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Witnessing the Word Erotic:
A Philosophical Theology of Proclamation

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WITNESSING THE WORD EROTIC:
A PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF PROCLAMATION

BY

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AN ABSTRACT OF
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Abstract

Witnessing the Word Erotic: A Philosophical Theology of Proclamation By Jacob D. Myers

This dissertation offers a new theology of proclamation in light of Jacques Derrida's "reading" of foundational texts in Western philosophical discourse. My thesis is that the theological crisis for proclamation—that which threatens theology from within—is that the words (*logoi*) we use in reference to God (*theos*) are always already encumbered by a certain rationality (*logos*) and unless we expose this feature of theology and experience the features that simultaneously structure the possibility and impossibility of theology, our quest will never quite reach its intended destination; it will never quite be *theological*. The solution that I propose for the contemporary crisis of preaching is to proclaim God's Word free from—if not at least cognizant of—the Western epistemological presuppositions that always already encumbers it. Such an approach I label *witnessing the Word erotic*.

Following an examination of the best attempts from the last thirty years at a theological articulation of Christian proclamation, I expose several of the most troubling philosophical concerns that frustrate theologies of proclamation. I focus on three indisputable components of Christian proclamation: language, speech, and sermons: preaching is impossible without language; preaching is manifested (most often) through speech; and preaching takes on the peculiar form of a sermon when it participates in the Word of God. The remainder of the dissertation builds a case for a new (philosophical) theology of proclamation that takes Derrida's critiques seriously.

In this, I attempt three tasks. The first task of this dissertation is to expose, or better, to show how Christian proclamation is always already exposed to certain philosophical issues that trouble preaching from within. These features are necessary conditions for the possibility of preaching, or they have at least functioned as such through the Church's history. First, preaching is impossible without language. Second, preaching has tended to favor the human voice as the ideal medium for preaching. Third, preaching happens in and as a sermon. The second chapter of this dissertation exposes these aspects of preaching to those features at work within them that trouble their foundational status within Christian proclamation. This I do in conversation with the early writings of Jacques Derrida.

The second task of this dissertation is to challenge the best theologies of proclamation according to these troubling philosophical features that underwrite theologies of proclamation, which I offer in chapter one. This task is not intended to supplant or subvert the work of these scholars whom I hold in such high esteem. Rather, as we become aware of the less-than-theological aspects of their respective theologies, and having experienced those philosophical aspects of their work that works against their declared intentions, we will be able to lift their thinking to a higher level. This level, I will argue, is more in line with their aims than that which they currently present.

The third task of this dissertation makes up the bulk of the work. Chapters three through five build a new theology of proclamation that takes seriously the philosophical issues Derrida helps us see in his early work. The theology of proclamation I am suggesting need not begin again from scratch, however. The Christian tradition is replete

with helpful contributions from thinkers who have thought through—or at least started to think through—some of the philosophical issues that vex proclamatory speech. I enlist Karl Barth, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Luc Marion as conversation partners that lend their work to the kind of philosophically informed theology necessary for the current cultural *epistémè*. In my final chapter, I articulate a (philosophical) theology of proclamation I am calling *Witnessing the Word Erotic*. There I revisit the work of my homiletical interlocutors to suggest points of convergence and dissonance as well as implications for homiletical theory and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Preaching is always in trouble and in this dissertation I want to make sure it is in trouble for the right reasons. In itself this assessment is not novel; indeed, every generation of preachers faces the daunting task of homiletical reform. Moreover, even if homileticians are in general agreement about the troubled state of preaching, their assessments differ as to what, exactly, troubles preaching. In the twentieth-century alone, opinions vary widely.

For instance, in 1928, the famed Baptist preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick published an article poignantly titled, “What’s the Matter with Preaching?” Fosdick diagnosed the preaching of his day as being irrelevant insofar as it missed the true concerns of congregants and parishioners. He writes, “Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem . . . and any sermon which thus does tackle a real problem, throw even a little light on it, and help some individuals practically to find their way through it cannot be altogether uninteresting.”¹ In essence, the solution Fosdick proffered to solve the problem of preaching was to give the people what they need, or believe they need.²

Not all shared Fosdick’s proto-self-help remedy for homiletical improvement. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a renegade pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland argued that the troubled state of preaching arose from something else entirely. Counter to Fosdick’s thesis, the young Karl Barth argued that the problem with preaching is not that

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What’s The Matter With Preaching?” *Harper’s* (July 1928): 133-41, 134.

² *Ibid.*, 134: “Any preacher who even with moderate skill is thus helping folk to solve their real problems is functioning. . . . He is doing the one thing that is a preacher’s business. He is delivering the goods that the community has a right to expect from the pulpit as much as it has a right to expect shoes from a cobbler. And if any preacher is not doing this, even though he have at his disposal both erudition and oratory, he is not functioning at all.”

it is uninteresting or irrelevant, but that we have changed the subject of preaching from God to ourselves.³ Barth characterized the minister's problem as that of finding a way between the dilemmas of human life on the one hand and the content of the Bible on the other.⁴ Barth's trajectory is one-hundred-eighty degrees from Fosdick's: it is not that we need to apply the Bible as a salve for modern wounds. Rather, for Barth, our genuine *problem* was our radical separation from God in light of the depravity of the human condition; our genuine *need* was that God should find *us*. Preaching, at its best, bears witness to the "need and promise" that God is decidedly *for* us in Jesus Christ. Barth's aim was to change the subject of preaching back to God.

In another important early essay Barth writes, "Our difficulty lies in the content of our task. . . . As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory."⁵ As history unfolded, it was Barth's assessment that would govern the next generation of preaching (in fact, it is not until recently that Fosdick's thesis has been resuscitated in the pulpits of the "teaching-pastor" rubric of preachers like Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer).⁶ Under Barth's incisive and compelling critique, homiletics became convinced that the trouble

³ Cf. Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans., Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 123: "If he answers the people's question but answers it as a man who has himself been questioned by God, then he speaks the word of God . . . for being truly questioned by God and truly questioning about God, he will know God's answer and so be able to give it to the people, who with their question really want God's answer."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵ Karl Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans., Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 186. Concluding this essay, Barth writes, "The word of God is at once the necessary and the impossible task of the minister. This is my ultimate conclusion. Further than this I have nothing to say" (213).

⁶ At one point in his essay, Fosdick associates good preaching with "good pedagogy," writing, "The preacher takes hold of a real problem in our lives and, stating it better than we could state it, goes on to deal with it fairly, frankly, helpfully. The result is inevitable: he makes us think" (137).

with preaching was essentially theological, rather than anthropological, sociological, or psychological.

Barth's vision for theological and homiletical reform would not go unchallenged. In the wake of the turbulent societal upheavals of the 1960s, homiletician Fred B. Craddock would resurrect a version of Fosdick's thesis. Craddock argued that the pulpit was in the "shadows" because preaching failed to connect with the existential situation of congregants and parishioners.⁷ The problem Craddock found with the dominant mode of proclamation in his day was the lack of relevance, or connectivity, the hearer experienced in the sermon. Most sermons were preached deductively, that is, from a position of authority removed from the lived experiences of the listeners. Without a point of contact, without relevance, the sermon could never be a Word of the Lord *for them*.⁸ Craddock's solution to the irrelevance of preaching in late-1960s America was to shift the logical form of the sermon from deduction to induction. By changing how we present our sermons, Craddock envisioned a way that the listener could become a co-creator of existential truth with the preacher. He believed that this would not only make sermons much more interesting, but would also create spaces where the gospel could be experienced at a deeper level.⁹ Craddock's solution and its concomitant inductive method for preaching captured the North American homiletical imagination for the next thirty years.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 124: "The point must be clearly understood that these various movements in preaching are not games of hide-and-seek or cat-and-mouse. The sole purpose is to engage the hearer in the pursuit of an issue or an idea so that he will think his own thoughts and experience his own feelings in the presence of Christ and in the light of the gospel."

⁸ For Craddock, this is achieved through "distance" and "participation" in the event of preaching. See Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 98.

⁹ Cf. Fosdick: "The future, I think, belongs to a type of sermon which can best be described as an adventure in co-operative thinking between the preacher and his congregation" (137).

More recently, Mike Graves gathered together a collection of the sharpest homiletical minds to revive Fosdick's question, asking, *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* The book functions as a Who's-Who of homiletical wisdom and contains a variety of answers to this pressing question. One of the most common answers is reminiscent of Barth's: theology is what's the matter with preaching. For instance, Thomas G. Long writes, "Getting right to the point: the main problem with much of today's preaching is that it is simply not newsworthy. . . . What is often lacking from our proclamation of the 'good news' is a deep sense of the gospel itself as 'news.'"¹⁰ Long clarifies, "It is not so much that people actually slumber as we preach; very few do. Rather, people doze with their eyes open, not expecting much because there is often so little newsworthy about what we say. In gospel preaching, no news is bad news."¹¹ For Long, the problem with preaching today is that it is not grounded in the *kerygma*, the "good news" that God in Jesus Christ died, was buried, and was resurrected in accordance with the scriptures. If proclamation is not focused on the good news of God's liberative work in the person of Jesus Christ, then preaching is irrelevant for an entirely different reason than Fosdick envisioned.

Yes, preaching is in trouble today, but homiletician Clyde E. Fant, who chronicles in *Preaching for Today* a history of pulpit criticism spanning the centuries, makes the case that there never has been a golden age of preaching. He rightly observes that each generation of preachers tends to think they are the first to have been "chained to the rock of the pulpit and have their livers torn out by the giant birds of criticism, only to have

¹⁰ Thomas G. Long, "No News is Bad News," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* ed., Mike Graves (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 149. To clarify, Long is writing of "news" in the theological sense: "preaching is about something that God has done."

¹¹ Long, 156.

them grow back before the next Sunday.”¹² No generation of preachers is spared from certain challenges and concomitant criticism. It is our duty, Fant contends, to make sure preaching is in trouble for the right reasons. This dissertation takes up Fant’s concern in earnest in order to address the contemporary crisis of preaching for twenty-first century preachers in the West.

The Contemporary Crisis of Preaching

Many contemporary preaching books are written to address the perceived challenges facing modern preachers. The guiding assumptions of these books tend to ramify according to two general categories. On the one hand are those texts that conceptualize the challenge of preaching *theologically*.¹³ For these writers, the assumption is that closer attention to God, the Holy Spirit, the person of Jesus, the biblical text—to matters of *theological* import—is what is required to stem the flow of ecclesial attrition and enliven the ministry of the Word. If we can only improve our understanding of what God is doing in the sermonic event and better articulate this theological truth in what we say about God, preaching will improve. So the argument goes.

¹² Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today*, rev. ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 24. Fant argues that “no age seems so golden as in the afterglow of its sunset” and that preaching has suffered from a pervasive shortsightedness that tends toward a “cave mentality,” which often produces nostalgia or untempered optimism (26-7).

¹³ I am not intending a detailed typology of preaching texts here, but a few examples are helpful nevertheless. See Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008); Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009); Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013); and Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

An excellent example of this kind of preaching book is Luke Powery's recently released *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*. In this book, Powery argues that preaching has been swept away by the undertow of the so-called prosperity gospel. Powery laments the reduction of Christian proclamation to Pollyannaish bromides gleaned from self-help books and positive thinking seminars, and a reduction of the good news of Jesus Christ to “candy theology” lacking in substance.¹⁴ Preaching, theologically construed, occurs in the context of death for Powery. Taking Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ez. 37) as a metaphor for preaching, he commends a Spirit-led orientation to preaching that promises to breathe life and hope into congregations. It is clear from Powery's account that culture has precipitated a crisis for preaching; but the solution is inherently *theological*.

On the other hand, homileticians conceptualize the crisis of preaching according to a failure of *hearing*—a much more *anthropological* concern.¹⁵ For these scholars, the challenge of preaching is less a matter of correct theological understanding than a failure to *communicate* the Word of God with contemporary churchgoers. The solution these thinkers put forward stresses that preachers should pay closer attention to the experiences of those who listen to sermons and that preachers also attend to the broader contexts in which sermons are heard. Once we understand the communication breakdown, we can remedy this problem by better connecting with our congregants.

¹⁴ Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2-6.

¹⁵ Examples of this kind include, John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Alyce M. McKenzie, *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010; Ronald J. Allen, et. al, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005); James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); and James H. Harris, *The Word Made Plain: The Power And Promise Of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

Ronald Allen provides numerous examples of this approach to the contemporary crisis of preaching. Given the decline in worship attendance in mainline Protestant congregations and the rise of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, the troubled state of the church is beyond question.¹⁶ In 1999 a team of researchers conducted an extensive study of 263 laypeople in twenty-eight African American and Caucasian congregations in a variety of settings (rural, urban, suburban). The project sought to understand how congregants listen to sermons in the hope that such knowledge would help preachers become more effective. Allen, who was the principal investigator for the project, constructed the interview questions around Aristotle's three modes of rhetorical argumentation: *logos, ethos, and pathos*.¹⁷ He concludes that among each of these “settings” individual congregants have a preferred “setting,” whereby they will best hear a sermon's intended message. Allen insists that his research is not intended merely to “give the people what they want,” and implicit in his book is the belief that all sermons ought to be measured against “theological norms to determine the relative faithfulness of the sermon.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Allen’s work displays an assessment that the crisis of contemporary preaching is centered upon the listener’s experience and he writes to make preachers aware of this crisis and to provide them with practical wisdom for overcoming this crisis of hearing.

¹⁶ Numerous surveys and studies have produced the same conclusion: the church in North America is in decline. See, for example, “The Transformation of Generation X: Shifts in Religious and Political Self-Identification, 1990-2008,” accessed January 22, 2013, <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/the-transformation-of-generation-x-shifts-in-religious-and-political-self-identification-1990-2008>. See also Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

¹⁷ See Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

In this dissertation, I question the binary configuration that has predominated in the guild of homiletics.¹⁹ Between God and ecclesial participant stands the preacher, who is inextricably related to both. The preacher's vocation originates from God, but is confirmed and renewed by congregants. The preacher goes to the biblical text seeking a Word from God, but this is always a Word of God *for the people of God*. The preacher delivers a sermon that she has cultivated through prayer and study—her sermon is guided by the Holy Spirit with the hope that others in the congregation might hear the Spirit's groans through her words. The *terminus a quo* of preaching is the light of God that shines upon contemporary contexts. The *terminus ad quem* of preaching is a congregational hearing of the Word in the words. Preaching is always both/and. To conceive the task otherwise is to miss the mark.

In this dissertation, I hold the contemporary crisis of preaching to be theological *and* epistemological; it is a crisis of *hearing God*. More concretely, the challenge to which I respond is that of conceiving a theology of proclamation *through* the emerging *epistémè*. By *epistémè*, which I discuss in greater length in chapters one and two, I signify the governing paradigms by which knowledge is structured in particular cultural contexts.²⁰ My argument is that theology—and proclamatory theology, in particular—has been governed by a particular *epistémè* that parallels Jacques Derrida's term,

¹⁹ Such an approach is intimated by Marva Dawn in an essay entitled “Not *What*, But *Who* is the Matter with Preaching?” Recognizing the formative capacity of culture on her language, she writes, “Another reason that ‘I am’ what’s the matter with preaching is that I so often let my language be formed by the culture around me instead of by my Christian faith” (80). She continues, “‘I am’ the problem with my own preaching if I am not constantly being formed by God to speak and live God’s language, so that those who hear will also become more like God” (81). Marva J. Dawn, in *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?* See also David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁰ The concept of *epistémè* is common among poststructural philosophers and cultural critics. Michel Foucault describes the word as an “apparatus” which determines *a priori* what counts as knowledge, truth, meaning, etc. In other words, for our purposes here, it is that which has always already done its work *prior* to theological argument. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed., Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 197.

logocentrism. I discuss this concept at length in chapter two, but for now we may understand logocentrism to signify the a priori operations whereby otherness is structurally excluded in order to protect a culturally privileged concept (e.g., maleness, whiteness, etc.). Because I reject the binary logic that has governed much of Christian theology in the West my project takes shape as a deconstruction of such logic by tracing the epistemological assumptions ingredient in contemporary theologies of proclamation in order to open up a way of understanding preaching in emerging Western contexts free from the philosophical biases that subvert theology at base.

Thesis and Methodology

In this dissertation I argue that the crisis of contemporary preaching is both theological and epistemological and that both aspects must be examined in concert—we must read the theological *through* the epistemological—if we are to truly address this crisis. I demur from those approaches that see the problem merely as a crisis of hearing because any homiletic that is not grounded upon the work of God in Christian proclamation fails, in my opinion, to address the real problem that always accompanies preaching: that the Word of God should manifest itself through the words of mortals. Likewise, exclusive attention to theology overlooks the epistemological origins of theological concepts. Only by holding theological and epistemological elements in creative tension may we respond adequately to the contemporary crisis of preaching.

Because we have to begin somewhere, in this dissertation I choose to begin with God since God is the source of Christian proclamation. Even as God's Word is always already filtered through epistemological lenses, I deem such a starting point more apropos than the more anthropocentric approaches attending to the crisis of *hearing* for

three reasons. First, Christian proclamation is more than communication. Second, Christian proclamation begins and ends in God. Third, unless Christian proclamation is at every point sustained by God, it devolves into mere human speech. By this I share greater affinity with the guiding presuppositions that fund the work of thinkers like Barth, Long, and Powery (mentioned above) than I do with Fosdick, Craddock, and Allen. Nevertheless, I argue that even the most robust theological approaches to the contemporary crisis of preaching fail to sufficiently articulate the epistemological commitments always already at work in every theology of proclamation. In short, I follow the *theological* trajectory of homiletical inquiry armed with a robust *epistemological* analysis.

Thus, my thesis is that contemporary homiletics—even the most stridently *theological* homiletics—smuggles unexamined philosophical presuppositions into their theologies of proclamation. The theological crisis for proclamation—that which threatens theology from within—is that the words (*logoi*) we use in reference to God (*theos*) are always already encumbered by a certain rationality (*logos*) and unless we expose this feature of theo-logy and experience those features that simultaneously structure the possibility and impossibility of theology, our quest will never quite reach its intended destination; it will never quite be *theological*. The solution, therefore, that I propose for the contemporary crisis of preaching is to proclaim God's Word free from—or at least cognizant of—the Western epistemological presuppositions that always already encumber it. I label such an approach *witnessing the Word erotic*. My argument in defense of this thesis occurs in two parts.

First, I expose the philosophical presuppositions that are at work in contemporary homiletics by offering close readings of a select group of prominent homileticians and theologians. My selection criteria for analysis includes: 1) scholars who have written within the past three decades and are thus broadly enmeshed in the contemporary *epistémè*; 2) scholars who offer a theology of proclamation, which is taken as a foundational framework for the preparation and delivery of sermons; and 3) scholars who take a self-avowed *theological* stance to the contemporary crisis of preaching.

Factoring in these criteria, five scholars emerge as robust conversations partners. I engage each of their works in chapter one of this dissertation. First, I consider the work of Richard Lischer. Lischer is the James T. and Alice Mead Cleland Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School. His book, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, focuses on the theological commitments that underwrite theologies of proclamation. Second, I examine the work of Charles Bartow, Carl and Helen Egner Professor of Speech Communication in Ministry Emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary. His *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* presents a way of understanding preaching as God's speech through human words. Third, I engage the work of William Willimon. Willimon serves as the Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School. His 2005 publication, *Theology and Proclamation*, presents a radically theocentric vision for Christian proclamation. Fourth, I read the work of James Kay, the Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary. His text, *Preaching and Theology*, argues for a theological "frame of reference" for preaching. Finally, I examine the work of Rebecca Chopp, who was recently installed as the president of Swathmore College. Her book, *The*

Power to Speak, offers a theology of proclamation informed by epistemological and political analyses.

In chapter two of my dissertation I appropriate the early deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida to articulate the extent to which certain philosophical commitments underwrite contemporary preaching. In particular, I present Derrida's engagement with the work of the Ferdinand de Saussure, Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and J. L. Austin in order to tease out the philosophical aspects that are always already at work in Christian proclamation. My analysis proceeds from the general to the specific, investigating how the contemporary Western *epistémè* informs language, speech, and finally preaching itself. I conclude this first part of my dissertation by putting the philosophical insights gleaned from Derrida into direct conversation with the theological proposals presented in chapter one.

At base, a theology of proclamation consists of three elements: God, the human preacher, and the relationship between them. Chapters three, four, and five of this dissertation treat each of these elements in turn. In chapter three I present the early work of the Swiss preacher and theologian Karl Barth as a model for the kind of theology of proclamation that remains in constant conversation with philosophy, in general, and epistemology, in particular. The centerpiece of this chapter is a close reading of the second edition of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* because here, more than anywhere else in Barth's massive corpus, I believe we find a theological paradigm sufficient to the contemporary crisis of preaching in the West. Through his unwavering submission to the revealed Word of God, yet wary of the ways in which this Word was being coopted by

certain philosophical commitments of his day, Barth offers us a helpful starting point for a contemporary theology of proclamation centered on the Word.

In chapter four, I place Barth's theological proposal into conversation with the human element in preaching. I find the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur to be an especially productive response to theocentric vision emerging from Barth's theology. I focus upon an early essay of Ricoeur that has been highly influential in the field of homiletics: "The Hermeneutics of Testimony" (1972). Retaining the theological commitments gleaned from Barth, I apply pressure to Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony in order to articulate a sufficient way for homiletics to respond to the Word as a radical witness in preaching.

In chapter five, I articulate a way of understanding the relationship between the Word of God arising from Barth's theology and the word of the preacher that is informed by Ricoeur's philosophy. Such a relation is suggested through a close reading of French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the erotic. I argue that Marion's philosophy of saturation provides a starting point for us to conceptualize the relation between God and preacher in the sermonic event, but that his erotic phenomenology does an even better job of rendering a mode by which the preacher engages the Word for Christian proclamation.

I conclude the dissertation by articulating this new (philosophical) theology of proclamation and showing how such a framework for understanding sermon development and delivery provides a better theological orientation for preaching while at the same time offering an approach that is sensitive to the crisis of hearing spurred by the emerging *epistémè*.

A Word About Style

My style of discourse in this dissertation is intentional. Readers who are familiar with the work of poststructural theorists have undoubtedly encountered a particular—perhaps perplexing—style of writing. Especially for those of us coming to poststructural thought from a theological orientation—represented by the style of writing found in the works of figures like Tillich, Bultmann, Tanner, and Cone—the style of poststructural discourse can be frustrating and even abstruse. One of the insights poststructuralists offer is that language is always already participating in certain epistemological schemas. Thus, many adopt a style of writing that deliberately works against that dominant mode of expression in order to deconstruct those a priori epistemologies through the very writing of their texts. This can produce a mode of expression foreign from that of German, English, and American theologians.

How one expresses oneself impacts what one is able to express. For example, in his important essay from 1964, published in English as “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida offers a reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s key works up until that time. Derrida writes,

It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas’s writing, *at its decisive moments*, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation. Its proper route is not that of an “either this . . . or that,” but of a “neither this . . . nor that.” The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this *wounding of language*. Through it, in its *opening*, experience itself is *silently revealed*.²¹

This passage is a round about way of simultaneously critiquing and complementing Levinas’s style of exposition vis-à-vis Levinas’s subject matter. Given that Levinas is attempting to proffer a philosophy of alterity beyond totalization, only a style otherwise

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 90. Italics added., Hereafter this volume will be abbreviated *WD*.

than totalizing modes of expression can overcome the Western logocentrism that obviates or occludes alterity in the first place. Put simply, to rely on traditional modes of discourse eliminates the possibility of ever letting that which is radically beyond manifest itself in writing. At his best, at “decisive moments,” Levinas articulates the “wounding of language”; he creates an “opening” in which the alterity he wishes to express is “silently revealed.”

Derrida recognizes the challenges inherent in Levinas’s project: “To attempt to think the opposite is stifling. And it is a question not only of thinking the opposite which is still in complicity with the classical alternatives, but of liberating thought and its language for the encounter occurring beyond these alternatives.”²² Nevertheless, Derrida criticizes Levinas for perpetuating a certain “violence” in his writing to the degree that he does violence to the other by retaining a discursive style that sustains metaphysics’ hegemony.²³ Derrida concludes, “By making the origin of language, meaning, and difference the relation to the infinitely other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse. The latter is understood, and instructs, only by first permitting the same and Being to circulate within it.”²⁴

Notwithstanding these criticisms, and recognizing the changes Levinas made in his own writing style, in this dissertation I have opted for a more traditional (metaphysical) mode of discourse. My reasons for this are three. First, my concern is to present a sufficient measure of poststructural critique to theologies of proclamation, to speech

²² Ibid., 95

²³ Derrida writes, “in depriving himself of the *enjoyments* and effects of his signs, the writer more effectively renounces violence . . . and thus practicing writing as *deferral* and as an *economy of death*. The limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing but within each of them.” Ibid., 102.

