not* avoid. Over and above our structural blindness before an unforeseeable future, we feel with our stick for the future that calls to us in the dark. When it comes to responsibility, Derrida says things like “go where you cannot go” (and not merely: “describe where you are”), or *give (donne)*, be engaged (*engage-toi*).⁸¹ This is the side of deconstruction Hägglund wants to steer clear off. Then it becomes clear that for Derrida deconstruction—and this time we’ll use another Kierkegaardianism—is a work of love, for deconstruction *is* love, he says, or forgiveness (“And yet, one *should forgive*”).⁸² Every time he is asked to encapsulate deconstruction, Derrida comes up with rousing sound-bites like that: deconstruction is love, deconstruction is affirmation, deconstruction is the experience of the possibility of the impossible, etc. He does not resort to neutral or merely descriptive observations that life is uncertain so you better keep your wits about you. On the contrary, here everything is responding and responsibility, the passion of existence and engagement, the madness of the moment of decision, the pledge of faith that takes place in the charged space of the promise, the call, the solicitation of the future. Such affirmation is the axiomatics and axiology and hyperbolics, the whole point, of deconstruction, its stylus tip, what it loves and desires with a “desire beyond desire.”⁸³ We are structurally exposed to the future, like it or not, yes, of course. But over and “beyond” that, something is calling or appealing to us from the future, and asking for our response, which may or may not be forthcoming. Not “must” but “perhaps.” “For in the end, where would deconstruction find its force, its movement or its motivation if not in this always unsatisfied appeal,...justice, the possibility of justice.”⁸⁴ That is the ethical and religious ambiance, beyond prescriptivity, of deconstruction. But it is not simply ethical and religious. It is no less, to stay with the Kierkegaardian triad, aesthetic. It has to do with a poetics, a politics, an account of traditions, institutions, science, law, the humanities, architecture, with anything, up and down the length of “experience,” in all its multivocality.

One might think of this on a Heideggerian analogy. Hägglund’s “ultratranscendental” situatedness in space and time emphasizes what Heidegger calls factual being thrown (*geworfen*). But of course for Heidegger *Dasein* is also projection (*Entwurf*). It throws itself forth, assumes responsibility and answers the call of conscience, which is the call of the other in me. For Derrida that means the appeal, the call, the promise of the *tout autre*, which is the unsettling other-than-self that inhabits and calls upon the settled self summoning it beyond itself. Heidegger’s “they” takes the Derridean form of standard form

⁸¹*Given Time*, 30

⁸²*Paper Machine*, 81.

⁸³The gift “is a matter—desire beyond desire—of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the gift (*give* [“*donne*”]), as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge).” *Given Time*, 30. Speaking of justice, he says “Justice is an experience of the impossible: a will, a desire, a demand for justice...” *Acts of Religion*, 244.

⁸⁴*Acts of Religion*, 249

ethical prescriptives, luring us into merely “following the rules” and thereby evading our responsibility, which is why Derrida cites Kierkegaard’s Johannes de Silentio when he says ethics is a temptation, a point to which I will return below.

Hägglund has recoded deconstruction so as to obscure the side of deconstruction that is driven by a hyperbolic, open-ended, fetching albeit dangerous injunction that is structured like a religion. Everything in RA is organized around beating back the idea that “concepts” like “justice” or “hospitality” could be construed as an “ideal” or “pure good” or a “positive infinity” of which we regrettably always fall short. But the injunction is a true injunction even though it is not a “pure good,” and this because it is risky and dangerous and requires the suspension of the law. It is an injunction even though it is not an “ideal,” because it is open-ended and hyperbolic and is still in the making, yet to come, and has passed through and gone beyond any ontic or ontological ideal, any essence, truth or essential form. It remains an injunction even though it is not a positive infinity but an infinitival infinity which calls to come but does not so much as exist, forced to call with a weak force, a faint promise set off by a play of the trace. These “concepts” are at best unstable forms in which the *à venir* pays us a call. But whatever it is, and we know it is not a what-is, this odd kind of uncanny and spectral injunction certainly cannot be accommodated by resurrecting an empiricist distinction between prescriptive and descriptive, which it both precedes and makes (im)possible.

So, of course the *tout autre* is not the “good” as such. Deconstruction is not a theory of the “good,” and still less of the good as such, but an account of the future and of our “responsibility”⁸⁵ to the future. The *tout autre* is not the good as such but the *event* as such. Good are bad are the categories of ethics, not of the “hyper-ethics” of responsibility, or the ultra-ethics “beyond” the transcendental (ethics) which “passes through” the transcendental (OG, 61-62). If the other were the good as such, everything would be programmed and we would have a rule to live by. The future would be good, but closed, which is “bad.” But that does not mean the *tout autre* is something *neutral* (that is, “short-of” the ethical) but rather that, as the event as such, the *tout autre* is the occasion of a heightened responsibility, that is, the “beyond-of” the ethical, where the necessity of the passage *through* the ethical can still be felt, *which eliminates any possibility of pre-*

⁸⁵I have been against “the good” for as long as I can remember, at least since I have been *Against Ethics*. When Drucilla Cornell decided to redescribe deconstruction as a philosophy of the Good, I tried to talk her out of it in a section of *More Radical Hermeneutics* entitled “Too Good to be True” (133-39). Deconstruction, I said is not a philosophy of the Good because it is philosophy of difference, of innumerable differences and innumerable goods, too many to count. The Good is too classical, too Platonic and transcendent or too Aristotelian and communitarian, and too Levinasian. It precisely those who think they know the Good who cause so much evil, who impose their own limited view of things on the rest of us in the name of the Good, as if somebody appointed them a spokesman for the Good, whereas we deconstructors are more focused on evils, on minimizing evil, on choosing the lesser evil. Of course, this goes unmentioned in RA.

ethical descriptivity. Instead of saying that the *tout autre* is neutral, Derrida says things like the *tout autre* is the “beginning of ethics, of the Law as such,” “a principle of ethics or more radically of justice.” The ultra-transcendental constitutes the hyper-ethical, ethics *beyond* ethics, the ethicity of ethics, “hyperbolic” ethics, an “increase of responsibility,”⁸⁶ which is an ethics beyond duty. Without the *tout autre*, without “the priceless dignity of otherness,” “ethics is dormant,” in a “dogmatic slumber.”⁸⁷ Ethics remains *sous rature*, struck through by the logic of the *sans*, constituting an ethics without ethics. Hägglund feels called upon to warn us about Derrida when Derrida talks like that. We should not be misled by such “positively valorized terms” (RA, 105)—which is about like Heidegger saying that nothing pejorative is intended in speaking of the leveled off inauthentic idle gossip of fallen Dasein. As happens often in this book, when Derrida gets to his point, he is chided for straying from Hägglund’s point.

The account of the *tout autre* is indeed not “normative,” not because it is less than normative, but because it is ultra-normative, more than normative, where the necessity of the passage through the normative can still be felt! The point of the analysis of the *tout autre* is not to *neutralize* the *tout autre*, but to pass through its normative or ethical features, allowing them to break under the pressure of the aporia, in order to *intensify* the injunction, the ethics, the impossible, the passion, the claim, the call, the responsibility, all of which are charges set off upon entering the field of the “beyond” (*ultra*, *hyper*, etc). Derrida does not *neutralize ethics but de-stabilizes its transcendental pretensions so as make room for ultra-transcendental or hyperbolic responsibility to the singularity of the other*. The “suspension” of the ethical is not neutralization, but Kierkegaardian fear and trembling and Levinasian irrecusability; it suspends the universal-normative under the intensity of the singular responsibility.

From the fact that the future may bring disaster, Hägglund concludes that we cannot think it is “better to be more open than less open to the future” (RA, 232 n4). The interesting thing about that view is that it is exactly the opposite of Derrida’s. It flies in the face of everything Derrida thinks and is expressly denied by Derrida. For even when we block things from happening, that is a way to keep the future open:

The openness of the future is worth more [my italics]; that is the axiom [my italics] of deconstruction, that on the basis of which it has always set itself in motion and which links it, as with the future itself, to otherness, to the priceless dignity of otherness [my italics], that is to say, to justice...One can imagine the objection. Someone [for example, Hägglund] might say to you: “Sometimes it is better for this or that not to arrive. Justice demands that one prevent certain events (certain ‘arrivants’) from arriving. The event is not good in itself, and the future is not unconditionally preferable.”

⁸⁶*Gift of Death*, 71; *Acts of Religion*, 248.

⁸⁷*Beast and Sovereign*, 108.

Certainly, but one can always show that what one is opposing, when one conditionally prefers that this or that not happen, is something one takes, rightly or wrongly, as blocking the horizon or simply forming the horizon (the word that means *limit*) for the absolute coming of the altogether other, for the future.⁸⁸

The coming of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented; it is another name for the future itself. This does not mean that it is good—good in itself—for everything and anything to arrive; it is not that one should give up trying to prevent certain things from coming to pass (without which there would be no decision, no responsibility, ethics or politics). But one should only ever oppose events that one thinks will block the future or that bring death with them: events that would put an end to the possibility of the event, to the affirmative opening to the coming of the other.

For Derrida the future is always worth more, not because it *is* more, as a *descriptive* matter, of course, but because it is *worth* more, as an “axiomatic” or axiological or aspirational matter, a vocative or spectral matter, a matter of the very idea of the *à venir*. The future that is worth more is not the unpredictable factual future, the bad infinity of endless time, but the future he is praying for, hoping for, the future of the promise, which is the evocative and invocative voice that is silenced in RA, the vocative space in which deconstruction transpires and the point at which deconstruction is structured like a religion. When someone writes “all men are created equal” that is as a factual matter incomplete, having left out half the race, and descriptively-empirically false. What is important about a phrase like that is that it contains a promise of justice, which belongs to the future that is always worth more, where the promise is undeconstructible and does not depend upon words like “men,” “created,” “equal” or even “democracy.” Factually of course, descriptively, the future may or may not be better, but the future is always better in the order of aspiration, of the spirit that inspires its spectrality. Factually, the “future” is not always worth more, but that is a matter of the unpredictable future-present, the endless roll of an infinite finitude—but not the *à venir*. The *à venir* for Derrida is not simply the empirically unpredictable future, what is coming, which may be awful. The neutral space of a description belongs to empirical time and blunts the stylus tip of Derrida’s quasi-prayer. The very “axioms,” the axiomatics and axiology of deconstruction—beyond and passing through any ethics of prescriptions—is *always and everywhere to keep the future open*, even though and precisely because this is an injunction which does not translate into saying that we should always and everywhere do *this or that*, make this or that response which would be to abdicate the ordeal of responsibility.⁸⁹ Starting out from our irreducible exposure

⁸⁸*Negotiations*, 105, 94; cf. p.182.

⁸⁹When Richard Kearney, Derrida and I discussed this point at Villanova, I pointed out that the moment of singular decision in Derrida would be undermined by “criteria,” a point I have been making ever since *Radical Hermeneutics* and *Against Ethics*. But I am also looking for a way to make Derrida’s second point, that in closing the door to Charles Manson, we still keep the door open to the “to come,” in closing off Charles

to an unpredictable future, which is irreducibly pre-given, Derrida's next step is to ask, how we are going to respond to the *claim* that is made upon us by the future. That is isomorphic with the point made against Husserl and Hjelmslev: pure transcendental-linguistic form will subjugate the future to transcendental rule and in deconstruction everything turns on the valorization (beyond ethical prescriptiveness) of the "openness of the future which is worth more."

At this point Hägglund's position is so much at odds with Derrida's that he simply admits it and chides Derrida for "giving in" to a bad argument precisely when Derrida should have stuck with the argument Hägglund prefers (RA, 231n4). To the long list of distinguished commentators who have misunderstood Derrida according to RA, it seems we have to add Jacques Derrida himself. So *just whose radical atheism is this?* Deconstruction just cannot be shoe-horned like this. I am not saying deconstruction is nothing of the sort that Hägglund presents but that he keeps cutting off what Derrida is up to. Derrida gives long lectures and it pays to stick around for the end. If you hear Derrida out, he sounds more like Augustine or Kierkegaard than like the new materialism, albeit a Jewish Kierkegaard and an atheistic Augustine, an Arab Jew, praying and weeping over the frailty and fragility of our mortal flesh, whose only salvation is that he realizes he cannot be saved. Now maybe it is time to emphasize materialism but any possible materialism in deconstruction would be an "ultra-materialism," which, if there is such a thing, is like his faith (*croire*) a bloodier brew (*cru*) than Augustine's or Kierkegaard's faith,⁹⁰ this because it is a matter of weeping over spilled blood in an ultra-materialist religion. But I agree with Derrida, that if you do not understand his religion, you will read him less and less well.⁹¹

Manson we are not closing off the coming of the other. Hägglund rejects Derrida's view of this matter, which is why he attributes to me "two mutually exclusive arguments." See RA, 124 and *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 131.

⁹⁰"Circumfession," 3-4.

⁹¹Hägglund offer us an abridged edition of deconstruction, as if he were presenting what Wilfrid Sellars would call the "scientific image"—it's all neurons and C-fibers firing—underlying the "manifest image," the blooming buzzing confusion of experience. Hägglund's radical atheism is a distillate of deconstruction, boiled down to double binds and reduced to neutralized toned-down description of spacing and timing, almost as if *differance* would be the Derridean counter-part to Badiou's theory of "presentation" and set theory. His Derrida is wary of any "beyond" and allergic to religion as an imaginary, nostalgic and enchanted world. In the vocabulary of radical atheism deconstruction is restricted to describing time's inevitable tides by way of a thin but rigid logic that is immunized against religious infestation. Hägglund's next target is the vitalism of Bergson and Deleuze. He is engaged in a worldwide immunization program to make the world safe from religion wherever an epidemic threatens to break out, whether in classical transcendence or on the plane of immanence. On that reading, his RA reads like a counterpart to Hallward's book on Deleuze [*Out of this World* (London: Verso, 2006)], which criticizes Deleuzian vitalism for transgressing Badiou's formalism, the proof of which is that this exposes Deleuze straightaway to a tropical disease ("theophany," akin to Meillassoux's "fideism"). Hägglund immunizes Derrida against religion by neutralizing the prescriptive, and

§11. Ethics is the Temptation

Let us clarify this question of “falling short” in deconstruction, which so much worries Hägglund. We fall short by failing to keep the future open, by choosing a course of action that maintains the steady state of the possible and evades the invading address of the impossible. Now the reader is constantly hounded by Hägglund—he is a kind of hound of heaven!—on the point that “the” (sic) religious interpretation moves between a pure good and mixed goods, just as ethics moves between ethical ideals and practical compromises, whereas no such gap or space is found in Derrida. It is true that there is no gap between an Kantian ethical ideal and an empirical shortfall (RA, 19 ff.) in deconstruction but it is a mistake to conclude from this that there is no falling short at all, no gap at all, no injunctive, vocative or hyper-axiological distance or difference.⁹² There is a structural gap between any concept and its to-come, which is not just a matter of the not-yet. On the contrary, deconstruction opens its doors for business in the gap between the possible and the impossible, as in its very first futile but exquisitely fecund failure to find a name for the conditions under which names are found. But this is falling short with a difference! To fall short in normative ethics is to fall short of the norm and to be found wanting. But for Derrida—where everything is organized around the affirmation of the impossible, the experience of the impossible—normativity is the short fall, duty is the “danger,” because the prescriptive constitutes a “program,” a failure to invent and keep the future open.⁹³ The evasion of “responsibility” in Derrida is not a fall *from* the normative but what Derrida calls the “danger” of a fall *into* the normative. When one does one’s “duty,” what one has to do or ought to do, that’s the evasion of responsibility. The paradox, to use the language of ethics, is that one fails not by breaking the rule but by *keeping* a rule; one fails by failing to suspend the rule. It is doing your duty that does you in.⁹⁴ As Johannes de Silentio says, when it comes to the singular, ethics is the *temptation*, which Derrida cites and glosses as “irresponsibilization” (GD, 61)! Contrary to ethics, what you are trying to *avoid* is a “good conscience.”⁹⁵ Responsibility is not a matter of duty or normativity because the demand that is made upon us by the singularity of the other exceeds

since Derrida does not embrace vitalism, he is not exposed to theophany, either; there is no threat of “contamination” with religion in any form. With remarkable boldness, this kind of border patrolling against infectious disease and anti-contamination is then called “deconstruction” and “auto-immunity!”

