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DIVINE REVELATION IN THE LITERAL EXPRESSION

Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of the truth.¹

How we find our way through the work of a philosopher or a theologian seems very different from the way we do so with a poet's work—except when it isn't. It might well depend not only on the thinker in question but on the particular work of that thinker: early or late Nietzsche—the early version of *The Birth of Tragedy* versus *Ecce Homo*. Heidegger not only linked philosophy and poetry in fundamental ways, he wrote poems, sometimes perhaps (con)fusing them; and reading *Being and Time* has a different language-thinking feel from *What Is Called Thinking*. A different language feel(ing)/*Sprachgefühl*—a concept easier to name than define. The experience of reading Wittgenstein—*Tractatus* versus *Philosophical Investigations*—is something like mountains and rivers, peaks and vales (non-invidiously), worlds apart, yet mirroring with a fluxional dynamic that conditions further thinking in its wake. And having summoned the name of Wittgenstein, his later thinking should keep us on our toes as we proceed toward and through Thomas J. J. Altizer, early and late, as regards characterizing the relation between theology and language; that is, the way we verbally frame the issues, even as we use language to think about (his) language and thinking in their capacity to “do theology.” Theology like poetry is first of all, and never not (and also not), what it says it is. And especially in the case of certain philosopher theologians—an Augustine, a Hegel, an Altizer, a D. G. Leahy—we're not only inside the theology as language (is it ever not language?), we're inside a full-scale other, even *alien*, language; it seems to instantiate a “world” or a “psycosm” with its own *Sprachgefühl*.

A POETICS OF THINKING

A “language world” is experienced as a realm with its own sound, tone, accent, music; sometimes a theater music; an opera, three-penny as much as grand; and characteristic silences. It has tunes and voices you get to know. And when you do get with it you're inside a

¹ William Blake, “Proverbs of Hell,” plate 8, line 38, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Anchor, 1982), 37. Available online: <http://erdman.blakearchive.org/>. All quotations of Blake in this essay are from this edition.

linguality—a language reality, a reality-creating language. And when the linguality speaks its realness in identifiable tones of voice, it soon becomes as unmistakable as a familiar voice on the phone, a voice with a *someone* inside. This someone now comes fully alive to you from the very moment you hear the voice: which is to say, once it has actually gotten to you, you know it the way you know someone you feel knows *you*.

Reading Augustine's *Confessions* is not like reading any other theology or any other confession. Altizer has expressed feeling himself closest to Augustine among theological forebears, as he tells us in *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (2006)²—a striking, even startling juxtaposition: a saint theologian and a Christian atheist. Strange syzygy: *one* whose conversion allows him to fervently and confessionally live the living God and *one* who lives the death of God with *passion*, in all its senses, having also undergone, notoriously, a conversion to—a full visionary initiation into—Satan. If Altizer gives us a major theological vision in an embodied *coincidentia oppositorum*—capable of entertaining a notion like Satan=Jesus—it is clearly inseparable from the self-identifying opposites at war, and at play, within himself.³

And paradoxically these vividly opposing notions comprise the very *one(s)*—what we might explore as a near-aporia, *singular plural with intrinsic polarity*, the one that is two (or more) with inherent oppositions—which set the underlying dynamic of his life energies, the stepped-up intensities of his affections/disaffections, the oscillating poles of his life as theological journey, and, in our present focus, the evolving vehicular language by which we know him as theologian. It may show up as an “Altizer style” in his vocal and written expression, but in the very force of his theological radicality it goes far beyond style, genre, or any readymade category of discourse. Its dynamic definitively informs the linguality that we the readers participate in; and once within it, undergoing the dynamic, we ourselves must have a range of reactions, with fluxions, as we voyage through his theological life, seeing reality from inside his lingual vehicle—what for Blake was a chariot of fire:

If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his
Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his
Contemplative Thought if he could Enter into Noahs
Rainbow or into his bosom or could make a Friend &
Companion of one of these Images of wonder which always

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*, with a foreword Mark C. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

³ Any close reader or acquaintance of Altizer knows that he had multiple personae, and beyond the obvious ones: theologian, philosopher, historian, political thinker, teacher, preacher, scholar, writer, and various more personal manifestations common to people in general. The “poet” is surely the one few would verify. The present perspective on poetics is no doubt the minority stance on his work.