²⁴ Ibid., 151.

about God. I fear that this critique would get lost were I to employ a discursive style typical of poststructural discourse. Second, if my own experiences with learning to read this material are in any way indicative of those experienced by others, it seems clear that the reader reading from a classical theological perspective would become frustrated with my playful prose. My critique would be lost were I to allow my writing to reflect the effects of that critique. Third, I am not presenting the kind of “readings,” or deconstruction, that Derrida offers in his early writings largely because Derrida has already offered them.²⁵ My aim is more modest than Derrida’s. And since I am essentially appropriating Derrida’s insights to theologies of proclamation my own writing can bear whatever complications arise from a more straightforward mode of discourse.

Derrida himself recognized this dilemma whereby one is restricted to a certain mode of philosophical (theological) discourse that constrains even as it aims to liberate. He writes, “[T]he necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè*. The natural tendency of *theory*—of what unites philosophy and science in the *epistémè*—will push rather toward filling in the breach than toward forcing a closure.”²⁶ Since Derrida himself has *done* the “decentering” I will risk straightforward prose.²⁷

²⁵ I put “readings” in quotes to signify a kind of engagement particular to deconstruction. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon; And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans., Dale B. Alison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88: “We say *through* Husserl’s text, we mean a reading that can be neither simple commentary nor simple interpretation.” Hereafter this work will be abbreviated *SP*.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed., (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 92. Hereafter this work will be abbreviated *OG*.

²⁷ N.b. that it is tricky to pinpoint the locus of deconstruction. See Geoffrey Bennington, *Deconstruction is Not What You Think . . . : And Other Short Pieces and Interviews* (Createspace, 2008), 248-9: “Where does the deconstruction happen? It doesn’t seem to happen straightforwardly or automatically . . . Does the deconstruction happen, then, simply in Paris in the late sixties? Probably not,

A Word About Approach

The focus of this dissertation is upon an epistemologically informed theology of proclamation that addresses the crisis of contemporary preaching. To this end, I engage the deconstructive philosophy of Derrida as it is presented in his early work. He offers the most poignant analyses of the kind of epistemological commitments that have gone unchecked in contemporary homiletical theory. Note that I am not focused on convincing the reader that Derrida's "readings" of his interlocutors are *correct*, whatever that might imply. Rather, in spite of the differences between Derrida's projects and my own, his thinking with and against a certain tradition of philosophy illuminates the concerns that arise from my reading of theologies of proclamation.

Derrida's approach to the authors whose texts make up the Western philosophical tradition runs parallel to my own aims in this dissertation, and thus by following the trajectory of his early thought we will be better able to understand the challenges germane to Christian proclamation vis-à-vis philosophy. Derrida focused his attention in his early texts on close readings of major figures within the Western philosophical tradition in order to expose—or to recover and thereby expose—the *epistémè*, or central philosophical kernel of the culture at large. This is a practice I seek to emulate herein with Derrida's assistance. By this I mean that my close readings of influential theologians like Lischer, Bartow, Willimon, Kay and Chopp has learned much from Derrida's way of engaging the works of his interlocutors. Such a way of reading discerns in these texts

because to some extent, demonstrably, *here it is* happening in Plato's text. So, to the answer where does the deconstruction or even who does the deconstruction . . . these question are very hard to answer, they are very mysterious questions. It's very hard to date an event of deconstruction, it's very hard to ascribe an event of deconstruction."

unexamined philosophical commitments that simultaneously fund their projects and undercut their ability to achieve their intended ends.

I follow Derrida's early mode of engaging the Western tradition for another reason: he helps to locate the philosophical *epistémè* within a cultural epoch. In other words, his (re)readings expose this cloaked relationship between *philosophia et istoria*. Derrida writes,

From Descartes to Hegel and in spite of all the difference that separate the different places and moments in the structure of the epoch, God's infinite understanding is the other name for the logos as self-presence. The logos can be infinite and self-present, it can be *produced as auto-affection*, only through the *voice*: an order of the signifier by which the subject takes from itself into itself, does not borrow outside of itself the signifier that it emits and that affects it at the same time.²⁸

Derrida unintentionally isolates a central problem for preaching in the current *epistémè*: when God and *logos* are coterminous, theology is always and already subservient to philosophy.

By testing the philosophical foundations of modern theologies of proclamation we may see more clearly the theological warrants that condition the possibility of Christian proclamation. The deconstructive movement of this dissertation hopes to open a path toward fresh insights into the possibility of preaching the Word of God for the people of God. This approach seeks to bolster a certain understanding of the task of preaching that follows a line of thought from the earliest Christian witnesses (μάρτυρες), through the Church Fathers and Mothers, and into the Modern era in the theology of Karl Barth, and the (theological) philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Marion. Lastly, it will open up

²⁸ Ibid., 98. Derrida often writes of the "age of metaphysics." He also calls this the "dominant discourse" of an age and the "thought within a finite configuration" (102).

a neglected approach to God's Word—the erotic—which is the means by which God has given the Church to draw near to Godself through the Word.²⁹

²⁹ The erotic is the way of love that leads to knowledge of the other. I do not distinguish between love as *erōs* and *agapē*. The reasons for this will become clearer as we proceed., See Jean-Luc Marion, "What Love Knows," in *Prolegomenon to Charity*, trans., Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 160.

CHAPTER ONE: THEOLOGIES OF THE PROCLAIMED WORD

Major epistemic shifts—culturally as well as philosophically—are often followed by a re-thinking of the purpose, means, and telos of Christian preaching. For example, in the opening pages of his *Theology and Proclamation*, Gerhard Ebeling confronts just such a concern in the life of the church, a concern in which the cultural forces at work in his generation were threatening the truthfulness of the gospel.³⁰ He writes, “Proclamation is always beset with trials and threatened with misunderstanding . . . yet in certain respects preaching has become more difficult today because the *situation* in which Christian proclamation has to make itself understood has become more problematical.”³¹ The “trials” and “misunderstandings” about which Ebeling writes—such as the growing incredulity toward biblical myths, the rise of logical positivism as the dominant epistemological assumption, the late-Heideggerian connection between language and ontology—produced a situation for Ebeling in which theology and proclamation had become separate endeavors.

Theology and proclamation were believed to be divided because the subject matter of theology (the *kerygma*) was separated from its form (biblical myth). Ebeling’s teacher, Rudolph Bultmann, pursued a strategy of demythologization in order to extract the kerygmatic kernel from its mythical husk. The schism between form and content in

³⁰ Such cultural forces are the “general impression” that proclamation has lost the power to produce certainty and his perception that the “traditional metaphysical understanding of reality is being replaced by the historical understanding of reality.” Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation: Dialogue with Bultmann*, trans., John Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 13, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis added). This situation was similar to that of Ebeling’s theological interlocutor and guide, Rudolf Bultmann. For a critical yet sympathetic reading of Bultmann’s work vis-à-vis the philosophical and cultural situation of his day see Paul Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed., Don Ihde, trans., Peter McCormick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 381-401.

hermeneutics produced a separation in theologies of proclamation as well. Ebeling argued that the main emphasis ought not be on the “content” of the Christian kerygma, but on the “word-character” of the kerygma, i.e., on the “word-event” which takes place through this message. Thus for Ebeling the task of Christian proclamation was to translate the primitive Christian message in such a way that the original word-event takes place afresh in each new historical situation. His *Theology and Proclamation* is an attempt to re-unite them for the sake of both; theology arises *through* proclamation.³²

Karl Barth, in the Preface to his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*, announces his intention to construct a theology of the Word that avoids “anything that might appear to find for theology, a foundation, support, or justification in philosophical existentialism.”³³ The problem Barth’s theology sought to alleviate was a theology grounded in a philosophy of human existence (*à la* Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Herrmann). To continue such a theological grounding, in Barth’s mind, would bring about “the plain destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant Church.”³⁴ For Barth, the

³² See also his 1963 essay, “Word of God and Hermeneutics,” where Ebeling most clearly relates his thinking to the task of preaching. He writes, “[T]he sermon as a sermon is not exposition of the text as past proclamation, but is itself proclamation in the present—and that means, then, that *the sermon is EXECUTION of the text*. It carries into execution the aim of the text. It is proclamation of what the text has proclaimed.” Gerhard Ebeling, “Word of God and Hermeneutics,” in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 327. A bit later in the essay, he writes, “*Thus the text by means of the sermon becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience*. Where that happens radically, there true word is uttered, and that in fact means God’s Word” (331).

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol. I/i, 2nd ed., ed., G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, trans., G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), xiii. This will hold equally for Barth’s theological reflection on proclamation: “Talk about God in the Church seeks to be proclamation to the extent that in the form of preaching and sacrament it is directed to man [*sic*] with the claim and expectation that in accordance with its commission it has to speak to him the Word of God to be heard in faith” (47).

³⁴ *Ibid.* Barth maintains the insistence that proclamation finds its footing on the revealed Word of God. See Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 50: “God himself wills to reveal himself. He himself wills to attest his revelation. He himself—not we—has done this and wills to do it. Preaching, then, takes place in listening to the self-revealing will of God. Preachers are drawn into this event. . . . The event becomes a constituent part of their own existence.” See also Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960).

subjugation of theology to philosophy necessitated a reformation; this reformation would place the proclaimed Word before philosophical speculation, if philosophical consideration could be tolerated at all.³⁵

Contemporary theologians and homileticians face their own cultural and philosophical challenges; in fact, such cultural and philosophical challenges are conjoined in the slippery concept of postmodernism.³⁶ Yet this dissertation does not investigate the cultural or philosophical conditions that produce new theologies of proclamation. Such conditions are givens. Instead, amidst the many possible replies to such challenges, I wish to begin by interrogating the best attempts at responding to contemporary challenges to preaching *theologically*. In other words, amidst all that's *the matter with preaching today*, I want to engage those scholars who recognize that the crisis ecclesial proclamation now faces is theological.

TODAY'S THEOLOGICAL CRISIS FOR PROCLAMATION

Not only am I arguing that one of the central problems with preaching today is theological at base, I am also suggesting that the reigning "theological" solutions to this problem default on their promise of a truly *theological* solution because they have failed to work through certain philosophical presuppositions that always already trouble their theology from within. This need not be surprising. *Theology*, after all, is not a Christian

³⁵ Such philosophical grounds are part of "natural theology," which is "every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, *i.e.*, to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture." Barth continues with the following warning: "If you really reject natural theology you do not stare at the serpent, with the result that it stares back at you, hypnotizes you, and is ultimately certain to bite you, but you hit it and kill it as soon as you see it!" Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed., Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 154-5.

³⁶ Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism* (New York: St. Martin's Press/London: Academy Editions, 1986), 22, writes that postmodernism captures the pluralism that "is our social and metaphysical reality."

word, but a loan-word from Western philosophy. The word appears nowhere in the Bible and it is highly unlikely that Jesus would ever speak in such terms. Coined by Plato, the term *theology* was later adopted by Aristotle to differentiate the myths about the gods from philosophy proper.³⁷

How can Christian proclamation purport to proclaim God when the God about whom it hopes to speak is already suffused with a rationality that sets the terms in which God may speak? In other words, no theology, no words about God, ever arise *ex nihilo*. My argument is that before we speak one word about God, our participation in socio-symbolic matrixes of meaning—language—rests upon an a priori epistemology. Put differently, before we may pay God homage with our words, our epistemological assumptions necessary to utter such words have already submitted to another (feudal) relationship. Before we genuflect theologically, we have always already done so epistemologically, in language. One of the miracles of preaching—and that which can only be professed by faith—is that God still speaks in spite of our epistemologically encumbered theologies. Our recourse to language in general and certain epistemological assumptions in particular must be taken into account on the way to a theology of proclamation.

My critique of the homiletical tradition is that quests for a “theological preface” (Lischer), a theological “frame of reference” (Kay), the “heart” of preaching (Willimon),

³⁷ See Plato, *Republic*, trans., Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), Bk. II, 379 a, p. 182. Plato, speaking to Adeimantus, describes theology as that which arises from the ancient poets about the gods (*contra* philosophy, which gets at the true essence of things). Few Christian theologians would ascribe to Plato’s conclusion: “[god] is the author of only a small part of human affairs . . . the good things we must ascribe to no other than god, while we must seek elsewhere, and not in him [*sic*], the causes of the harmful things” (379 c). Aristotle, in a derisive tone, challenges the *theologoi* (whom Tredennick curiously translates as “cosmologists”) vis-à-vis his own philosophical account for metaphysics. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans., H. Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), Bk. XII, 1071 b 27, p. 142.

“assured knowledge” (Bartow), or even a “reconsideration of the Word” (Chopp) are not theological enough because they each, in their own way, smuggle unexamined philosophical presuppositions into their theologies. My thesis bears repeating here: the theological crisis for proclamation—that which threatens theology from within—is that the words (*logoi*) we use in reference to God (*theos*) are always already encumbered by a certain rationality (*logos*) and unless we expose this feature of theology and experience the features that simultaneously structure the possibility and impossibility of theology, our quest will never quite reach its intended destination; it will never quite be *theological*.

Contemporary Theologies of Proclamation

Among the scholars I engage below I find two kinds of scholarship. The first group of scholars, irrespective of their theological differences, claims that theology is what is the matter with preaching and then they proceed to solve the problem with little or no consideration of the philosophical complexities associated with their approach.³⁸ For these thinkers, it is as if the last sixty years of philosophical critique has had no bearing upon theological matters. Even as I applaud the contributions these scholars have made to homiletics, the lack of attention they pay to language and the role it plays in epistemology in general, and theology in particular, troubles me.³⁹ A goal of this dissertation is to

³⁸ I limit the scope of my study by necessity according to the following conditions: 1) scholars who have written in the last thirty years and thus would have ready access to the majority of the early “post-structural” philosophies in English translations; 2) scholars who choose to ignore the philosophical questions that arise from their work; and 3) scholars who explicitly state that the problem of contemporary preaching is theological. I exclude, for instance, Donald English, *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) because his is less of a theology of preaching than an apology for preaching on doctrine. Admittedly, this excludes earlier scholars as well as those scholars whose contributions might inform the current conversation. To expand the circle of contributors would, I fear, dilute and distract from the aim of this dissertation. However, to account for this necessary focus I will include certain voices parenthetically when appropriate.

³⁹ This is not to suggest that these scholars are not free to choose which thinkers they will engage and how they will structure their own projects. Part of scholarship is deciding which thinkers to treat and on what level. Nevertheless, to ignore certain thinkers who challenge the very core of one’s thinking needs to

expose the unexamined philosophical features of these theologies of proclamation in order to make the task of preaching as difficult as it needs to be, or, to borrow Fant's phrase again, to make sure that preaching is in trouble *for the right reasons*.

The second, and much smaller, body of scholarship is comprised of thinkers who recognize that certain philosophical problems accompany theologies of proclamation.⁴⁰ When we again reduce the scope of investigation to those who focus upon the Word of God as the guiding thread of theological reflection for proclamation, only Rebecca Chopp's text, *The Power to Speak*, remains. Chopp is right not to shy away from the philosophical critiques that trouble theology from within. My debt to her work is deep. The fault I find with Chopp's work is that in her zeal to ferret out oppressive political agendas she has allowed philosophy to supplant theology.

The purpose of this chapter is not so much to challenge or deconstruct the work of these authors than to help us experience a certain trembling that threatens the stability of

be accounted for. One of my hopes with this dissertation is that by exposing the work of these scholars whom I hold in such high esteem to the philosophical conundrums that have vexed my theological thinking we will all be open to see the problem in new ways and contribute fresh insights to the homiletical conversation.

⁴⁰ My selection criteria for this group of scholars is the same as that listed earlier, with the addition of scholars who choose to engage the work of philosophers vis-à-vis theologies of proclamation. For example, even though they bravely embrace some of the philosophical implications arising from postmodernism, I exclude Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) because they view the problem of preaching as cultural rather than theological. I also exclude the work of John S. McClure, who is the most philosophically oriented of all contemporary homileticians, because his work is less focused on issues related to a theology of proclamation than on rhetoric, culture, the authority of the preacher, and ethics, respectively. See *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); and *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). This does not, of course, mean that his work is not theological, only that it is not focused on offering a theological foundation for preaching. Another scholar of high caliber is Eunjoo Kim. Increasingly Kim has contributed to discussions on theology for preaching. See her *Preaching in an Age of Globalization* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) and her recent essay "A Theology of Preaching in Post-Christendom: Seeking a New Paradigm," in the papers of *Societas Homiletica* Biennial Meeting (Wittenberg, Germany, 2012). In these works Kim grounds preaching in a theology of human dignity and diversity, rather than the Word.

their respective theologies of proclamation. My contention, and what I hope to display in Chapter Two of this dissertation, is that by experiencing those philosophical complications that nevertheless fund our theologies of proclamation, we may move toward an understanding of God's Word in human words that acknowledges the internal limitations posed on our language, speech, and preaching. Such an acknowledgement of our philosophical "sins" is the first step toward a theology of proclamation appropriate to the redeemed.

Richard Lischer's A Theology of Preaching

Duke Divinity professor Richard Lischer's *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (1981, rev. ed. 1992) functions as a theological prolegomenon to preaching. He structures the purpose, form, and telos of preaching according to a central theological doctrine: the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his own words, his book is "a theological preface whose aim is to show how theology informs preaching and how preaching, as a kerygmatic, oral, practical activity, informs theology and brings it to its final form of expression."⁴¹

Lischer was one of the first contemporary homileticians to make the case that proclamation should drive theology even as it builds upon theology's insights.⁴² Along the way Lischer challenges the post-Schleiermachian subordination of proclamation to theology, contending that preaching *is* theology at a primary, indeed, ontological level.

⁴¹ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 11. Lischer writes, "What is offered represents my own sense of priorities and my own understanding of those things that generate theology, preaching, and a theology of preaching" (12).

⁴² In an earlier generation, proclamation remained very much subordinate to (systematic or dogmatic) theology. See Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, whose views on proclamation arise from Bultmann's theology and Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation*, whose work arises from "the basic Biblical and dogmatical questions which . . . will inevitably come to every responsible preacher when he begins to think seriously about the proclamation of the Church in which he and his congregation have a part" (7). Ritschl's primary progenitor is Karl Barth.

He declares that “every aspect of preaching is theological; not only the scriptural words and themes, but the style with which they are restated; not only the words, but the posture and the sense of congruence between person and world; not only the message, but also the program and congregational action by which the sermon is implemented.”⁴³ Lischer is not advocating a simple inversion, whereby preaching seizes the primary role for itself from theology. Rather, he views the two as interrelated: theology is preaching; preaching is theology—provided that such a theology draws its life from the Gospel. When the two work in concert, both are enlivened. Lischer writes,

Only the preacher who is rooted (not buried) in the church’s constitutive principles, its doctrine, will be free to address the concerns of living people. Such a preacher will not necessarily live on the boundary between two separate spheres of existence, but will learn to interpret existence in all its dimensions as a gift from God. Then, preaching, because it is rooted in those truths that touch humankind at its deepest levels—creation, identity, love, fulfillment, sin, hope, peace, forgiveness—becomes relevant without losing its soul.⁴⁴

Lischer’s book poses the question that should be asked of all preachers before any sermon preparation is ventured, namely, what is the theology behind and beneath Christian proclamation? Along the way, Lischer facilitates a helpful conversation between Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann, as well as their intellectual progeny, Heinrich Ott and Gerhard Ebeling. Lischer articulates a helpful clarification of some perceived misconceptions of the Lutheran law-gospel dialectic, and so helps to bring Reformed and Lutheran homiletics into greater proximity, all the while stressing the important interpenetration between theology and proclamation.

One of the primary concerns expressed through Lischer’s text is to establish a working relationship between theology and proclamation. He declares this explicitly and

⁴³ Lischer., 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

such work arises from a concern that in between the homiletical gaps—between text and preaching, between text and congregational context, between Law and Gospel—theology holds a “mediatorial position.”⁴⁵ He recognizes too that theology constantly opens itself to that which is otherwise than theology (psychotherapy, anthropology, philosophy, etc.) and states that such dialogue not only informs preaching, it makes it possible—and intelligible.⁴⁶ However, even as he advocates a reciprocal relationship between theology and preaching, the same dialogical openness between preaching and its interlocutors does not seem to hold. Confusedly, preaching *is* theology, and yet it is somehow relieved of the burden of remaining open to *its* interlocutors.

Lischer writes, “Preaching functions as a corrective to theology. When theology moves toward synthesis with its dialogue partners of other disciplines, preaching recalls for it its character as *theo*-logy, reflection on God. . . . When theology produces unpreachable, that is, nonevangelical, words about God, preaching marks them REFUSED, and the church momentarily pauses, examines itself, and corrects its course.”⁴⁷ So, even as Lischer opens the channels of dialogue between theology and proclamation, he imposes a theological valve, a valve which proclamation has the sole rights to operate.

Citing E. L. Mascall’s warning against “the kind of philistinism which would reduce theology to homiletics and would repudiate any interest in scholarly questions as ‘wisdom according to the flesh,’” Lischer contends that “preaching engages the apparently remote, assimilates and internalizes it, and finally, not only makes it real, but

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22-3.

integrates it in congregations of faith.”⁴⁸ I wish to press Lischer on how well his own theology of proclamation “internalizes” and “integrates” that which preaching might deem “remote,” but which theology proper would deem crucial. In other words, to what degree has Lischer ignored epistemological and linguistic concerns in his homiletical theology, concerns that many theologians deem crucial for making and bolstering theological claims?

One of the most profound statements Lischer makes in relation to theology and proclamation reads as follows: “The movement from proclamatory theology to theological proclamation results in a three-fold confluence: in the preacher, in the Christian community, and in the sermon.”⁴⁹ Thus, “The preacher *is* the exegete, systematician, domatician [*sic*], historian, and pastor. The preacher becomes the embodiment of Schleiermacher’s ideal theologian described in *A Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*.”⁵⁰ However, even as proclamation subsumes and thereby seizes the premiere role in the theological task, Lischer fails to describe the critical (philosophical) task that accompanies the work of theologians, biblical scholars, church historians, etc. In short, the prolegomena necessary to the work of these disciplines is lost in the “estuary” that is theological proclamation.

Two issues in particular show how the trajectory of Lischer’s thought is significant for a theology of proclamation. First, and of particular interest for this dissertation, is the issue of speech. Lischer writes, “Our cultural perception has so long been dominated by the visual—script, print, electronic image—that from time to time

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28. The πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ Jülicher I citation is from *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977), 24.

⁴⁹ Lischer., 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 28.

voices are needed to remind us that the visual words we see are *representations* of a more fundamental and primal reality, namely, the word as sound. Words are for hearing.”⁵¹

Lischer continues along these lines, arguing, with Walter J. Ong, that “[s]ound is the key to interiority.”⁵² Where, we may wonder, is the engagement with the “apparently remote” that Lischer commends as a necessary condition for obviating the “philistinism” of supplanting theology with preaching? Lischer accepts, with no critical pause, the Western proclivity to subordinate writing to speech. I suggest that Lischer has accepted the orality of the Word because it bolsters the primacy of (oral) proclamation over (written) theology. This I find problematic and the critical engagement with a theology of orality/aurality will be a key component of analysis in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

A second moment of slippage is evident in Lischer’s treatment of “Christian anthropology.” Lischer writes,

The many factors contributing to the hermeneutical dilemma are usually analyzed with a sense of detachment appropriate to any discipline that deals in ancient and authoritative texts. Theology rightly joins this inquiry into the possibility of preaching; but before it uncritically accepts the conclusions of the cultural anthropologists and philosophers of *Existenz*, it must reflect theologically (that is, on its own terms) upon this volatile, yet programmed, profanely sacred, paradoxical creature named *Adam* (human) and *Adamah* (earth).⁵³

So far, I am in relative agreement with Lischer about the need for critical engagement with extra-theological disciplines (although I doubt systematic theologians would concede that they have *uncritically* accepted anything from their interlocutors).⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69. See Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) and Ong’s later work *Orality and Literacy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1982).

⁵³ Lischer, 82.

⁵⁴ By my reading, homiletics is much more prone to uncritical adoption than systematic theology. Consider Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), esp. 63-78, where he conforms the mode of proclamation to the existential philosophy of Heidegger and

Lischer continues, “The revelation about humanity offers no neutral pre-understanding concerning human reason, language, history, or any other data to which a theological slant might be superadded. God is in the human picture from beginning to end.”⁵⁵ Again, I concur. However, as Lischer proceeds to discuss the givenness of language as a medium of human communication, he is dismissive, and uncritically so. He argues against the “growing cynicism toward language” and that “preachers should be implicated in the distrust of language,” writing, “Ordinary, simple words have been kidnapped and their meanings pressed into service by powers foreign to their original intention.”⁵⁶ One of the primary reasons why theology in general and theologies of proclamation in particular need to remain in continued conversation with philosophy is to remind us that language and its accompanying epistemological assumptions are logically prior to theological propositions. Were Lischer more faithful to his declared intention he would not be so quick to charge philosophy with “kidnapping” language, but might “reflect theologically,” in his own words, upon the theological implications that arise from philosophies of language. What does it say about the words we employ to signify God if language was always already “kidnapped”?⁵⁷

Notwithstanding Lischer’s supreme contributions to theology, especially proclamatory theology, his work displays another gesture that is at work within his text that works against his declared intentions. Proclamation *is* theology. But this charges homiletics with just as many responsibilities as privileges. Lischer is correct in asserting

communicational theory of McLuhan. Bultmann, I would argue, is much more intent on baptizing Heideggerian insights than accepting them *carte blanche*. See Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” 381-401.