⁹²See *On the Name*, 132-33, n3.

⁹³“For a deconstructive operation, *possibility* is rather the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible...—the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible, in other words, as the only possible invention.” *Psyché*, 15.

⁹⁴“One forgives, if one does forgive, beyond any categorical imperative, beyond debt and duty. And yet, one *should forgive*.” *Paper Machine*, 81. See “Passions,” *On the Name*, n3, 132-37.

⁹⁵*Acts of Religion*, 245.

"a law, a norm, a rule, or a duty."⁹⁶ Deconstruction does not describe neutral facts of the matter but exposes itself performatively to an infinite call or claim. As Derrida says:

Deconstruction is already pledged, engaged (*gagée, engagée*) by this demand for infinite justice...constantly to maintain a questioning of the origin, ground and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice—this is, from the point of view of a rigorous deconstruction, anything but a neutralization of the interest in justice..."⁹⁷

We pause in respect before singularity, suspending the calculations of the law, having been brought up short from an excess of responsibility, which is not to be confused with shifting into neutral, with the neutrality of a description. That excess does not subtract ethics but passes through ethics to a hyper-ethics, intensifying the hyper-ethicity of responsibility, which answers the call of the other, going beyond the rule not falling below the rule, making for an "ultra-transcendental" in the precise sense that is suppressed by Hägglund.

The "justice to come" is a call or claim, an exigency or a demand, for the justice that does not yet exist, that is still to be invented. In that sense there is no falling short of an ideal for there is no ideal form up ahead; what is ahead does not exist, is still in the process of being invented, and is being invented by a process of forward repetition, like a composer picking at a piano trying to compose a sonata that is still to come. "Justice" does not have an ideal meaning but a history of composition that is still unfolding. In another sense, every response to that claim, every attempt to make justice happen, or rather to let it happen in us, falls short, not because it has not met an ideal but because justice refuses to allow itself to be invented, in virtue of its very meaning of the to-come, as the structure of hope and expectation, of the demand and exigency, of justice. Every attempt to get it right falls short not by falling short of an ideal but being a finite and provisional response to a call. But this is the finitude of a joyous repetition forward, forging a history of justice, without melancholy, without frustration, without castration.

Not only does Derrida have an account of our infinite responsibility to the *tout autre* (which is not to be confused with saying the *tout autre* is the good as such) but he is also saying that you cannot be responsible to anything other than the *tout autre*. For if it is not *tout autre*, or rather, if it is not respected in its character as *tout autre* (since everything is *tout autre*, but not everything is treated as such), it is rule governed, which is the definition of the evasion of responsibility.

If a distinction like descriptive and prescriptive, or constative and performative, is introduced, deconstruction will inevitably occupy the undecidable and porous

⁹⁶Paper Machine, 81.

⁹⁷Acts of Religion, 248.

difference between them. In *Rogues* Derrida is perfectly explicit about this. The “democracy to come,” he says, oscillates between two possibilities:

...it can, on the one hand, correspond to the neutral, constative analysis of a concept. (In this case I would simply be describing, observing, limiting myself to analyzing, as a responsible philosopher and logician of language...what the concept of democracy implies...This would amount to saying: if you want to know what you are saying when you use this inherited word *democracy*, you need to know that these things are inscribed or prescribed within it; for my part, I am simply describing this prescription in a neutral fashion. But on the other hand, no longer satisfied to remain at the level of a neutral, constative conceptual analysis, “democracy to come” can also inscribe a performative and attempt to win conviction by suggesting support or adherence, an “and yet it is necessary to believe it,” “I believe in it, I promise, I am in on the promise and the messianic waiting..., now you do the same”...The *to* of the “to come” wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come).⁹⁸

Descriptive neutrality would require the absolute reflective neutralization of consciousness and the possibility of presenting something in its simple presence, of which Derrida had been a relentless critic as he was a critic of the “knights of good conscience” of ethics and their army of prescriptives.⁹⁹

Derrida’s concern is whether our response to the coming of the other is inventive or uninventive, exceptional or routinized, generous or mundane, surprising or per-programmed, unexpected or predictable, excessive or merely normative. Accordingly, the failure of responsibility is not a matter of failing to meet an unconditionally good ideal and settling for the mixed goods of a pragmatic compromise. It is a failure to take a risk, but failure or short-fall it is. The space of decision in hyper-ethics is not the space between rule-and-violation, but the hyper-axiological space between risk and safety, between risking the impossible and staying safely behind the lines of the possible. The *im-possible* “is not a privative expression...It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed Derrida presses the case of the singularity of the other upon the whole range of our beliefs and practices—not just in ethics, but in literature, in institutional life, in politics, in architecture and in religion—in order to reinvent the future, to let the event happen.¹⁰¹ The result of this is that deconstruction turns on a wide range of

⁹⁸*Rogues*, 91

⁹⁹*Gift of Death*, 67, 85.

¹⁰⁰*Rogues*, 84.

¹⁰¹Derrida also dissociates himself from purely descriptive account of deconstruction in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 82-85. I do not believe in non-violence as a

strange hyper-structures or ultra-structures: hyper-politics (politics made possible/impossible by a politics beyond politics) (GD, 84-85; *Rogues*, 152), hyper-literature (letter-writing and letter-reading beyond the laws of the letter), hyper-institutionality (institutions going beyond the laws of the letters patent that authorize them), and of course hyper-religion, a religion *sous rature*, religion *sans* religion, all of which would be both inside and outside the corresponding empirical structures that bear these names. That is why Derrida does not trust anything that does not pass through the movements, the tropes and gestures of negative theology: as the mystical theologian moves through the *ousios* to the *hyperousios*, Derrida moves through ordinary rule-governed experience (of the possible) to a hyperbolic or aporetic experience (of the impossible)—in ethics, literature, politics, etc.

So if, as the ethics books say, the other is “bad,” that is no less a “singularity” than if the ethics books say the other is “good” because both, *n'import qui*, who or what, confront deconstruction with the same problem of inventing a course of action for the occasion, as opposed to following a rule or applying a norm. Indeed, if anything, as Derrida’s texts confirm again and again, because the point of deconstruction is to press and promote the cause of risking the impossible—“we should always invent the best dispositions, the least bad conditions, the most just legislation, so as to make it as effective as possible” (PM, 67)—its dominant tendency would be to press the cause of what the ethics books call “bad” others—to risk opening the borders of the nation as far as possible to “bad citizens, rogues” (*Rogues*, 63), to risk including people whom we would like to exclude, extending ourselves to these unknown, unrecognizable and menacing others, to put ourselves at risk *as far as possible* in forgiveness or hospitality, and to avoid the danger of doing what “any sensible person” would do in this situation. His whole point is to isolate the pure call that is sounding forth in words like hospitality or forgiveness so as to provide the maximum opening for the future, to take the risk of welcoming the unwelcome, forgiving the unforgiveable, believing the unbelievable, going where you cannot go, loving those who are not our friends and brothers, etc., as far as that is possible. A pure ethics, he says, would begin with the absolutely unlike, unknown, unrecognizable, whereas the like, the likeable, the nearby “neighbor” would be the very ruin of ethics (*Rogues*, 60). Commenting on the snake that arrives first at the well on a hot August day in D. H. Lawrence’s poem, he says that, according to the demands of Levinasian hospitality (“*après vous*”), the snake is “the first comer, and whether or not he wants to or might kill me, I owe him, I ought not to kill him, I ought to respect him,” which he adds is a “classic biblical scene, a classic Middle Eastern scene.”¹⁰²

descriptive, he says, but as an irreducible promise of non-violence, although violence is irreducible, which is why we have law (83). Deconstruction is politically neutral, on the one hand, but on the other, this neutrality enables a hyper-politicization (85), a chance and a risk (84).

¹⁰²*Beast and Sovereign*, 240-41. In any given decision, we negotiate a compromise between the conditions and the unconditional. “The decision occurs,” Derrida says, “when you want to reach an agreement between your desire for pure unconditional

Hägglund, on the other hand, thinks exactly the opposite of Derrida: "Only if one assumes that the other is primarily peaceful does it make sense to prescribe a nonviolent relation, since the command to 'respect' the alterity of other does not make any sense if the other wants to destroy me" (RA, 100). The only reason to prescribe non-violence to the other is if we can be sure the other will be peaceful and will be non-violent with us, which we cannot do without denying the unpredictability of the future. (Hägglund does not like snakes.) So evidently we should only take safe bets, and never put our money where we don't have good reasons to expect a return. Just so, I presume that Hägglund thinks that in the interests of fortifying ourselves against the coming of the bad guys, it "does not make sense" to take any risks, to forgive the unforgiveable, to hope against hope, to go where you cannot go, or any other motif of Derridean hyperbolics which, I agree, do not make a lot of sense, which is why Derrida thinks we are haunted by them.

§12. Another Way to Distinguish the Religious and the Secular

Because in deconstruction, things happen *by* the impossible, because everything begins in a poker game, a gamble on the future, deconstruction invokes a thematic of insecurity and madness not of common sense, of the madness of the moment of decision, the madness of the impossible, not the good sense of the possible. Deconstruction takes its stand with those who gamble on the future, not those who seek out the safety and security of the possible. There is, for example, a long list of examples of people who greet others who have come to destroy them with non-violence and who, by Hägglund's logic, do not make any sense. This structural hyperbolicity or madness goes to the heart of deconstruction (and it does have a heart!)¹⁰³ and it is intimately tied up, if not identical, with the religious para-structure that I am analyzing under Derrida's sobriquet "religion *sans* religion." There is a deeply "ultra-religious" madness in the heroes for peace and forgiveness and hospitality, who are also the heroes of an ultra-materialism, as there is nowhere else but matter to exercise such madness, a madness found both inside and outside religion in the empirical sense. They are "saints" of either a "secular" or religious sort, as Hélène Cixous has recently said, which echoes Edith Wyschogrod's classic *Saints and Postmodernism*, a long list of "martyrs" for peace and justice.¹⁰⁴ The "saint" is not an ecclesiastical or canonical category for me; it is a form of life, a category of immanence, rather the way Laruelle uses the categories of "Christ" and

hospitality and the necessity of discrimination." (*God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, 134). The decision occurs only if I desire the unconditional and bring that openness to bear upon the concrete conditions. Notice too that even when I deny the intruder entrance to my home, I am trying to keep the future open and I do not forfeit my responsibility to the coming of the other. Even in the United States, which worships weapons, if the intruder flees I cannot pursue him and shoot him down, and for Derrida even if the intruder is a murderer, I do not then embrace capital punishment.

¹⁰³See "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible," 23-24.

¹⁰⁴Cixous, "Promised Belief," *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion*, pp. 182-83; Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

"heretic." The saints of deconstructive responsibility, with or without religion, lead maximally risky lives, exposing themselves to the uncertainty of the impossible. Far from trying to keep themselves safe, religious people (with or without religion) are constantly doing things that seem mad, irresponsible and uncommonly dangerous to the rest of us who stay safely behind the lines in the secure surroundings of the possible, the literal, the safe, where there are neither saints nor monsters. I think of the recent best-seller *Three Cups of Tea* which recounts the mad career Greg Mortenson has made of building schools for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan amidst "impossible" circumstances.¹⁰⁵ Too often these people end up like the four nuns murdered by right-wing thugs in El Salvador or they contract the diseases of the people to whom they minister, translating "auto-immunity" from an academic trope into their blood. Pure "pragmatists" are neither religious nor deconstructive.

I think Derrida offers us a new way to repeat the distinction between secular and the religious without sacrificing the *laïcité* that he and I want resolutely to protect from intrusions of ecclesiastical power. The "secular" attitude in this context is represented by Hägglund's secular common sense and his own implicit normative ethics: you have no obligation to sacrifice yourself and every right to watch out for your own hide because the one who is coming may be a rogue. To press that consideration is to see to it that nothing happens. It is to completely suppress the madness of the moment of decision in deconstruction, which is the counterpart to religious madness, which shows up in Derrida's analysis of *Fear and Trembling*, where the moment of decision is the moment of madness. What "secular" means in this context is not Derrida's *laïcité*, which is never in question,¹⁰⁶ but the common sense of pragmatic self-interest which has no taste for madness. Deconstruction is a suspension of the good sense of normative ethics, ethical value judgments—of discriminating between "good" others and "bad" others—not subtractively, in order to drop back to pure descriptives, but excessively, going beyond normativity, in order to expose us to the madness of responsibility. Otherwise we will abide within the circle of the same which will last if not forever at least a lot longer than we want, as it is little comfort to know that God maketh solar death to consume both the just and the unjust. When Derrida runs up against the "prescriptive" he does not retreat to the descriptive; when he encounters theism he does not drop back to atheism; when he encounters idealism, he does not counter with materialism. In every case, the movement is hyperbolic, passing through the rule governed to the hyperbolic force of the singularity suppressed by these binaries, in just the way he recommended the "passage through the transcendental" in OG.

¹⁰⁵Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 2007). Mortenson thinks one does not fight terrorism by fighting, but by building schools for girls.

¹⁰⁶As Michael Naas point out, what he is calling Derrida's *laïcité* and what I called Derrida's religion without religion describe the same thing from different angles and meet in the middle. *Derrida From Now On*, p. 239 n5.