intreats him to leave mortal things as he must know them
would he arise from his Grave then would he meet the Lord
in the Air & then he would be happy⁴

Altizer's theological thinking values language, including discourse that recognizes itself in declarations like the above Blake notebook entry, as the very foundation and inspirational source of his own radical theology. This is particularly so in that it prioritizes Imagination as the basis of further awareness and, accordingly, that it presumes intrinsic authority in speaking. Implicitly this self-authorized speaking happens at a theological level of intensity. And Altizer's theology of creative and self-renewing language treats Blake's text, along with that of Milton and Joyce as well as Hegel and Nietzsche, on a par with Biblical text itself. A modern visionary theologian inherits the prophetic poet's vision of his own text as primary *given*. "Prophetic" writing embodies a level of lingual reality intensity—linguality—in being second to none; that is, Prophecy in Blake's sense is revelation itself. It is not "belatedness" with attendant "anxiety of influence" (à la Harold Bloom) but biblical writing as actual present reality: "Divine Revelation in the Literal Expression."⁵ And far from Biblical literalism and the letter of the law, it is the letter liberated in the incarnate expression, new, free, and itself—a singularity—what we will understand here as *poiesis*.⁶

THE SELF-EMBODIMENT OF GOD

Why does the listener listen to prophetic speech? No doubt a power is present here, even if it is a purely negative power, and that power elicits response. Not only does it elicit response, it actively calls for response, and does so by the sheer negativity of its assault, an assault which penetrates to the very center of all possible response. . . . Hence the hearing of prophetic speech immediately issues in the resaying of that speech, a repetition in which the actuality of that speech is reenacted, and reenacted at and by the center of its hearer. This reenactment occurs in hearing itself, a hearing in which the hearer embodies what it hears, and embodies it in speech. Now listening becomes hearing, which is to say that listening passes into full and total attention, an attention in which listening becomes what it hears.⁷

In his remarkable retrospective account, "Altizer on Altizer: A Self-Critique," seeing himself here as "a genuinely biblical theologian," he

⁴ William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 560.

⁵ William Blake, *Milton*, plate 42.

⁶ I will use *poiesis/poietic* for the principle of paracultural language creation and *poetic/poetry/poem* as a culturally defined phenomenon.

⁷ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 51-52.

explicitly frames for us the way he wants *The Self-Embodiment of God* to be read, a way ostensibly in contrast to his other works:

Altizer's real hope and intention is to do pure theology, a theology thinking about God alone, and thinking in such a manner and mode as to make possible a theological realization of revelation. *The Self-Embodiment of God* (Harper and Row, 1977) is the purest embodiment of this intention, as it undertakes a reenactment of biblical revelation in a contemporary language, and attempts to do so by way of a meditation upon the pure actuality of speech and silence. Jacob Neusner, in a preface to a later edition of the book (University Press of America, 1985), accepted *The Self-Embodiment of God* as belonging to the sacred circle of the Torah, affirming that it is a meditative theology within that tradition. . . . This is an endeavor to rethink the whole movement of biblical revelation, and to do so in such a way as to make manifest its fundamental unity, a unity invisible to historical and critical understanding, yet a unity which becomes real in the very calling forth of the origin, the center, and the ending of the actuality and finality of speech itself. While this is a deeply abstract theology, and one posing formidable difficulties for its reader, this is a meditational and not an academic or scholastic theology, and if nothing else it does demonstrate the virtue of the dissolution of the theological author.⁸

His intention here is clearly to create a work that must be meditated or read meditatively. The work asks for a level of engagement beyond understanding and reasoning, a spiritually alive state of reading that mirrors the author's actual theological journey. This transformational state of mind is implicitly a linguality, coinherent with written language in a state of poiesis. As such it leads to further questions: What is meant by meditation/meditative reading in such a context? What is reading that it can bring about a profound transformation that is both intellectual and spiritual? And what is theology that in finding its root principle, its actual radicality, it arises and is re-visioned within poiesis? These kinds of questions we think of as a contemporary focus, but aren't we in some kind of continuity, say, with Parmenides, the "first Western philosopher" (and for that matter, theologian) whose foundational thinking exists only as a single poem?