⁵⁵ Lischer, 82-3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁷ As Derrida, *OG*, 37, will point out, and we will devote significant space to this point, “Usurpation has always already begun.”

that preaching has a thing or two to teach theology. Yet, this does not grant homiletics the right to dismiss the critical work of theology under the mantra, “It won’t preach.” Indeed, preaching always needs theology to make preaching as hard as it needs to be.⁵⁸

Charles L. Bartow’s God’s Human Speech

Charles Bartow’s compelling and well-researched text, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (1997) presents a way of understanding preaching as God’s speech through human words. His declared purpose is “to encourage confidence in the Bible read and the sermon delivered as means of grace in an age of radical criticism of Scripture, creed, and confession.”⁵⁹ Bartow takes seriously the dictum from the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1562) that “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” By this he understands the “performance” of a sermon as a re-animation of the living Word of God held in abeyance in the biblical witness, as a work entangled in words. Moreover, his intention is to offer a practical theology of the Word as a positive corrective to what he labels the “post-modern mind.”

Bartow offers many helpful insights for proclaiming the Word, insights garnered through a fruitful career spent “in service to the servants of the Word.”⁶⁰ Through his teaching and scholarship Bartow is consistent: through the preacher’s (embodied) speech, the Spirit of God is loosed upon the congregation, reconfiguring both the preacher and the congregation in the process. Bartow writes that in the performance of the Word, “[w]e

⁵⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans., James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 424, cited in Lischer, 17.

⁵⁹ Charles L. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), ix.

⁶⁰ See Charles L. Bartow, “In Service to the Servants of the Word: Teaching Speech at Princeton Seminary,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 13, no. 3 (1992): 274-86 and his classic text on the performative element in sermon delivery, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1995).

are speaking of the infinite in finite terms, of *actio divina* in the discourse of *homo performans*. We are using vocal and physical gesture to sound forth and body forth (enact) human experience of the divine.”⁶¹ Bartow’s insistence upon the *embodiment* of the Word is of special value and this fact is often overlooked in homiletical conversations on embodiment and preaching.⁶²

There is much in *God’s Human Speech* that is commendable.⁶³ For the purposes of this dissertation, however, it is important that we scrutinize Bartow’s theology of proclamation in order to expose some of the uncritical philosophical presuppositions that underlie his work. I focus on two areas of trouble at the intersection of philosophy and theology: 1) the call to hear the Word of God as “living speech” vis-à-vis the “arrested performance” of the written Word and 2) the “entanglement” of meaning and signification in proclamation. By applying pressure on these aspects of Bartow’s thought, we can better fulfill Bartow’s stated purpose for the book, namely, to “encourage confidence in the Bible read and the sermon delivered as means of grace.”⁶⁴ I believe that the key to “positive preaching” with regard to the “post-modern mind” is not to double-down on ostensive reference, authorial intention, and creedal affirmation, but to experience that which always already troubles preaching through open and critical investigation.

⁶¹ Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 60.

⁶² See, for example, Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), who never even mentions Bartow. A notable exception to this trend is found in Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmidt, ed., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). The essays collected in this volume function as a *de facto Festschrift* for Bartow. Indeed, Childers and Schmidt label Bartow “the dean of the school of performance studies” (11).

⁶³ Particularly helpful is Bartow’s treatment of oxymoronic, metaphorical, and metonymic speech in proclamation.

⁶⁴ Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, ix.

Bartow writes, “. . . when I step into the pulpit of a church, face the congregation, say: ‘Let us hear the word of God,’ and then proceed to read from the Bible and to preach, that *is* performative action.”⁶⁵ On the contrary, this is not a performative (in an Austinian sense), and from Bartow’s definition almost anything said or done in or outside of the context of Christian worship could constitute performative action. Bartow continues, “It is not an invitation—take it or leave it—to pay attention to the preacher.”⁶⁶ When the preacher declares, “Hear the word of God,” Bartow argues that it is to apprise congregants that God is about to act through the preacher’s words. He is quick to note, however, that this declaration in no way secures God’s presence, but that God remains free to act, and speak, according to God’s good pleasure. Bartow notes, “In any case, the absence of God may be as much God’s word to us human beings at any given moment as the divine presence. Likewise, silence from God may be precisely what people now and then are expected to ‘hear.’”⁶⁷

What Bartow has offered is a logically suspect defense of the *actio divina in homo performans*: the preacher says, “Let us hear the word of God” and the congregants are either going to hear God’s words as presence, as absence, or not at all. What then is the performative significance of this prefatory call? Given the space he dedicates to the call, it seems to add something necessary for Bartow, some essential supplement to God’s Word, but I cannot decipher what precisely. Bartow continues down this path, writing, “The word of God is not always what we think it should be. Often we cannot imagine—much less re-imagine—it, so totally does it disconfirm instead of confirm our

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

expectations concerning it.”⁶⁸ So, it seems that even the preacher himself is not sure what he is saying when he utters, “Let us hear the word of God.” Curiously, the Word is not *always* what we think it is. Does that mean that preachers sometimes get it right? Is the intentionality behind these words an intentionality of something accessible to consciousness? An intentionality *of* something? On what grounds, then, might we “gesture” toward the Word by way of a certain figure of speech?

The importance Bartow places on the call seems to arise from his (philosophical) distinction between “living speech,” which is “full,” “present,” and which “reveals interiority” (authorial intention) on the one hand, and the “written text,” which is an “arrested performance,” a “dead-letter” or that which “is about to be lived,” on the other.⁶⁹ Bartow argues, following the insights of his teacher and mentor, William Brower (to whom Bartow dedicates this work), that “the purpose of speaking literature is to turn the ink back into blood.”⁷⁰ It was T. S. Elliot who argued that the purpose of literature was to turn blood into ink. Through speech and concomitant “physical gestural virtuosity” the preacher conditions herself to “experience and understand presence and the Presence.”⁷¹ Embodied speech is the human performance (*homo performans*) that ignites the flow of presence from its inert state in the dead-letter of the text, in short, from ink into blood.⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 64, 66, 121.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 64. Later, p. 97, Bartow will describe the text as “sound frozen in ink.”

⁷¹ Ibid. Cf. Jana Childers’s forward to *God’s Human Speech*, xiii-xiv: “Bartow believes that preaching is a theological enterprise embodied at any given time in a human voice, body, and person. . . . He makes a persuasive theological argument for Divine Presence—Real Presence—in the public reading of Scripture and in preaching, and he shows how a preacher’s language, inflection, phrasing, and intonation are in service to that presence.”

⁷² Bartow adapts *homo performans* from Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 81 ff.

An internal tension remains unresolved in Bartow's text. This is not a productive tension—it does not achieve anything in the event of preaching—but an equivocation on God's presence in "God's human speech." For instance, Bartow writes,

Revelation thus evokes with us awareness of God's distance from us and nearness to us, God's accessibility to us and hiddenness from us, God's coming and God's going, God's speech and God's silence. The history of revelation, therefore, is marked by episodes of continuity and discontinuity. There is sufficient continuity to enable us to speak to each other about God and to have some idea of what we are talking about when we do. But there is sufficient discontinuity to keep us aware of the fact that we can never sum it all up.⁷³

Here Bartow recognizes the paradoxical nature of revelation, which is beyond totalization. Why then is Bartow so insistent on re-inscribing the classic Western tendency to associate speech with presence and writing with absence? When we invite our congregants to hear the Word of God might this not be a call to recognize God's presence in God's absence and, *mutatis mutandis*, God's absence in God's presence? In what way, then, is the text an "arrested performance" if both text and proclamation *are* the Word of God?

Bartow displays that the philosophical problematic of speech and writing, and how such a bias against writing trips up his theological claims, in the following passage:

And if the divine self-disclosure in Jesus Christ is the primary (if peripatetic) locus of performative action for practical theology (and other forms of theological study as well), it is imperative that we attend to that self-disclosure with all the varied means appropriate to it. . . . The Word of God is face to face, oral-aural, situated, and suasory discourse. It is not a dead letter. It is not reason alone. It is an event of *actio divina* (God's self-performance, if you will). It is in fact God's human speech.⁷⁴

An awareness of the relationship between speech and writing obviates the simple distinction Bartow makes between *dead letter* and *living speech*. Inherent in the structure

⁷³ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

of human communication is a certain vacillation between life and death, and this situation is necessary for both speech and writing.⁷⁵ That is the philosophical quandary reinscribed in Bartow's text. Theologically, we must question Bartow's handling of the second form of the Word of God—the written Word. I would argue that *actio divina* is equally at work in the “dead letter” of the Bible as in the proclaimed Word of God.

The second point of pressure I would like to apply to Bartow's text is on the double “entanglement” of literal versus figurative speech and meaning versus indication that he sees at work in preaching. Bartow exhibits a particular philosophy of speech that troubles his articulation of *God's human speech* throughout his text. For instance, when articulating oxymoronic statements as “prototypical figures of speech used to designate the plural specificity of *actio divina* as the Scriptures bear witness to it,” Bartow makes a distinction between indication and expression.⁷⁶ For Bartow, oxymoronic statements “do not just make room in consciousness,” they “indicate” beyond the conscious intentionality of the speaker (or writer).⁷⁷ In other words, the degree to which certain figures of speech are indicative beyond consciousness is the degree that they are “utterly unthinkable,” the measure of their “incommensurability.”⁷⁸

Even as he recognizes that literal speech is neither more nor less referential than figurative speech and that “[l]iteral speech is simply a taken-for-granted form of

⁷⁵ See Derrida, *SP*, 40: “All these ‘goings-forth’ effectively exile this life of self-presence in indications. We know now that indication, which thus far includes practically the whole surface of language, is the process of death at work in signs. As soon as the other appears, indicative language—another name for the relation with death—can no longer be effaced.”

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58-9. This distinction was fundamental for Husserl's treatment of language and its facility in connecting consciousness to speech. See Derrida, *SP*, 17-26 and Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, 2nd ed., part 1 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1928), 23 ff. on *ein Doppelsinn des Terminus Zeichen*.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-9. This is a point he reiterates later in his book (p. 96) when he writes that “. . . the text's significations and effects go beyond what can be said.”

figuration,” Bartow draws a clear distinction between the two. The former he deems “conventional” and “conservative,” while the latter is “radical” and “reformative.” He writes, “If literal speech is conservative, generally though not consistently intended to maintain the status quo, boldly figurative speech . . . is radical and reformative.”⁷⁹ What seems to differentiate the two most clearly for Bartow is their reference. Literal speech has an objective referent while figurative speech has a subjective, or experiential, referent. Literal speech, as employed by the biblical authors, “refer[s] to the divine reality” whereas in figurative speech “[t]hey are gesturing toward what is there, acting on the biblical authors, causing them joy, anguish, hope, despair. . . .”⁸⁰

Although qualified, the distinction Bartow makes between *conventional* and *radical* speech displays a philosophical decision not accounted for in his theology of proclamation. All of language is conventional inasmuch as it arises from a social-symbolic agreement prior to articulation. As the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure observes, “. . . any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention, which comes to the same thing.”⁸¹ Moreover, when the word *radical* modifies speech it can do so only in relation to certain perceptions of reality for a given group of language users. There is nothing inherently radical about speech, merely contexts. What remains to be seen is what kind of speech is appropriate to God’s human speech. Bartow writes,

To single out certain figures of speech as prototypically associated with divine self-disclosure, then, is not to say that no other speech is engaged in

⁷⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 62. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor of the Text in Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207-72 on the problems associated with bifurcating the literal and the figurative senses. Hereafter this text will be abbreviated *MP*.

⁸¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed., Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger, trans., Roy Harris (Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1983), 68.

by those passing on to us from long ago their experience of God who is one and the same, yesterday, today, and forever. It is rather to say that even their literal (that is, more customary) speech must contend with God's radical otherness and freedom, including God's freedom to be with humanity where and as it seems fitting to Godself.⁸²

If this is so, then why does Bartow devote so much space in his text to advocating certain figures of speech as better suited to proclamatory discourse?

Meaning and indication are also "entangled" in Bartow's work. He writes, "The text has something to say, and the meaning of the text never can be less or other than what is asserted in it. Its asserted meaning is its conceptual content. Yet the text's significations and effects go beyond what can be said. Denotation is enriched by connotation."⁸³ The biblical text houses a meaning (*vouloir dire*) as well as a signification. In other words, its "conceptual content," or denotative meaning is housed within the fabric of the Text. For Bartow, the meaning is fixed by the Text itself (it "can never be less or other than what is asserted in it"). At the same time, the Text signifies an ostensive meaning that lies outside the Text. Its denotation (meaning) is supplemented by a connotation (signification).

It is the task of preaching to embody the meaning of the Text, but Bartow recognizes that it is impossible within the spatio-temporal confines of human speech to ever fully capture the denotative and connotative meanings of the Word revealed in the Text. He notes, "When one speaks of the text as cue to the work entangled in its words, one is speaking of a textual life and meaning beyond the full comprehension of the preacher-interpreter."⁸⁴ How then can Bartow prioritize, in hierarchical fashion, meaning

⁸² Bartow, *God's Human Speech*, 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98. Cf. Husserl, 24 on the entanglement of indication and expression. Derrida will make much of this in *SP*.

over indication? How is this metaphysical decision accounted for in Bartow's text? How can, as Bartow asserts, "conceptual content, originating historical circumstance, authorial intents, and redactional developments set the trajectory for textual meaning"?⁸⁵ If meaning and indication are always already "entangled," by what measure and according to what standard can Bartow disentangle them in order to favor meaning over indication? These questions remain unresolved in Bartow's text.

William H. Willimon's *Theology and Proclamation*

In his *Theology and Proclamation* (2005), Bishop William Willimon proceeds from the conviction that, "At the heart of preaching is either a God who speaks, and who speaks now, in the sermon, or preaching is silly."⁸⁶ His text is a marked critique of the reigning "psychologism" he sees in most contemporary sermons, where the effectiveness of a sermon is measured against its utility to help one face the problems of one's quotidian existence. Willimon declares, "Our job as preachers is to stand up and speak the truth as God gives it to us; congregational response is God's business."⁸⁷ While not as stridently opposed to rhetoric and contextual considerations as others, Willimon's theology of proclamation is unequivocal in its claim that God's Word ought to be the center of discrete acts of proclamation. Like the texts summarized above, Willimon focuses upon the Word of God as the central and normative theological orientation for proclamation. He argues, "We must recover a sense of preaching as something that God

⁸⁵ Ibid., 97. He continues, "They do not delimit it. Meaning is always more than what was meant. Through performance, scriptural texts evoke worlds of human being "real enough for people to enter, to believe in, and to be changed by.""

⁸⁶ William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22.

does—a theological matter before it is an anthropological matter—preaching is the business of God before it is our business.”⁸⁸

This small but helpful volume is organized into six chapters: “The Preached Word Is the Word of God,” “The Prophetic Word,” “The Biblical Word,” “The Incarnate Word,” “Cross and Resurrection in Preaching” and “The Political Word.” It is evident just from the chapter titles that theology structures Christian proclamation at every turn for Willimon. This text is less concerned with rhetoric—especially as it relates to “effectiveness” or congregational response—but it nevertheless sees rhetoric as a theologically important matter for preaching. Willimon writes, “So the incarnation implies that we preachers are not concerning ourselves with trivialities when we consider the design, form, arrangement, and structure of a sermon or when we agonize over issues of delivery and presentation of a sermon.”⁸⁹ Homiletical rhetoric is crucial inasmuch as it arises from a theological conviction; the rationale for rhetorical consideration is paramount for Willimon.

Willimon contends that a “sermon is a speech that is more.”⁹⁰ The surfeit of sermonic speech is nothing less than God’s speech, and it is precisely in relation to this *something else* that propels Willimon’s text. He writes, “This book is written from the conviction that if there is anything wrong with preaching as we know it today, what’s wrong is theological.”⁹¹ God’s decision to speak, to express Godself through Christian proclamation is at the “heart” of preaching. While I appreciate Willimon’s contribution to a theology of proclamation and share his conviction that the central problem with

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18-22.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹ Ibid., 3.

preaching today is theological, I am nevertheless troubled by several philosophical inconsistencies that frustrate his theological contributions.

First, Willimon insists upon the linguistic construction of reality. He writes,

In the Bible, word precedes world. There is nothing until there are words to create something. The names are not necessarily connected to the thing but rather arise from the one who does the naming. Reality is linguistically constructed. Word precedes world. Words do not arise from things, but rather things are evoked by the Word. Word precedes all things.⁹²

I completely agree with Willimon's starting point. To begin—"In the beginning . . ."—with the linguistic construction of reality is to begin *before* the beginning. Anterior to creation is something like language, a certain possibility of (divine) speech out of which all things were made that were made. This point is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture (e.g., Gen. 1:1-2:3; Isa. 55:11; John 1:1-4; 1 John 1:1-1-3). Moreover, I agree with Willimon that the possibility of preaching arises from the primal (originary?) Word of God. God's Word establishes the conditions of possibility for preaching as well as its primary theme. What I find problematic in Willimon's text is a failure to carry out this theological insight to its fullest conclusions. Nowhere does he account for his view of language, for instance, and this oversight raises questions about his theology. Does Willimon hold to a nomenclaturist view of language, whereby words are understood to come about as names for already-existing meanings, thereby suggesting a historical and ontological primacy of non-linguistic reality? What is at stake for his theology such that language must precede creation? Do preachers have access to such a language? And, if so, how can reality be "linguistically constructed"?

⁹² Ibid., 12. Cf. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, in *Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed., Whitney J. Oates, trans., A. W. Haddan and W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Random House, 1948), XV/10, 846.

A second point of concern is that Willimon slides into a Western mode of binary logic—logocentrism—in his text and this logic governs his theology of proclamation at its core. By this I mean that he adopts, without comment, an epistemological assumption that creates meaning by creating opposites and then giving preference to one of the terms in the binary over the other.⁹³

For instance, Willimon writes, “It is my judgment that current preaching is in great need of theological refurbishment. We desperately need something from the *outside*. We must recover a sense of preaching as something that God does—a theological matter before it is an anthropological matter—preaching is the business of God before it is our business.”⁹⁴ If, as Willimon asserts, reality is linguistically constructed, where might we find such an *outside*? Moreover, if the possibility of human speech arises from the originary speaking of a loquacious God, is not this *outside* of speech always already at work on the *inside* of human language? This certainly seems to be the case for Willimon:

If God should stop talking, if God should withdraw, even for a moment, into apophatic, empty silence, then the mountains would fall, chaos would overwhelm, the light would become darkness, and death would have the last word. Yet God’s creative, life-giving, people-forming, intrusive Word keeps creating, keeps being made flesh, keeps pushing in, keeps having the last say.⁹⁵

Perhaps a more theological argument, and one that clings more faithfully to the Word incarnate, would not look for an outside, but would recognize that God’s Word is always already at work on the inside of human experience and language. The outside/inside binary creates more (theological) problems than it solves for a theology of proclamation.

⁹³ For more on logocentrism see Derrida, *OG*, 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-9. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

An additional philosophical conundrum arises from Willimon's distinction between truth and effectiveness. Even as Willimon himself is considered one of the twelve "most effective" preachers in the English-speaking world, he insists that he has no concern for listener response. He writes, "Next Sunday, if once again my congregation appears to be unmoved and unimpressed by my homiletical efforts, I intend to ascribe their lack of response to God! Our job as preachers is to stand up and speak the truth as God gives it to us; congregational response is God's business."⁹⁶ Such a statement, even if hyperbolic, proceeds upon the a priori decision to separate truth from effectiveness. Might not an ineffective sermon point just as clearly to truth as falsehood? Compare Jonathan Edward preaching during the 1st Great Awakening with the "Word of Faith" prosperity preaching; both are *effective* by their own standards.

Rather than drawing proclamation closer to theology (the Word of God preached is the Word of God), binary commitments unintentionally enforce the very same anthropology that Willimon wishes to overcome. He writes, "We preachers are to worry more about what is being said and how well we can replicate that word than we are to worry about whether or not what is being said in the Gospel is being heard in the world."⁹⁷ Whatever the cause of our *worry*, is not such an effort a human effort? Would it not be more theological to bear witness to God's Word in the biblical text and in the world, to preach God's Word and trust God to communicate the truth to be found therein as well as any human response? Neither truth nor effectiveness ought to guide preaching because neither is within the confines of human agency.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 20.

Willimon continues, “Our faith in preaching is not based upon preaching’s effectiveness but rather upon its truth, a truth that graciously reaches out to us and gives us what we need to hear as the way, the truth, and the life.”⁹⁸ Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, Willimon’s construct gets in the way of his declared intention: “At the heart of preaching is either a God who speaks, and who speaks now, in the sermon, or preaching is silly.”⁹⁹ It matters little whether the preacher is focused upon her effectiveness or her truthfulness; it still arises as a result of human agency for Willimon.

We are unable to overcome the human limitation through which God has chosen to communicate Godself to humankind by human effort. As an aside, few if any preachers whom Willimon might accuse of being concerned with effectiveness *rather than* truth would accept his terms, much less the idea that their preaching is unconcerned with “truth” (n.b., each preacher’s understanding of “truth” will differ according to his or her theological persuasion; for some, the purpose of preaching is conversion, which is only possible through declamation of Gospel “truth”). The hard distinction between truth and effectiveness re-inscribes a logic that works against Willimon’s declared (theological) intention.

At day’s end, Willimon himself seems unwilling to fully accept the binary logic that governs his treatment of the prophetic word. He writes, “Preaching can be said to be ‘effective’ only because it is true. It is not through psychology, sociology, or skillful rhetoric that we reach people but rather through theology—and *God said*.”¹⁰⁰ Even later, he observes, “If a sermon ‘works,’ it does so as a gracious gift of God, a miracle no less

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 21. If this is true, how does Willimon account for the swelling number of converts in Evangelical churches that focus on effectiveness (i.e., conversion) in relation to the dwindling effectiveness of Mainline Protestant churches?

than the virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰¹ Though he never explicitly states this, Willimon seems to associate truth with the Word, which is greater than exegetical fidelity and/or historical-critical astuteness.¹⁰² For preaching to be as theological as it needs to be it must emerge theologically, that is, according to God’s incarnate Word and abiding Presence.

Willimon gets it right when he declares, “The Word has in itself the power given by God, to effect that which it proclaims.”¹⁰³ Truth and effectiveness are inaccessible to human preachers. I may convince a congregation through impeccable logic of the truthfulness of my message. I can arrange my argument in order to sway the hearts and minds of my listeners, to compel them to respond. Neither of these approaches, however, is theological for they arise out of my own agency. To live into the belief that the Word of God preached is the Word of God is to acknowledge the philosophical hindrances that always already impede the possibility of God’s speech through human words and in sight of this aporia to give thanks to God.

The key to Willimon’s theology of proclamation is the spoken Word of God. God has spoken most articulately through the person of Jesus Christ, and thus his treatment of incarnational preaching gets at the best Willimon has to offer. He writes, “When Jesus walks through his congregation in the words of the sermon as the Word, the congregation experiences Jesus as God in the Flesh. Jesus Christ is the self-attestation, the self-proclamation, the self-revelation of God.”¹⁰⁴ The mysterious incarnation of God in Jesus

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰² Willimon, 30, writes, “The real test of preaching that is done by an ordained pastor is not the praise of the public, nor even its faithfulness to the original Greek of the biblical text, but rather the ability of the pastor’s sermon to evoke a prophetic people.”

¹⁰³ Ibid. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 54.

Christ makes preaching possible for Willimon. He therefore offers an understanding of preaching that mirrors Jesus' earthly incarnation: fully human, fully divine. Willimon confesses, "[Jesus'] human life was not some fleshly husk that he could discard once his divinity took over his humanity. He never got over being fully human while he was fully divine."¹⁰⁵

I believe that much of homiletics, particularly that which hopes to be more theologically grounded, has paid insufficient attention to the incarnational realities of preaching. We are too quick to talk of mystery, so much so that we have missed the mystery of God's human speech always already at work *in* human speech. Willimon seems to agree: "Thus, in preaching, the Word of God is both revealed and arcane, unveiled and veiled. Hearing is never self-evident, rarely obvious or direct, but mediated, tainted, and constrained by the human limits of both the preacher and the congregation."¹⁰⁶ I would argue that one such human limit that is insufficiently treated in the homiletical literature is that of language.