This irrecusable and infinite responsibility to the *tout autre* in Derrida is why he was so deeply opposed to capital punishment, which violates an infinite responsibility to *murderers*, who are pretty “bad” by the standards of ethics. I underline the Levinasian language of infinite responsibility in Derrida while also insisting that there is all the difference in the world between Derrida and Levinas, on politics, art, the animal, women, and hence between their very conceptions of the *tout autre*.¹⁰⁷ That is why he included Sister Helen Prejean’s *Dead Man Walking* on his syllabus on capital punishment, why he writes on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal (*Negotiations*, 125), and why he admires people like Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin and Nelson Mendela. These people are so-called secular saints of justice who do the most un-safe things, who put their lives on the line with a passion and madness that is well described as religious, where religion is a para-category of immanence, a form of life, where there is a religious madness in politics, art, literature, architecture, universities, animal rights, environmentalism, in whatever order the claims laid upon us the *tout autre* are responded to or heeded. The real danger for Derrida is to play it safe; ethics is the danger. In the religious relationship, as Kierkegaard says, ethics is the *temptation!* The easy thing for Abraham to do (like Derrida, I treat this story allegorically, not literally!) is to dismiss the voice that beckoned him into the abyss and to have recourse to ethics, which forbids taking the life of Isaac. The *easy* thing is to follow the rule, to stay within the guardrails, to color between the lines. Responding to the call, rising to the radical responsibility of the one occupying the Abrahamic position before the singularity of the other one—that is the difficulty of life, full of fear and trembling; that is deconstruction, *s'il y en a.*

Of course, deconstruction may lead to disaster, not just in fact but as a structural matter. It is at the same time true that once one takes the risk of going beyond the norm and normativity, one is exposed to the risk of the worst violence. One is always exposed to it anyway, as Hägglund points out, whether you take a risk or not, whether you choose to stay in bed and hide under the covers or not. But when you stray beyond the rules you voluntarily act upon this exposure and make yourself even more exposed, exposing your exposure instead of trying to protect it. Then deconstruction, instead of reinventing the law in the name of

¹⁰⁷In “Force of Law,” *Acts of Religion*, 250, Derrida says he is “tempted” to bring his idea of justice closer to Levinas on the grounds of what Levinas says about the “infinite” and “heteronomic” relation to the *autrui*, but he will resist—given these differences. Once he has criticized the notion of *tout autre* in Levinas, he can use the deconstructed notion; see P&T, 20-26. I think that Levinas is dealt with heavy handedly and with no recognition of the latent and maybe not so latent atheism and materialism implicit in Levinasian ethics, and with no recognition of the crucial role played for Derrida by Levinas on death—the disabling of the “I can,” the impossibility of possibility, and even the theme of “more life” and of “living on,” all originally and deeply Levinasian themes. Levinas rejects an afterlife, which he regards—the impossibility of dying—as a horror, which is why the thinker with whom Levinas should be associated is not a Christian Neo-Platonist like Marion but the atheist Blanchot. All this Hägglund seems to have completely missed. That is also why I think the binarity of theism/atheism is finally undone in deconstruction by the thinking of the event.

justice, results in tyranny in the name of justice and democracy, hatred in the name of love, vengeance in the name of forgiveness. We risk becoming sinners instead of saints, monsters instead of heroes, martyrs for the worst cause, since the worst are those who are beyond the pale and consider themselves above the law. Suspending the law is the common trait of both justice and the sovereign, and we cannot renounce every sovereignty if we are to be free. Derrida's Abraham does not know if he is a man of faith or a monster. A pure risk is nothing pure. A pure risk does not mean the risk is pure, like a pure good or a pure evil. Nothing is safe and deconstruction may make things worse. Undecidability is not neutrality but fear and trembling, the fluctuating specters of the promise/threat, the haunting condition of the im/possibility of a decision. Things really heat up in deconstruction when the situation is white hot with the impossible.

§13. Desire beyond Desire

The torso effect generated by Hägglund's experiment of recoding deconstruction as description shows up every time Hägglund warns us that Derrida is being "misleading" and Hägglund feels called upon to straighten Derrida out. This happens again in the contracted notion of desire Hägglund defends. One of Derrida's most lively intuitions, the one I love the most, is his insight into the driving force of *the impossible*. For Derrida, desire is a desire for the impossible. *By (par)* the impossible, everything happens—events, gifts, forgiveness, works of art, scientific inquiry, hospitality, even gardens in the parks. If St. Paul thinks we desire what is forbidden, and René Girard that we desire what others desire, and Lacan that we desire what we lack, Derrida proposes we desire the impossible. When revolutions happen—in art or politics or science—it is because the impossible happens, and when the impossible happens it is because the possible was all along haunted or solicited by the possibility of the impossible. *The impossible* happens when things are reimagined, reinvented, reconfigured, when what cannot possibly be portrayed is painted, when what cannot possibly be thought is theorized, when what cannot possibly happen, happens. We have an appetite for "another" world, another possibility that cannot possibly be possible, and Derrida's proposal is that other world is another *world* in the Heidegger sense, another opening of the world, a *tout autre* way of experiencing the promise of the world. This trope of "another world" does not mean, as it did in classical metaphysics and Augustinian theology, another world beyond space and time, but another unimaginable reinvention of space and time, something that happens every time a genuinely revolutionary movement occurs in art or science or politics. The other world of religion is a way we have of speaking of the religious power of the world.

The impossible is not a simply negative idea. It is not a logical but a phenomenological construction—it requires a phenomenological horizon of expectation, which is then shattered. It is not governed by a logic but by a grammatical, a phenomenologic, or a quasi-transcendental phenomenologic. The "possible" means the invention of the "same," another instance that confirms the horizon of expectation, that stays within its limit (*horizon*), while *the*

impossible signifies the arrival of the *tout autre*, which didn't seem possible. The impossible is the aporetic pressure brought upon the possible, the way the possible is "solicited" which literally means to be shaken. The impossible shakes and stretches the possible to the breaking point, as when the unsayable issues in sayings of remarkable inventiveness, which is why Derrida was interested in the remarkable twists and tropes of negative theology, and why Meister Eckhart, a master of this unsayability, was one the founders of the German language. (For the contemporary version of apophatic theology I suggest a close look at the utterly mind-numbing proposals of contemporary speculative cosmologists.) As Žižek says, and I think Derrida would agree, what religion and contemporary science have in common is that they both think the *prima facie* world is not the last word; they are both working on versions of another world. Deconstruction is the grammar of reinvention, the grammatology of the invention of the *tout autre*, of a *vita ventura*, the axiological faith that the future is worth more.

But when Hägglund speaks of desire he is content to describe the logic of the double bind, as if desire were an intellectual conundrum, and he erases the injunction, that is, the desire *for* the impossible and the call *by* the impossible to which desire responds. In Derrida, desire is a response, a second "yes" coming after the "yes" by which it is solicited. But Hägglund restricts himself to pointing out that whatever is desired is threatened from within, above all life, which is threatened by death. He confines desire to desire for what is perishable and under threat, which of course is very true but not the whole truth. Thus in a characteristic passage he cites Derrida's observation that we ought not to "accept" finitude or death, for that would amount to a denial of finitude and death, since what is important about finitude and death is that they make precious our finite life, so that to "accept" them is to drop our attachment to life. By the same token, if we could keep something forever, it would lose its desirability which is a function of its perishability (RA, 159). This is the main lever pulled against "*the* [my italics] religious conception of what is desirable" (RA, 9), as if there were one, as if there were but one, which is identified with a desire for immortality [a claim made in perfect innocence of the long history of the absence of such a desire in Judaism—Job's reward included fourteen thousand sheep and six thousand camels (Job 42:12)—and elsewhere, which must then not be "religion."] Although Hägglund has completely missed it, this is a point we share—that mortality makes things precious for Derrida. But Hägglund here is pursuing an agenda of his own, viz., the "radical" in radical atheism and his own version of the logic of desire. He wants to say that garden variety atheists feel some residual loss about the missing god, an empirical claim which is not at all obvious and unsupported by any reference to the history of atheism. But in his radical atheism, we are told, we do not even desire God, since God is pure death, which could only mean no more time, and we do not desire God, since God is pure good, not a good under threat. We cannot love God (RA, 111).

As happens so often in this book Hägglund is unaware of the theological debates that have taken place about the issues he runs into. The problem of whether we can "love" God, or in turn if God can "love" us—if God cannot risk suffering

from being rejected by us—are staples of theology—of process theology, panentheism, theopassionism, open theology and other alternate theological movements. The result is not an alternative to theology but alternate and radical theologies which use arguments like that to reimagine God. Hägglund cites Derrida's gloss on the impassivity of God in Aristotle in the *Politics of Friendship* as if it slams the door on theology without the least suspicion that an entire counter-tradition of the “friends of God” lay behind (or follows after) this text (RA, 112). Such alternate theologies are directed against a two-worlds Augustinian theology and an impulsive Hellenic God and they, not “radical atheism,” are precisely the theological effects that deconstruction would predict by bringing *differance* to bear upon the name of God. Unless of course one has mistaken deconstruction for a hammer instead of a way to read and reread. But for Hägglund, there is neither a God nor a desire for God, and that is the end of it—except when it is not, as when, as he himself points out, “the desire for God is a desire for the mortal, like every other desire” (RA, 120). This is said with a completely straight face, without the least suspicion that this is precisely why deconstruction does not close theology down but reopens it under new management.

But the point I want to pursue here is not the way Hägglund abridges theology, which is considerable, but the way he abridges what Derrida means by desire and the way it communicates with the desire for God. For “having never loved anything but the impossible” (Circ, 3), Derrida says that he shares with God “my desire for the impossible.”¹⁰⁸ *Le désir de Dieu* is both God’s desire for the impossible, and our desire for God, who is the possibility of the impossible, both a subjective and objective genitive. God is one of the impossibles, one of the things we desire, and as the most famous case of the possibility of the impossible God is a paradigmatic object of desire. Once again, let me be clear. I am not saying that the event, the possibility of the impossible in Derrida’s sense, is realized in the orthodox theology of omnipotence; I am saying that what orthodoxy calls omnipotence must be redescribed as and seen in terms of the event. For Derrida the impossible is precisely what we desire with a “desire beyond desire” (GT, 30), the only thing we can truly love and desire, just because it is impossible.¹⁰⁹ “And deconstruction is mad about and from such justice, mad about and from this desire for justice.”¹¹⁰ Even if democracy does not and never will exist, it is necessary to keep the “democratic desire” alive, “with all one’s heart” (*Rogues*, 74). Desiring the possible is the desire of presence and hardly

¹⁰⁸“The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” 29.

¹⁰⁹The “desire” of Madame de Maintenon, would be to “give what she cannot give;” “that is the whole of her desire. Desire and the desire to give would be the same thing, a sort of tautology. But maybe as well the tautological designation of the impossible.” GT, 4-5. “For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it...In this sense one can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure of the impossible...If one wants to recapture the proper element of thinking, naming, desiring, it is perhaps according to the measureless measure of this limit that it is possible, possible as relation *without* relation to the impossible.” (GT, 29)

¹¹⁰*Acts of Religion*, 254.

desiring at all, hardly worthy of the name desire. A real desire according to Derrida, the event of desire, the desire for the event, always turns on the impossible. Of course I agree and have pointed out that the impossible is not a regulative ideal or an ideal in any sense, and I also agree that while we want the Messiah to come, we also do not want the Messiah to show up, for that would ruin everything and put us on the spot. That we do not want the Messiah to show up does not refute our desire for the Messiah but constitutes it, or co-constitutes it, because we both do and do not desire the Messiah, just the way the accused does and does not want the jury to return a verdict, which is how the impossible works for Derrida.¹¹¹ That is what is fantastic or impossible about desire, what a fantastic and impossible desire is, if it is. For that very reason the aporia of desire is above all and only the desire of the impossible, which is the time of the impossible.¹¹²

According to Hägglund, the logic of the double bind means "a pure gift is neither thinkable nor desirable as such" (RA, 37). Maintaining this view causes Hägglund some difficulty since it is exactly the opposite of Derrida's, who says that "one can think, desire, and say only the impossible" (GT, 29). So Hägglund feels called upon to warn us that Derrida is "misleading" when he talks like that. Hägglund fears treating the "pure gift" as a regulative ideal we can never realize and actual gifts as contaminated compromises with our ideals (RA, 38). So he redefines "pure" to mean purely contaminated, contaminated even in its purity as a concept (RA, 36). But by pure Derrida does not mean contaminated; if he did that would have been an odd choice of words. The pure gift for him is the

¹¹¹Derrida describes the ongoing violence in the Middle East as a war over the "appropriation of Jerusalem," a "war of messianic eschatologies," "an unleashing of messianic eschatologies" (*Specters of Marx*, 58), the endless war that the religions of the Book conduct among themselves (GD, 69-70, 107). I agreed some time ago that the statement in *Prayers and Tears* (190), which was glossing those comments, that the messianic is to be associated with peace and the concrete messianisms with war was too quick. This is because the messianic includes also the absolute danger, which is what interests Hägglund (RA, 135). As I said in P&T, 23: "The dream of pure non-violence is too violent; it would be a breach of speech, history and phenomenality that would, moreover, put the rest of us at risk." But just as importantly, it is also because of the injustice of this observation to the concrete messianisms, which are filled with countless saintly people who labor in obscurity and at great personal risk in the name of peace. I set all this out in print some time ago. See Ronald Kuipers, "Dangerous Safety, Safe Danger: the Threat of Deconstruction to the Threat of Determinable Faith," in *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 20-33, and my response, my confession (126-28).

¹¹²Indeed, Derrida reads "à-Dieu" precisely as the desire for God: "le à...se tourne vers l'infini [or, we might say, alterity]....cette préposition, à, est préposée à l'infini....il ouvre à l'infini...la référence-à, la relation-à...vouée à l'excès d'un désir – le désir dit À-Dieu. Il réside en cela, Dieu, qui désire y résider: le désir dit À-Dieu [the desire says A-Dieu]." (*Adieu* 178-79 [Eng 103]), which corresponds to the desire implicit in à-venir and to the call of hospitality: "'come'...'enter,' enter without waiting...hurry up and come in, 'come inside,' 'come within me,' not only toward me but within me; occupy me, take place in me" (*Of Hospitality* 123/109). My thanks to William Robert for this reference.

gift, *s'il y en a*, the pure concept of the gift that does not exist while existing gifts are always contaminated by economies. The pure gift is the gift which does not exist because the conditions under which it could exist have been removed, hence it is the gift in its unconditional and irreal purity in order to isolate its pure call (as in the analysis of hospitality and forgiveness, above). What is true is that Derrida does not feel bad about all this. He is not complaining about contamination and saying that he wished he lived in world where we did not have to compromise. He is trying to explicate the force or movement of the gift, the impetus and motivation, the energy and dynamics of the gift as driven by the impossible, *par l'impossible*, the way the gift shatters the circle of exchange. Gifts are interruptions of economies that give economies a chance, leading up to ever more generous and open-ended economies and ever more open-ended and hospitable narcissisms. So the logic of the double bind belongs to the larger picture of the poetics or dynamics of the impossible.

In fact, then, what is misleading is not Derrida's text, which as usual is quite careful, but what Hägglund tries to do with it, which is to insist that, since Derrida is not making a distinction between a pure transcendental ideal and a contaminated empirical shortfall, there is no gap at all between the impossible gift that we desire and actual gifts. For Derrida the pure gift is "pure" because it does not exist, but it is not pure because it is a pure good or a pure ideal. It is a pure call, a pure promise, a pure perhaps, a pure injunction and hence a pure risk. Actual gifts, on the other hand, which are the only things that exist, are real responses and risks actually taken. The distance between the two is irreducible, as irreducible as the distance between existence and non-existence, the real and the irreal, a response and a call. The distance between "give" (*donne*) and our response is never closed (which would shut the future down) but only momentarily crossed; the two touch only in the madness of the moment, in the event which tears up the circle of time. The pure irreal gift is a measureless measure of the measurable real gifts given. For Derrida it is precisely that irreducible gap—the axiological space of the gap that separates the immeasurable from the measured, the impossible from the possible—that elicits desire and the gift in the first place. So the issue turns on determining exactly the nature of this gap, which Hägglund denies is there at all and Derrida carefully explicates in the so-called "misleading" text. Proceeding on the fiction that deconstruction takes place in a purely descriptive space, that Derrida is simply describing double binds, Hägglund wants to make sure that there would never be a gap or shortfall between the desire for the gift, if there is such a thing, and actual gifts given, which contradicts the central purpose of Derrida's analysis. But Hägglund's duty, as he sees it, is to protect Derrida from himself.