⁸ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Altizer on Altizer: A Self-Critique," appendix B in *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. with an introduction Lissa McCullough, with a foreword David E. Klemm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 155.

⁹ See poet and philosopher Charles Stein's translation and extended discussion in "The Parmenides Project," http://harveybaly.org/files/The_Parmenides_Project.pdf. A new version of the translation and commentary will be published by Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York.

For Altizer a radical theology requires a new language, and his sense of what this might mean often comes through his discussion of specific works, with *Paradise Lost*, *Jerusalem*, and *Finnegans Wake* the major instances of Christian epic as implicit theology and radical poiesis. And the part of what makes poiesis radical that most concerns us here is its ability to inform and alter consciousness in both the writer and the reader, and the two as one: writer as reader/reader as writer, and a reader-writer syzygy, a coincidence of contrary others.

The Self-Embodiment of God implicitly aims to impart the sense of Imaginative revelation that early on Altizer experienced reading Blake, a species of vision or faith that arises in the actual reading within its disruptive dialectical dynamic. He has claimed this discovery of Blake as the beginning of his (Imaginative) theology, an actual reading experience that awakened the mind in specific theological ways and embodied a new, indeed apocalyptic, awareness.¹⁰ In Altizer's book, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (1967), in the writing of which he later says he had actually become a writer, we get a picture of how this powerful reading experience played out.¹¹ When I read this book the year it was published I realized that it redefined reading in important ways—ways related to what I myself had been discovering in reading Blake intensively. And as a theologian's vision of a prophetic poet—in fact a vision of a vision—it authorized, so to speak, the unauthorizable unique journey through Blake, one not easily acceptable to mainstream academic criticism.

Revelatory/Imaginative writing in the Blakean conception is a singularity, and there can be no fully reliable method of reading that automatically applies. In the absence of an identifiable precedent, a text must instruct in its own reading, and to the extent that it is successful in inculcating its own modality in actual reading, it changes reading itself. A full engagement (re)tunes reading, bringing it into a meditational register. In effect it shows meditative reading as neither an ordinary discipline nor a traditional practice like zazen; rather it's a readerly event with a nature and dynamic specifically its own.

¹⁰ Altizer gives another account of transformative reading in *Living the Death of God* regarding first reading D. G. Leahy's work, after which he says he was never the same. My references to Altizer's *The Self-Embodiment of God* are to the original edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); all in-text pagination refers to this edition.

¹¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967). This book was a profound and radically new contribution to both Blake studies and theology, although it retains an outsider status in all the domains to which it made major contributions: Blake literary criticism, philosophy, and theology itself. It is also the book that cemented our friendship when I read it in 1967 and we were both on the faculty of the English department at Stony Brook University. At the time I was doing critical writing on Blake, still working with David Erdman, also on the faculty there.

Optimally the event within the reader's attention directly transmits what has been revealed and embedded within the text due to its own originating event—a state of revelation *woven*, to use Blake's frequent metaphor, inside writing itself. This performative event has been enacted in the actual process of writing, and the writing seems to extend further inside the reader's meaning-realizing experience. Any description of such experience, itself a unique expression, implies a possible phenomenology of reading that saturates the mind space of its event; this is a state that discourages the reader from thinking of anything besides the thoughts that occur in the act of reading—a trans-referential occurrence and, in the Altizer perspective, inherent *reading apocalypse*. Reading transforms into its own species of singular writing in mental process, quite in the Blakean sense that you become what you behold. It accords to a mirror principle of transformation by direct encounter through co-performativity.

Responsible reading at the transformative or poietic level involves responding to a work in a way that furthers its principle within one's own reading. This does not mean that one necessarily agrees with the work, believes its statement, or adopts its philosophy—nor the opposite. Agreement/disagreement at the level of idea or statement may have little or nothing directly to do with a responsible response. Quite the contrary, the true and responsible response may embody a principle that is beyond belief or full agreement as such; the level to which a work aspires in its mode of vision may involve a recognition of the impossibility of belief, or acknowledge the counterproductive nature of belief. Paradoxically, true seeing is not believing but a poietic state beyond belief and disbelief as end positions.