In spite of his many significant contributions in this text, Willimon misses opportunities to reflect on God's Word in human words of proclamation. He writes, "We preachers must therefore pray that God will give us as great a gift of critical self-knowledge as possible. It is demanded of all of us preachers that we be willing to engage in a lifetime of self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-discovery so that we might better know all the ways that we adulterate the Word of God in our words."¹⁰⁷ What remains to be seen in homiletics is how the *adulteration* of God's Word in human words might be

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 55. Willimon appropriates this insight for preaching: "Even for Almighty God to speak in ways that we comprehend, is an incarnational exercise" (56).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 57-8.

the very condition of God's incarnation. It is not so much that "[p]reaching originates in a God who when God 'utters his voice, the earth melts' (Psalm 46:6)"¹⁰⁸ than by the fact that God's speaking does not obliterate human speaking. This fact is as much a cause for celebration as it is for further theological investigation.

James F. Kay's *Preaching and Theology*

James F. Kay, the Joe R. Engel professor of homiletics and liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, begins his superb *Preaching and Theology* (2007) by offering an invitation for "those who may have lost or never found their theological frame of reference."¹⁰⁹ Over and against other frames of reference that have held a disproportionate amount of homiletical currency, Kay makes a compelling case for a theological frame of reference that may then govern the others. Kay puts it well when he writes, "Insofar as the God of the gospel is of concern to preaching, theology—that is, thinking about what we are saying and doing in light of this God—is unavoidable."¹¹⁰ Like Lischer, Bartow, and Willimon, Kay's aim is to show how and why theology matters for preaching and how and why preaching matters for theology. What distinguishes Kay from the others is the clarity and surprising concision by which he is able to accomplish this task.

One of the central features of Kay's text is his insistence on the primacy of theology in proclamation. He decries what he sees as the usurpation of theology in preaching by rhetoric and poetics, arguing unequivocally for the primacy of theology. According to Kay, the key insight from a theological frame of reference in preaching is

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁹ James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., viii.

that God is the speaker of God's own Word, "both formally and materially."¹¹¹ Kay works through this argument by pointing to the threefold Word of God as a theological license for preaching as God's Word.

Kay opens his text with the following words:

"You poor preachers. You only have words!" This reproach rings truer of the Christian pulpit than a certain defensiveness might otherwise allow. Yes, we preachers work largely with words. And words are problematic. Sometimes they seem scarcely up to the job. Sometimes they wander and hide from their subject matter—or get lost. Through repeated use and overuse their meanings cease to challenge us to further reflection or needed action. . . . No less than ourselves, words are fallen into the grips of a power, traditionally termed sin, that corrupts and kills them even while enticing them into its service and frequently in the name of religion or God.

For this reason, thinking critically and theologically is necessary for preaching to proceed with honesty, integrity, and faithfulness to the Christian message.¹¹²

The significance of Kay's prefatory remarks is profound: 1) we are limited by the linguistic constraints in which we find ourselves; 2) our words, in spite of our best attempts, never quite do the job of communicating because they are somehow "fallen"; and 3) if we will but employ critical, theological thinking we will be able to overcome the "grips of power" that "corrupts and kills" our words about God. With these opening remarks, Kay seems to be seeking a secret passage into a linguistic Eden. The only problem with this is that Kay has forgotten about the cherubim and flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way (Gen. 3:24).¹¹³ While I immensely appreciate

¹¹¹ Ibid., 48.

¹¹² Ibid., vii. On the susceptibility of language to "fall into the grips of power," see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 40: "In the place of truthful speech we encounter the propaganda of the state, the exaggerations of Madison Avenue, the doublespeak of politicians and advertisers, the false claims of expertise by bureaucrats, the code language of racism, and the diversions of the entertainment industry. . . . Confusion reigns—and we become caught in the web of the powers."

¹¹³ Were we to seek less mythical nomenclature, we might reach for the term *différance*, as that which guards the way to the origin of language.

Kay's insights at the intersection of preaching and theology, this initial gesture belies the difficulty—nay, impossibility—of such a task. What troubles me about Kay's text is that his attempt to return to the pre-lapsarian state of language by way of theology (as opposed to poetics or rhetoric) ignores the philosophical difficulties that haunt his journey at every step.

Kay begins his volume straight away with an engagement with Bullinger's famous declaration in 1566, *Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei* ("The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God").¹¹⁴ Bullinger's is arguably the most theological declaration on preaching produced by more than two millennia of Christian theology.¹¹⁵ Kay then goes on to cite Rebecca Chopp's clarion call to reconsider both proclamation and Word.¹¹⁶ Chopp asks, as cited by Kay, "Is the identity of Protestant theology and Protestant Christianity secured only through institutional affiliation, or is there some meaning in the Reformation insistence that God is revealed, experienced, and present in the proclaimed Word?"¹¹⁷ The problem with Kay's use of Chopp here is that he takes what is clearly a rhetorical question for Chopp and runs with it as if it is the key question driving her work. Even as Kay insists that he is going "to try to think critically in order to

¹¹⁴ "The Second Helvetic Confession," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, pt. 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1994), cited in Kay, 7-8.

¹¹⁵ Gerhart Ebeling, *Gott und Wort* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1966), 9 deems the inclusion of "God" and "Word" under the same scope of analysis a "foolhardy, dangerous and yet a necessary project" (*Es ist ein nahezu vermessen, ein gefährliches und dennoch ein notwendiges Vorhaben*).

¹¹⁶ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 5.

¹¹⁷ Kay, 9; Chopp, 5.

test a claim that historically has characterized Protestant understandings of preaching,” his work is far more confessional than critical.¹¹⁸

How is an “exposition of the Second Helvetic Confession as a key document for construing and assessing perennial theological perspectives on preaching” able to help him “think critically” at the intersection of theology and preaching?¹¹⁹ Kay’s text, astute though it is, functions less as a critical engagement with problems arising from the “fallenness” of language than an attempt to protect the Word from such fallenness. A crucial juncture is the preacher’s “interpretation” of Scripture in the event of Christian proclamation. Kay writes, “. . . the hermeneutical problem of the church’s canonical texts is handled in Christianity by *interpreting* them through preaching and teaching, rather than by excising or otherwise supplementing them.”¹²⁰ Putting a bit of pressure on this assessment, we may inquire as to the validity of Kay’s distinction between interpretation and supplementation and excision. Is not the very act of reading a text in a new context an instance of supplementing the author’s intention enclosed in the texture of iterability by the reader’s (contextually bound) intention? Is not the re-contextualization of Scripture a kind of cutting, or hollowing out (*excidere*) of the animating intention structuring the original? If Kay is correct in his assessment that “the scriptures serve as the rhetorical artifact for a subsequent act of preaching,” then must not the preacher supply (*supplée*) something to the text from her current culture, language, perspective, etc. in order to *enter* this rhetorical artifact, to *interpret* it?¹²¹ And does not such a point of

¹¹⁸ Kay, 9. Chopp’s work is critical. It is a “reconsideration of proclamation and the Word” (5). Rather, Kay’s work is critical of other homileticians who have “tested” theology and have presented work appropriate to the faults they find.

¹¹⁹ Kay, 23.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

entrance necessitate a certain hollowing out to make room for the preacher's interpretation?

Kay continues, "*Preaching arises, so the scriptures teach us, because the meaning of the scriptures is not obvious but requires and demands interpretation.*"¹²² Might not this teach us something profoundly theological about God's Word revealed through the Bible? Perhaps when Rebecca Chopp argues for a "reconsideration of proclamation and the Word" as a "perfectly open sign" her work is not merely that of a feminist or a liberationist, but a theologian in the truest sense.¹²³ In short, drawing directly from Kay's declaration cited above, preaching is supplementation. If the meaning of the scriptures were full, obvious, accessible, etc. we could simply read them and our seminaries would need only to empower lectors and not preachers for ecclesial service. Language participates in the fallenness of the created order, but rather than protecting the Word by redoubling credal formulations, as Kay exhibits, it seems that a more "theological and critical" way of "thinking" would be to see the homiletical supplement necessary to the proclamation of God's Word.

The most productive aspect in Kay's book is his chapter on preaching as "promissory narration," which he gleans from the work of Christopher Morse. Building on the "theology of hope" articulated by Jürgen Moltmann, Kay argues that God's presence is tied up with God's self-revelation as promise-maker and promise-keeper. Kay writes, ". . . Christian preaching and the life of faith are occurring in the interval created by the promise of God to reconcile the world to Godself. . . . In this interval, can more be said for preaching, not only as an act of proclaiming God's promised salvation, but as the

¹²² Ibid. Italics his.

¹²³ See Kay's reading of Chopp, Ibid., 95-100.

linguistic medium for God's own promise making?"¹²⁴ Even as Kay offers an exciting and compelling vision for preaching as promissory narration, that vision has failed to notice several lingering problems, especially in Kay's association with the philosophy of "speech acts."

There is a slippage between Kay's deployment of Moltmann's theology of promise and Kay's subsequent homiletical proposal. Citing Moltmann, Kay writes, "A promise is a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not exist."¹²⁵ This promise "binds man to the future" even as it "stands in contradiction to the reality open to experience now and heretofore." These are Moltmann's words.¹²⁶ The "contradiction" is lost, however, when Kay makes his constructive move, in which a promise does not merely announce a coming reality as it contradicts the present, but serves "to constitute a new state of affairs in the present."¹²⁷ By my reading, the power of a promise is produced by the tension between a current state of affairs and the *hope* that the promise entails concerning the possibility of another state of affairs. Kay has lost or ignored the necessarily possibly *not*—the fact that every illocutionary act contains within its essential make-up the conditions by which it might *not* perform the speaker's intention in saying something.¹²⁸ Austin himself, who figures prominently in Kay's proposal, recognizes conditions by which an illocutionary act might fail. Austin calls these "impure" or

¹²⁴ Ibid., 122. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 103-4, which Kay cites (121).

¹²⁵ Kay, 121, citing Moltmann, 103.

¹²⁶ Kay leaves out of his discussion Moltmann's distinction between history and existence "in general," and the "peculiar history" oriented toward hope that God will make good on God's promise: "The promise takes man up into its own history of hope and obedience, and in so doing stamps his existence with a historic character of a *specific kind*." Moltmann, 103, emphasis added.

¹²⁷ Kay, 122. C.f. Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," 124: "*Speaking the word of God* is the *promise* of Christian preaching. Promise is not fulfillment. Promise means that fulfillment is guaranteed us. Promise does not do away with the necessity of believing but establishes it. Promise is *man's* (*sic*) part, fulfillment is *God's*."

¹²⁸ Cf. Barth's thoughts on promises, which "does not do away with the necessity of believing but establishes it." Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," 124.

“infelicitous” and his philosophy of performative utterances necessitates an originary exclusion of such instances.¹²⁹ To lose the future-oriented aspect of God’s promises in Scripture as well as the elision of God’s promise into the human preacher’s “promissory narration” constitutes a double fault. The third strike arises from Kay’s uncritical appropriation of Austin’s, and Searle’s, philosophy of “speech acts.”¹³⁰

In spite of Kay’s contributions, which are many, his work is encumbered with several theological problems that arise from his engagement with philosophy, problems that need to be explored further in the service of a theology of proclamation. Nevertheless, Kay is absolutely right in arguing for a theological “frame of reference” as a starting point for preaching. What remains a question is whether the “frame of reference” he offers in his text is theological enough.

Rebecca Chopp’s *The Power to Speak*

Theologian Rebecca Chopp’s *The Power to Speak* (1989) offers the most philosophically informed theology of proclamation to date. Her work stands out from the others we have encountered above in that she does not take philosophical articulations to be separate from theological argument. Rather, she sees them being radically internal to the construction of theology. Because language, as well as certain psychic and political commitments, pre-exists theological articulation, it cannot be ignored along the way to theological reflection. Before theology speaks philosophy has already spoken. Central to her project is a kind of consciousness-raising, whereby theologians may come to see that

¹²⁹ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edition, ed., J. G. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 22, where Austin cites an example of an actor on the stage uttering “I do” in a staged marriage. Such an example is “parasitic” on “real” performative speech.

¹³⁰ For example: “That is, a promise not only announces or informs as to a future state of affairs but does so in such a way as to constitute a new state of affairs in the present.” Kay, 123.

the arguments of feminist theologians about the importance of these philosophical concerns are fundamental to theology. For, as Chopp puts it, “. . . by unveiling the linguistic and discursive practices of feminist theology as the form and substance of the Word in the present situation, feminist theology is no longer for women only and a few interested men, but intrinsic to Christianity and Christian witness in the world.”¹³¹

Drawing heavily from contributions to feminist scholarship by such towering figures as Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Hélène Cixous, and Rosemary Radford Reuther, Chopp challenges theologies of the Word that enervate the radical freedom and transformative power promised by God through proclamation. She writes, “If Protestant theology has any identity to find or, more to my interests, anything to contribute to Christian theology and Christianity in general, such a contribution requires a reconsideration of proclamation and the Word.”¹³² Such a reconsideration leads her to conclude that any theology of proclamation that takes the Word seriously must result in an understanding of that Word as a “perfectly open sign,” one that is radically open to new significations leading to transformation and freedom.¹³³ In other words, she views the Word signifying an alternative order beyond all significations that are a part of the present order of domination and injustice; the Word is radically free and is therefore not subject to the political, linguistic, and even theological constraints thrust upon the Word. This is how Christian proclamation of the Word can be freed from its “ecclesial prison” and thereby pronounce emancipatory transformation for the whole world.

Chopp writes, “This book seeks to examine and construct feminist theology as discourses of emancipatory transformation that proclaim the Word to and for the world. It

¹³¹ Chopp, 22.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 30–9.

is an interpretation of feminist theology and a reconstruction of proclamation and the Word in Christian theology.”¹³⁴ By pointing to the underlying philosophical constructs—in language, subjectivity, and politics—that fund both Christian theology proper as well as feminist theologies, Chopp troubles the foundation upon which theology rests. Such a project is motivated by a Protestant theological conviction and a feminist ideological principle, both of which call for liberation. She writes, “Women will be forever strangers unless their words and their voices revise the social and symbolic rules of language, transforming the law of ordered hierarchy in language, in subjectivity, and in politics into a grace of rich plenitude for human flourishing.”¹³⁵

With the help of Cixous and Kristeva, Chopp recognizes a metaphysical commitment to a structured hierarchy at play in theology, in which the masculine is set against (and above) the feminine.¹³⁶ Such is the binary configuration of Western society: logocentrism. Theology has not only participated in this binary logic, it has in fact reinscribed logocentrism at a deeper level by associating God (and thus the Word) with the masculine. This has resulted in the othering and marginalizing of women in both Church and society. Chopp reminds us that “[t]heology is, after all, words about God, and when God is spoken of as the Word then theology must include linguistic self-reflexivity on how we speak of God and world.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3

¹³⁵ Ibid., 2

¹³⁶ See Hélène Cixous, “Sorties,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed., Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, trans., Ann Liddle (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 90-98; idem, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans., Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1/4 (Summer, 1976: 875-93); Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans., Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 201-24. See also Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans., Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹³⁷ Chopp, 22.

While her conceptualization of the Word differs greatly from that of Lischer, Bartow, Willimon, and Kay, it maintains a certain continuity with the emancipatory thrust of the Word arising from God's solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. Her work is a philosophically informed response to such a theological perspective. Chopp writes, "The theological reconstruction involved in this book relies on the assumption that the formation of Christian discourse is, in fact, not only appropriate to but, in fact, called for in much of the tradition; indeed, the present theological reconstruction seeks to provoke and encourage the revision of Christian witness in the present day."¹³⁸ One of the greatest benefits of Chopp's "theological reconstruction" is her recognition that Christian proclamation is in no way static. Rather, because it participates in the outpouring of the Word, proclamation is dynamic and "radically immanent in the world," especially on the margins of society. For this reason, Chopp insists that proclamation is always partial and it calls for a theology of proclamation that is radically open.¹³⁹

While much is gained theologically (and homiletically) from Chopp's work several problems arise as well. The first of these problems is that of agency. In most, if not all, theologies of proclamation, there remains a dogmatic insistence that God is the speaker of God's own Word. Agency is entirely God's, including the agency whereby God allows God's Word to appear through human words in preaching. For Chopp, it is not God who speaks God's Word through preaching, but feminist theologians who are now proclaiming God's Word inasmuch as they challenge oppressive political and

¹³⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 99. "Proclamation," writes Chopp, "is not formed around an eternally finished content nor understood through an a priori theory that works for all time and places. It is, rather, radically immanent in the world existing in the margins and gaps of present structures, in the dances and laughter of women as well as in the visions and hopes of the poor, in the desires for love and relatedness of the bourgeoisie, in the poetry and dreams of people of color."

linguistic structures. She dangerously equates the Word of God with her own theological position—a dangerous practice no matter how confident one is in one’s position. This assumption is present throughout her work. She writes, “In the production of these discourses of emancipatory transformation, feminist theologies proclaim the Word of God.”¹⁴⁰ The task of feminist theology is to produce emancipatory transformation, to produce the Word. Chopp continues, “The task of feminist theology includes the formation of new poetic practices and new rhetorics; therefore, feminist theology must construct, weave, and image new visions of human flourishing.”¹⁴¹

Might not Chopp’s articulation of feminist theology be repeating the very problem that she uncovers in traditional theologies: a problem of too closely identifying a particular linguistic, psychic, political perspective with God’s Word? How can God’s Word be a “perfectly open sign” if that sign is closed to all expressions save emancipatory signification? Moreover, does not a sign that signifies so openly also preclude the possibility of narrowing on particular significations? Even as I share Chopp’s theological perspective, I am worried by the subtle elision of God’s Word into human words, even if those human words are aimed at liberation!

This presents us with a further task. We must disentangle human agency from divine agency. We ought not become too convinced that our discourse is God’s discourse. God must remain otherwise than our human words, no matter how assured we are that our words are in line with God’s Word. In acts of Christian proclamation, men and women speak a word, but this word need always and forever bear a “coefficient of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

uncertainty.”¹⁴² Our words are never God’s Word apart from God’s gracious action. When we forget this, we subtly change the subject of our proclamation from God to ourselves. We do not need another lesson in the ills accompanying such a project.¹⁴³

The second frustration that arises from Chopp’s work is her treatment of proclamation’s whence. In other words, not only has her “theological reconstruction” upset the content of Christian witness, it has also reconstructed the topos of Christian witness. Traditional theologies of proclamation that center around the Word of God view proclamation arising from the preaching event, when that event is centered on the Word of God revealed in the Bible. Chopp supplants the proclaimer’s pulpit for the scholar’s study. It is in feminist theology, rather than the pulpit, that the Word is proclaimed for Chopp. She writes, “Through multiple practices in writing and speech that invoke the God behind God, the Word hidden in words, feminist theology creates possibilities of emancipatory transformation for all.”¹⁴⁴ In Chopp’s work (feminist) systematic theology supplants proclamatory theology.

We must, of course, note that the Christian pulpit has often been the site of repression and oppression, especially for women. By boldly—too boldly—standing on the claim that the preacher’s words are participating in God’s Word, many preachers have proclaimed a Gospel that participates in “the hierarchical ordering of binary oppositions”

¹⁴² I am indebted to John Caputo for this phrase. See John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 19. See also *idem*, “The Prayers and Tears of Devilish Hermeneutics,” in *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 253, where he writes of a “coefficient of contingency.”

¹⁴³ See Karl Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” 126: “*Is* not the whole situation in the church an illustration of man’s (*sic*) chronic presumption, which is really worse here than in any other field? . . . But so far as *we* know, there is no one who deserves the wrath of God more abundantly than ministers.”

¹⁴⁴ Chopp, 23. N.b., the “Word behind words” could signify anything when conceived in this way.

that forbids “relations between Word and woman.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, the exclusionary political practices that persist even today in many denominations rob women of the right to proclaim God’s Word in pulpits throughout the world. And it was not until well into the twentieth century that women were able to articulate their theological perspectives in the academy. Bearing these political realities in mind, my criticism of Chopp is that her “reconstruction” doesn’t really re-construct. Rather, it migrates the locus of proclamatory discourse from the Christian pulpit to the academy. In her conclusion, Chopp declares, “The church is not created for fellowship, continued support, spiritual nourishment or even social service; rather, the church is called to proclaim, to give to the world news of emancipatory transformation.”¹⁴⁶ We might press Chopp on the univocality of Church that arises from this statement. Might not fellowship, support, spiritual nourishment, and social service participate in emancipatory transformation?¹⁴⁷ Might not the Church be an ideal site for such transformation? Would not such a community bear witness to and for the world?

What remains to be seen is how Chopp’s many theological insights can be put to use in the Church, transforming not only the content of proclamatory pulpit discourse, but also the ways in which we proclaim God’s Word.¹⁴⁸ We need to think more concretely and deeply about how the Word is at work in and through the preacher’s words in the act of preaching. Chopp’s project helps us discern “another reality of Word,” a Word which

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴⁷ Indeed, this seems to be a haphazard distinction, especially considering Chopp’s frequent insistence that proclamatory discourse should be guided by the terms of “specificity, difference, solidarity, embodiment, anticipation and transformation” (23). I would argue that the Church as a community can be and ought to be a topos for emancipatory transformation. By setting these in opposition, Chopp re-inscribes the Modern idea of the isolated, solitary individual that she deconstructs in chapter 3.

¹⁴⁸ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 92-101, does precisely this. Her work does more than any to date to appropriate Chopp’s theology of the Word to preaching.

is the “possibility behind a Word of order, of rule.”¹⁴⁹ Now we must experience these insights as a theological “unveiling” that is inclusive, not exclusive, of pulpit discourse.

CONCLUSION

In sympathy with the scholars treated above, that which is the matter with preaching today is fundamentally theological. If we tweak our deliver styles, the technologies we employ to enhance our sermons, or the ways in which we approach the biblical text *without* attending to the deeper theological currents troubling proclamation from beneath the surface, we miss what’s truly the matter with preaching today. We are only treating the symptoms rather than the disease, so to speak. This is not to say that these other matters are of no consequence for preaching; indeed, they are crucial. Yet what some homiletics and theologians fail to recognize is that a refusal to engage the theological crises that trouble preaching from within undercuts the constructive aims of their work. What unifies the scholars listed above is an unremitting focus on God as the source and sustainer of Christian proclamation through God’s very Word.

Drawing together the unexamined philosophical and theological assumptions mentioned above we find several points of commonality. First, any theology of proclamation worthy of the name must attend to the originary (or foundational, though this term is problematic vis-à-vis Derrida’s writings) aspects of theology as well as proclamation. As Karl Barth reminds us, “Theology itself has only to be unsure about its foundations and its truth, and this uncertainty has only to mount to a crisis like that which marked the age of Schleiermacher, and it is led at once to the discovery and assertion of

¹⁴⁹ Chopp, 27.

L. Feuerbach, that at bottom it too is perhaps nothing but concealed anthropology.”¹⁵⁰

Such a foundation—and I will opt for a more non-foundationalist understanding of foundation vis-à-vis the term *originary*—must attend not only to the theological footings that bolster Gospel proclamation, but also to the philosophical components of such theology that hold the footings together. A consistent problem that emerges in these the best of proclamatory theologies is the work of language in and upon theology. In the following chapter we will follow this line of inquiry to its root in order to better understand how God might always already be at work in language and how this originary work is productive for a theology of proclamation.

Second, a troubled understanding of speech frustrates a philosophically astute theology of proclamation. The uncritical praise of speech as a mode of conveying (God’s) presence in the here and now of Gospel proclamation must be questioned. Moreover, as my reading above displays, theologies of proclamation ought to attend to the relationship between speech and meaning. We need to rid ourselves of the naïve assumption that speech is somehow pure and that as a filter of thought it bypasses the “fallenness” of human language in general. Is it not necessary to the functionality of a filter that it allows—by design—for the possibility of contamination? Might not the very means of removing that which adulterates contain within itself the likelihood of letting that which is “impure” pass through unfiltered? Indeed, as our examination of speech will show, contamination is always and already at work in even the purest of speeches.

Third, and arising from a philosophical engagement with language and speech, we may inquire into the nature of sermons as acts of proclamatory discourse in which God’s

¹⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/2, G. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, ed., H. Knight, G. Bromiley, J. K. S. Reid, and R. H. Fuller, trans., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 21.

Word revealed in Scripture becomes God's Word revealed through proclamation. This is the "something else" that distinguishes preaching from mere speech, to borrow Willimon's phrase. We must experience the differential and arbitrary structure of language, which emerges according to kind of writing that conditions the possibility of all modes of signification. Both speech and writing participate in the play of absence and presence, in the play of death and life. Writing is not the mere representation of speech, nor does it adulterate some imagined purity of speech; all modes of signification are representational inasmuch as they require a priori signifiers that are already attached to signified concepts. This is necessary for iterability, which is the socio-symbolic condition for speech and writing. We need to think through what this might mean theologically as well as homiletically.