The reason Hägglund writes the text off as misleading is that in it Derrida invokes Kant's distinction between thinking (ideas of reason) and knowledge (categorical determination of the manifold of intuition). Derrida writes:

For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it...In this sense one can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure

of the impossible...If one wants to recapture the proper element of thinking, naming, desiring, it is perhaps according to the measureless measure of this limit that it is possible, possible as relation *without* relation to the impossible." (GT, 29)

The gift occurs in a *gap* between our "knowledge" of the possible and our "thought" or "desire" of the impossible:

This *gap* [my italics] between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science and the order of presence is also a gap between gift and economy" (GT, 29).

Crossing this gap has the appearance of a transcendental illusion in Kant's sense, where the cognitive faculty strays beyond the limits of experience lured by an illusory *ens realissimum*, and indeed, Derrida says, it is something like that. The aporia of the gift poses a sort of "quasi-transcendental illusion" (30), where it "is a matter—desire beyond desire—of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the gift (give [*"donne"*]), as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge)." (*Given Time*, 30). So Derrida is clear that the gift is not an *ideal* but an *injunction*, and we are caught in the middle of a *injunction*, of *demands* [my italics] coming at us from both directions—from the impossible and the possible, from a thinking, naming, desiring of the impossible, on the one hand, and from what we know and experience of the possible, of the circle of economy. (Allow me to note in passing the evolution of Derrida's use of "experience" from *GT* to *Psyché*. In *GT* he consigns "experience" to the order of presence in order to affirm the impossible beyond presence and experience. In *Psyché* he defines deconstruction as the "experience of the impossible" beyond presence. From the impossibility of experience to the experience of the impossible.)¹¹³ The response (not the resolution, dissolution or compromise) to the aporia is to take a risk, to enter its destructive circle, expose oneself to the danger, tear up the circle of time—by giving, by going where you *know* you cannot go, *facere veritatem*, doing the truth rather than knowing it, for the gift is not finally a matter of knowledge:

Know still what giving wants to say, know how to give, know what you want and want to say when you give, know what you intend to give, know how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself (*engage-toi*) even if commitment is the destruction of the gift by the gift, give economy its chance. (GT, 30)

There is no simple outside of the circle, no "transcendental illusion" in the strong sense. There is only the interruption of the circle and regeneration of new more ample circles. Not every circle is vicious (GT, 9); circles, like all narcissisms, admit of ever widening and more generous circulations (*Points*, 199). So "even if the gift were never anything but a simulacrum, one must still render an account of

¹¹³See "Force of Law," 244.

the possibility of this simulacrum and of the desire that impels toward this simulacrum."

Literature (the topic of the analysis) will always be a matter of moving in the space between the order of gift and the order of economy, which itself depends upon moving between the orders of automaticity and intentionality, between the anonymous auto-deconstructive processes of *differance*, the *peut-être* of the play of traces, and the living subject. The gift requires that the anonymous "donative eventiveness" and "intentional freedom" come together in a happy chance, "miraculously, graciously" (my italics, GT, 123). That is also the miraculous and gracious unity of life/death, of the structural death that puts the author/donor/subject out of play so that the gift (text) cannot be returned to the donor. This does not mean only the dead can give, he says, for giving belongs to the living, but living with a life in which death plays a part. The immortal cannot give because they are always around to take back and the dead are no longer around to give at all. So giving is a matter of life and death, of *sur-vie, survivre*, the space between living subjects who are always on the take and the lifeless anonymous automaticity of the play of traces which gives without having generous intentions (GT, 101-102). Literature is the work of mortals, as when Madame de Maintenon said, well beyond her knowledge of what she intended to say, completely unable to foresee what a wag like Derrida would make of her words, that she wished to give what she did not have. What she writes in her letters is inscribed forever in the play of differences and opens up unforeseeably beyond anything she could have intended.

On the one hand, the gift is the giving of the anonymous generative eventiveness of *differance* or *écriture*, an unintended piece of luck which has nothing to do with generous or narcissistic subjects or with what subjects intend. Once we allow subjects on the scene, subjects are like capitalists always looking for a return (GT, 101), the gift is annulled and the authors want their texts returned to them. So we have to forget authors with a forgetting deeper even than unconscious repression. On the other hand, the *point*, the stylus tip of the analysis of the gift is announced in the epigraph—which is about how to read a letter, for example, the letter from Madame de Maintenon about which Derrida seems to have made such a big deal (GT, 5). This is a book about reading letters, reading literature, reading anything (law, traditions, etc.), in short about *reading*. When a book is released, that releases the text from the grip of the donor/author and releases the reader from the debt of returning the text to the author. This releases the text (tradition, law, scientific formula, etc.) and its reader to the future, to the multiple readings *to come*, which gives the text a future, gives reading a future, which gives readers, which gives us all a future, which is why we so love literature. He is opening reading to the readings to come, to the coming of the other, almost as if he is dreaming of a literary Messiah, in love with a messianic reading, a literary fiction or simulacrum which means a structural openness to the event of another and impossible reading that will take us by surprise. What takes place in reading literature takes place generally for Derrida. Reading is really reading, is really worthy of the name reading, when it is eventive, which means when texts do what they cannot do, when they give up what they do not have to give, which is

impossible, *the* impossible, which is why we *love* literature, and why Cixous says that literature is her religion. That event, which exceeds the *order* of knowledge, science and presence, is he says what we desire with a desire beyond what we know and fore-know, a desire for the impossible which he condenses into the formula “desire beyond desire,” which is the only thing we can truly desire.

But in order to meet the demand of radical atheism we are permitted only a stripped down version of the gift according to which the gift we desire exceeds the order of meaning, presence, science, knowledge and experience because it is a gift of unpredictable time and is never fully present and knowable, and structurally inhabited by economy (RA, 37-39). As always, Hägglund is worried about turning the gift into a noumenal and ideal being outside time, a regulative ideal, lest God surreptitiously slip back into the picture. So we are duly warned that every gift is structurally inhabited by the possibility of poison. True but not the whole the truth, for it would never explain why anyone one would *desire* to *give*. Beyond being inescapably inscribed in the coming to be and passing away of unpredicatable time, beyond *knowing* the logic of the double bind in which the gift is caught, the gift belongs to the order of an *injunction*. The space or gap it inhabits, the space or gap between the impossible and the possible, is injunctive space, which means it is not the space between the ideal and the empirical but between the call and the response. The gift is not a contaminated ideal but a momentary response. The gift is a call that calls unconditionally, an undeconstructible promise that is inscribed in the “name” (without fulfillment) of the gift, an injunction to give to which we respond in making gifts. The reason Derrida himself says the desire for the gift is beyond the order of knowledge is not simply that we cannot foresee its future, although that is certainly a crucial and necessary part of it. The gift is not matter of knowledge just the way a confession is not a matter of knowledge but a matter of *making* a confession of what everyone around the confessor may already know very well. The reason is not, as in Kant’s first *Critique*, because the gift would require knowing what we cannot know, but rather, as in the second *Critique*, that the gift is an *injunction* and not a matter of *knowledge at all*. There is a gift, if there is one, only if and insofar as we *give* in response to the call to give (*donne*), that is, we make the mad *leap* from knowing the truth of the gift to *making or doing* the truth, per(ver)formatively, *facere veritatem*.

§14. *The Event Comes from the Come!*

There is yet another way to see what is abridged when deconstruction is recoded as a strictly descriptive work, and I will stop with this (I really could go on). We saw above that for Derrida the future is always worth more, where the future means not simply the unpredictable future-present, which belongs to empirical time, but the future which belongs to the charged and space of the “to come,” which comes from “come!,” which belongs to a valorized time of hope and expectation. This bears a closer look. Derrida does not speak of *le futur* nor even *l’avenir*, but *l’à venir*. *L’à venir* is not a space of time near or far off in the future; it is not the future present, not the descriptive-factual not-yet— and it is *not even an unpredictable not-yet* of a bad infinity, which I think is all it can amount to in the

purely descriptive account Hägglund is giving. *Là venir* is not a stretch of time at all; it is the very *force* or structure of the “to-come,” which is the structure or force, the weak force, of a call or claim made upon us and of a certain hope or prayer or promise *sous rature*.¹¹⁴ That is why I said above (§6) that deconstruction is not so much a philosophy of time as of the quasi-transcendental conditions under which time-effects are produced. Deconstruction originates in and belongs to the order of the *viens*, *oui*, *oui*, which opens up a scene of risk, of faith and expectation, of what we hope and pray will come, of what could come, what might come, with all the might of the “might be,” which means it might all turn out to be a disaster. The event (*événement*) comes from the “to come” (*à venir*) and the “to come” comes from the *viens*:

The event of the “Come” precedes and calls the event. It would be that starting from which there is (*il y a*) any event, the *venir*, the *à venir* of the *event* (*événement*) that cannot be thought under the given category of the event.¹¹⁵

The event takes place in a scene (time-space, *Zeitspielraum*) opened up by a call, by an invocation (*viens!*), and not the reverse. Deconstruction transpires not in a neutral descriptive space but in the future active participle, the *ventura*, what is to come, what promises to come, what we call upon to come, that which by coming calls upon us like a thief in the night. The call announces without simply saying “the desire, the order, the prayer, or the demand” that opens the vocative space of deconstruction.¹¹⁶ That is why I say deconstruction is structured like a prayer. Derrida has isolated the quasi-phenomenological structure of a certain prayer and loosened it from the God of strong theology and confessional religion. He analyzes a circum-fessional prayer of a heart more cut than Augustine and confessional theology can concede, which thereby reinscribes prayer in a desert khoral space that is outside religion even while religion cannot get outside it. That means the cut is inside religion too, striking it through, marking it with its *sans*, and these marks show up inside religious scrolls from which he tries to “extract” a certain philosophical “function.”

The “come” belongs not to an empirical descriptive future but to the time of the promise, what I called in *Prayers and Tears* a “messianic” time or what Derrida once called an (ironically) “apocalyptic” time. The “Come” has already come as a famous prayer, as the last word of the New Testament (*erkhou, veni, viens*). In saying “Come” he was already citing the New Testament, but without realizing it, citationality being a structural feature of every discourse, whether you realize

¹¹⁴See my “The Very Idea of *à venir*” in *Transcendence and Beyond*.

¹¹⁵Jacques Derrida, “An Apocalyptic Tone That Has Recently Been Adopted in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), p.164. Hereafter RTP. Cf. *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 45.

¹¹⁶*Negotiations*, 94, adding: “One must think the event from the ‘Come [*viens*]’ and not the reverse.”

you are citing or not (RTP, 162).¹¹⁷ "Come" calls up what we cannot simply call the "place" but "the advent of what in the apocalyptic in general no longer lets itself be contained simply by philosophy, metaphysics, onto-eschatology." (RTP, 165). Why not?

First of all, because "Come," opening the scene, could not become an object, a theme, a representation, or indeed a citation in the current sense, and subsumable under a category, even were it that of coming or event...Nevertheless, I am trying to extract from this, at the risk of essentially deforming it, the demonstrative function in terms of philosophical discourse. (RTP, 165)

"Come" is not an object you can describe. You can no more "arraign" (*arraisonner*) "Come" before an "onto-theo-eschatology" (strong theology) than before a "logic of the event" —for example, the logic of RA—"however new they may be and whatever politics they announce." "Come" is "neither a desire nor an order, neither a prayer nor a request," because all the standard-form "grammatical, linguistic, or semantic categories" that would determine "Come" are themselves always already traversed by "Come." The Come opens the scene in which these categories are inscribed. "This 'Come'—I do not know what *it is*...because the question 'what is' belongs to a space...opened up by 'come' come from the other" (RTP, 166). It does not fit into the grammatical category of a standard form prayer, imperative or a performative (let alone a constative or a descriptive!) because it opens the scene to which all such categories belong. Come is like a prayer—it is neither true nor false, but optative or jussive—but it is a kind of archi-prayer, a quasi-prayer before any determinate prayer, a dangerous prayer you may be sorry you ever breathed, for when you pray a deconstructive prayer you are asking for trouble. Only if we pass through the given category of prayer can we pray this prayer. Only if prayer leaves its tracks in the *viens* can we say this ultra-prayer. Still it is not an origin but derivable, or a divided origin, because Come comes from the other, to which it comes in response. Come comes second, after the first Come comes calling. Perhaps one might call this calling a "tonal" difference, a new tone, perhaps not (RTP, 166). It does not belong to a descriptive space but opens a vocative space of calling, re-calling, being called upon, calling in response, which belongs to the order of an injunction. But this quasi-prayerful tone is left hanging without a prayer, belonging to an "apocalypse without apocalypse, "*sans vision, sans vérité, sans révélation,*" as much a threat as a promise, a hope against hope, unveiling the

¹¹⁷In the middle of the account of citationality, Derrida says the *singularity* of the "come" is "absolute," that is, each usage (by John of Patmos, by Derrida, etc.) is unique, and "divisible," that is, repeatable (not absolutely singular) (RTP, 165). Hägglund cites this text and effectively undermines it with his gloss. Omitting the reference to "singularity," he says the come is "absolute because it is the condition of everything," but that is reduced to meaning that events can only be events by succeeding one another (RA, 46). So for Hägglund the text announces (quite apocalyptically!) the absolute being of space and time. Never a word about the prayer, the injunction, the call, the appeal, which is "beyond being" (RTP, 166). The whole thing is simply deposited in the accounts of radical atheism.

apocalypse as such, which for Derrida means the structure of the “chance,” the chance of a grace, the grace of a chance. The charged scene opened by the “Come” is not that of “good or evil” or of “truth”—it is “older” than good or evil or truth and “beyond Being”—but of *chance itself*, that is, of a promise that is entirely lacking in assurance and destination, traversed throughout by the strange (il)logic of the “*sans*.” Indeed, that very *destinerrance*—and here is the so-called “philosophy of religion” I love in Derrida—is even inscribed inside the scroll of this New Testament book, when it says “do not seal” these words, that is, do not close this book; the future is open, quasi-transcendentally. The future is always worth more.