Accordingly, *The Self-Embodiment of God* embodies a vision that may well destabilize belief, even as it would awaken a faith. The possibility of arousing a previously unrealized species of faith implicit in poiesis would not be faith *in* something, but *intransitive* faith, a verb event self-contained within the act of reading-writing itself.

This species of reading requires a high level of Negative Capability (Keats)—when a person is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”—and more than that, it requires a capability of creative negativity or something like a positive incapability (as in the willingness *never* to reach a final interpretation or judgment). And it takes more than a “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge)—it takes a suspension of belief itself. Yet this kind of suspension is not a negation of belief altogether (surely an impossibility in relative reality) but a transformation of believing into an active practice in oscillation with disbelieving—oppositionally coinciding as a condition of the process of reading. Such a process invokes a dialectical intensity that needs to be sustained throughout a reading. And its practice belongs to a domain of radical poiesis requiring unprecedented and continuously evolving modalities of reading. In the later Prophecies of Blake such pressure on reading rises to a new and transformative level—a level of reading experience wherein a

relentless dialectic steps up intensity to a potentially visionary state:
*If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination
approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought....*

Within the process of such Imaginative reading, there can be a functional *coincidentia oppositorum* between willing reader and resistant text, where the text seems to push back against readerly agreement and absorption, indeed against interpretation and understanding as a state of intellectual rest; the latter would turn text into object and distance mind from action. The text, the contrarious weave, does not rest. The movement forward is at once alluring and frictive. A reader may indeed experience a degree of comprehension-despair, reflecting life befuddlement, a “falleness” filled with fear of never coming to grips with profound ambiguity. The reader’s role oscillates between friend and foe of the unfolding text: resistance begets resistance, allowing for a polarizing further release of expectation. The very possibility of such active embrace of contrary states, a Marriage of Heaven and Hell, assumes a profoundly hidden coinherence of otherness with reader’s mind. Reaching into this hiddenness to actively co-inhere requires reading that is a *mirroring by alterity*. This does not come about from familiar pleasures in the text. Rather the probable options are distress and ecstasy. One wrestles with the text as with the angel.

In particular Blake’s late Prophecies – *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem* – are generally considered difficult to understand, due in part to the disruptive narrative and non-consistent role of personae; there’s not a lot to hold on to, or that promises to be there for more than a moment’s reflection. But understanding, especially the critical variety, may not be the most appropriate goal or fulfill the primary value of reading such a text, especially if one respects Blake’s actual creative intention.

As with some modern and postmodern poetry, reader must surrender to text and discover a new way of reading, which necessarily interferes with, or at least delays, a rational grasp of the poetic event. In a sense, poets create their readers. Where there is a new poiesis and operative poetics, a responsible reading comes into being as a singularity – a new reading mind event making possible or actually creating a new modality of conscious being. Blake may be thought of as the first poet whose intentional poiesis puts such a transformative degree of stress on language in writing-reading/reading-writing, where reader is radically cocreative with writing, and in fact enters a given writerly state by way of creative reading. Blake’s readers did not fully come into being until decades after his death, and they are still coming into being and potentially still with a radically challenging edge. *The Self-Embodiment of God* is a distant cresting of one of the waves radiating out from *Jerusalem*. Poiesis in this stream is a call to the *possible reader* who may or may not yet exist.

POIESIS IN PRINCIPLE

To speak of poiesis is not necessarily to stay within the domain of poetry in a literary or traditional sense. Poetry in this distinction is defined by, or at least within, a culture, by precedent, and “the tradition” (in T. S. Eliot’s legacy, a canon); poet looks back through tradition before discovering the present path forward. Poiesis, by contrast, is not a cultural distinction as such but a principle of language creation itself, conceptualized, for instance, in terms of novelty and intensity; and no particular use or manifestation can be definitive. Poiesis cannot be fully defined but only located, engaged, and further distinguished in actual present use. In principle there is no limit of poiesis; there are only constraints within a context. To view *The Self-Embodiment of God* in the same set with *Jerusalem* is neither invidious nor honorific; it’s a recognition of shared poetic resources and their singularity in common. *Singular plurals with intrinsic polarity*. They are alike in being firsts and onlys.