CHAPTER TWO: DECONSTRUCTING THE HOMILETICAL FOUNDATIONS

If theologies of proclamation are foundational for homiletics, then it is crucial to test the sturdiness of such foundations. We need not demolish existing foundations and thereby prove to ourselves their destructibility. That proves nothing. A better approach is to deconstruct these foundations, to critically examine them. This is the task of this chapter. By applying pressure to those footings that are particularly important for the fidelity of our homiletical superstructure we may gain deeper insight into the challenges and possibilities germane to the preaching task.

Deconstruction can be made to serve a theology of proclamation by point to the cracks and fissures plastered over by centuries of philosophical spackle. By this we discern a certain “trembling” (*tremblement*) always already at work in the foundations of Western thought and preaching. As Jacques Derrida writes, “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it.”¹⁵¹ In this chapter we therefore “inhabit” the foundational elements of

¹⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected., (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 24 (abbreviated hereafter as *OG*). This is not a “radical rupture and discontinuity” that some criticize. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 207. In his essay, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 134-5 (hereafter cited as *M*), Derrida differentiates between a *trembling* and a *radical trembling*: “A radical trembling can only come from the *outside*. Therefore, the trembling of which I speak derives no more than any other from some spontaneous decision or philosophical thought after some internal maturation of its history.”

preaching—language, speech, and the sermonic event—in order to assess the fidelity of traditional theologies of proclamation for Christian preaching.¹⁵²

Christian proclamation arises from the audacious premise that God speaks to God's people through preaching.¹⁵³ Theologies of proclamation differ from one another in *how* this miracle transpires, but every Christian theology of proclamation affirms this basic assumption. This is homiletics' first principle. But there is a problem with this assertion. If the God revealed in Scripture is beyond human conceptualization, how then can we say anything that might open our language beyond conceptualization toward the radically other God (*totaliter aliter*)?¹⁵⁴

In this chapter I will show that the metaphysical presuppositions that fund many theologies of proclamation are shaky, and I will follow Derrida's lead in identifying just how tenuous our thinking really is in this regard. Derrida labels this kind of approach "deconstruction." He explains:

. . . the very condition of a deconstruction may be at work, in the work, *within* the system to be deconstructed; it may *already* be located there, already at work, not at the center but in an eccentric center, in a corner

¹⁵² See my word about style and approach in the Introduction above. There are, of course, other elements we might interrogate: the subjectivity of the preacher; the aural phenomenon of preaching; the exegetical/hermeneutical act of scriptural engagement; etc. In accordance with the parameters of this project, I must leave it to others to engage those elements.

¹⁵³ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 17: "To preach is to join our human words with the word that God in Christ in the power of the Spirit is already speaking to the church and to the world, and to speak in Christ's name is to claim Christ's own promise, 'Whoever listens to you listens to me' (Luke 10:16)."

¹⁵⁴ As Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans., Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 44, writes, "We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say 'God.' We assign to [God] the highest place in our world: and in so doing place [God] fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things. . . . This is the *ungodliness* of our relation to God. And our relation to God is *unrighteous*. Secretly we are ourselves the masters in this relationship." This is the status of metaphysics, as Derrida writes, in "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 97 (hereafter abbreviated as *WD*), "Metaphysics begins when theory criticizes itself as ontology, as the dogmatism and spontaneity of the same, and when metaphysics, in departing from itself, lets itself be put into question by the other in the movement of ethics. . . . If it is true that 'Western philosophy most often has been an ontology' dominated since Socrates by a Reason which receives only what it gives itself, and if ontology is tautology and egology, then it has *neutralized* the other, in every sense of the word."

whose eccentricity assures the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it at the same time threatens to deconstruct. One might then be inclined to reach this conclusion: deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes *afterwards*, from the outside, one fine day; it is always already at work in the work; one must just know how to identify the right or wrong element, the right or wrong stone—the right one, of course, always proves to be, precisely, the wrong one. Since the disruptive force of deconstruction is always already contained within the architecture of the work, all one would finally have to do to be able to deconstruct, given this *always already*, is to do memory work.¹⁵⁵

My guiding assumption in this section of my dissertation is that homiletics in general and theologies of proclamation in particular are implicated in Derrida's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. Inasmuch as homiletics, with theology, has failed to think through the metaphysical gestures that establish and bolster its foundations, Derrida, or someone like Derrida, is necessary.¹⁵⁶

Yet what follows is a selective and condensed iteration of Derrida's *reading-through* the works of several foundational thinkers in Western philosophy: Plato, Saussure, Rousseau, and Austin.¹⁵⁷ I have selected these readings because they allow us

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans., Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 73. For more clarity on Derrida's use of the term deconstruction see Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed., Peggy Kamuf, trans., David Wood and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 269-76; John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); and Geoffrey Bennington, "'Jacques Derrida'" in *Interrupting Derrida* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 7-17.

¹⁵⁶ See John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) who undertakes a similar project with the assistance of Emmanuel Levinas's work and Ruthanna Brinton Hooke, "The Preacher's Words and God's Word: The Divine-Human Relationship in Preaching" (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2007), who employs Luce Irigaray in addition to Derrida and Levinas. Sadly her published work does not reflect this critical thrust. See Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Transforming Preaching* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010). Derrida himself offers me the license to follow his lead: "If I provisionally authorize myself to treat this *historical structure* by fixing my attention on philosophical or literary texts, it is not for the sake of identifying in them the origin, cause, or equilibrium of the *structure*." Rather, like Derrida, I find in those who lend their work to my own (deconstructive) mode of inquiry a similar target: namely, an internal structure that is symptomatic of the "the totality of their metaphysical appurtenance" (*OG*, 99).

¹⁵⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans., David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88 (hereafter cited as *SP*): "We say *through* Husserl's text, we mean a reading that can be neither simple commentary nor simple

to see most clearly the breadth and depth of Derrida's critique vis-à-vis proclamatory theology. Below I touch upon three of the most important aspects of Christian proclamation: 1) our necessary reliance upon language; 2) our emphasis on speech as the privileged vehicle for sermonic communication; and 3) the stress we place on the performative, event-like structure of preaching in a sermon by which God's Word is made manifest through human words. The kind of deconstruction I will be mapping is Derridian inasmuch as it "weaves and interlaces" two motifs of deconstruction—the one of exiting from *within* and the other of a discontinuous and irruptive break from *without*. The necessary point of departure for such a project is the nature of language itself.

SIGN LANGUAGE

Preaching is impossible without language. This is obvious. In fact, it is so obvious that it is incredibly easy for us to take language for granted, as much of Western philosophy and theology has done.¹⁵⁸ Language is made up of words that we arrange in structured and conventional ways to communicate with others. Few of us remember our own efforts at language acquisition, when we first began to mimic our parents' or guardians' words to indicate our thoughts and feelings.¹⁵⁹ For those of us who have attempted to master a language other than our native tongue, we become more profoundly aware of the structure of language and how it works to signify meanings according to cultural conventions.

interpretation." NB. other leading figures could have been included: Husserl, of course, as well as Lévi-Strauss, Hegel, etc.

¹⁵⁸ For instance, on signs and their relationship to language see St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans., R. P. H. Green (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), II/3, 30-2. This was one of the first texts to offer explicit instruction on Christian preaching. See also *idem.*, III/13, 75: ". . . it is a mark of servile weakness to follow the letter and accept the signs rather than the things signified by them . . ."

¹⁵⁹ Cf. St. Augustine, *St. Augustine's Confessions*, vol. 1, trans., William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), I/6, 14-5

How, and in what sense, can we claim that God speaks through human words? In most theologies of proclamation this is merely asserted. As Bishop Willimon avers, “Preaching is not merely what we say, even what John Wesley said, or what we hear, even the most astute of us listeners. Preaching is what God says.”¹⁶⁰ This, he declares, is the “heart” of Christian preaching. In other words, on the sub-phenomenological inside of proclamation, shrouded by all-too-human speech and gesture, “is” the Word of God. By interrogating the unexamined fact of language, perhaps we will be better placed to understand Willimon’s assertion.

At the beginning of *Of Grammatology* Derrida observes that the “epoch of the logos,” that is, a relationship of conventional symmetry between the mind and the spoken word, is structured on the premise that “the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing” (*OG*, 11). Derrida pronounces the end of this epoch, the “de-sedimentation” that conjoins logos with truth. This pronouncement arises from the observation that all of language is structured by signification: words are signs pointing to other signs. At no point on the inside of language (as if one could somehow get outside of language) does the play of signification rest. Understanding that language is at root *sign* language—that is, an arbitrary and differential structure of significations—is crucial to understanding Derrida’s argument in *Of Grammatology*.

Reaching as far back as recorded history is the assumption that (spoken) words signify objects in the world. Plato, in both his *Cratylus* and *Republic*, assumes this.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁶¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, trans., H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 383, p. 6: “. . . Socrates says that everything has a right name (ὀνόματος ὀρθότητα) of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whether people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice

Aristotle too argued, “Words spoken are symbols or signs of affectations or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of spoken words. . . . of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind (*sic*), as are also the objects of which those affectations are representations or likenesses, images, copies.”¹⁶²

Accompanying such a nomenclaturist assessment is the subordination of writing to speech. Writing, for the great span of Western philosophy, has maintained a secondary status at best and a usurper status, at worst: a signifier of a signifier, doubly removed from the *res* or the thing-itself (*die Sache selbst*). It is not that writing as it is traditionally understood has ceased to function in this secondary and accidental manner for Derrida. Derrida claims that all of language functions in precisely the same manner as Western philosophy has reserved for writing. In other words, “signifier of signifier” describes not just written language, but also the basic movement of language *at its origin*. Because language has forgotten or erased its originary non origin it was content to consign its own derivative status to writing to protect the imagined purity of language as speech. Derrida writes,

. . . the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all the signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today such a play is coming into its own, effacing the limit starting from which one had thought to regulate the circulation of signs, drawing along with it all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of

applied to the thing by agreement, but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names (ὀρθότητά τινα τῶν ὀνομάτων), which is the same for all men, both Greeks and barbarians.” See also *idem.*, *Republic*, vol II, trans., Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), X/595a, p. 418, where he argues that the “antidote” (*pharmakon*) to the corruption of the poets is knowledge of the “real nature” of things apart from mere representation (*mimesis*).

¹⁶² Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, trans., Harold P. Cooke (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), I/16a, p. 115.

language. This strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of “sign” and its entire logic. (*OG*, 7)

This is no small task and one need not strain to hear a call to reconsider a basic (originary) theological declaration: *In the beginning was the Word . . .*¹⁶³ This will be the task of our reading.

Derrida’s assessment of language as a kind of semiotics—a general system of signification structuring the generation of meaning—is not novel. He is engaging the most widely accepted notion of language in his day. This view came to prominence under the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work we must understand in order to appreciate Derrida’s critique.

Saussure on Signification

Saussure writes, “In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud [*une nébuleuse*], where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure.”¹⁶⁴ This was a revolutionary claim,

¹⁶³ Augustine saw this connection and makes explicit that which Derrida finds implicit in the Western tradition, writing, “Whoever, then, is able to understand a word, not only before it is uttered in sound, but also before the images of its sounds are considered in thought—for this it is which belongs to no tongue, to wit, of those which are called tongues of the nations, of which our Latin tongue is one—whoever, I say, is able to understand this, is able now to see through this glass and in this enigma some likeness of that Word of whom it is said, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’” St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, in *Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed., Whitney J. Oates, trans., A. W. Haddan and W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Random House, 1948), XV/10, 846. Consider also Willimon’s words: Reality is linguistically constructed., Word precedes world. Words do not arise from things, but rather are evoked by the Word. Word precedes all things” (12). Derrida observes, “The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality” (*OG*, 13). See also Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans., Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 224: “We are always inclined to that naïve concept of a primordial period in which a complete man discovered another one, equally complete, and between the two of them language was worked out little by little. This is a pure fiction. We can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it.”

¹⁶⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistic*, ed., Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger, trans., Roy Harris (Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1983), 66. Hereafter cited *CGL*. I employ ascriptions such as “Saussure writes” for ease of communication. The text of the *Cours* was

and its impact is still felt in contemporary contexts where notions of *meaning* and *truth* are maintained a priori. Amidst the intellectual climate of his day, Saussure drew together disparate strands of thought to articulate a new understanding of language, a *general linguistics*, that focused on language itself. Prior to Saussure, as one commentator notes, “[I]n so far as the relationship between language and thought was broached at all, the implicit assumption was that language ‘clothed’ pre-existing thought.”¹⁶⁵ Saussure’s linguistic legacy, which was slowly realized (the *Cours* was not translated into English until 1959), came fundamentally to reorient European thought in such areas as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and, of course, linguistics.

Saussure’s contemporaries operated under the assumption that through the careful reconstruction of ancient languages (especially Indo-European, the parent language of Greek and Latin), one could gain access to the purity of language, could get at primal signification. Saussure himself held this position for the majority of his scholarly career, noting how Sanskrit enabled him to “reconstruct the life of people who had disappeared,” thereby enabling him to harvest the first fruits of their linguist heritage.¹⁶⁶

What is clear from the historical records, especially from Saussure’s own notes, is that what emerged as the *Cours de linguistique générale* came about as a fusion of linguistic presuppositions, which, as one commentator has noted, might be as accidental

published posthumously by several of Saussure’s students from lecture notes. There is, therefore, a problem with identifying Saussure with the *Cours* in an uncritical manner. Nevertheless, it is not Saussure’s reconstructive work through comparative linguistics that gained him the attention of scores of commentators, but the ideas articulated in his *Cours*. Thus, following the scholarly convention, I identify Saussure with the ideas expressed through the *Cours*. See Derrida, *OG*, 329, fn. 38.

¹⁶⁵ Carol Sanders, “The Paris Years,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed., Carol Sanders (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 32.

¹⁶⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, “Sovenirs de F. de Saussure concernant sa jeunesse et ses études,” ed., R. Godel, *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 17 (1960 [1903]): 16, cited in Anna Morpurgo Davies, “Saussure and Indo-European Linguistics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed., Carol Sanders (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

as Columbus's "discovery" of America.¹⁶⁷ Saussure came to believe that for linguistics to maintain any modicum of dignity as a *science* it needed to focus its angle of vision as narrowly as possible, and for Saussure, the focus was upon the concept of the *linguistic sign*. There are several key points associated with Saussure's teaching on the linguistic sign that are imperative for understanding his work's significance. These features of his work would form a new foundation for many branches of Western thought, foundations that Jacques Derrida would later deconstruct.¹⁶⁸

The Linguistic Sign

As a central aspect of his semiological approach to the study of language, Saussure focused his attention on the linguistic sign.¹⁶⁹ Saussure declared that the linguistic sign is a dual entity, consisting of a signal (*signifiant*) and signification (*signifié*). The signal cannot exist independently of its signification, nor can any linguistic sign exist independently of the system of signification that holds it in relation to other terms. The glue that holds the linguistic sign together, i.e., the social-semiological structure, is that of a language system (*langue*).¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Louis Jean Calvet, *Pour Et Contre Saussure: Vers Une Linguistique Sociale* (Paris: Payot, 1975), 55.

¹⁶⁸ Saussure's impact was slow to build, but by the 1950s, "the experience of reading Saussure seemed to have been so thoroughly absorbed as to make a distinction between Saussureans and non-Saussurians meaningless." Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure: A Critical Commentary on the Cours De Linguistique Générale* (London: Duckworth, 1987), *viv*.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Leonard Bloomfield, "Review of Saussure," *The Modern Language Journal* 8, no. 5 (February 1, 1924): 319, who writes, "In detail, I should differ from de Saussure chiefly in basing my analysis on the sentence rather than on the word." Compare also Benveniste, 43 ff. in his chapter "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," which presents a sustained critique of Saussure.

¹⁷⁰ This was not a particularly novel idea. In 1836, Wilhelm von Humboldt had written of the "simultaneous acts of the language-making spirit," noting, "the production of language is a *synthetic* procedure, and that in the truest sense of the word, where synthesis creates something that does not lie, *per se*, in any of the conjoined parts. The goal is therefore reached only when the total structure of sound-form and inner shaping are fused together with equal firmness and simultaneity." Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, trans., Peter Heath (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University

Moving away from the commonsense view of language as “naming” or “referring to” objects in the world, wherein the linguistic sign is understood as a *word* linked with a *thing*, Saussure writes, “A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound pattern (*image acoustique*)” (*CGL*, 66).¹⁷¹ An “acoustic image,” it is important to note, is not to be confused with a material sound; rather, it is the “psychic imprint” (*l’empreinte psychiques*) of this sound that gives to us “the evidence of our senses.” In other words, signification demands a more active orientation to the signals of another than mere hearing: it requires recognition that a given material signal accurately reproduces the psychic-sensorial nature of the sound as an acoustic image in the mind. Thus, for Saussure, interpretation is always already at work at the most basic unit of representation: the linguistic sign.

Just a few lines later in his *Cours*, Saussure makes a further claim of great importance for social-semiological structures, like language. He describes the sign as “a two-sided psychic entity” in which the concept and acoustic image are in reciprocal and necessary relation to one another. This relationship is established by the language system (*la langue*). By analogy, Saussure reasons, “Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound” (*CGL*, 111).

Linguistics necessarily engages the adhesive power of the language system between the realm of thought and the realm of sound, the content of which is structural

Press, 1988), 88. What was innovative, however, was the way in which Saussure came to regard the linguistic sign.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Écrits De Linguistique Générale*, ed., Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 17, where Saussure distinguishes between *la figure vocale* and *la forme-sens* rather than *une image acoustique* and *un concept*.

rather than concrete. Or, as Saussure puts it, “*The contact between them gives rise to a form, not a substance*” (CGL, 111). This is the reason that Saussure shifts the nomenclature to signifier and signified: they capture the formal or structural relations of the linguistic sign as *internal* to the language system. As Paul Thibault writes, “The sign is not a picture or a photographic replica of something else in the outside world. . . . The point is that the semiological relationship between signifier and signified is the means whereby language users selectively orientate to and give structure to the analogue flux of perceptual phenomena in the outside world.”¹⁷²

The internal structure of the language system will give rise to two aspects of signification that will guide Derrida’s “reading” of Saussure. The first is the arbitrariness of language. In other words, there is no *necessary* and *a priori* reason why any particular sound, gesture, inscription, etc. should conjoin with any particular acoustic image. Second, it is not the givenness of a particular sound, gesture, inscription per se that gives it meaning. Rather, meaning is structured by the *differences* between sounds, gestures, and inscriptions.

Arbitrary and Differential Signification

The linguistic sign is arbitrary.¹⁷³ Culler writes, “Since I speak English I may use the signifier represented by *dog* to talk about an animal of a particular species, but this sequence of sounds is no better suited to this purpose than another sequence. *Lod, tet*, or

¹⁷² Paul J. Thibault, *Re-Reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 214.

¹⁷³ NB. This is not original to Saussure. Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, I/2, p. 117: “A noun is a sound having meaning *established by convention alone* but no reference whatever to time, while no part of it has any meaning, considered apart from the whole.” See also John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), III/§8, p. 408: “*Words* by long and familiar use, as has been said, come to excite in Men certain *Ideas*, so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose a natural connexion (*sic*) between them. But that they *signify* only Men’s peculiar *Ideas*, and that *by a perfectly arbitrary Imposition*, is evident . . .”

bloop would serve equally well if it were accepted by members of my speech community. There is no intrinsic reason why one of these signifiers rather than the other should be linked with the concept of ‘dog.’”¹⁷⁴ *Perro* or *Chien* also signify a furry animal that barks and wags its tail when it is excited. The sounds are radically different, but that is irrelevant. What matters is the *connection* between the sound and the image it renders within a particular system of signification.

The arbitrariness of language is readily noticeable to all who study another language.¹⁷⁵ Different languages describe the world distinctly, divide time distinctly, even render relations between persons distinctly. When one studies another language one is left to conclude that either 1) other languages misrepresent the way things are, while one’s own language describes the world accurately, or 2) the very structure of language is inherently arbitrary, i.e., no necessary relationship exists between linguistic signals and mental concepts. For much of the history of Western expansion into other cultures, the first option prevailed. European nations were eager to impose their own “proper” classifications on other cultures. Imperial conquest went hand-in-hand with linguistic conquest. However, twenty-first century persons are much more inclined to side with Saussure’s thesis on the arbitrariness in language. As Culler explains, “The fact that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary means, then, that since there are no

¹⁷⁴ Jonathan D. Culler, *Ferdinand De Saussure*, rev. ed., (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 29.

¹⁷⁵ We ought not to conflate Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness with utter capriciousness. Saussure writes of the “limitations of arbitrariness,” arguing that if this “foundational principle” were not curbed in some way the entire system would devolve into “utter chaos” (*CGL*, 131). Instead, Saussure argues that “There exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated., . . . Languages always exhibit features of both kinds—intrinsically arbitrary and relatively motivated—but in very varying proportions” (*CGL*, 131). Thus, we may speak of a general arbitrariness giving rise to a relative motivation.

fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers, the signified itself is arbitrary, and so is the signifier.”¹⁷⁶

The linguistic sign is differential *because* it is arbitrary. Language is differential not referential for Saussure; in other words, the language system does not exist to represent thought: “No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure” (*CGL*, 110). A bit later, Saussure observes, “If words were charged with representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case” (*CGL*, 114-5). How then do linguistic signs do the work of meaning making within social-semiological spaces? They do so, Saussure will argue, according to differential signification.

In Part II, Chapter 4 of the *Cours*, Saussure lays out the fundamental aspects of linguistic value, which, according to one commentator, is the “climax” of Saussure’s *Cours*.¹⁷⁷ He describes language formation as a “somewhat mysterious process” whereby language takes shape between the amorphous realms of sound and thought. Values are established by a community of language users—a social-semiological system—and it is only according to “usage and general agreement” that the language system is able to

¹⁷⁶ Culler., 33. See also Thibault’s reading, which I find persuasive. It argues, “Signifiers have their basis in the order of phonic differences and, hence, in the phonological system of a particular language, rather than in physical sounds *per se*. Signifiers are not comprised of a sequence of sounds. The signifier, rather than a ‘sequence of sounds’ is a structured sequence of phonemes which constitutes a layer of symbolic organization which is internal to language form.” Consider Saussure: “The characteristic role of language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed., It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units” (*CGL*, 110).

¹⁷⁷ David Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 107.

function as such. An individual, acting alone, is incapable of establishing a value” (*CGL*, 112).¹⁷⁸

What creates linguistic value is the system of structured significations itself. If, as Saussure contends, “A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others” (*CGL*, 113), it is only logical that a drift (or diffusion) within the system would produce diminished values for all the elements of the system. The necessary conditions for the possibility of values of any kind, linguistic values included, are 1) something *dissimilar* in economic relations with other elements (i.e., exchangeable “goods”), and 2) something *similar* in relative measure with other elements (i.e., comparable “goods”).

Saussure writes, “The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. As an element in a system, the word has not only a meaning but also—above all—a value. And that is something quite different” (*CGL*, 114). Put otherwise, words are able to attach to meanings not because of any a priori relationship between them, but on account of our ability to differentiate one sound, gesture, or inscription from all the others that make up the system. A word has meaning just as much by its own identity as its non-identity vis-à-vis other words within the language.

Derrida’s “Reading” of Saussure

Derrida’s deconstruction of Saussure’s quest for a “science” of general linguistics forms the philosophical backbone of *Of Grammatology*.¹⁷⁹ By way of reminder,

¹⁷⁸ It is important to note that *value* does not equate to *meaning* in Saussure’s conception of linguistics. He argues that this distinction is imperative to prevent a slippage back to the nomenclature fallacy (*CGL*, 112; cf. *CGL*, 65).

deconstruction results from the exposure of an originary contradiction within one's thought that was nevertheless necessary for the construction of such thought. Derrida deconstructs the "science" of linguistics that Saussure first articulated by putting Saussure's declared intention (*propre delarée*)—writing is a supplement (outside) to speech (inside)—into conversation with another gesture (*autre geste*)—*something like writing* is necessary for language to function as such. Derrida shows how this other gesture at work in Saussure always already begins to unravel Saussure's declared intention. Saussure's other gesture is that writing always manages to elbow its way in and has the power to alter speech (i.e., the outside becomes inside). Derrida writes,

Yet, the intention that institutes general linguistics as a science remains in this respect within a contradiction. It's declared purpose indeed confirms, saying what goes without saying, the subordination of grammatology, the historico-metaphysical reduction of writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originary spoken language. But another gesture (not another statement of purpose, for here what does not go without saying is done without being said, written without being uttered) liberates the future of a general grammatology of which linguistics-phonology would be only a dependent and circumscribed area. (*OG*, 29-30)¹⁸⁰

Let us begin with Saussure's declared intention. Saussure asserts, "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (*CGL*, 23/45). Writing must remain *outside* of any general

¹⁷⁹ Derrida's critical engagement with Saussure is not without critics of its own. See Russell Daylight, *What if Derrida Was Wrong About Saussure?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Ltd., 2011), who accuses Derrida of importing Husserl's notion of intuition too hastily, thereby clouding Derrida's reading of Saussure. See also Daylight's recent essay that recapitulates an argument in his book that Saussure is not logocentric but only phonocentric. Russell Daylight, "The Passion of Saussure," *Language and Communication*, 32 (2012): 240-8.