III. Materialism, Metaphysics and Religion

§15. Religious Materialism

I want now to conclude this discussion, which is already too long, by moving to the more general issue that is at stake today, at a point when continental philosophy as we know it is under radical attack. RA is organized around the assumption of the opposition, I might even say the “mortal” opposition, between religion and materialism. The question of whether there might be a religious materialism is never raised, although it is fair to say that that is today one of the most common subjects of theological debate, which is only one of the many times this book brushes up against theological issues with which it is completely unfamiliar. In fact, in my view and that of a good many other religious theorists today, religion is not opposed to time and temporality, but religion is a material practice, a mode of temporalization and historicization, of miserable and glorious bodies, of children and land, which are all primarily Biblical categories that rarely come up in Greek philosophy except as matters to be subordinated and governed. One sign of this is Heidegger’s *Being and Time* which formalizes a mode of being-in-the-world that is at root, or structurally, Augustinian and Lutheran—or conversely, and this is the way Heidegger would prefer to put it, the way a certain Augustine or Luther is a “de-formalization” of the existentialia of *Being and Time*. Indeed, the very word *déconstruction* arises as a translation or gloss on Heidegger’s *Destruktion*, which is itself a translation of Luther’s *destructio* of scholastic theology back down to its Scriptural sources, which itself is traceable to the Septuagint *apolo* in Isaiah 29:14 (see I Cor. 1:19), and crucial to the analysis of time in *Being and Time*. Badiou’s use of St. Paul, whom he interprets in terms of the truth-making event, while dismissing the actual content this event (the resurrected Christ) provides a more recent example. This leads to the question of which came first, the religious form of life or the philosopheme, the ontology or the “unavowed” theology. It was considerations of just this sort that led Derrida to speak of a religion without the doctrines and dogmas of religion, and this lay behind his musings on the relative priority of the messianic and the concrete messianisms or the “unavowed theologemes” that lay behind philosophy (*Rogues*, 110)

The same line of consideration can be extended to religion and materialism. Religion is not the opposite of materialism but itself a mode of materialization, a

way of understanding the material practices of our lives. As I have already pointed out, one of the most interesting debates of the day is the exchange between Milbank and Žižek, about what Hegel called the “monstrosity” of Christ, meaning the monstrous compound of God and man. The contested issue is Milbank’s claim that “materialist materialism is simply not as materialist as theological materialism.” While I think that Milbank is too much of an Augustinian to win that debate, my point is to emphasize the terms in which the argument is cast.¹¹⁸ Both Milbank and Žižek, are pressing their competing interpretations of the peculiar advantage of Christianity in this regard, where a theology of Incarnation makes everything turns on the birth and death of God in the flesh (*caro*).

It is symptomatic of the shortcomings of RA that the contribution of Levinas to this debate is completely missed. But Levinas provides the Jewish version of the same theme under the name of the materialism of the other person, the cup of cold water offered to the wayfarer. *There is no other place to deploy ethics for Levinas except matter, no other meaning of ethics beyond materializing ethics or ethical materiality.* Ethics is all about good soup, cups of cold water and children, which is the Jewish meaning of all his talk about “transcendence.” In Levinas, the meaning of all those Neoplatonic tropes of transcendence, which throw off Badiou, Žižek, Vattimo and certainly throw off Hägglund, too, is materialism, which Levinas explains not in terms of the Monstrous Compound of Christianity but in terms of what he calls “deflection.” When we lift up our face to “the Good” (the Neoplatonic trope) or to the “face of God” (the Jewish trope), we are “deflected” to the neighbor and the stranger. There is no difference between serving the neighbor *au nom de Dieu* and serving the neighbor *tout court*, the name of “God” serving only as a possible semantic interference in what he calls “ethics.” By this he does not mean the sort of ethics one finds in an ethics book with its inventory of “prescriptives”—Levinas is one of the foremost critics of prescriptivism in continental philosophy—but a primal “metaphysical” relation between the same and the other, which means settling into the singularity of the demands that the *tout autre* makes of us. Levinas provides the antecedent of what Derrida calls hyper-ethics and Levinas mediates Derrida’s approach to Kierkegaard. The meaning of “religion” for Levinas translates *without remainder* into “ethics,” and “ethics” translates *without remainder* into time and matter. Levinas has produced a radical demythologization of religion. For Levinas the name of God has nothing left to do beyond ethics, and there is nothing left for Levinas to do except perhaps to mock with Nietzschean scorn the idea of the *Hinterwelt* and Kierkegaard’s desire for eternal happiness. Levinas has used up all the language theology makes available to speak of God in order to speak of the other person and nothing is left over. There is a materialism, a temporalism, and a death of God theology in Levinas in which religion is turned over entirely to time and matter.

¹¹⁸ See the debate between Žižek, and Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ* over Milbank’s claim that “materialist materialism is simply not as materialist as theological materialism.”

It would be an understatement to say that Levinas is dealt with badly in RA. Apart from completely misunderstanding Levinas's point about positive infinity (above), it is a central part of Hägglund's critique of Levinas to imagine that Levinas is defeated by the question of the structural undecidability of the other who knocks on my door and the place of self-interest (RA, 89)—Levinas, who spent most of World War II in a Nazi work camp. He never discusses Levinas's own analysis of this aporia, that my obligation to myself derives from my obligation to others, who need me, the way parents are obliged not to be reckless with their own health and well being because they have children who depend upon them. (That is why radical Catholic priests in Central America maintain that their celibacy enables their political radicalism on behalf of the destitute.) Levinas calls this the “thanks be to God” (*grace à Dieu*) that I am the other of the other. Ironically, that explains how Levinas could strike his famous but unfortunately unsympathetic attitude to the Palestinians, in which he answers Hägglund's demand to know what he would do if the other (the Palestinianins) threatened me (Israel)! Hägglund does his best to put a distance between Derrida and Levinas (RA, 94-100) in every respect, even on their common notion that there is always already more than two, and hence that our obligation to the singular other is always already and structurally divided *in advance* by the other others (the “third”) who are there from the start. This vintage bit of Levinasianism is later adapted by Derrida in *The Gift of Death* and glossed in *Adieu*. Hägglund objects that Levinas has an “ideal” of perfect non-violence and Derrida does not. But Levinas rejects *consensus* even as an ideal, because he thinks the alterity of the other is always already “absolving itself” from ethical or political systems, and hence some kind of violence is structurally built into systems of any sort—even as Derrida thinks that deconstruction provides for the “perfectibility” of systems of law, for the reduction of violence, so that laws can be better cut to fit the needs of justice. For Derrida, it is not a question of asymptotically approaching an ideal but of avoiding our responsibility less and less without the help of ideals. But Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida all believed that universals do structural violence to singularity.

The treatment of Levinas in RA demands careful critique. Suffice it to say here that Hägglund labors under the misunderstanding that Levinas is some kind of Neoplatonist who thinks that when you die you enjoy eternal happiness outside of time as a reward for good behavior here on earth, whereas that was Levinas's critique of Kierkegaard's Christian eudaemonism. Quoting the very passage in which Levinas is saying that the dream of “happy eternity” (Kierkegaard) needs to be demythologized into fecundity (children) and the endless time it takes to do good (future generations of children), which would represent either a new idea of time or a form of messianic vigilance, Hägglund mistakes Levinas reference to “the eternal” as Neoplatonism (RA, 133). When Levinas uses the word “absolute” he means that the other is always *absolving* itself (withdrawing) from the relation in which it is also entered (like the other in Husserl's Fifth Meditation, but given an ethical inflection). But he means it is withdrawing not from time but more deeply *into* time, *into* the past that was never present, into the future that will never be present. Hägglund mistakes this for a Neoplatonic absolute *outside* time, unlike both Laruelle and Brassier who to their credit single

out Levinas for having thereby identified the very *structure* of the “real,” of the trauma of our experience of the real, even if it is restricted to the reality of the other person.

For Levinas, transcendence is to be ruthlessly demythologized into temporal terms (the absolute past that was never present, the absolute future which is unforeseeable), quite like Derrida, and not as the transcendence *of* time and space, which is the mythic *Hinterwelt* under attack. Levinas thinks that when you die you rot, that you survive only by living-on in more time (he is one of Derrida’s sources on this point!), or in your children, and that life is postponing death. Hägglund notices this last point, but simply laments that Levinas should have been more consistent about it (RA, 91)! In fact, Levinas thinks that Plato’s Good is just one of the places in “philosophy” where the relation to the neighbor is mythically inscribed and foreshadowed. Levinas denies that there *is* any such Hyperbeing called the Good or God. The whole idea of “God” is a word of such semantic bombast that it gets in the way of ethics, which is why he says serving the neighbor *au nom de Dieu* reduces to serving the neighbor *tout court*, why he “loves the Torah more than God,” and why the relation to God gets structurally “deflected” to the neighbor in space and time, in all their palpable carnality, in their hunger and nakedness. The “Most High” for him is a trope for ethical obligation to the neighbor or stranger, whose carnal vulnerability or violability is the condition of possibility of responsibility.

What is truly interesting about Levinas to me is the way in which he presides over a distinctively Jewish opening for a materialist “death of God” theology without requiring Hegel’s deeply Christian and Trinitarian metaphysics. In terms of my own weak theology, Levinas is doing an analysis of the event harbored in the name of God, and he concludes that that event is the ethics of the neighbor or the stranger. My own criticism of Levinas is that this is too narrow an analysis, that it represents an ethicism, an ethico-centrism and even a kind of ethical foundationalism. As Hent de Vries has shown, the name of God is a paradigmatic name, the most famous name we have of the *tout autre*. But since on Derridean grounds, *tout autre est tout autre*, not just the human neighbor or stranger, there are endlessly unforeseeable presentations of the *tout autre* and hence endless versions of the events harbored there—environmental, cosmic, aesthetic, scientific, social, political, etc.

I would be the first to agree that there is a danger in associating Derrida too closely with Levinas. There is no ontological claustrophobia, no thematics of being “trapped in being” in Derrida, no need to “escape,” no “nausea” before being. Derrida has nothing to do with Levinas’s grim ultra-Kantianism, the ultra-ethicism in which there is only ethics and everything else is a vanity of vanities, with the terrible neglect of nature and the animal; with the devaluation of art; with the embarrassing patriarchy; with the embarrassing politics. Of all of this Derrida has been discreetly, respectfully, but expressly critical. But on this precise point of transcendence as time itself, on the materiality of the ethical, and *survie*, on life as deferring death, Derrida is so close to Levinas that he can say he finds nothing to disagree with in Levinas, who is one of his deepest sources! On

this precise point, that there is no *Hinterwelt* beyond the temporal world, that the “beyond” that we could agree to call “transcendence” is the work of time, that it *is* time, Derrida has struck a position that, for all its other differences, is close to Levinas, is repeating Levinas differently.

My point is that “religion” is misunderstood by both its critics and orthodox theologians like Milbank when it is reduced to Christian Neoplatonism and its inescapable metaphysical dualism, because religion is through and through a mode of being in the world, of temporalization and materialization. Religion is not a body of beliefs and texts that give us privileged information on the origin and destiny of the cosmos or that provide us with a window through which we catch glimpse of another world beyond space and time. Its “meaning” is to be a “how,” a way to be, a mode of being-in-the-world. Its meaning is performative, per-ver-formative, a way of making the truth happen, *facere veritatem*, and where else can that happen except in matter, space and time?

§16. A Mortal and Non-Sovereign God

The issue of materialism can be focused on the interesting fact that both Hägglund (RA, 142-43) and I cite with approval the text in *Rogues* where Derrida inscribes the name of God within time and mortality and speaks of God’s vulnerable nonsovereignty:

For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable nonsovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a God who deconstructs himself in his ipseity.”¹¹⁹

Hägglund calls this radical atheism whereas for me it is the touchstone piece of what I call radical theology, a theology of a non-sovereign God. The text is certainly atheistic enough, as there is—for me and Hägglund, for Derrida and Levinas—no eternal and omnipotent being out there beyond space and time called God. Derrida is very atheistic about the God of ontotheology, hyperousiology and metaphysical theology. But he is not atheistic in the way Hägglund sets out, *viz.*, that he has no interest in the “name of God” or the “desire for God.” Derrida is not trying to hammer this name senseless but to save it; he is not trying to cut this desire off but to repeat it, to repeat the name of God as the name of an *event*, *viz.*, of the possibility of the impossible, which is the event harbored in the name of God. Thus repeated, the desire for God is not, as in classical (strong, onto-) theology, a desire for immunity and immortality but a desire for the “grace” of the “moment,” for an event which I locate in the “might” of God, not the might of omnipotence, but the might of might-be. The name of God is not that of a secure and necessary being but rather of the dangerous “perhaps,” and as such represents an attempt to economically

¹¹⁹*Rogues*, 157.

condense into a single word the desire or the passion for the experience of the impossible, which is the least bad definition of deconstruction. In classical metaphysics, *deus est ipsum suum esse* but in deconstruction the *être* of God lies in *peut-être*, which is the point on which Richard Kearney and I have reached common grounds, he starting from Ricoeur and I from Derrida.

But how then can there be such dramatically different interpretations of the same text? Because in RA the name of God—in contradiction of everything that Derrida says about names and about God—is abridged, truncated, denied its status as a trace. Hägglund points out that for Derrida “God” is an effect of the trace (WD, 108), but then it is thereafter denied the iterability which is thus its birthright, denied its reinscribability, recontextualizability, and held fast as a rigid designator. RA is an attempt to shut down a field of effects, a regional play of the trace, to close off a discourse instead reinventing it, which is what a deconstruction is, if it is. So instead of seeing that the reinscription of the name of God in mortal time opens up religion and theology in a new voice, RA thinks it has thereby suppressed the voice of “religion” or “theology,” in the singular. Instead of seeing in the new materialism an opportunity for a new materialist theology, he is content to say materialism excludes theology even more radically than we think. Instead of treating the name of God deconstructively, the name of God is treated essentialistically and dogmatically. Instead of taking up the deconstruction of religion and dogmatic theology underway in Derrida’s work, RA restricts itself to hammering the ontotheology that is under deconstruction. Hägglund speaks of “religion” the way the Vatican speaks of “materialism,” with the same dogmatic dismissiveness. Instead of taking up the possibility of repeating religion and theology, *sous rature*, instead of saying, religion, “if there is any such thing,” and theology, “if there is any such thing,” instead of putting religion and theology in scare quotes, instead of speaking of religion *sans* religion, RA speaks consistently, relentlessly, uncompromisingly of an ahistorical, unrepeatable, self-identical essence called “religion” and “theology,” in the singular, *la religion, la théologie*, and this without almost no consultation at all of the actual history of theology, not to mention of atheism.

For example, instead of following Derrida’s careful and meticulous analyses of all of the multiple voices of “negative theology,” instead of listening to the *other* voices and tropes of negative theology singled out by Derrida, over and beyond its hyper-ousiological voice, instead listening to the negative theology that takes place in the tropic not of the *agathon* but of the *khora*, negative theology is reduced in RA, against the point and purpose of everything that Derrida says about negative theology, to univocity, to the single voice of hyperousiology, which is the dogmatic form of negative theology which Derrida wants to open up beyond itself to that point where he can say that he does not trust any discourse that does not pass through negative theology (DNT, 309-10). Instead of paying attention to the profoundly subversive character of Meister Eckhart’s sermons, which were so deeply disturbing to the Inquisition that they led to Eckhart’s condemnation in 1327, Meister Eckhart is made to look like the very soul of orthodox dogmatic theology. On this point the Inquisition was prophetic: it rightly feared that his words would produce heresy and unorthodoxy and

might undermine the sovereign power of the Church. Unlike the Inquisition Hägglund has a tin ear for the “perhaps” which made Meister Eckhart, which made the *texts* of Meister Eckhart, so dangerous to the Church. The Inquisition was smart enough to know all about the ear of the other, about how these texts might be heard, about the might of their “might (be).” When Eckhart assured the Inquisition that he was personally very loyal to the Church, the Inquisition was not moved. It said that it was his *texts* that were so dangerous, the *iterability* of the trace, for although he was very much alive at the time these texts were already marked by his death and would be around long after he would be around to personally monitor their interpretation and could cause a lot of trouble down the road.