The Self-Embodiment of God shares with *Jerusalem* a self-declared complexity of authorship. Blake famously spoke of *Jerusalem* in its prefatory “To the Public” as “Verse . . . dictated to me”; and Altizer a number of times spoke of “the writing or receiving of this book,” and in various contexts he acknowledged not knowing “where it came from.” In a phenomenological or historical study of “received” texts, each of these works would find companion texts closer to them in form and style than they are to each other. But in Imaginative kinship, as expressed in *The New Apocalypse*, they are true companions in “visionary company.” And their most visionary writing is *received* in the sense of self-creation spontaneously generated, as distinct from constructed or Constructivist. The emphasis is on an inspired speaking and what it makes happen, its impact, through radically creative language.

In a certain sense Altizer as author undergoes a process of merging with, even disappearing into, the unfolding writing, which speaks well beyond what as an actual person he can otherwise say. *The Self-Embodiment of God* declares: “Speech is that act which embodies a final otherness, and embodies it in a manifest identity, an identity wherein otherness is manifest as the otherness of itself. But otherness only becomes manifest when the name of God is spoken, for only the utterance of that name evokes a final otherness.”¹²

Speech here is intrinsically a divine act. It is not always clear in the above and many other passages in the book whether speech is being understood as *any human speech*, the very fact of speech, or *speech realized within a special or intense focus*, one in which, as above, “the name of God is [or can be] spoken.” As Blake aspired to an evolved condition in which “all the Lords people were *Prophets*,” Altizer longed for a speaking—originally for him a *preaching*—that anyone could hear, perhaps as a kind of primordial right or a gift of the

¹² Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 36.

Incarnation. But Blake wrote *Jerusalem* which few would or could read, and Altizer took that complex linguality as his matrix of inspiration and eventually wrote *The Self-Embodiment of God*, which is likely the least widely readable of his works—a short book long in the reading.

Yet it is also a book without a length as such, without much development along the way, and primarily a lingual presence, a slow unfolding taking place in what Gertrude Stein called the *continuous present*. The textual process is not so much open-ended as open-middled. Such a process obviously occurs in time—an Imagined time, a textual or woven time of reading-thinking—while in the texture of (only) apparent repetitiveness it allows a feel of timelessness, an atemporality with an innuendo of Eternal Return. What keeps coming back from outside of time are words charged with incremental meaning in the sheer weight of their continuous presence—*speech, silence*, and finally *God*—and weaving together in and through each other, as living entities, lingual embodiments, asserting themselves with an urgency unlike any other. In a text virtually without names—only the name of God, the name that cannot be spoken without violation, the “unnameable,” and briefly Abraham, never Jesus or Christ (the rarest absence in Altizer’s oeuvre)—words name themselves as their own emergence in a revelatory lacing. The word that endures in naming, *God*, takes on mantric force in the reading. And what moves the text forward is speaking that one hears as an actual voice, fully idiolectual, with a someone inside although not a someone one can still name, but rather a one that sheds naming, giving space to further incarnation; a self-annihilation within linguality; an impersona, a speaking through the faceless mask of writing. Reader can become impersona because there’s no identity in the way. *Paronymity*, identity standing aside and out of the way of itself. There is only voice speaking writing, literal expression.

AUDIBLE THEOLOGY

Poiesis is language so completely realized in its hyper-idiolectual singularity that it can seem virtually a foreign language; one must learn a poet’s language in order to experience its living being. And hearing work read by the poet can sometimes impart an otherwise remote dimension of its actual life. Altizer reflects: “I have discovered that sections [of *The Self-Embodiment of God*] can have far more of an impact when they are heard orally, so I sense that the voice of the preacher is not silent here.”¹³

Altizer’s true gift of preaching was still in the foreground when I first heard him in 1967 at Stony Brook University, and although he gave it up as an aspect of his public identity, it never left him. In some sense preaching died into writing, reaching an apotheosis in *The Self-*

¹³ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 34.