¹⁸⁰ Bennington explains, "Derrida's point here is simply to suggest that for this 'usurpation' of speech by writing *even to be possible*, something about speech (about nature, then, insofar as speech is the natural place of language) must from the start *lend itself* to such a possibility: that speech become affected by writing in a way it never should have must therefore nonetheless be a possibility, what Derrida would later call a *necessary* or *structural* possibility, of the supposedly 'natural' speech from the start. Nature does not simply come first, only subsequently to be affected by culture or technology, but is, from the first, in part constituted by this very possibility." Geoffrey Bennington, "Saussure and Derrida," in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed., Carol Sanders (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 189.

linguistics. As Derrida paraphrases, “Writing will be ‘phonetic,’ it will be the outside, the exterior representation of language and of this ‘thought-sound.’ It must necessarily operate from already constituted units of signification, in the formation of which it has played no part” (*OG*, 31). Moreover, not only is writing utterly exterior to speech for Saussure, it is unrelated: “*Writing is ‘unrelated to [the] . . . inner system’ of language.*” (*CGL*, 24).

Derrida asks why Saussure devotes so much time and energy to excluding writing at the beginning of his *Cours* and answers by critiquing Saussure for going along with this classical exclusion of writing. Derrida writes, “It is less a question of outline than of protecting, and even of restoring the internal system of the language in the purity of its concept against the gravest, most perfidious, most permanent contamination which has not ceased to menace, even to corrupt that system . . .” (*OG*, 34). Derrida draws attention to the kinds of words that Saussure uses to describe writing in relation to speech. Indeed, the tone counts, especially for a “scientist”! Listen to some of the words Saussure uses to characterize writing with respect to language: *Intrusion, forced entry, archetypal violence, breaching, inversion of the natural relationship, garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise*. Here—in Saussure’s “declared intention” of “restoring the natural to itself” (*OG*, 37)—is the locus of deconstruction:

“Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. ‘Usurpation’ has always already begun” (*OG*, 37). The “originary violence” to which Derrida refers is the metaphysical decision to force writing

to the outside of language to preserve an imagined purity of language as speech. Saussure's "science" of general linguistics participates in this originary violence. Bennington observes that such a metaphysics ignores the "trace-relation, in which 'presence' is affected by absence and alterity from the start."¹⁸¹

It is precisely when Saussure feels he has "closed the parentheses" on the subject of writing, when he has relegated writing to an "intralinguistic leper colony" that he paves the way for a general grammatology. Derrida writes: ". . . one realizes that what was chased off limits, the wandering outcast of linguistics, has indeed never ceased to haunt language as its primary and most intimate possibility. Then something which was never spoken and which is nothing other than writing itself as the origin of language writes itself within Saussure's discourse" (*OG*, 44).

Saussure's *autre geste* continues a thesis that is prevalent in Aristotle and Locke that the linguistic sign is "arbitrary," meaning it is an "unmotivated institution" (*OG*, 44). Derrida observes, "The very idea of institution—hence of the arbitrariness of the sign—is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside of its horizon" (*OG*, 44). In his quest for establishing a scientific foundation for language as a "pure institution," Saussure, in Derrida's words, "chases writing to the outer darkness of language" (*OG*, 45). In addition, as we saw above, Saussure explained language as "difference without positive terms" (*CGL*, 120), i.e., language is held together by a web of differential significations. Derrida notes, "The unmotivatedness of the sign requires a synthesis in which the completely other is announced as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity—within what it is not" (*OG*, 47). This necessary condition by which the possibility of language is predicated upon an originary absence takes on a

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 193.

variety of names in Derrida's work: *trace*, *arche-writing*, and *différance* and it is such a feature of language that bears the greatest weight for contemporary theologies of proclamation.

God's Word; Human Words

Derrida's engagement with Saussure is pertinent for our exploration of the underlying presuppositions of theologies of proclamation because it exposes that which is concealed within the simple opposition between signifier and signified, namely, a certain metaphysics in which "the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God" (*OG*, 13). Derrida elaborates, "The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological" (*OG*, 14). My contention is that modern theologians and homileticians have not been sufficiently "disturbed" by the easy alliance between (*sign*) language and theo-logy. Christian theologies of proclamation are enclosed in a kind of tautology in which presence is linked with a (Divine) *logos* that in turn promises its own presence via theology.¹⁸² Derrida's "reading" of Saussure helps to unsettle this questionable heritage, thereby opening up new possibilities for imagining the relationship between God and language, specifically sermonic language.

So, what does this all have to do with preaching? What challenges does this deconstructive engagement present for theologies of proclamation in particular? I shall present these challenges in greater detail in the concluding section of this chapter, but for now, we may interrogate the theological foundations for proclamation according to three

¹⁸² We may see this unsettling slippage in Willimon: "'Theology' means literally 'God's words' (*theos* = God; *logoi* = words). But theology does not just mean words *about* God, our talk about the meaning of God. Theology also means God's talk, God's talk about the meaning of God to us" (8).

“concepts” emerging from Derrida’s discourse: 1) the trace; 2) *différance*; and 3) the hinge.

The Trace as Mark of Originary Otherness

As my reading of the most prominent theologies of proclamation for contemporary preaching in chapter one revealed, homiletics has acquiesced to the same metaphysical precepts assumed by Saussure. Even as theologies of proclamation seek to open a connection with a God whom they recognize as radically other, there is an inclination to stifle alterity by securing language as presence. Against this is the trace, the place where the absence of the other is marked. As Derrida writes, “*The trace must be thought before the entity. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation. When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself*” (OG, 47). Derrida teaches us that every ‘presence,’ every ‘as-such’ is haunted, is imbued with an alterity that is present in its absence at the same time that every ‘as-such’ is absent in its presence: “*The field of the entity, before being determined as the field of presence, is structured according to the diverse possibilities—genetic and structural—of the trace. The presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of its ‘as such,’ has always already begun and no structure of the entity escapes it*” (OG, 47). In other words, the trace points to those elements within a system of differential signification that must necessarily “exist” prior to any discrete articulation within the system. Paradoxically, they exist in their non-existence; they are present in their absence.

The trace, which Derrida will also call “arche-writing,” is the element within language creating the very possibility of language as such. It is the originary breach of

living speech from within, dissimulated by the historical imposition of language.¹⁸³ If this is an accurate construal of language, it raises important question for proclamatory theology. What might this teach us about God? Moreover, what spaces might this open up at the heart of language for proclamation that does not restrict God's presence to a form of presence *in language*? Such questions we will carry into the heart of this dissertation.

Différance and Proclamatory Signification

Différance is a term that appears throughout Derrida's oeuvre. By design it is difficult to translate with a single concept, for it defies conceptualization.¹⁸⁴ As a kind of shorthand, *différance* signifies the originary difference and deferral of meaning always already at work in language. It is equivalent to the (pure) trace; as "unconstituted difference" it is the "formation of the form" and the "being-imprinted of the imprint" (*OG*, 62-3).¹⁸⁵ Derrida explains,

¹⁸³ Arche-writing is set in opposition to "vulgar writing," in which the latter is submitted to deconstruction by the former. But Derrida catches himself. As *arche-writing* itself starts to sound like a metaphysical term too, he encourages us to use it under erasure (*sous rature*) (*OG*, 60). Nevertheless, despite its transcendental aura we must allow its necessity to be felt before letting it be erased (*OG*, 61).

¹⁸⁴ Derrida emphasizes that *différance* is neither a word nor a concept. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *M*, 7. *Différance* is of Derrida's invention, i.e. it holds no lexical space in the dictionary (at least when Derrida invented it). Derrida packs many words and concepts into this word that is neither word nor concept. First, in French, the verb *différer* carries two distinct connotations: 1) to defer and 2) to differ (from). Thus, *différance* evokes both the notions of deferral (a temporal designation) and difference (an ontological designation). So, for starters, *différance* connotes a delay or a suspension of decision *as well as* a dissimilar otherness, a discernibility, or a condition by which we can tell two things apart. The verbal root of *différance* (*différer*) is always and already polysemic. Second, the noun *différence* (with an *e*) in French is a passive noun. In other words, it does not convey the idea of actively putting off, of deferring. In French, *différence* only means difference (as in 'dissimilar to'), which is a passive idea. Third, the French language does not put forth a gerund (noun-verb) to render the sense of active deferral (in English, the gerund would be "deferring"). Typically, a French gerund is formed from the present participle of the verb: *différant*. Since no such gerund existed, Derrida invented his own. Moreover, the French ending *-ance* is retained in the language as a vestige of the middle voice, which is now obsolete. To illustrate, Derrida cites the word *mouvance*, which does not simply mean the fact of moving, of moving oneself or of being moved, but remains ambiguously related to all three. Thus Derrida's neographism, *différance*, would not simply mean the act of differing or deferring but remains undecidable between the active and passive.

¹⁸⁵ "The trace is the *différance* which opens appearance and signification" (*OG*, 65).

The (pure) trace is différance. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it does not exist, although it is never a being-present outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign . . . It permits the articulation of speech and writing—in the colloquial sense—as it founds the metaphysical opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, then between signifier and signified, expression and content, etc. (OG, 62-3)¹⁸⁶

Taking *différance* to heart—and to the heart of theologies of proclamation—opens up new questions. It forces us to factor in an irreducible undecidability in proclamatory discourse, both at its origin and toward any ultimate completion or end to the play of signification. Thinking through (or better, thinking with) *différance* invites us to entertain the possibility that we were never supposed to have it all figured out. Hardwired into language itself is an obdurate, or wily, frenetic disposition that hovers over the surface of the deep reservoir of language. It teems with an energy we cannot control, no matter how violently we strive to subdue it, to arrest its restlessness. It is master of language without enforcing its sovereignty. It is not God, as Derrida insists on several occasions, but it ought to shape the ways we attempt to speak about (and for) God in Christian preaching.¹⁸⁷ Theological thinking according to *différance* is already being done, and

¹⁸⁶ Later in *OG* Derrida explains, “Differance does not *resist* appropriation, it does not impose an exterior limit upon it. Differance began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*., Until death. Death is the movement of differance to the extent that movement is necessarily finite. This means that differance makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of differance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Differance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible” (*OG*, 143).

¹⁸⁷ See Derrida, “Différance,” 26: “This unnameable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example.” Cf. Derrida’s concern about a kind of “theological trap” and “theology of the Text” that seeks the absolute erasure of the trace in search of a full presence. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans., Barbara Johnson (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 258 (hereafter cited as *D*). For further reading on this point see the excellent treatments by John D. Caputo, “God is not *différance*,” in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1-19 and Rudolphe Gasché, “God, for Example,” in *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 150-70.

turns out to be not so foreign to Christian thought. As Willimon avers, “There is a relentlessness about the speech of this God, an effusive loquaciousness, a dogged determination not to rest, not to fall silent, not to cease striving until every single one of us is part of the conversation.”¹⁸⁸ What might this theological assertion suggest about God’s relationship to language? How might we need to reconsider language *theologically* if this is true?

La Brisure

Another important concept for us to consider as we test the foundations of our theologies of proclamation arises from Derrida’s mention of the hinge (*la brisure*). The term connotes both *difference* and *articulation*. In French, *la brisure* means a “fracture/break,” but it can also signify a “hinge/joint.” Thus it captures in one word the movement of the trace in language—*différance*—as the opening for articulation. Derrida writes, “The hinge [*brisure*] marks the impossibility that a sign, a unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence. . . . there is no full speech” (*OG*, 69). Thus, the hinge is understood as a necessary condition for the possibility of language. Without an originary difference, or alterity, language cannot appear. And yet, it is this same feature of language that opens the space necessary for articulation—of speech as well as writing in the general sense.

La brisure is a concept that presents theologies of proclamation with as many possibilities as problems. In fact, if we will acquiesce to Derrida’s insistence that difference is necessary for articulation—“Difference is articulation” (*OG*, 66)—we will begin to imagine new theological premises for proclamation. Otherness, difference, play,

¹⁸⁸ Willimon, 15.

undecidability, etc. are not obstacles to be overcome or controlled by language protected from the supposed infections threatened by writing. Might these purported obstacles be the exact opportunities for language in general, and language about God in particular?¹⁸⁹

THAT DANGEROUS (BIBLICAL) SUPPLEMENT

Preaching participates in a peculiar mode of speech. It is not only “peculiar” because Christians have heard God’s call to an “odd” way of life, though this is certainly true.¹⁹⁰ What makes preaching really strange is the way in which it unabashedly tethers speech to writing. Preaching is mere speech making apart from the (written) Word of God. As Cleophus LaRue notes, “. . . [T]he Bible is the single most important source of language, imagery, and story for the sermon.”¹⁹¹ Thomas Long too deems the connection between Bible and sermon “normative” for Christian preaching.¹⁹² In this section, I consider the status of speech as the privileged mode of proclamatory discourse.

To broaden our locutionary horizon we will follow Derrida’s engagement with two of the most prominent contributors to Western philosophical thought: Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Both have much to say on the matter of speech, especially its supposed connection to meaning, Truth, presence, and even life. Derrida’s “reading” of Plato will circle around a slippery Greek term, *pharmakon*, which can be rendered in

¹⁸⁹ Perhaps Derrida’s reading of Saussure is not so far afield from Willimon, 12: “The Word of the Lord not only creates but also devastates. For something to be born, something must die; for there to be transformation, there must be dismantling. The Word of the Lord destroys what has been so that something new may come.”

¹⁹⁰ See William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁹¹ Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁹² Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 52.

English as “remedy” or “poison.”¹⁹³ Likewise, Rousseau frequently employs the word *supplément* to describe the relation of writing to speech. Supplementation (*supplément*) can mean both *substitute* and *addition*, and even as Rousseau tries to keep the polysemy at bay in his writing, Derrida’s “reading” teases out the entanglement that threatens Rousseau’s declared intention from within.

Under Derrida’s reading *supplément* and *pharmakon* are analogues. He writes, “The *pharmakon* is neither the cure nor the poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing; the *supplément* is neither plus nor minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither an accident nor an essence, etc. . . .”¹⁹⁴ We turn now to examine these two “non-synonymous synonyms” with deeper attention.

Plato on That Dangerous Phantom (of) Speech

In Plato’s *Phaedrus* Socrates engages his young companion (Phaedrus) in a dialogue about the nature of love. Phaedrus was on his way out of the city to ponder the rousing speech he had just heard from Lysias, an acclaimed rhetorician. Even though the theme of their dialogue is love, Plato uses it as an occasion to tease out some of the intricacies of speech and its relationship to memory, writing, and Truth.

Socrates, being a self-proclaimed “lover of discourse” (λόγων ἐραστοῦ), is eager to hear Lysias’s speech recited by Phaedrus. Phaedrus, however, laments that his poor

¹⁹³ See Geoffrey Bennington, “In the Event,” in *Derrida’s Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, ed., Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 34 on Derrida’s “reading” or deconstruction, which is never quite complete

¹⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 43 (hereafter abbreviated *Pos*). See also Barbara Johnson’s prefatory comments: “With a few precautions, one could say that *pharmakon* plays a role *analogous*, in this reading of Plato, to that of *supplément* in the reading of Rousseau.” “Translator’s Footnote,” in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans., Barbara Johnson (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 96, fn. 43 (hereafter abbreviated *D*). Spivak draws the same connection. See “Translator’s Introduction” in *OG*, lxxi.

memory is insufficient to honor Socrates's request: "How can you imagine that my unpracticed memory can do justice to an elaborate work, which the greatest rhetorician of the age spent a long time in composing?"¹⁹⁵ Socrates persists and Phaedrus finally agrees to recite a portion of Lysias's speech, as well as he can remember it. But the shrewdly perceptive Socrates is not to be fooled. He says, "Yes, my sweet one; but you must first of all show what you have in your left hand under your cloak, for that roll, as I suspect, is the actual discourse. Now, much as I love you, I would not have you suppose that I am going to have your memory exercised at my expense, if you have Lysias himself here."

¹⁹⁶ Phaedrus thus reads Lysias's speech while he and Socrates recline outside of the city.

After Socrates has sufficiently refuted Lysias's teaching on love and supplemented (supplanted) Lysias's thoughts with his own, he addresses another concern that has arisen in the course of his dialogue with Phaedrus: the impropriety of writing. Socrates asks, "Do you know how you can act or speak about rhetoric so as to please God best?" (274b). Phaedrus confesses that he does not and so Socrates launches into a seemingly impromptu recounting of the Egyptian myth regarding Theuth and the origin of writing.

In brief, Theuth—who is associated with the moon and is the fabled weigher of person's souls in the underworld—introduced to humankind such great advances as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, draughts, and dice-playing. Theuth's greatest

¹⁹⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 36, trans., Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 228a. Hereafter citations from this source will be parenthetical.

¹⁹⁶ *Phaedrus*, 228e. NB. the Greek: παρόντος δὲ καὶ Λυσίου (lit. *to be present in or at a thing*). Even in Lysias's absence he is present through his text. Derrida passes over this point without comment. Instead, he writes, "A spoken speech—whether by Lysias or by Phaedrus in person—a speech proffered *in the present, in the presence* of Socrates, would not have had the same effect. Only the *logoi en bibliois*, only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under the solid object, letting themselves be desired for the space of a walk, only hidden letter can thus get Socrates moving" (*D*, 71).

contribution, in Socrates's estimation, was writing (274d). When Theuth presented the art of writing to the god-king Thamus (a.k.a. Ammon), he expected to win the king's approval, declaring it an "elixir of memory and wisdom" (274e: μνήμης τε γὰρ καὶ σοφίας φάρμακον ἠύρεθη). Thamus, however, saw in the gift of writing a false-friend. He declared that the gift offered by the "father of letters" (πατὴρ ὄν γραμμάτων) was a recipe not for memory, but for reminding (275a: ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον). The god-king continues, "[Y]ou offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise" (275a-b).

Phaedrus recognizes the truth in the Egyptian myth, leading Socrates to conclude:

He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person, and in truth ignorant of the prophecy of Ammon, if he thinks written words are of any use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written. (275c-d)

Writing is useful for self-use; however, it falters when it is intended for dissemination. In other words, inasmuch as it aids the memory of a speaker, writing is a remedy (*pharmakon*). However, when an author is absented from her thoughts, which is most poignantly displayed through writing, writing becomes a poison (*pharmakon*).

The feature of writing that distresses Socrates the most appears to be the impossibility of dialogue in writing. Like the works of a painter—which seem to have the "posture of life" and yet are mute, observing an "altogether solemn silence"—writing cannot respond to the interrogation of an intelligent interlocutor.¹⁹⁷ Intelligence is articulated in the response to critical questions for Socrates, and a written speech bound

¹⁹⁷ See also Plato, *Republic*, X/595a, p. 418.

en biblia is capable of only one, unvarying signification (σημαίνει μόνον). Moreover, Socrates laments that once words are inscribed they lose their connection to the mind of their author, being “tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them” (275e).¹⁹⁸

The key to Socrates’s instruction on wisdom and its connection to speech and writing is that thought requires the sustained attention (and intention) of its author in order to proceed toward Truth. True wisdom is situated in the heart of the speaker, and it is through the heart that she is able to respond to critical questions with sophistication. Thought always needs its father (Wisdom) to accompany it, to protect it from “mistreatment” and “abuse” for it has no means of defense in and of itself.¹⁹⁹ The central concern for Plato in this pericope is a distinction between the living word of the soul and the written word, which a mere (soul-less) representation cannot persevere in spite of its seeming permanence. Phaedrus articulates this thesis succinctly: “You mean the living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called the image” (276a).²⁰⁰ Writing is phantom speech. As such it haunts living speech with the semblance of wisdom when in actuality its tendency to drift from the father’s presence and protection (intention) makes it prodigal.

¹⁹⁸ Socrates’s observation about the innate possibility of written words to break from their original context will be a central feature of Derrida’s interaction with J. L. Austin and John R. Searle, which I discuss at length below.

¹⁹⁹ Derrida’s research into Egyptology uncovers a feature of the Theuth narrative that Socrates passes without comment. Thamus (Ammon-Ra) was the god of the sun, as well as the father of Theuth, whom ancient Egyptians associated with the moon. Thus Thamus recognizes a certain disparity between what Theuth believes the gift of writing will offer mortals (memory) and what it will actually produce (forgetfulness). However, there is a deeper issue at stake, namely, patricide. Just as the light of the moon supplements (*supplément*) that of the sun, so too does writing supplement “living speech.” Always already at risk in such a supplementation is the risk of supplanting. This will be the primary focus of the following section.

²⁰⁰ Note the Greek: τὸν τοῦ εἰδότος λόγον λέγεις ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον, οὗ ὁ γεγραμμένος εἶδωλον ἄν τι λέγοιτο δικαίως. The spoken word is alive and has a soul (ἔμψυχον) animating it. The written word, by contrast, is a phantom (εἶδωλον), only seeming to possess the soul of living speech when actually dead.

A Recipe/Remedy for Patricide

From Socrates's retelling of the Theuth myth we learn that writing is deemed an insufficient substitute for speech. Theuth believed his invention to be a remedy for forgetfulness. In complete opposition, his father-king declared it a recipe for forgetfulness. Only speech—living presence, flowing from the heart and at work on the inside—can participate in Truth. Writing, he says, is not a *remedy* but a *poison* that infects the soul with the illusion of Truth. The *pharmakon* is not the solution; it is the problem. Derrida writes, “[O]ne and the same suspicion envelops in a single embrace the book and the drug, writing and whatever works in an occult . . . Books, the dead and rigid knowledge shut up in *biblia*, piles of histories, nomenclatures, recipes and formulas learned by heart, all this is as foreign to living knowledge and dialectics as the *pharmakon* is to medical science. And myth to true knowledge” (*D*, 72-3).

Through writing, as well as myth, Derrida notes a “genealogical break” and “an estrangement from the origin” that both underwrite/undercut the distinction between writing/knowledge and myth/truth. He observes, “One thus begins by repeating without knowing—through a myth—the definition of writing, which is to repeat without knowing” (*D*, 74, 75). In other words, Socrates reveals through his reliance on the Theuth myth the very thing from which he desires separation. Writing and myth, in spite of Socrates's (Plato's) protests to the contrary, turn out to be necessary for speech and truth.

Theuth declares that writing is a “recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom” Derrida points out that this idea the father-king receives as a “poisoned present” (*D*, 77). It bears the semblance of a divine tribute when it is actually a veiled attempt to overthrow the king, to kill the father. Derrida explains,

Living *logos*, for its part, recognizes its debt, lives off that recognition, and forbids itself, thinks it can forbid itself patricide. But prohibition and patricide, like the relations between speech and writing, are structures surprising enough to require us later on to articulate Plato's text between patricide prohibited and patricide proclaimed. The deferred murder of the father and rector. (*D*, 77)

Derrida continues, "Only a power of speech can have a father. The father is always father to a speaking/living being. In other words, it is precisely *logos* that enables us to perceive and investigate something like paternity" (*D*, 80). He wonders, then, about the seductive beneficence of such a present. On the one hand, Theuth presents a *technē* and a *pharmakon* to the king, who is also his father. The god-king embodies speech as plenitude; it is he "who speaks or commands with his sun-filled voice" (*D*, 86).²⁰¹ The word of the king is law.

On the other hand, the gift is no gift at all, but a *Gift* (poison).²⁰² It is an opportunity to supplant the authority of the king. Derrida notes,

As the god of language second and of linguistic difference, Thoth can become the god of the creative word only by metonymic substitution, by historical displacement, and sometimes by violent subversion.

This type of substitution thus puts Thoth *in Ra's place* as the moon takes the place of the sun. The god of writing thus supplies the place of Ra, supplementing him and supplanting him in his absence and essential disappearance. Such is the origin of the moon as supplement to the sun, of night light as supplement to daylight. And writing as the supplement to speech. (*D*, 89)

²⁰¹ Derrida makes much of the filial relation between Theuth (Thoth) and Thamus (Ammon-Ra). The secondary and derivative status of the son/writing from the father/speech participates in the same presence/absence dynamic that Derrida questions *through* Plato's text(s). Theuth (or Thoth) is the "signifier-god" who is always wily enough to steal (away) from the Subject from whom the message arises. See *D*, 86-9.

²⁰² In German, *Gift* means *poison*. Derrida has written much on (the impossibility of) the gift. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2nd ed., trans., David Wills (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans., Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and *D*, 131. See also Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans., Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 188-203, esp. 188 and John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54-111.