Instead of taking note of the fertile work and growing literature of rereading Paul and Augustine and the Scriptures under the impulse of the auto-deconstructibility of “religion” RA is content to reduce the deconstruction of religion to hammering away at the onto-theological voice of two-worlds Augustinianism, contrary to everything that Derrida says about the multiplicity of voices, including the irreducible plurality of voices in Augustine’s *Confessiones*. When it comes to “religion” and “theology,” RA is the monologue of logic with itself, suppressing every trace of neologicity, iterability and multivocality that constantly interrupt Derrida’s texts—whose texts are often unidentifiable polylogues—erasing every trace of the traces of “religion” and “theology.” Religion and theology are traces of an event which they announce, which they call up and recall, to which they are uttered as a response, but all that is erased, exorcised, expunged, excommunicated, in order to produce a deconstruction decontaminated of religion and theology. In RA, when it comes to religion and theology, deconstruction is decontamination—contrary to everything that auto-immunity is supposed to do.

If the very idea of deconstruction is bound up with structural iterability, then all that “radical” atheism could mean in deconstruction is that “atheism” is radically, structurally iterable, recontextualizable, reinventable. By the very terms of deconstructive radicality, atheism too is *plus d’un*. There is no one atheism; there is always more than one, including the atheism that hails a coming god, a god to come, the event that is promised in the name of God, and that even shows some interest in the weak and battered body of the god dying on the cross. Hägglund addresses this question in his first footnote where he observes that Derrida has reservations about the classical sense of radical because it suggests a unitary root. So Hägglund says his books establishes that “*the* root of *the* religious conception of desire” [my italics] is divided and uprooted (207n1). But it is not only the root that is divided but the fruit and that any such “atheism” that issues from deconstruction’s uprooted roots is also divided and uprooted—that is, iterable. Radical atheism on Derrida’s terms means a radically repeatable, radically iterable atheism, theism structurally exposed to atheism, atheism structurally exposed to theism, both of them flowers growing in a desert. Radical atheism too has a quasi-transcendental and “khoral” status. Both “radical atheism” and the “desire for God” are inscribed in the desert of *khora*, in the very spacing of deconstruction, which underlies and undermines both,

constituting and deconstituting both as relatively stable and unstable unities of meaning (ON, 36, 80).

As opposed to the radical atheism of Häggglund, the only form atheism could take for Derrida would be *sous rature*, atheism without atheism, an impossible atheism that trembles with anxiety over what is being closed off under the force of this violent negation—which is why Mark Taylor proposed a more cautious “a/theology,” an atheism that remains exposed to a God to come, like the coming God of Heidegger of whom no one has suspected the slightest hint of democracy (*Rogues*, 110), an atheism held in insecurity, as insecure about itself as the believer is about faith (GD, 79), “rightly passing for” atheism (Circ., 155). In RA, we are reassured, even dogmatically assured, *ex cathedra*, that we all are safe, or at least we can be made safe and have nothing to fear—from God or religion. We can be assured deconstruction has extinguished the name of God. It’s not even under erasure; it is dissipated without a trace. Faced with such an imperial religion of anti-religion, with such a violent excommunication, Derrida would look for all the possible religions, radical and otherwise, that have been thereby excluded. Faced with as rigid an atheism as this, Derrida would find a multitude, a corporation, a chorus of voices of faith and of other gods, of innumerable and uncountable theisms and atheisms to come. “Atheism” is—just like psychoanalysis, just like “religion” or “animals,” just like *everything*—“heterogeneous, conflictual, historical, i.e., perfectible and open to a still undecided future” (*Sovereign and Beast*, 101). Derrida always brushes against the grain, which is how deconstruction proceeds, just in order to keep the future open. Auto-immunity makes every formulation fragile, unstable, trembling with undecidability, exposed to everything from which it would protect itself. In deconstruction, both “theism” and “atheism” are provisional unities of meaning that produce limited pragmatic and perspectival effects in this or that context, while all the linkings, alternate perspectives, recontextualizations and reinscriptions run on and on, well beyond the self-assured intentions of theistic and atheistic authors intent on excommunicating each other without anxiety. That explains the dogmatic and imprudent dismissal of the vast amounts of careful work on Derrida and on the ethical and religious texture of Derrida’s texts, which Derrida himself treasured. Indeed what could “atheism” ever mean for Derrida, what could the death of God ever mean for Derrida, except, as he says in response to Malabou, “[t]he very condition for something to come, and even that of another God, of an absolute other God.”¹²⁰

In short, Häggglund reads this text from *Rogues* to say that we should have no time for God while the text, which inscribes God in time and mortality, means exactly the opposite, that we should make time for God, reimagine God in terms of time and mortality. Häggglund refuses to take the risk of the *name* of “God,” which is denied its chance, its status in the play of the trace, reduced to an eternal rock of ages, a univocal timeless essence, cutting off the future of theology in a way that contradicts the renewal that Derrida hoped deconstruction could effect

¹²⁰Derrida, “Preface,” to Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), xlvii.

throughout the humanities, including theology,¹²¹ in the departments of theology and religion in a humanities to come (WA, 230). But it is the time of the impossible that ultimately makes time for God/“God,” that gives God a chance. Deconstruction provides a way to clear our heads of the eternal omnipotent being or hyperbeing of classical metaphysical theology who squares circles in order to make time for God, a project that has been underway in theology at least since Hegel and Schelling (a tradition at the head of which stands Meister Eckhart, which confirmed the Inquisition’s prophetic powers). In deconstruction, it is not only we who want more time, who want to survive, but also God. The misspelling in *diffrance* does not spell the end of God but creates the textual space and time of a radical khoral theology which rethinks, reimagines and reinvents God, a coming God, a God to come, whom I am trying to think under the name of the *peut-être* and a weak theology.

Deconstruction occupies the irreducible distance or gap (*écart*) between the undeconstructible and the deconstructible, or between the impossible and the present, which is the very spacing, the khoral gap, which opens the real to the ultra-real, the here to the beyond, the material to a materiality yet unheard of, the present to the to-come, and in so doing intensifies and impasses the real, the here, the material, the present with all its urgency. What deconstruction and religion have in common is that, by inhabiting the distance between the possible and the impossible, they share a common compact with the impossible, a common passion for the impossible. Where (a certain) religion means believing in “another world,” Derrida believes in what he calls the promise, not of God to man or of man to God but the “promise of the world.”¹²² That explains why Derrida’s interest in the name of God is central to his work, stretching back to the early conversations long ago between two Algerian atheists in the 1960s on the first name of God. By plotting the movements of the event deconstruction plots the hyperbolic movements of a certain religion without religion, an immanent religion deprived of after-worldly succor, thereby disclosing the experiential character of the structure of the religious (*s’il y en a*) no less than the religious character of the structure of experience.

§17. No More Metaphysics, Please

By now I trust it is obvious that I have no brief to make on behalf of dualism, the classical Platonic-Christian metaphysics of one world in space and time and

¹²¹Derrida says he “felt that deconstruction, from the very beginning, could be a good strategic lever for theologians” and his hope is that “thinking, writing and religion have a new relationship, where religion would not be enclosed in a dogmatic field of revelation, but open up to radical deconstructive questioning, open, without being threatened, to the naked minimal experience of faith.” “The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” 24, 33. That is my goal in my own interactions with and within the Christian tradition. For a splendid tracking of the play of the trace of the name of “God” in Derrida, see Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T & T Clark International, 2009).

¹²²“Avances,” in Serge Margel, *Le Tombeau du Dieu Artisan* (Paris: Edition de Kinuit, 1995), 38-39.

another transcending it. But in view of everything I have been saying about the provisionality and instability of our ideas, it is important to be clear about just how much leverage deconstruction has against such an idea. I do not wish to be mistaken (again) about this. I completely agree with Hägglund that for Derrida life is inscribed in time and mortality, and that mortality, far from undermining life is the condition under which life is held dear. Like Mark Taylor I am dissatisfied with satisfaction and satisfied only by dissatisfaction. That is why my Augustinian critics complain that I cite only the first half of the famous *cor inquietum* saying—the reason is, I have no interest in Augustine's *donec requiescat* which really is quite literally *requiescat in pacem*. I too think “life without *différance* is another name for death” and that the classical metaphysical idea of God is meant to hold death in check and to erase the trace (OG, 71). So far am I from disagreeing with all this that it has been the subject of my lectures in the last few years and of the book that I am currently preparing for publication on our vulnerable mortal bodies.¹²³

Still, one might ask, could there *really be* an “immortal life,” one not inscribed in time and mortality, which is what the Greeks (and mainstream metaphysics thereafter) meant by the “divine” (*theios*)? Asking that of Derrida would be like asking a physicist whether the universe studied by physics might *also* have been created by God. The framework of physics (space-time) simply does not accommodate the question. There is nothing about physics that allows it to establish anything beyond physics, one way or the other. The physicist has to take a pass. The same is true of deconstruction, or any philosophy of experience: it has to take a pass. There is nothing about a philosophy of experience that allows it to establish that there is nothing *beyond* experience. There is nothing about saying, against Kant, that space and time are real that allows us to establish that nothing *else* is real, nothing outside space and time. As Derrida said to Kevin Hart when asked about “supernatural” grace (as opposed to the grace of the event), “deconstruction, as such, has nothing to say or to do...deconstruction has no lever on this. And it should not have any lever.”¹²⁴ Deconstruction is entirely in the business of giving an account of *experience*, of time and the trace. But, Derrida hastened to add, once such a thing “is embodied in a discourse...then deconstruction, a deconstruction, may have something to say...but without questioning or suspecting” such a thing. Deconstruction can speak about *texts* in which things like that *are said*, which is why “negative theology” is methodologically prudent (the less said the more prudent), and if it

¹²³ My Syracuse lecture courses are available as MP3 files at "Homebrewed Christianity" website: <http://trippfuller.com/Caputo/>. One gets an idea of how systematically I am misread in RA from a note directed against me (225n39) in which Hägglund describes quite felicitously what is in fact my present project. I am right now working on “reading the desire for resurrection against itself,” on finding another way to read the “glorious body” celebrated in the Scriptures (which I think is the paradigmatic “saturated phenomenon” in Jean-Luc Marion), in terms of our vulnerable mortal bodies. I could even use Hägglund’s complaint on the back cover of my book. His “corrections” of my views often turn out to be useful contributions to my own weak theology.

¹²⁴ “*Epoche and Faith*,” 39.

is consistent enough to remain absolutely silent, which is really quite difficult, it is methodologically invulnerable (which does not mean it is "right"). About something completely outside space, time and the trace, deconstruction has nothing to say, whether it be to the physicists or the metaphysicians, until they start talking.

The one thing deconstruction can say is that every time someone talks like that, or makes claims like that, what is said will inevitably be an effect of the trace and hence be subject to the constraints thereof. But that does not settle anything about whether there *is* such eternal being. On this point the status of *differance* is quite like what Heidegger said of temporality, which Heidegger claimed is the transcendental root of the understanding of Being (which is Heidegger's way of saying something that parallels saying it is the effect of the play of traces). Radical temporality does not mean that there is nothing outside of time, but that any talk of such a thing would have a temporal "meaning," that is, it would be projected upon the horizon of time, and necessarily be framed in temporal terms. The concept of "eternity" is constituted negatively, by dividing the "temporal" from the "non-temporal," so that the "eternal" belongs within and depends upon a temporal horizon of understanding being. Only temporal beings could ever construct an idea of "eternity" (as non-temporal). When we say that "eternal" being is pure "presence" (*Anwesenheit*) we invoke a temporal understanding of eternity (derived from the privilege of the *Gegenwart*). Eternity is a *nunc stans*. So, too, being-unto-death says nothing one way or the other about any so-called "life after death." Indeed, believing in immortality presupposes being-unto-death; it constitutes a particular existentiell stand with respect to the existential structure of being-unto-death. In Husserl, who also thought that temporality was the transcendental root of consciousness, even the "eternity" of ideal objects has a temporal meaning. The truths of geometry are "eternal" not because they are simply outside of space and time but because they are "omni-temporal," the same every time they are thought. Interestingly, the Scriptures themselves agree about this. God is "everlasting," "lives forever," "always was and will be" in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, where the idea of eternity is unknown.¹²⁵ God is not "eternal" in the Platonic sense which was unknown for and to centuries of Judaism. So too "life after death" in the Scriptures means "resurrection of the body," resuming carnal and temporal life here on earth, and not the "immortality of the soul" in another world.¹²⁶ By the same token, to call God "almighty" in the Scriptures means that God is the Lord of History and the mightiest of all, but not with the *creatio ex nihilo* omnipotence that is the issue of a second century CE theological debate. That is why speculative theologians and Scripture scholars fight like Kilkenny cats.

¹²⁵See Oscar Culmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1962, 3rd ed.) and the Calvinist philosophical theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in S. M. Cahn and D. Shatz *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 77-98. This goes all the way back to Duns Scotus.

¹²⁶See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

In deconstruction, which is an account of experience, of everything that is constituted in *différance*, all such talk of the “supernatural” is an effect of the play of traces, but that does not settle anything. Hägglund seems to think it is a death blow to the name of God to point out that it is an effect of the play of traces. But so is the “real,” so is everything, so is the kitchen table, which does not mean we are obliged by *différance* from here on in to eat on the floor. By the very terms of *différance*, every constituted unity of meaning is a provisional and relatively stable effect of the play of traces; that is how it acquires a place in the space of experience. All we are doing by insisting that “God” (whom no one can see and live) is another effect of the trace is to revisit once again one of the oldest and most subtle debates in metaphysical theology: how are we able to signify something outside space and time when all the modes of signification available to us are based upon space and time or inscribed in the play of traces? Should we hold that the things we say of God (conceived in this very timeless Hellenic way) are said only by “analogy,” as Thomas Aquinas argued? For Aquinas, theological discourse is a matter of keeping straight the difference between the *modus significandi* (the way we signify things, which is always and inescapably framed by space and time) and the *ens significatum* (the thing signified, which may or may not be so framed). Or should we maintain, as does the negative theologian, that we are better served to say of God that we are not to say a thing, which involves learning how not to speak of God, as Derrida so memorably put it. If you have your heart set on something that “transcends space and time,” the only vocabulary you have available is inscribed in the shifting sands of space and time, which is the conundrum that occasions the brilliant innovations of a linguistic genius like Meister Eckhart. This might lead Hägglund to object that such talk would be “meaningless.” But is that what deconstruction has come down to? Logical positivism?