Embodiment of God. Experiencing a truly powerful preacher helps to imagine the direct impact of the parables of Jesus in their moment. And Altizer's next book, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (1980), explores the phenomenon of parable in a depth and poignancy that offers a key to his own poetic realization, and may be the most helpful commentary on the previous book:

The true parable has no "author," or no author who is manifest in the parable, and this because a fully parabolic language gives no sign of either a source or a purpose lying outside of itself. Perhaps we could say that the intention of parable is to realize an enactment of speech wherein a totality of speakable or realizable identity is wholly present and immediately at hand. Therein parable is the antithesis of allegory, and the antithesis of allegory because in its full expression it leaves behind all simile and metaphor. . . . For the pure parable so centers the attention of its hearer upon its enactment as to end all awareness of a meaning or an identity beyond its immediate arena of speech.¹⁴

With the force of oral expression *audible theology* migrates into writing, and even though it loses the direct contact with listeners that is every preacher's true medium, it evolves to a different kind of intensity in the actual working of the language—a textual complexity that can embody an intimate bonding with poetic Imagination, as realized from *Jerusalem* to *Finnegans Wake* and beyond. The "fall" of parabolic language into literal expression—lettered poiesis—is a fortunate fall, a *felix culpa* that is Imagination's gain in a Blakean lineage and transmission.

What drives transformative text is still a talking poiesis, where oracular and parabolic poiesis turns fully profane and the poetic urge takes its daemonial self-impelling from living speech. While parable functions as an attraction of attention for the listener—a storytelling—there's simultaneously a refusal of full disclosure, leaving the mind hanging and in need of completion. There's an induction by disruption where the mind is thrown back on a need to know that concerns ultimate matters. What may be most radical in theologizing poiesis is the arousal of language in its pure activity within uncertainty, even a spiritualized eroticization of unsaying and unknowing. In *Jerusalem* the awakened and aroused body of the text is a verbal call to reading intensity, to energetically override the mind's fearful withdrawal from uncertainty. The wish is to inspire a reading equivalent of the daemonial givenness of poiesis with its inner rhythming: a moving light within the line, a follow-the-bouncing ball without the ball, an implicit guidance reaching the limen between eye and page, so that . . . *the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination...*

¹⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today*, 2nd ed., with a foreword by Lissa McCullough (Aurora, CO: Noesis, 2016), 3–4.

The hearing of prophetic speech immediately issues in the resaying of that speech, a repetition in which the actuality of that speech is reenacted, and reenacted in and at the center of the hearer. . . . Now listening becomes hearing, which is to say that listening passes into the full and total attention, an attention in which listening becomes what it hears.¹⁵

Inspired patience might name a rarely achieved state necessary for truly meditative reading of the kind Altizer explicitly calls for. It differs from ordinary patience in that it is not a control state, not a discipline imposed on reading or otherwise coerced, and not a triumph over ignorance or indolence; it might rather be characterized as a surrender to listening in a pull toward rewarding intensities—yet such intense rewards can scarcely be characterized or anticipated reliably. In whatever spirit a sustainable intensity is brought to be, it doesn't make a text like *Jerusalem* or *The Self-Embodiment of God* any more accessible; still, inspired patience in anticipation of further lingual arousal might get one through in a more or less evenly receptive or contemplative mode of attention. This would be a mode in which the text is allowed to act on the mind freely and without critical obstruction, and in which the ordinarily impermissible is allowed to range freely:

If silence can be present in speech, then so likewise speech is present in silence, and a common dimension of each is made manifest by that which cannot be said. What can we not say? Obviously, we cannot say everything, not even everything which is at hand. A plenum may be invoked by rite or by symbol, but it cannot be spoken, it cannot pass into actual speech. Nor is it accidental that silence is the most cherished language of both mystics and masters of ritual, for each is in quest of an original ground or source lying on the hither side of speech. It is not possible to speak a plenum, for at most it would be just that, a plenum, and not plenum itself. The very act of speech disjoins the said from the not-said, and hence embodies otherness in its utterance. Speech is the “other” not of silence, but rather the unsaid, the unnamed, and the unnameable. Plenum or everything is by necessity unsaid and unsayable, for if it were to be spoken, then nothing would be other than speech.¹⁶

Here in the first chapter “Genesis” we enter a discourse that prioritizes speech and silence as primaries essential to each other, interdependent, coinciding in opposition, and coinherent in action as the very process happening in the language as we read it. And we begin to know that silence is present, actively present, in the speaking text, as throughout the book we are called to experience the possibility of silence co-inhering in speech. The imaginal process

¹⁵ Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

unfolding retains its silence as the matrix of saying from the unsaid, always returning to unsaying. And here we should perform our own (un)saying to the effect that the permission to think here, now, in the way called for by the text at hand, with a certain processual aporia, begins to carry over from *The Self-Embodiment of God* into language attempting to describe (its) language.