In other words, the “gift” of writing is the “gift” of death. It is the occasion for patricide, supplanting the authority of the logos/father/sun with a mere *technē*, writing. The structure that makes writing possible—the possibility of substitution—functions as a “pure play of traces or supplements” (*D*, 89). This differential structure operates according to a certain violence that threatens the origin and purity of language that Derrida identifies at once with the father and the *logos*. The god of writing and the god of death are one.

Writing participates in the absolute absence of the speaker, of living speech.

Derrida explains:

The system of these traits brings into play an original kind of logic: the figure of Thoth is opposed to its other (father, sun, life, speech, origin or orient, etc.), but as that which at once supplements and supplants it. Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing. By the same token, the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and substitutes for. But it thereby opposes *itself*, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. . . .

The god of writing is thus also a god of medicine. Of “medicine”: both a science and an occult drug. Of the remedy and the poison. The god of writing is the god of the *pharmakon*. And it is writing as a *pharmakon* that he presents to the king in the *Phaedrus*, with humility as unsettling as a dare. (*D*, 93, 94)

It is precisely this originary tension, that is simultaneously etymological and conceptual, that allows Derrida to deconstruct Plato’s logocentrism articulated as phonocentrism.

The Poison that Heals

The Greek word *pharmakon* is ripe with semantic possibility. Derrida makes much of this fact, recognizing how the various translations of the word by French classicists obstruct the polysemy at work in it. *Pharmakon* presents itself readily in Plato’s text and

Derrida uses it to locate certain metaphysical presuppositions at work in Plato.²⁰³ Most commentators whom Derrida engages translate *pharmakon* as *remède* (remedy). While this is certainly valid as a translation of the word, it also erases the polysemy of the term. Derrida explains, “This medicine is beneficial; it repairs and produces, accumulates and remedies, increases knowledge and reduces forgetfulness. Its translation by ‘remedy’ nonetheless erases, in going outside the Greek language, the other pole reserved in the word *pharmakon*” (*D*, 97). This translation participates in Theuth’s declared intention, namely, that he offers writing to the god-king as a worthy product, an invention for the good of humanity. But for Plato (through Thamus) writing is a *pharmakon* in the negative sense: a poison.

Derrida notes Plato’s long history of disdain for magic, sorcery, occult, etc. and he offers numerous examples from Plato’s other texts (esp. *Republic* and *Laws*) to support this prejudice. By contrast, Plato elevates science, rationality, logic, etc. as gifts worthy of serious study. Thus, in Plato’s dismissal of writing, he reveals an a priori bias at work. Derrida sees the translators as colluding with Plato on this prejudice through their translation work. Derrida explains:

When a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison* (for example, since that [is] not the only other thing *pharmakon* means), the choice of only one of these renditions by the translator has as its first effect the neutralization of the citational play, of the “anagram,” and, in the end, quite simply of the very textuality of the translated text. (*D*, 98)

Translators perpetrate a kind of violence on the text in the same measure they take to protect or secure it. That Plato is suspicious of the *pharmakon* in general is readily

²⁰³ Derrida writes, “The word *pharmakon* has seemed to us extremely apt for the task of tying all the threads of this correspondence together” (*D*, 96).

evident, just as his suspicion of writing as a remedy (*pharmakon*) is actually a poison (*pharmakon*) infecting speech. Derrida concludes, “There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial” (*D*, 99).²⁰⁴

Plato himself tries to dominate writing on the basis of opposition. Derrida notes, to the contrary, that such oppositions (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) are never simply external to each other. Nor are they simply derivative or simply representational. The non-simplicity of Plato’s oppositions means that the opposition is frustrated from the start. The oppositional dimension must already be at work in order to unfold the kind of logic Plato displays. By pointing out the a priori tension written into Plato’s discourse, Derrida deconstructs the simple opposition between speech and writing through the *pharmakon*, which itself refuses a simple definition. Derrida concludes, “The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing” (*D*, 110).

Plato displays what Derrida will label logocentrism in his attempt to remedy language as speech (*à la* Socratic dialectic). He makes writing that perfidious element that poisons discourse. And so it must be avoided, except perhaps in private, when one is alone to enjoy oneself. The *pharmakon* enables a kind of auto-affection with disastrous consequences when exposed in public. Following our engagement with Rousseau—a later master of logos—the connection between Plato’s *pharmakon* and Rousseau’s *supplément* will become clearer and directed to proclamatory theology.

²⁰⁴ Also, “This type of painful pleasure, linked as much to the malady as to its treatment, is a *pharmakon* in itself. It partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and the disagreeable. Or rather, it is within its mass that these oppositions are able to sketch themselves out” (*D*, 99).

Rousseau: Master of Absence, Master of Death

The eminent eighteenth-century philosopher and social theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau receives a great deal of Derrida's attention.²⁰⁵ Indeed, the majority of *Of Grammatology* is devoted to Rousseau, particularly his understanding of language vis-à-vis speech and writing. As it was for Plato, Rousseau takes speech to operate according to the "natural" way of being in the world. It is the "first social institution" and as such, it "owes its form to natural causes alone."²⁰⁶ Language arose according to instinct, for Rousseau, and in his *Second Discourse* he asserts that it is the "organ of speech [that] is natural to man."²⁰⁷ Rousseau himself admits that much of his thinking on the origin of language comes from his reading of his friend and fellow philosopher, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac.²⁰⁸ The origins of language are less interesting to Derrida than the relationship between language, speech, and writing.²⁰⁹ Rousseau writes, "Writing, which might be expected to fix language, is precisely what adulterates it; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness."²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ Derrida states that Rousseau occupies a "singular position" in the history of Western metaphysics between Plato's *Phaedrus* and Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (OG, 97).

²⁰⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed., & trans., Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 248.

²⁰⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Second Discourse, or, Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed., & trans., Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207. Nevertheless, Rousseau differentiates between the "organ of speech" and "speech itself." The latter is not natural to human kind.

²⁰⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "First Discourse, or, Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed., & trans., Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 145: "I could leave it at here quoting or restating the Abbé de Condillac's investigations [regarding the origin of languages], all of which fully confirm my sentiment, and which perhaps suggested its first idea to me."

²⁰⁹ Rousseau himself dismisses the project. See Rousseau, "Second Discourse," 149. It is impossible to determine the origin of languages with certainty precisely because language arises according to Nature.

²¹⁰ Rousseau, "Essay," 260.

Rousseau presents a peculiar picture of the relationship between speech and writing. On the one hand, writing “enervates speech” by robbing it of tonal and gestural nuance that only a living, breather person can give it.²¹¹ On the other hand, he argues, “The art of writing does not in any way depend on that of speaking.”²¹² For Rousseau, writing’s strength is its weakness. It allows one to communicate one’s ideas at a distance, but this also means that the recipient receives the *absence* of the communicator rather than his *presence*. Only speech allows for presence; writing results in absence, and so is necessarily inferior for Rousseau.

By contrast, speech is thought to be the most natural expression of thought. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau charts the origin of speech emerging out of the “cry of Nature.” It is only after humans recognized the need to “substitute” visible objects with “articulations of the voice” that they “instituted signs; a substitution which can only have been made by common consent.”²¹³ It is nevertheless the primary mode by which one’s internal thoughts, feelings, desires, etc. are externalized. Put simply: speech gets the inside *outside*. Writing, on the other hand, is *unnatural*; it diverts and obstructs the immediacy of presence. It is a detour of sorts, albeit a perilous—even deadly—route, that kills the living present by means of the dead letter. As Derrida comments, the recourse to writing for Rousseau is “a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it

²¹¹ Ibid., 261. See also Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or, On Education*, ed., & trans., Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 315. Rousseau instructs, “In general, never substitute the sign for the thing except when it is impossible for you to show the latter, for the sign absorbs the child’s attention and makes him forget the thing represented.”

²¹² Rousseau, “Essay,” 258.

²¹³ Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 147.

is actually absent.”²¹⁴ Thus, Rousseau decides to subordinate the believed *unnaturalness* of writing to the *natural* mode of intercourse: speech.

The metaphysical split between speech and writing is one of several binaries Rousseau creates under the subsuming dichotomy between Nature and the Unnatural. He writes that it is in human nature to have passions and that even if the source of human passion is natural, yet it has been contaminated by “countless alien streams.”²¹⁵ Rousseau laments, for example, that some women, forsaking the “*natural* condition” of humankind, have stopped breastfeeding their own children, but turn instead to wet nurses to carry out such perfunctory duties. He writes, “Not content with having ceased to suckle their children, women no longer wish to do it; with the natural result, motherhood becomes a burden; means are found to avoid it.”²¹⁶

Rousseau also associates Nature with agriculture and a general appreciation for that which Nature gives for sustenance and enjoyment. Rousseau notes that he himself, in times of introspective solitude, turned to a “very natural instinct” in attending to the natural world. Against this “natural” tendency, he sets those who turn to metallurgy. Such an individual turns, by his greed, from the natural order to “bury himself alive” beneath the earth’s surface in search of precious minerals employed by industry. He writes, “The mineral kingdom has nothing either likable or attractive about it; its riches, locked up deep inside the earth, seem to have been placed far from the sight of men so as not to

²¹⁴ *OG*, 144. He continues, “It is a violence done to the natural destiny of language.” He then quotes Rousseau: “Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech. . . . Speech represents thought by conventional signs, and writing represents the same with regard to speech. Thus the art of writing is nothing but a mediated representation of thought.” (*OG*, 144)

²¹⁵ Rousseau, *Émile*, 362.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

appeal to their greed.”²¹⁷ Such elements—while equally a part of Nature—are “a kind of reserve,” or “supplement” to that which Nature supplies.

A final example upon which Rousseau seizes is the “natural” mode of sexual intercourse in relation to the “unnatural” arousal of oneself through masturbation.²¹⁸ With this in mind, in *Émile*, Rousseau stresses an issue that is of the utmost importance for him: the teacher is to strive above all to protect the pupil from himself. Never is the adolescent boy to be left alone, neither by night nor day, for the pupil’s “instinct is not to be trusted.” Instinct would have indeed gone off course by Rousseau’s estimation if the pupil learned to “abuse his senses” by acquiring “that dangerous habit” of masturbation.²¹⁹ The seriousness of this “habit” is stressed without equivocation: It “ruins”; it “enervates body and soul”; it is “the most fatal habit a young man can acquire.”²²⁰ Against this, Rousseau declares, “I shall not permit the purposes of nature to be evaded.”²²¹ Masturbation abandons, or evades, the “natural” relations between a man and woman.²²² Rousseau stresses that the way of nature is the way of intercourse, not masturbatory auto-affection where the imagination can lead one to rely on *that dangerous*

²¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans., Russell Goulbourne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77.

²¹⁸ Cf. the discussion of natural passions in *Émile* (362).

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 504. NB., the word translated “habit” in English is *supplément*.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.* See Glen Baier, “A Proper Arbiter of Pleasure: Rousseau on the Control of Sexual Desire,” *The Philosophical Forum* 30/4 (December 1999): 249-68.

²²² Some have speculated that Rousseau’s discussion of sexual intercourse—especially in the *Confessions*—suggest a closeted homosexuality. To be sure, Rousseau’s discusses sex between men and women, but this point neither advances nor disavows a homosexual predisposition for Rousseau. Cf. Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2007), 54: “It is true that he often experienced powerful infatuations with admired male companions. But in any case the sexual act itself was alarming to him, and he combined passionate emotion with physical timidity.”

supplement to the point that one has no need of sexual intercourse at all and self-love has supplanted sex altogether.²²³

Derrida notes what is at stake for Rousseau: “The dangerous supplement destroys very quickly the forces that Nature has slowly constituted and accumulated” (*OG*, 151). On one side, Rousseau lists nature, life, presence, and speech; on the other side, he lists artifice, death, absence, and writing. The crux of the issue for Derrida—indeed, his issue with all of Western metaphysics—is that such simple oppositions between the natural and the unnatural, between presence and absence, and even between life and death are established by a certain metaphysics that Derrida will label *logocentrism*. The guiding thread of Derrida’s early work, which we have seen already in his “readings” of Saussure and Plato, is the decision to subordinate writing to speech. It is unnatural for mothers not to breastfeed their own children, for men to risk blindness and death by burrowing deep into the earth, and for young men to prefer masturbation to copulation. These are paths away from Nature. Rousseau writes against such practices because, as Derrida states, “like the sign” they bypass “the presence of the thing and the duration of being” (*OG*, 151). Such a detour leads away from Nature for Rousseau.

Or does it?

This is precisely the question Derrida asks throughout *Of Grammatology*; he calls into question the simple opposition and subordination that is perpetrated by Western philosophy since Plato. He does this by tracing certain internal tensions within the

²²³ Rousseau appears to have been better equipped to offer this instruction than to keep it. In his *Confessions* he divulges, “I have possessed extremely few [women sexually], but I have not failed to enjoy many in my manner; that is to say, by imagination.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed., Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters and Peter G. Stillman, trans., Christopher Kelly (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1995), 15. He continues, “This is how my senses, in harmony with my timid disposition and my romantic spirit, have preserved pure feelings and decent morals for me, by means of the same tastes which might possibly have plunged me into the most brutal sensuality if I had had a little more effrontery.”

tradition that are nonetheless ingredient in the very possibility of the tradition. In other words, he shows how the conditions for the possibility of many of the unquestioned dogmas of Western thought are simultaneously conditioned by their impossibility. For Rousseau, this happens by way of pitting Jean-Jacques (the contemplative who authored *Émile*, *Reveries*, and the *Confessions*) against Rousseau (the philosopher who penned the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and the award-winning *Discourses*).

What it all comes down to is control. Through a certain *logos* Rousseau seeks to master absence: “One cannot help wishing to master absence and yet we must always let go” (*OG*, 142). By Derrida’s “reading,” that which Rousseau believes to have mastered escapes from his sovereign regime. Mastery turns out to have been a mere illusion created by the binaries established by a certain *logos* itself. Presence turns out to be an illusion masked by the play of signification. The presence that Rousseau so wanted to establish through “natural” speech is deferred absolutely. Derrida avers, “The presence that is thus delivered to us in the present is a chimera. Auto-affection is a pure speculation. The sign, the image, the representation, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusion that sidetrack us” (*OG*, 154). This is not something that Derrida brings to Rousseau’s oeuvre as a rebuttal. It is already at work in the fabric of Rousseau’s discourse.

Rousseau insists that presence is communicated through speech, and yet he confesses that his own self-presence is better communicated in writing than in speech. He reveals,

Made to meditate at leisure in solitude, I was not at all made to speak, act, deal with business among men. *Nature*, which had given me the former talent, had refused me the latter. . . . It was clear that I would no longer be able to dispose of myself, and

that—dragged in spite of myself into a whirlwind for which I was not at all born—I would be leading a life completely contrary to my taste there and would only show myself at my disadvantage.²²⁴

Jean-Jacques fears that his actual, here-and-now *presence* would poorly maintain the opinion his hosts might have garnered from his books, which constitute a different kind of presence altogether. Derrida shows how this is the genuine writing lesson in Jean-Jacques's life. Writing for Rousseau aims at "the greatest symbolic reappropriation of presence." His own life and experience with speech and writing bears witness against the simple oppositions he makes between speech and writing, presence and absence, life and death. Indeed, "[f]rom this point of view, Rousseau knew that death is not the simple outside of life. Death by writing also inaugurates life" (*OG*, 143).²²⁵

The simple division between life and death unravels the more Jean-Jacques writes in order to preserve his life, his presence. Later in the *Confessions*, Rousseau describes his "open and frank natural character." However, when he is greeted with the news of an article which d'Alembert was to add to the *Encyclopedia*, Rousseau was indignant. He viewed this as a "stratagem of seduction" in his native Geneva; and yet, Rousseau presents himself—seemingly unbeknownst to himself—as closed and timid. Diderot is the one who brought news of this article to Rousseau while visiting him at the Hermitage. Rousseau describes all of this. And yet, he writes, "I said nothing to [Diderot]; but being indignant at all this stratagem of seduction in my fatherland, I

²²⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 544-5. See also, p. 97-8: "I would love society as much as anyone else if I was not sure of showing myself, not only to my disadvantage there, but completely different from the way I am. The decision I have made to write and hide myself is precisely the one that suits me. If I had been present, no one would ever have known what I am worth . . ."

²²⁵ It seems unlikely that Jean-Jacques could even handle the experience of a plenitude of presence without it killing him. Derrida writes, "Pleasure *itself*, without symbol or suppletory, that which would accord us (to) pure presence itself, if such a thing were possible, would be only another name for death. Rousseau says it: 'Enjoyment! Is such a thing made for man? Ah! If I had ever in my life tasted the delights of love even once in their plenitude, I do not imagine that my frail existence would have been sufficient for them, I would have been dead in the act' (*Confessions*, Bk. VIII)." (*OG*, 155).

impatiently waited for the volume of the *Encyclopedia* in which this article was, to see whether there might not be a way to make some response to it that could parry this unfortunate blow.”²²⁶ Rousseau displays the sentiments of many introverts: presence (understood spatially and temporally) may seem to occlude who one really is; a certain non-presence is sometimes necessary in order to convey one’s true presence.

Rousseau continues, “Far from fearing death, I saw it drawing near with joy; but I regretted leaving my fellows without them feeling everything I was worth, without them knowing how much I would have deserved to be loved by them, if they had known me better.”²²⁷ Toward his fellows, as well as the women that incite his surreptitious imaginary rendezvous, Jean-Jacques’ presence is mediated through a sort of non-presence; his essence (“everything I was worth”) is better received by a certain absence, in writing. But this causes the natural/unnatural binary to collapse under its own weight. The *natural* itself is inadvertently opened to interrogation. Perhaps writing and masturbation are not as “dangerous” as Rousseau imagines. Masturbation has much in common with writing; both present a certain manumission for the subject. As Derrida writes,

In as much as it *puts into play* the presence of the present and the life of the living, the movement of language does not, one suspects, have only an analogical relationship with “sexual” auto-affection. It is totally indistinguishable from it, even if that totality is severely articulated and differentiated. The logocentric longing par excellence is to distinguish one

²²⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 414-5. Italics added. He continues, further frustrating the simple opposition speech/presence and writing/absence upon which he insists elsewhere, “Full of everything that had just happened to me, still alarmed by so many violent movements, my heat mixed the feeling of its pains to the ideas that the meditation of my subject had caused to be born in me . . . How many delightful tears did I shed while writing it! Alas! In it one feels only too much that the love, that fatal love which I was exerting myself to cure, had not yet departed from my heart.”

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 415-6. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Lettres morales,” VI, C.G. III, 370, cited in George Armstrong Kelly, “A General Overview,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28: “When one lives alone, one loves men better; we are attached to them by a tender interest, our imagination develops the charms of society . . .”

from the other. . . . In the same way that the “fatal advantage” of sexual auto-affection begins well before what is thought to be circumscribed by the name masturbation . . . , the supplementary menace of writing is older than what some think to exalt by the name of “speech.” (OG, 167)

That dangerous supplement of writing—or masturbation—is always already at play and it is at work *prior* to metaphysical excommunication. What is ironic about the exclusion of the unnatural, absence-ridden *supplément* (writing, death, masturbation, etc.) is that the very process of exclusion operates according to the same structure of supplementarity it had hoped to master.²²⁸ Thus, by the exact measure Rousseau takes to master absence, to master death, he introduces the object of the undoing of presence, and life, experienced as a plenitude, and hence without supplement. The very possibility of a *supplément* prevents mastery.²²⁹

Supplementing the Supplément

As explained in passing above, the French word *supplément* (from the verb *suppléer* and its derivatives) is the crimson thread that leads Derrida through the labyrinth of Rousseau's texts.²³⁰ Derrida notes that the word simultaneously bears two significations. On the one hand, the *supplément* adds itself, as a surplus, as “a plenitude enriching another plenitude.” On the other hand, the *supplément* supplants: it “intervenes or insinuates itself *in-place-of*” the natural representation of thought, which is speech. In Derrida’s words, “As substitute, [*le supplément*] is not simply added to the positivity of a

²²⁸ “*What is added is nothing because it is added to a full presence to which it is exterior. . . . The concept of origin or nature is nothing but the myth of addition, of supplementarity annulled by being purely additive*” (OG, 167).

²²⁹ Derrida avers, “The death of speech is therefore the horizon and origin of language. But an origin and a horizon which do not hold themselves at its exterior borders. As always, death, which is neither a present to come nor a present past, shapes the interior of speech, as its trace, its reserve, its interior and exterior difference: as its supplement” (OG, 315).

²³⁰ Derrida notes that the French verb *suppléer* means simultaneously “to supplant” and “to compensate for” (OG, 280).

presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. . . . The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself” (*OG*, 145). The question this raises for Derrida is that if the spoken sign is so full of the presence of that which it signifies, why does it need a supplement? If presence is so “natural,” and if Nature needs no supplement, then why, Derrida wonders, does the *convention* of writing persist? Is it not paradoxical to speak of an artificial (i.e., non-natural) supplement within Nature?

We recall that Derrida has already noted the complex relationship between speech and writing in his readings of Saussure and Plato: it is fundamental to the Western philosophical tradition (a.k.a. *logocentrism*). Derrida’s deconstruction presupposes a certain engagement with the “engineers” of Western metaphysical discourse and it is through Derrida’s readings of others that the light of his own methodology shines brightest. Rousseau is one such “engineer.”²³¹ Derrida’s deconstruction of this tradition is precisely that: a de-construction of the structures too long presumed immutable.²³²

The *supplément*, while seeming to be the element of mastery, of securing indemnity against the loss of presence, turns out to be the very element that prevents such mastery within Rousseau’s logocentric economy. Derrida writes, “This metaphysics of presence constantly reappears and is resumed in Rousseau’s text whenever the fatality of the

²³¹ See Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Lévi-Strauss’s engineer vis-a-vis the *bricoleur* in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *WD*, 278-94. As one commentator observes, “What emerges in the course of Derrida’s reading is *not* just a series of associated ‘themes’ in Rousseau but a singular logic of reversal and displacement which governs the entirety of his literary output.” Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 99.

²³² Cf. Hélène Cixous, “Sorties,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed., Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 96: “There is no such thing as ‘destiny,’ ‘nature,’ or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historicocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else. At present, we are living through a transitional period—where the classical structure appears as if it might crack.”

supplement seems to limit it. It is always necessary to add a supplement of presence to the presence that is concealed” (*OG*, 309). Once we recognize the truth of Derrida’s deconstruction we are free to experience the freedom of a discourse that is always already supplemented, always already represented, of a condition that is always already exposed to death. Such a death structures the conditions for the possibility of life: “Birth is the birth (of) presence. Before it there is no presence; and from the moment that presence, holding or announcing itself to itself, breaches its plenitude and starts the chain of its history, death’s work has begun” (*OG*, 309).

The realization that Rousseau’s simple opposition fails to hold at bay those elements that seem to contaminate, to supplant the system from within, opens up a new horizon for thinking about speech. Derrida writes, “The sickness of the outside . . . is in the heart of the living word, as its principle of effacement and its relationship to its own death” (*OG*, 313). In other words, there is an “originary supplement,” a “supplement of origin” always already at work within speech. Derrida continues, “[T]he supplement of origin: which supplements the failing origin and which is not yet derived; this supplement is, as one says of a spare part [*une pièce*], of the original make [*d’origine*]” (*OG*, 313). Banishing writing from speech fails to secure an essential plenitude of presence in speech; writing, or at least something like writing, is not “contingent,” but is a necessary condition for the possibility of speech.²³³ Rousseau has missed this feature of speech because he uncritically succumbs to the lure of logocentrism, which promises a mastery while delivering servitude.

²³³ Derrida explains, “Placing representation outside, which means placing the outside outside, Rousseau would like to make of the supplement of presence a pure and simple addition, a contingency: thus wishing to elude what, in the interior of presence, calls forth the substitute, and is constituted only in that appeal, and in its trace” (*OG*, 312).

Derrida's insights trouble the Western philosophical intuition, where mastery is identified with domination and penetration.²³⁴ The voice seems inseparable from life. Dead things cannot speak, after all. Derrida notes, "Voice penetrates into me violently, it is the privileged route for forced entry and interiorization, whose reciprocity produces itself in the 'hearing-oneself-speak,' in the structure of the voice and of interlocution" (*OG*, 240). The interiorization of hearing-oneself-speak gives the impression of mastery. Derrida explains,

The self-presence of the voice and of the hearing-oneself-speak conceals the very thing that visible space allows to be placed before us. The thing disappearing, the voice substitutes an acoustic sign for it which can, in the place of the object taken away, penetrate profoundly into me, to lodge there 'in the depth of the heart.' It is the only way of interiorizing the phenomenon; by transforming it into *akoumène*; which supposes an originary synergy and an originary synesthesia; but which also supposes that the disappearance of presence in the form of the object, the being-before-the-eyes or being-at-hand, installs a sort of fiction, if not a lie, at the very origin of speech. (*OG*, 240)

The voice ends up veiling its necessary reliance on an originary representation that is necessarily non-present in its iterability.²³⁵ Or, as Derrida puts it, "Speech never gives the thing itself, but a simulacrum that touches us more profoundly than the truth, 'strikes' us more effectively" (*OG*, 240).