Either way, nothing is settled by simply *defining* life on page 1, as Hägglund does, as “essentially” mortal (RA, 1, 48)—nothing more, that is, than to stipulate how one is going to use the word in the rest of the book. By the same token, to say that nothing “happens” in eternity (RA, 32, 45, 122) is analytically true, true by stipulation, trivially true, since to happen is defined as to happen in time. Similarly, to say that the desire to “survive” would be ruined by “immortality,” or that someone who wants to “survive” does not desire “immortality,” is simply true by the definition of the terms. It does not settle anything to *define* desire as the desire of the imperishable, as does Augustine, or to *define* it as the desire of the perishable, as does Hägglund, and then to stamp one’s feet and insist that “Being” heed one’s definitions. Within the framework of immortality, mere survival is of only passing worth; within the framework of survival, immortality is pure death. Those who desire immortality cannot imagine that anyone would be content with survival, and those who desire surviving cannot imagine that immortality (death) would satisfy anyone. Each side thinks that the very terms in which desire is framed by the other destroy what desire “means.” But that establishes nothing more than a definition of terms which successfully immunizes each side against the other.

There are no non-circular arguments against the eternal in RA. For example, to say that “God is death” does not settle anything other than to define the borders of the binary dispute between Augustinian eschatology and radical atheists. Both sides are agreed about this assertion but they interpret it differently. No one can see God and live, say the Augustinians, but they would rather see God and not live (a merely mortal life) because they think seeing God represents a higher life. Radical atheists would rather live a mortal life and not die any sooner than need be because they think seeing God in another life is an illusion and no life at all. Both sides take the other side to be nihilists, that is, denying what is real.

As any classical theologian would point out, none of what Hägglund argues can in any way gainsay that in eternity there might not be a different field of desire in which there is a perfection beyond happening and event, a timeless *actus* beyond any temporal *actio*, as Aquinas said, a justice beyond adjudicating conflicting interests, a *libertas* beyond *liberum judicium*, and a life beyond a biodegradable biological basis. Who is to say what the limits are on what the word “life” means and what it is going to come to mean, what may come in the life to come (*vita ventura*)? “Post-humanists” today, in fact, are hard at work pushing against these boundaries, trying to create a form of life that would result in neither a *zoon*, an animal, nor *bios*, biologically based life; they desire a post-zoological and post-biological life. In that sense, classical metaphysical theology is post-humanist. Aristotle, who was not exactly a member of the Christian right, certainly thought that the “separate substances” had “life” (*zoe*), which meant a pure intelligence. Hägglund’s concept of space and time is closely hewn to intuitive experience but those intuitions have undergone quite a shock in contemporary physics. Aquinas invites us to consider that this intuitive experience can be displaced on another plane of being, not entirely unlike the way that Einstein’s special and general theory of relativity displaced our ordinary Newtonian intuitions about space, time and gravity, and quantum theory has thrown the logic of everyday experience into confusion. Everyday intuitions about space and time have proven to be thoroughly contingent. Aquinas introduced the word *analogia* to accommodate this contingency or play of differences. Aquinas did not think that there is no “inherent value to the temporal” (RA, 32), as in Hägglund’s innocently monolithic rendering of “religion” or “theology,” which is completely immunized from contact with the actual history of theology. Aquinas thought the perfection of the temporal was inherent (*proprie*) but created and as such a participation in and pointer to the still higher perfection of the eternal. If we could get John Milbank to read this book, he would give Hägglund an earful about Aquinas on “participation,” according to which the perfection of the temporal and carnal is real—which is what a theology of Incarnation requires—but supported by the eternal, which is not more real but more perfect, which is the basis of what Milbank’s “theological materialism,” meaning that the robust reality and perfection of matter is all more perfect for participating in God’s perfection, reflecting his Anglo-Catholic sacramentalism.

To say that the name of God is an effect of *différance* does not settle anything either. That consideration does not imply that God does not exist but only that the ontological argument does not hold up. That does not cast Derrida with atheism but with Thomas Aquinas. Like Derrida, Aquinas held the name of God to be a finite human construction, forged from the materials given in sensible experience and analyzed by the intellect. That is why, in a famous article, Paul Tillich traces the actual history of atheism—something never actually consulted in RA—back to Thomas Aquinas!¹²⁷ What Derrida called an effect of the play of traces has an epistemic status parallel to what Aquinas calls a concept abstracted from experience. Unlike Anselm and Descartes, Aquinas was an Aristotelian who denied that we have a positively infinite idea of God. On this point, our idea of God is like our idea of a mountain or the kitchen table, built up from materials gathered in space and time and subjected to intellectual analysis. He held that “God” is a concept of a positive infinity (*ens significatum*), that is, it is intentionally directed at a being of actual and not potential (mathematical) infinity, but that our idea is not positively or actually infinite (*modus significandi*). That is why Aquinas rejected the ontological proof which, he held, would be valid only if you were God (and then you would not require proof) or at least had an intellectual intuition of the essence of God’s being, which Aquinas, ever a good Aristotelian on this point, steadfastly ruled out.¹²⁸ Aquinas denied that philosophy and theology can fly. Philosophy has to proceed on foot with the idea of God, starting out with sensible experience (“in the world, some things are in motion”) and mounting a causal argument back to (*a posteriori*) a supersensible cause (“and this everyone calls God”), a very thin idea of God made more robust by supernatural faith, which puts wind in the sails of theology. Derrida of course embraced no such faith and as a good post-phenomenologist had sworn off all such metaphysical “ventures,” which have nothing to do with his “event.”

Aquinas thought you could construct an *a posteriori* causal argument for the existence of a being that everyone calls God but that there was no valid *a priori* argument. Derrida kept a safe distance from mounting either sort of argument and certainly never goes so far as to claim, as does Hägglund, that there is an *a priori* argument against the existence of God. Hägglund on the other hand agrees with Anselm and Descartes that the existence of God can be settled on *a priori* grounds, albeit negatively. He simply uses *diffrance* to stipulate that life is mortal and that being is spatio-temporal but he offers no non-circular argument that there is no life or being outside space and time. He simply assumes the

¹²⁷Paul Tillich, “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion,” in *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 10-29.

¹²⁸By the same token, one might have an idea of God as the “pure good” but that does not mean one has an intellectual intuition of the pure good, a purely good idea. As an effect of the play of traces one’s idea of the pure good is historically constructed and therefore completely deconstructible and structurally inhabited by every evil that it is possible to commit in the name of God or the good (or of justice, or of democracy—the list is endless). Like every other religious idea, it is not immune from the structure of the promise/threat; in fact, it is less so because as a limit-concept, located as it is at the extreme limits of experience, it has raised the stakes—to the limits!

conditions of space and time and then complains that eternity does not meet them. His objection to eternity is that it does not abide by the conditions of space and time. But that is not an objection to eternity; it is the definition of eternity. Derrida thinks that *differance* opens the space within which we can differentiate “God exists” from “God does not exist” and that any name of God that gets itself constituted cannot shake off the chain of substitutions and associations in which it is caught. *Differance* guarantees that nothing is guaranteed when we invoke or are provoked by the name of God, which may lead to the worst violence or produce men and women whose lives are consumed serving the wretched of the earth (and everything in between). *Differance* sees to it that the name of God is not safe. It has nothing to say about what is or is not outside space and time – although it has plenty to say, all quite salutary, about what is involved in talking like that.

Deconstruction on Derrida’s account is the “experience of the impossible,” hence a kind of post- or quasi- or ultra-phenomenology of the structure of *experience*, which takes place in space and time. Once again, Hägglund disagrees. He says that Derrida “repeatedly argues” (no citations) that *differance* “not only applies to language or experience or any other delimited region of *being* [my italics]. Rather it is an *absolutely general condition* [his italics], which means there cannot even in principle *be* [my italics] anything that is *exempt* [my italics] from temporal finitude” (RA, 2-3), that “*being* is essentially temporal (*to be* = *to happen*)” (RA, 32, all my italics). But if there is a text in which Derrida says he offers an account of *essential being*, of *absolute being*, that *differance* picks out absolutely general *being*, beyond experience, it must have been lost in the mail or is still sitting in the attic in Ris-Orangis. The term *differance* is introduced to explain how “language, or any code, any system of referral in general is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences” (Margins, 12). It is introduced to support the argument that, contrary to the metaphysical view that language is produced by a speaking subject and preceded by a naked contact with presence to which the speaker afterwards gives a name, language is the effect of the weave of differences, and that all its effects, including “language” and “subject,” “presence” and “produced,” are the issue of the weave of differences. *Differance* explains our ability to refer to presence as a constituted effect of *differance*, so that “presence” can never stand free of how it got itself constituted (in the middle voice). It is the successor form to what, in the language of the metaphysical tradition, is called a theory of signs, of the *modus significandi*, and in the language of Husserl a theory of constitution, but of such a radical sort that it displaces both the classical idea of sign and the modern idea of the transcendental subject.

But Hägglund ends up endowing *differance* with the status of *savoir absolue*, of Hegel’s *Begriff*, albeit a “bad” *Begriff*, that is, a *Begriff* for “being in general” as a “bad infinity,” infinite finitude (RA, 92-93), becoming and non-identity, rather than being as presence and identity, as if Derrida were a contemporary Heraclitean, propounding a metaphysics of the flux. But deconstruction is the deconstruction of the *Begriff*, or of the Logos, of *any* strong concept, of the concept as such, even of the flux. What Derrida *does* “repeatedly say” is that deconstruction is an *experience* of the impossible, which means that *differance* is an

"absolutely general condition" of *experience*. The "unpredictability" or "unforeseeability" upon which Häggglund lays all his emphasis is a feature of *experience*, an experiential structure all the way down. It requires an agency of seeing or predicting whose horizon of predictability or foreseeability is upset. The universe itself, being in general, coming to be and passing away, has no vision of its future and is never surprised by what happens. While Häggglund lays claim to the high ground of *being* itself, all his arguments take place on the plane of the unpredictability of human *experience*. *Différance* is not an absolute but a point of view whose fruitfulness Derrida invites us to consider and explore. It is not an intellectual intuition but a framework or condition of experience. That does not reduce it to a theory of mere appearances as opposed to a noumenal being outside time and space, which is Häggglund's constant fear, since the point of departure of phenomenology, no less than deconstruction, is to undo the phenomenal/noumenal binarity.¹²⁹ It is an account of experience which is above all experience of the real, of the *tout autre* which is *real* (*Paper Machine*, 96). Hence none of the nonsense served up by Meillassoux.

But to say that space and time are real, and are really experienced, is not to establish that nothing else is real. To make that claim, deconstruction would have to shift gears and become a materialistic metaphysics of absolute being, a materialist metaphysics-pitted-against-an-opposing-metaphysics, a metaphysics of atheism, the very metaphysics Derrida criticizes because it is imbued with "theological prejudices" essential to metaphysics "even when it is theology of atheism" (OG, 323n3). Then deconstruction would become a way of finally settling the hash of classical theology, which is what Häggglund wants to hammer it into, whereas for Derrida deconstruction is always a way of un-settling any final settlements. Deconstruction is not a metaphysics of atheism or of being-as-becoming but a quasi- or ultra-transcendental phenomenology of the event. On Häggglund's account, deconstruction opposes the metaphysics of being as presence with a metaphysics of spatio-temporal becoming, which as Derrida and Heidegger both point out would be a simple reversal, inverted images of each other within the same framework, whereas *différance* is in the business of displacement, not reversal. No more metaphysics, please! Metaphysics, as Kant showed, spins off endless dialectical cobwebs and there is no end to it, which shows up in Meillassoux's ludicrous speculations about eternal recurrence. It would take more metaphysics to get metaphysical "leverage" against the metaphysical idea of God in the way Häggglund wants, and more metaphysics is something Derrida always "defers." Deconstruction does not give us any hard rules, whether for theism or atheism. It does not make the problem of "atheism" simple, rule-governed, axiomatic, a priori.

¹²⁹What Häggglund says of Husserl is also true of Derrida: "Husserl does not set out to prove that anything exists [or does not] but to analyze the conditions for appearance in general" (RA, 53), remembering that phenomenology undermines the opposition of appearance to reality, and that Derrida's adaptation of Husserl lies in having recourse to an anonymous and quasi-transcendental field to explain what Husserl calls constitution.

§18. How Not to Desire God

I should add that Hägglund creates some confusion on this point because he inconsistently speaks, just as often, not of being in general but of being that can be “cognized and experienced...thought and desired” (RA, 10, 19, 29 et al). That softens the claim, makes it less metaphysical and more experiential, but then radical atheism turns out to be weaker than traditional atheism. For the God of classical metaphysics, if there is such a thing, would exist whether we desire it or not, whether we know it or not, whether effects like *Dieu*, *Gott*, *theos*, and “God,” are produced or not, whether or not they disappear forever into forgotten and dead languages. That is the point about the impassivity of God which Derrida picked up on in *Politics of Friendship*. The God of classical metaphysics is completely untouched by such sublunar events. Aquinas held that we are related to God but God is not related to us, lest the absoluteness of God be compromised. God subsists, absolutely and self-sufficiently. Creatures have a real relation of dependency on God while God’s relation to creatures is an *ens rationis*. The reality of God in Aquinas perfectly fulfills the requirements of the “unilateralism” of the “real” or the “absolute” in Meillassoux, Laruelle and Brassier. Aquinas is an absolute realist for whom being is under no obligation to conform to our desire. God’s absolute being stands absolutely clear of whether it is “cognized and experienced...thought and desired” by us or by anybody else. Thus, by introducing being-as-desired into atheism, “radical” atheism becomes a weaker anthropological version of traditional atheism, not a more radical one. Classical atheism maintains that God does not exist, objectively, regardless of what we desire, whereas radical atheism is defined by our desire, on the presumption that if we don’t desire it, it will go away. But the real does not depend upon our desire.

Let us assume, then, that radical atheism meets this challenge by presenting itself as a supplement or corollary of classical atheism, one that adds the further consideration that we cannot even desire the God whose objective non-existence has first been independently established in traditional atheism. But this would run into the well known difficulty that Derrida has already worked out in “How Not to Speak.” The whole point of *comment ne pas parler* is the intractable difficulty of *dénégation*, knowing how not to speak of God, how to not say God, how to say not-God, how to not-say God while not ending up saying God after all, how to deny God without being in denial? The same aporetic of *dénégation* besets desiring. *Comment ne pas désirer?* How not to desire God, how to not desire God, how to desire not-God, how to not desire God without ending up desiring God after all, how to deny the desire for God without being in denial? To deny we desire God would require, in a way that Derrida rejects, that desire be transparent to itself, for it requires that the subject be present to itself so that nothing is going on behind its back, which as Hägglund himself takes pains to point out Derrida rejects (RA, 57). It requires that we know quite clearly what we desire, that we can be sure that when we say we do not even desire God, we are not by some trick of the unconscious desiring God all the more, that when we say we desire this or that temporal thing instead of God (like more time) we are certain that this is a not a disguised desire for God (which is Augustine’s theory

of desire). Augustine thinks that our desire of perishable things dissimulates a desire of the imperishable; Hägglund thinks our desire of the imperishable dissimulates a desire of the perishable. The positions are perfectly symmetric. Derrida thinks that such arguments, such wars over the “final word,” could go on for a long time and nothing would ever be settled. It requires that when we say we desire survival and not eternal life, we are sure that by some trick of our unconscious it is not precisely eternal life that we desire. The logic of radical atheism requires a stable and transparent logic, a stable and transparent concept of desire, and a stable and transparent concept of God, such that we can be sure that in denying God we are not in denial, *dénégation*, of what we secretly and unconsciously affirm. It requires—contrary to everything that Derrida says about self-knowledge and desire—that the voice of atheism be absolutely univocal, undisturbed by other voices, unhaunted by specters, perfectly luminous in its denial, perfectly clear that what it is denying is God and not something else, and perfectly clear that it knows what God is, and what denial is. It requires everything from which Derrida dissociates himself when he says he only “rightly passes for” an atheist and this because of the multiplicity of voices within him that give him no peace.¹³⁰ Hägglund’s radical atheism is the perfect opposite of proceeding, as does Derrida, *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*. For Derrida, desire is desire only under the condition that we do not know what we desire. Unlike classical desire, a deconstructive desire is most truly desire when the very thing that blocks desire and makes desire impossible, viz., not knowing what we desire, is just what makes it really possible in the first place. The aporia that stops desire in its tracks, that bars its way and leaves it no way to go, is just what fires it with passion and gets it on the move.