To genuinely encounter a text is to allow it to speak in us in its voice, displacing one's own voice or giving over to a plurality, a doubleness and an intrinsic, potentially revelatory duplicity. The voice of Altizer surrendered to his meditative (a)systematically unfolding theology is then further transferred to our reading and our language emanating from it; but this eventuality also reflects his own voice still undergoing further transformation into the otherness of his self-embodying writing, *as we read*. The writer originally has been reading—and for us still is reading—inside his self-generating writing—reading, that is, what shows up in the process—and becomes what he beholds, now becoming his further being. To pretend to stand outside such a textual process—to describe it with some conceptualized accuracy—is to claim an outside where there is none, at least other than in the most superficial sense, which act of fictive outlining in effect puts a preconceived outside in the place of an emergent one; and in a certain way this is a betrayal, or at least a limiter (Blake's Satan), of the most deeply held intention of the work.

Poiesis can fill any container from sonnet to sacred book, but on its own it has no outside. The fully (self-)embodied body is the shape of its living, displayed in what Blake called *the bounding line*. Bounding makes a boundary as the shape of an action of a living being, and this describes both Blake's and Altizer's powerful self-animating works. In addressing *The Self-Embodiment of God* we are implicitly in dialogue with the self-embodying text, and in that sense we are non-separate from, or coinherent with, the authorship. We become the fulfillment of the principle of the work, its actual further life, which is to say we are readers embodying a live poiesis, itself an instantiation of an emergent theology. Receiving the transmission of the text is to enter into its intransitivity, its *one plural*. As the other of the text, reader is the agent of its plurality and its principle in further poetic action: its self-embodiment.

INCONCLUSION

In bringing into play the perspective of a poetics of thinking/meditating *The Self-Embodiment of God* my intention is to carry forward Altizer's innermost aspiration, as I hear it: that the book should engender an actual process of its/one's own theological realization, a meditative process coinherent with an active reading. A true reading would embody its own Imaginative voyage, and it could well perform its own phenomenological reflection in real time. From the perspective of poiesis there can be no meaningful "objective" assessment of such a work. It has no outside because it happens outside consensus; it is unauthorized except that it is self-

authorizing, like poiesis itself, and intrinsically indefensible. A true reading of such a work is singular. And articulating an appropriate poetics is intended as performative of its principle. As a non-theologian I cannot claim this species of reading as theology, but as poet I can *hear* in Altizer's voice the book engendering a radical theology as the poiesis of the text, and I can align with the notion that any reader who actually undergoes the process is implicated therein. I have refrained from making many evident connections between this presentation of a poetics of meditative reading and Altizer's own theology, particularly as he so richly discusses his own works and intentions in *Living the Death of God* and "Altizer on Altizer: A Self-Critique." From a poetic perspective it may even be better not to spell out a full alignment beyond acknowledging that reading *The Self-Embodiment of God* is performative of his theology. Becoming conscious of this dynamic projects further reading.

The Self-Embodiment of God is a journey indeed, but to characterize from what to what is to turn an actual journey into a travelogue, a rational surrogate and, for the possible reader, something of a spoiler—and in the end an impediment to direct transmission. Poetic criticism, literary history, historical theology are important disciplines in our intellectual orientation, but they are also potential obstacles to that of which they speak: a conundrum with no resolution. Altizer's range of work is extraordinary not least in his effort to give "live" theology—radical theology or actual theological realization true to its moment—a viable and protected place in the greater discipline. I think that, not seeing himself ultimately as a writer, although he clearly became an utterly unique one, he saw himself as a theologian and therefore in need of a community of receptivity and discursive engagement. There is always a possible community of possible readers, but it can only name itself in process and in passing. *The Self-Embodiment of God* as a singular embodiment should be allowed a protected space out toward the margin of his oeuvre as a whole. It is a zone of poiesis and remains a vital matrix of further theological realization, alive in its own poiesis, for the awakening reader "living going forth & returning" as in *Jerusalem*.