But then are we not back to the very “fideism” to which Meillassoux and the young generation of restless realists object: because you cannot refute us, we are free to believe it? No. But the reason is not that we can after all refute it, but rather that we can make it look bad, as Rorty liked to say. The more sensible alternative to mounting a metaphysics of anti-religion (a “theology of atheism”) against theistic metaphysics is to stop thinking about what we in the West call in Christian Latin “religion” as a body of propositions that pick out facts of the matter and that provide shortcut answers to the questions of speculative cosmology and to start thinking about it, as is increasingly done in theology today (starting with Schleiermacher), in terms of modes of experience, and ultimately therefore in materialist terms. In my view the two worlds theory is just withering away, inside and outside theology, and I regard its resurgence in fundamentalist versions of religions around the world as reactionary, a knee-jerk reaction to the deracinating effects of capitalism and technology, which is why fundamentalism enjoys its greatest prestige among the least educated. I concede that Kant is right, you can’t settle metaphysical debates, and so I concede that there’s no stopping someone from holding an Augustinian two worlds view, the way you cannot stop someone from believing in guardian angels, demonic possession or alien abductions. All you can do, as Rorty said, is try to discourage

¹³⁰ “Roundtable,” *Augustine and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 38-39.

it by making it look bad and by offering a more persuasive alternative, in this case, a way of reimagining God and reinventing Christianity, a way of thinking the event that is harbored in the name of God and Jesus, which is what we radical theologians are trying to do by seducing the orthodox with a “theopoetics” of “events.”

If two worlds theology is not logically refutable it is increasingly out of touch with what we know about the world. It loses its credibility as our pre-Copernican imaginations are transformed and we learn more and more about our bodily life and our universe from contemporary natural science, about our minds from the neuro-sciences, about our lives from the contemporary humanities and social sciences. Our appetite, our desire, for the impossible is more and more addressed by the more stupendous and counter-intuitive advances made by special and general relativity and by quantum theory. The events of quantum mechanics are “absurd” says Richard Feynman,¹³¹ and the strange results of speculative cosmology are I think even more extraordinary than the extraordinary events recorded in the Scriptures. Our ancient thirst for an “other world” is quenched by other means. The Platonic supersensible and the theological supernatural are giving way to superstrings; the heavenly is giving way to the extra-terrestrial. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the only metaphysics we ever get is physics. Michel Serres’s book on angels is a brilliant development of how the classical figure of the “angel” (*angelos*, messenger) is gradually being instantiated by today’s advanced information technologies (the angel as an “instant message” system).¹³² The two worlds theory, the various versions of dualism served up by metaphysics, become less and less plausible with each passing day. But they are not contradictions in terms. I do not think there are any a priori arguments against the two worlds theory, any sort of logical refutation of it, that succeed in being anything more than a circular definition of terms—which is all that is served up in RA—just like Sartre’s ontological argument against the existence of God. *Différance* did not come into the world to pick up where the *en-soi/pour-soi* fell down on the job.

Viewed in the given categories of sociology Derrida is a leftist secular atheistic French intellectual. He greets any such world beyond space and time with total incredulity. He simply doesn’t believe a word of it, certainly not after he hopped that ship to France at the age of nineteen. But it is of some importance to point out that to be restricted to experience is not to be restricted to appearances but to stick to what one knows something about. He thinks that “other world” is a dream, a myth, a bit of a fantasy, even a neurosis. He gives all his time to time, to the only world he knows anything about, which is as real as real can be. He interests himself in the promise of the world and he treats religion and the Scriptures as ways to speak about this promise. He greets the two worlds theory

¹³¹Cited by Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York & London: Norton, 2003), 111.

¹³²Michel Serres, *La Légende des Anges* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993). English translation: *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper, ed. Philippa Hurd (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

with the same incredulity as do more than a few theologians, I might add. For Derrida (and for me) the “life” of “God” (and mortals) are traces inscribed in time. Some other world outside time and space where we would live on (*überleben* not *fortleben*)¹³³ in what I like to call “bodies without flesh” is so much of what Shakespeare called “strong imagination.” All such imaginings are what Hegel aptly called a *Vorstellung* of something else—not of the *Begriff*, to be sure, which would just be more (Hegelian) metaphysics—but of the “event.” If you really seek to know something about another world (other dimensions, alternate universes, etc.), you need to know a great deal of mathematics.

Allow me to add that in deflating the claims of “radical atheism” as a way to describe deconstruction I am not advocating a “religious turn” in deconstruction. I do not think and I cannot find any place where I have ever said that there is any such turn. I agree with Derrida that the whole idea behind “deconstruction” has always been the same, from OG to 2004: a hyperbolic movement that passes through the rule governed to the hyperbolic force of singularity, which he called in OG the “passage through the transcendental,” where the whole point is to keep the future open, whatever future happens to be under discussion (from literature to God). The idea has always been to keep the play of traces open in whatever order one happens to find oneself, and to ward off and evade the forces that want to cut it off. There is no religious turn because the experience of the impossible, and hence the religious structure, “has been there from the very beginning,” as he himself says.¹³⁴ It was there back when the usual subject matter of deconstruction was literature not ethics or politics. The aporia of the absolutely proper name, to take an early example from the 1960s and 1970s, is structured around the aporetic conditions that make a proper name possible while also making it impossible (a name has to be iterable). But this exposure of the possible to the impossible produces an unforeseeable in-coming, a mad and hyperbolic Joycean effect, a shattered horizon of expectation, a literature to come, which is what literature will have been. The desire beyond desire of literature is to write something absolutely idiomatic and untranslatable, so that the becoming literary of literature is its becoming ultra-literary, more than the law of the letter, beyond the letter of the laws of writing. That is why Cixous speaks with the tongues of angels when she says that literature is her religion, the way she is gripped by the hyperbolic.

Deconstruction has from the start meant a quasi-transcendental open-endedness to something coming, an unconditional call for and from something absolutely singular, a hyperbolics of the *tout autre*. It has always been a response to a spectral scene and has always been written in the vocative voice. That is a tautology meant to produce a heterology, which is why Derrida's texts again and again contest the constative mode while not being satisfied with the merely performative, lest its performances prove pro forma. That is why Derrida adopts a performatory mode, trying always to make something happen, or stages

¹³³Jacques Derrida, “Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 15:4 (Summer, 1989): 863-64.

¹³⁴“The Becoming Possible of the Impossible,” 24, 26; *Rogues*, 38.

scenes meant to let something happen, because any event we could make is not the event. He is not describing a neutral scene but evoking a haunted one, where the Heideggerian *es gibt* becomes the *es spiikt*, charging a vocative and spectral space. Deconstruction happens in the valorized spacing and timing of multiple and unidentifiable calls, unnerving calls that reduce us all to praying for our lives. “Matter” for Derrida is spooky stuff. Deconstruction is not just describing the event; it means to be one.

§19. The Hammer and the Stylus

In his “Acknowledgements,” Hägglund thanks the Swedish writer Horace Engdahl, who taught him to philosophize with a hammer (RA, ix). This is no doubt a gift in many contexts, and Hägglund is an original and gifted thinker, but this gift easily turns to poison when it comes to Derrida where it turns deconstruction into a weapon and a way to get a thrill out of sweeping aside the views of others. In this regard, RA has a problem with what the Habermasians like to call a performative contradiction, an embarrassment brought on by the decision to organize an argument for radical atheism around the figure of auto-immunity. Auto-immunity is supposed to result in putting the *autos* in question, in an auto-critique that exposes our own body to tolerating alien bodies, our “positions” to their other, infecting our certainties with uncertainty, breaking down our immunities to the invading other (*Rogues*, 86-87). RA, on the other hand, undertakes a massive campaign to decontaminate deconstruction of God, to inoculate deconstruction against religion, to quarantine religious beliefs and practices, and to do so in the most self-certain, well-defined borders of binary and constative terms, posing, positing, depositing the “last word” about God, who is dead and gone, without a trace. Everything about RA is meant to keep Derrida safe and deconstruction unscathed, immune from God. If Christopher Hitchens had not already done so, Hägglund could have called his argument for auto-immunity “How Religion Poisons Everything.”

God and religion are treated like lepers consigned to a colony where they can be strictly policed, and the “return of religion” like a disease we thought we had wiped out years ago. But is not the whole idea of auto-immunity to embrace the contamination, and Derrida like Damian living among the lepers? Just so, if religion is the attempt to keep oneself pure, is RA not a radically atheistic “religion,” which Derrida warns against under the name of the theologians of atheistic metaphysics (OG, 323, n3)? Where is the auto-deconstructive auto-immune self-interrogation of the atheism in *Radical Atheism*? RA presents itself as an anti-theo-logical “booster shot” meant to “fortify” (RA, 11) the immunities of deconstruction against religion, to give Derrida the strength he lacks for a certain atheism when his resistance flags. RA is not finally about following the trace, about *écriture*, about texts and scribblings, but about policing the trace by way of a logos, a logic. But Derrida speaks in many tongues. The challenge to the logic of RA does not come from a “different logic” (RA, 12) but something different than logic, something non-logocentric, something neological, grammatical, pragmamatological, performativite. Derrida’s trace disseminates, wanders beyond the borders of the logos. There are all sorts of

contaminants in the body of his texts, all kinds of lepers and indiscriminate mixings, including a constant and ongoing commingling with the name of God, with the trace of God, with the “trace” of “God,” with the event that is harbored in the name of God.

I think that RA is a brilliant book, brilliant in pursuing a logic through to its end. Hägglund is surely one of the brighter lights of the new generation. I am grateful to him for defending Derrida against the stereotypes that circulate today about deconstruction among the speculative realists. But this must be weighed against the Derrida with which we are left, for this is not the brilliance of Derrida, which is too often blunted here by Hägglund’s hammer, which often enough falls on Derrida himself. Hägglund warns us from the start that this book runs on a logic, not a *Lesen*, not a reading (RA, 11-12), and that warning should be taken seriously.¹³⁵ Its procedure is “analytic,” that is, it is pursuing a (one) logic of auto-immunity, survival and atheism; it is not “exegetical,” that is, it may or may not be in agreement with what Jacques Derrida is saying. That means that whenever Derrida gets in the way of Hägglund’s argument, so much the worse for Derrida. Sometimes Derrida will say things that cannot be “salvaged”—saved, made safe—by this logic. Then the “analytic” task is to “fortify” Derrida, to make him stronger for a particular version of the logic of auto-immunity and survival advanced in RA. In the end, it is clear that “radical atheism” is Hägglund’s responsibility and not the doing of Jacques Derrida, and the question it raises is how much of Derrida and deconstruction has survived this logic of survival. After Derrida has been thus fortified, corrected for being inconsistent (RA, 12), reproved for misleading his reader’s about what he means (RA, 38) or for “giving in” to the logic that Hägglund rejects even though it goes to the heart of deconstruction, I think what is left is a torso, an abridged edition, whose point has been blunted by the hammer which Hägglund wants to wield. Hägglund uses deconstruction as a weapon to make us safe from religion; deconstruction is an account of why nothing is safe.

Derrida’s is the brilliance of a man of tears, the brilliance of the stylus tip, of praying and weeping *in literis*, “*viens, oui, oui*.” The affirmation of our vulnerability to an unforeseeable future is a propaedeutic to the deepest affirmation of deconstruction, to the “Come” by which everything is touched. The affirmation of our vulnerability which is insisted upon in RA is an affirmation in the sense of an acknowledgement, a *recognition* of the unforeseeability of the future. That is to affirm something we can *know* and *cognize*, something that *is*, our absolute exposure to the unpredictable. The deeper affirmation is of what we do *not* know and what lies *beyond* being—the affirmation of the future unforeseen, unacknowledgable, unknowable,

¹³⁵In “The Force of Law” Derrida notes “Deconstruction is generally practiced in one of two ways or two styles, and it most often grafts one on to the other. One takes on the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other, more historical or more anamnesic, seems to proceed through readings of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies.” (*Acts of Religion*, 250.) To his peril, Hägglund one-sidedly adopts the first and ignores the graft.

unrecognizable, the one in which we hope, *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*, the one that has never existed, which we desire with a desire beyond desire. Not the unconditional which must exist but the unconditional that never exists and is nowhere to be found except as a promise. We pray and weep, we hope for and desire something new, for an incoming in which we will be reborn with the only rebirth our mortal material life permits, like a certain Lazarus, and with a full understanding of the risk. We understand—we stand up under—the risk, which means that we understand that we cannot comprehend the risk. If you comprehend it, to paraphrase Augustine on God (always God!), it is not the future you comprehend. We understand that—and then we take the leap. We are moved by what we love, by what we desire, *by* the impossible, *par l'impossible*, for which we are praying and weeping. That is a matter of neither knowledge nor confessional faith, but a matter of *facere veritatem*, of saying, praying, doing *viens, oui, oui*.

Hägglund brilliantly mines the works of Derrida for a certain logic which supports his own argument and is clearly exhilarated by dismissing a great deal of Derrida and of the careful work on deconstruction which Derrida himself valued as a new way of thinking about ethics and religion, a new way of thinking, *tout court*. He uses Derrida where he can, corrects Derrida when he cannot, and ignores what he does not need. However one might judge that strategy, at least it makes clear that when push comes to shove Hägglund's book is not about Derrida but about an independent orchestration of the logic, or one logic, of auto-immunity. But it sells Derrida short, and religion, and what Derrida does for rethinking religion and hence for undoing the harm done in the name of religion. We should maintain a distance between Hägglund's radical atheism and Jacques Derrida. I will not say a safe distance. Nothing is safe.

In sum, I contest the idea that Hägglund's radical atheism is the work of Jacques Derrida and, since Hägglund boldly declares that he is reinventing deconstruction and that his views and Derrida's often diverge, I contest its intrinsic viability as an independent view and the particular way that Hägglund ventures to repeat or reinvent deconstruction. If you want to reinvent deconstruction in terms of religion, I think you need to start with the weakness of God, which "would be a completely different story" (*Rogues*, 157).

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