Rather than oppositional (either/or), the *supplément* turns out to be complementary (both/and), indeed, a necessary complement *through* its seeming opposition. Without

²³⁴ Much could be made, and indeed has been made, of the relationship between logos and androcentric penetration. See Luce Irigaray, "Cosi fan Tutti," in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans., Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985): 86-105 on the "economy of truth" as the "surest way of perpetuating the phallic economy" and Hélène Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," trans., Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1/4 (Summer 1976), 877, fn. 1: "Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a "dark continent" to penetrate and 'pacify.'" See Spivak's prefatory remark that Derrida's reading of Rousseau's texts are "psychoanalytical only in the very general sense" (*OG*, xlvii).

²³⁵ On "iterability" as a necessary possibility for speech as well as writing see *LI*, 7ff. and 56ff.

supplément we could have neither speech nor writing. Even as it looks like death (of the letter) that threatens life (in speech), Derrida shows that it “opens as much as it threatens the possibility of the spoken word” (*OG*, 141). To be sure, “[w]e are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it” (*OG*, 141). The “play of substitution” which participates in the logic of the *supplément* simultaneously “fills and marks a determined lack” (*OG*, 157). Derrida puts it no clearer than this: “The supplement transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict. That is what also permits writing as the supplement of speech; but already also the spoken word as writing in general. Its economy exposes and protects us at the same time according to the play of forces and of the differences of forces” (*OG*, 155).

Derrida’s “reading” of Jean-Jacques (and) Rousseau presents a profound philosophical truth even as its unfolding calls the very notion of truth into question. There is no full-presence, full-life, full-signification; the *supplément* is always already there as their condition of possibility. “What is thus eluded,” notes Derrida, “is the fact that representation does not suddenly encroach upon presence; it inhabits it as the very condition of its experience, of desire, and of enjoyment [*jouissance*]” (*OG*, 312). The quest to master absence and even death by abjuring the *supplément*, the *trace*, *différance*, etc. ignores the possibility that such might be received as benevolent, auspicious gifts. As Derrida writes, “it is this *faculty of supplementarity* which is the true ‘origin’—or nonorigin—of languages: articulation in general, as articulation of nature and of convention, of nature and all its others” (*OG*, 241). What remains to be seen is how this observation impacts theologies of proclamation.

“The Λόγος Was God” (John 1:1)

As with Saussure, it matters little for our present concerns whether or not Derrida’s “readings” of Plato or Rousseau are accurate.²³⁶ What does matter are the metaphysical presuppositions that Derrida’s own texts illumine for theologies of proclamation. Let us begin with his reading of Rousseau. Derrida’s analytic of *supplément* opens a window toward an analogical pattern in homiletics: the preacher’s voice is a *supplément* to God’s voice. On the one hand, the preacher adds something to God’s Word by interjecting her own words, opinions, personality, etc. to the written Word of Scripture.²³⁷ Her words clarify that which has been written, adding additional information and definition. This presupposes that the original—the Text—is lacking in some way; it is in some manner unclear, ambiguous, indeterminate.

On the other hand, the preacher’s words signify a replacement for that which came before. The supplement of homiletical discourse does not merely compensate for a lack, it supplants that which preceded it. By presuming to speak from the pulpit the preacher intimates that God’s Word revealed in Scripture is inadequate, lacking, obscure, too

²³⁶ See, for example, Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 4-8, who argues that Socrates is actually attacking presence rather than defending it and Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 138-9: “What happens in Rousseau is exactly what happens in Derrida: a vocabulary of substance and of presence is no longer used declaratively but rhetorically, for the very reasons that are being (metaphorically) stated., Rousseau’s text has no blind spots: it accounts at all moments for its own rhetorical mode. Derrida misconstrues as blindness what is instead a transposition from the literal to the figural level of discourse.”

²³⁷ See, for example, Phillips Brooks’ comments in his Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale University in 1877: “Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. . . Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being.” Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 26.

difficult to understand in contemporary contexts. Unless, of course, the preacher is merely reading the Text; but this is not preaching.²³⁸

Let us bracket, for the moment, the legitimation of the task of preaching by Scripture itself (Lk. 10:16; Jn 15:27; Acts 1:8, etc.). Focusing on the homiletical reality of supplementation we discover that this situation points to several features of proclamation that we ought to bear in mind. First, that the spoken word of the preacher *supplée* the written Word of God means that preaching leads not to some closure but to an endless, re-iterable processes of supplementary signs, differing and deferring, from Sunday to Sunday. Writing is “elaborately prolix” for Rousseau (*OG*, 281). But the supplementary relation between the Text written and the Text proclaimed establishes its own prolixity: no Sunday sermon says it all; never do we “overcome” the Text. Supplementation is already and always at work.

Second, in Christian proclamation, the paradigm of supplementation is inverted. The written Word gives way to the spoken Word. The sermon supplements a certain absence established and partially resisted by writing with a spatio-temporal presence.²³⁹ With Rousseau, writing is the *supplément* to speech; the Natural succumbs to the Unnatural. Preaching, to the contrary, might be considered the recuperation of the Natural, if we allow Rousseau’s distinction to hold. Moreover, we must recall that many of the written documents that constitute the Christian Bible were written to be read.

²³⁸ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 49, writes, “[In preaching] I have not to talk *about* scripture but *from* it. I have not to say something, but merely repeat something. If God alone wants to speak in a sermon, neither theme nor *scopus* should get in the way. . . . Our task is simply to follow the distinctive movement of thought in the text, to stay with this, and not with a plan that arises out of it.”

²³⁹ Let us also bracket the recent phenomenon gaining ground in Evangelical churches of the “video-venue” or “holographic” sermons, whereby the preacher’s “presence” is re-presented in another location, and perhaps at another time. See Sarah Pulliam, “The Art of Cyber Church,” *Christianity Today* 53, no. 9 (September 2009): 50-3 and C. Christopher Hook, “The Techno Sapiens Are Coming,” *Christianity Today* 48, no. 1 (January 2004): 36-40.

Paul's letters, the Gospels, even the Psalter were intended to be read (or sung) in the context of Christian and/or Jewish gatherings (see Rom. 1:7; Rev. 1:4). In other words, for some texts, there never was a point of pure presence in speech apart from writing. Any meaning or truth contained therein always already lacked the "natural" capacity imagined by Rousseau. The remedy preceded the disease.

Third, and this point arises more clearly from Derrida's engagement with Plato than Rousseau, the *logos* (reason/discourse/word) is a *pharmakon* (medicine/poison). Preaching has aligned its charge with an understanding of God as *logos*—"In the beginning was the Word/*logos*. And the Word/*logos* was with God and the Word/*logos* was God. This one was with God in the beginning" (Jn. 1:1-2). By participating in the metaphysical dualism speech/writing, preaching radically reduces the infinite alterity signified by God as *logos*. Derrida writes, "As a *pharmakon*, *logos* is at once good and bad; it is not at the outset governed exclusively by goodness or truth" (*D*, 115). Derrida notes that by squelching the "ambivalence" and "mysterious indetermination of *logos*" that the simple opposition between truth and myth, speech and writing, ideality and rationality, etc. is possible (*D*, 115). When God is identified as *logos* and the *logos* is identified with speech, homiletics arrests the play of *différance* resonating through the *logos*. By participating in the Platonic decision out of which *logos* emerged as philosophy proper, within and against the horizon of the *pharmakon*, homiletics operates according to a structure that has already determined to treat the *logos* a certain way, thereby *silencing* the possibility of alterity, and ultimately, reducing God to that which we have already decided we can control. Derrida's point ought to haunt our homiletic: "the

pharmakon properly consists in a certain inconsistency, a certain impropriety, this non-identity-with-itself always allowing it to be turned against itself” (*D*, 119).

What Derrida teaches us is that the distinctions between speech and writing, the Natural and Unnatural, presence and absence, etc. collapse in light of the play of *différance*. Both speech and writing are sensible reminders that we are not self-sufficient in and of ourselves. There is an originary trace at work in both speech and writing so the notion that in preaching we transform “ink into blood” misses the mark.²⁴⁰ Full presence is always deferred; it never arrives. And so we repeat, “Come (*viens, oui, oui*), Lord Jesus.”

STAGE FRIGHT

We have been slowly making our way to the preacher’s pulpit through the detour of language theory, which culminated in the privileged medium of speech. These preliminary investigations have led us to the point where we now stand: the event of Christian proclamation.

That preaching is understood as an event is not new.²⁴¹ Recently in homiletics, however, scholars have added philosophical sophistication to this theological claim, finding an ally in the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and his student, John Searle. The main focus of these homileticians is on Austin’s 1955 William James Lectures at Harvard University, published as *How To Do Things With Words*. Following the pattern established thus far in our discussion, I will first present Austin’s theory and then

²⁴⁰ Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 64.

²⁴¹ See Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 15-8. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, ed., G. W. Bromiley, & T. F. Torrance, trans., G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 95: “Real proclamation as this new event, in which the event of human talk is not set aside by God but exalted, is the Word of God.”

introduce Derrida's critique of it. I will conclude by pointing to the most salient questions this explication raises for theologies of proclamation that have drawn from Austin's philosophy of language.

How To Do Things with Words

For philosopher J. L. Austin the basic unit of meaning is the sentence.²⁴² So, unlike Saussure, the focus of the philosopher is not upon the arbitrary and differential structure of linguistic signs that give rise to word meaning, but the configuration of such words to express the intention of a speaker or writer vis-à-vis the "total context" of a use of language.²⁴³ Like Saussure, however, Austin is concerned with creating an overarching theory of language that is "scientific" inasmuch as it opens a way toward a *pure theory* of discrete linguistic acts that he will call performative utterances.

Austin's theory of performative utterances prompted a powerful reconsideration of a major component of investigation in the philosophy language. Whereas most scholars focus on the truthfulness (or falseness) of an utterance. Austin observes, "We have not got to go very far back in the history of philosophy to find philosophers assuming more or less as a matter of course that the sole business, the sole interesting business, of any utterance—that is, of anything we say—is to be true or at least false."²⁴⁴ Instead, Austin focuses his attention on "straightforward utterances" that are participating in another kind of discourse than that concerned with truth or falsehood: performative utterances.

²⁴² J. L. Austin, "The Meaning of a Word," in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd. ed., ed., J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 56: "What alone has meaning is a *sentence*."

²⁴³ Austin focuses on the "total context," or total situation of a speech act, which includes both the speaker/author's intention as well as the contextual factors surrounding a particular utterance. For Searle, however, it is solely on the basis of the speaker's intention that an utterance is "normal" or "parasitic."

²⁴⁴ J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd. ed., ed., J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 233.

Performative utterances, or speech acts, are particular sentence constructions that actually perform in and of themselves the action they announce (e.g., promissory utterances *make* promises). Such sentences do not merely report the performance of a certain action.

Conventional linguistic configurations such as betting, promising, christening, apologizing, etc. achieve in and of themselves that which they imply.

Austin dedicates a significant amount of time, however, to setting the attitudinal and circumstantial conditions that make performative utterances “come off.” One of the key features of his work is an awareness of the ways in which a performative might become contaminated from within or from without.²⁴⁵ Beginning on the inside, a person must have the proper intention to make the performative valid *qua* performative. Austin writes, “In the particular case of promising, as with many other performatives, it is appropriate that the person uttering the promise should have a certain intention, viz. here to keep his word: and perhaps of all contaminants this looks the most suitable to be that which ‘I promise’ does describe or record.”²⁴⁶ Austin is quick to note, however, that the words are not a mere report of an inward intention and this is where his thinking loses his usual crispness.²⁴⁷ On the one hand, Austin recognizes that a certain inward assent or condition of the heart necessarily accompanies performative utterances. When I apologize, for instance, it is assumed that my words participate in a sense of contrition within myself. On the other hand, Austin has two concerns. First, he is worried that the

²⁴⁵ This is less of a concern for Searle, who focuses instead on ideal speech acts. See John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 55: “[C]ertain forms of analysis, especially analysis into necessary and sufficient conditions, are likely to involve (in varying degrees) idealization of the concept analyzed. In the present case, our analysis will be directed at the center of the concept of promising. I am ignoring marginal, fringe, and partially defective promises.”

²⁴⁶ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed., ed., J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 11.

²⁴⁷ This may, in fact, arise from what Wittgenstein identified as the “blurred boundaries” of such concepts as promises. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans., G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), § 71.

mention of an “inward spiritual act” in addition to the words uttered under certain conditions will give the impression that the words are more or less factual descriptions of one’s inward state. This would undercut the *poiesis* of performative utterances, namely, their ability to accomplish what they say outside the bounds of descriptive or representational discourse. Second is his concern that the coupling of a speaker’s intention to her words will open a “loophole to perjurers and welschers and bigamists” whereby one’s words do not express a certain solemnity at work within her heart and mind. At day’s end, Austin advocates that we “stick to the old saying that our word is our bond.”²⁴⁸

A significant portion of Austin’s writing on performative utterances consists of acknowledging the various ways that a performative utterance might fail. He calls these “contaminants” or “infelicities.”²⁴⁹ Austin explains, “But [performative utterances] do suffer from certain disabilities *of their own*. They can fail to come off in special ways . . . The various ways in which a performative utterance may be unsatisfactory we call, for the sake of a name, the infelicities; and an infelicity arises—that is to say, the utterance is unhappy—if certain rules, transparently simple rules, are broken.”²⁵⁰ He recognizes that for any possible performative utterance there are myriad ways that it can go wrong. These are the circumstantial conditions for the possibility of a performative utterance:

Besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action. What these are we may hope to discover by looking at and classifying types of case in which

²⁴⁸ Austin, “Performative Utterances,” 236.

²⁴⁹ Searle will call these defects: “My notion of a defect in an illocutionary act is closely related to Austin’s notion of an ‘infelicity’ ” (54).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 237. Italics added., N.B. that such “disabilities” are internal to the very possibility of performative utterances. This will become increasingly important as we unpack Derrida’s reading of Austin.

something *goes wrong* and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general *unhappy*. And for this reason we call the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the *Infelicities*.²⁵¹

It is worth noting that before Austin lays out the conditions for the possibility of a performative utterance he admits certain (internal) conditions for the *impossibility* of such a feat.²⁵²

Words that are performed infelicitously—or “non-seriously,” like those of an actor or poet on a stage—Austin deems “*in a peculiar way hollow or void*.”²⁵³ He explains, “Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of *etiolations* of language. All these we are *excluding* from consideration.”²⁵⁴

Austin distinguishes between three kinds of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary.²⁵⁵ A *locutionary act* is the simple act of saying something. It is equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference. An *illocutionary act* carries a certain (conventional) force. Austin lists informing, ordering, warning, and undertaking as examples of illocutionary speech. Both Austin and Searle take promising as the illocutionary act par excellence. *Perlocutionary acts* actually bring

²⁵¹ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 14.

²⁵² Such “necessary conditions” are recounted in Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 14-15. In brief, they are these: 1) the words must yield to a convention of speech accepted under certain circumstances; 2) the persons and circumstances must be appropriate to that which is being said; 3) the words (and rituals) must be executed “correctly and completely”; 4) the “thoughts and feelings” of the participants must accompany the words; and 5) the future actions of the participant must follow according to the words spoken.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

about or achieve that which they say (e.g., convincing, persuading, deterring, surprising, misleading).

Context

Context is a very important aspect of theologies of proclamation. There is a certain infungibility at work in the event of preaching. Homiletics has staked much of its theory and practice of communicating the Gospel on the hope that through the act of proclamation—always already structured by a certain felicity maintained between preacher and congregant—God will communicate God’s concerns.

As our brief investigation of Austin makes clear, he too was concerned with establishing the contextual conditions for the possibility of certain illocutionary speech-acts that he labels “performatives.” The declaration, “I now declare you husband and wife” is governed by an array of contextual circumstances that seem to be external to the words themselves. Does an “authorized” person—a member of the clergy or a justice of the peace—make this declaration? Do these words culminate certain words and gestures by a couple who have declared their intention to marry? Is this utterance ensconced within a pre-ordained venue—a wedding ceremony, for instance—such that the words carry their official, even ontological, force?

This is one example, among many, that Austin offers as a condition that structures the possibility of a performative utterance. In the process of establishing these conditions Austin excludes certain infelicitous conditions that might render the performative force of an illocutionary utterance ineffectual. If an actor performs the wedding declaration on stage, we would not expect the words to bind the actors in the same way were they in a different context (a church or courtroom) and were their intentions less clear. If the

officiant were an impostor, a rogue impersonator who had usurped the right to utter these words in a legally and/or ecclesiastically binding way, then we might deem the context null. Furthermore, if the bride and groom were not sincere in their intention to marry—if they crossed their fingers during the vows, for instance—the ceremony fails the test of contextual fidelity.

To this seemingly straight-forward explanation, Derrida presents a bold thesis, one that we have seen rehearsed before: the very conditions for the impossibility of a performative utterance continue to haunt the conditions for its possibility. In other words, it is always possible that the conditions for a speech-act might not be met, that the conditions might run adrift from those presupposed (preordained) by the context.

Even if everything goes off without a hitch, as we say, the “success” of the speech-act is nevertheless governed by the very real possibility of the couple failing to get hitched, as we say. The entire situation is organized around its ever-present possibility of failure and this possibility cannot be summarily discounted at the outset, but always already upsets the situation at its origin even as it interrupts its ends. What if our priest isn’t really a priest? What if my partner was lying? What if the witnesses were in on a joke? These fears are more than paranoia; they are necessary to the rite of getting hitched without a hitch. This line of inquiry in no way undermines the possibility of a wedding context; rather, it inquires into the concealed philosophical presuppositions that underlie it. Derrida argues that “context is never absolutely determinable . . . [And thus] its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated” (*LI*, 3).

The same kind of structure that sustains the possibility of writing—particularly understood as the extension of an empirical, or at least psychological, presence beyond the

context of the actual writing—also structures performative utterances. This structure Derrida labels *iterability*. Iterability is the possibility of repeatability in *other* contexts.²⁵⁶

Performative utterances are necessarily susceptible to infelicity in as much as “an essential drift [*dérive*]” sustains them that is internally situated to the iterative structure (*LI*, 8). Intention is always already exposed to what Derrida calls elsewhere “dissemination”; it is “abandoned to its essential drift” and this “breaking force [*force de rupture*] is ingredient, not accidental, to the structure of iterability (*LI*, 9). Derrida concludes,

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [*ancrage*]. (*LI*, 12)

So, as it turns out, Austin is not as far from Saussure as it would seem; both thinkers are united by the very aspect of language that drives them to protect or secure their theory: iterability.

Unhappy Performatives

To recap: For Austin, every instance of discourse (excluding reflex exclamations) is an event, a speech act. Present with every utterance is a certain force (locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary) that is, at minimum, a force of communication. In saying anything it is presumed that I seek to *do* something, *viz.* to communicate. Austin moves the conversation from truth value to force value and Derrida appreciates this move: “The performative is a ‘communication’ which is not limited strictly to the transference of a

²⁵⁶ Derrida notes that iterability likely comes from the Sanskrit word, *itera*, meaning “other.” It is the working out of alterity in discrete acts of repeatability (*LI*, 7).

semantic content that is already constituted and dominated by an orientation toward truth (be it the *unveiling* of what is in its being or the *adequation-congruence* between a judicative utterance and the thing itself)” (*LI*, 14).

Derrida applauds a certain openness (and playfulness?) that he finds in Austin’s discussion of performative utterances. He deems Austin’s discourse “fruitful” inasmuch as it acknowledges the aporetic aspects of its own logic. Nevertheless, Derrida writes, “Austin has not taken account of what—in the structure of *locution* (thus before any illocutory or perlocutory determination)—already entails that system of predicates I call *graphematic in general* and consequently blurs [*brouille*] all the oppositions which follow, oppositions whose pertinence, purity, and rigor Austin has unsuccessfully attempted to establish” (*LI*, 14). In other words, Derrida finds in Austin’s work a failure, or refusal, to acknowledge certain structural conditions that threaten speech act theory from within.

Austin seeks the *total context* by which a performative utterance might be executed.²⁵⁷ Constitutive of this total context are certain internal and external conditions of possibilities. The internal conditions for a performative to “come off” have to do with a classical theory of consciousness by which the speaker is the author of her own intention to communicate something to someone else.²⁵⁸ Derrida writes, “performative communication becomes once more the communication of an intentional meaning, even if that meaning has no referent in the form of a thing or of a prior or exterior state of

²⁵⁷ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 148, writes, “The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.”

²⁵⁸ Austin also devotes some space to demarcating the grammatical conditions that structure the possibility of performative utterances. This too would be *internal* to the “total context” of speech acts in addition to the immediate access of a conscious speaker to her intentionality, her *vouloir-dire* (see *How To Do Things With Words*, Lecture VI, pp. 67-82). Critiquing Austin on this front would merely replay our discussion of Saussure on the arbitrary and differential structure of language in general, and so I focus on the internal contextual conditions that structure performative utterances.

things” (*LI*, 14). These internal conditions, recounted above, necessitate that the speaker’s intention (understood as belief or “inward spiritual act”) correspond with his words. The speaker must enter into speech acts in a “serious” way, that is, according to its “normal use.”²⁵⁹

Austin is careful to delimit certain external conditions of possibility as well. These conditions rest upon a priori contextual specifications—conventions—whereby the force of a speaker’s utterance are said to come off without a hitch. Declaring, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” demands a series of external conditions for the illocutionary force of the words to effect a situation for the bride and groom. For instance, the partners must both be unmarried to another who is still living and not divorced; the officiate must be in some conventional way certified to make these words binding; the setting must be in some way recognizable as a wedding ceremony; etc. There is a necessary slippage at work in all of these external conditions and Austin recognizes that attempts to establish the conditions absolutely are futile. There must, at base, exist a minimal and *general* correspondence with the external conditions of a particular speech act and the a priori conventions that structure its possibility qua speech act.

To Austin’s discussion of certain conditions of possibility for performative utterances he immediately recounts certain “infelicities” that make the speech acts “unhappy.” Derrida observes, “Austin’s procedure is rather remarkable and typical of that philosophical tradition with which he would like to have so few ties. It consists in recognizing that the possibility of the negative (in this case, of infelicities) is in fact a

²⁵⁹ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 22. The seriousness or lack thereof is a major point of disagreement between Derrida and Searle. See John R. Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” in *Glyph 1* (1977): 198-208 and Jacques Derrida’s rejoinder to Searle in “Limited Inc a, b, c . . .,” in *Limited Inc*, trans., Samuel Weber, ed., Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 29-110.

structural possibility, that failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration . . .” (*LI*, 15). In other words, the “unhappy” or “infelicitous” aspects of speech acts, aspects that must always and already accompany the *positive* conditions of possibility, are necessary to performative utterances in the first place.

Derrida points out that those contextual circumstances that result in a misfire, which Austin denounces as accidental, exterior, or aberrational, cannot be relegated to the periphery of speech act theory. They forever and at every moment structure the speech act as a possibility. Derrida presses Austin on this very point: “Austin does not ponder the consequences issuing from the fact that a possibility—a possible risk—is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility” (*LI*, 15). There is always already a necessary possibility of infelicity; the risk must originally accompany the speech act at every point.

Even as Austin (and Searle) recounts the infelicities (Searle labels these “defects”) of performative utterances in order to circumvent them, to create a “pure theory” uncontaminated by “abnormal” or “parasitic” factors, Derrida shows how such a prospect is untenable given Austin’s speech act theory in general. Austin himself recognizes that “unhappy” features “constantly obtrude.”²⁶⁰ How then can Austin exclude as parasitic, abnormal, or impure that which is always already present on the inside of speech acts, structuring their very possibility? Derrida shows that that which Austin excommunicates from speech acts form the “internal and positive condition of possibility” (*LI*, 17). That

²⁶⁰ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 22: “Now I suppose some very general high-level doctrine might embrace both what we have called infelicities and these other ‘unhappy’ features of the doing of actions—in our case actions containing a performative utterance—in a single doctrine: but we are not including this kind of unhappiness—we must just remember, though, that features of this sort can and do *constantly obtrude* into any case we are discussing. Features of this sort would normally come under the heading of ‘extenuating circumstances’ or of ‘factors reducing or abrogating the agents responsibility,’ and so on.” Italics added.

performatives might always be “unhappy” is inherent in the general possibility of speech acts. As a result, when Austin treats such infelicities as “a failure or trap into which language may *fall* or lose itself as in an abyss situation outside of or in front of itself” he unknowingly undercuts the necessary foundations for a general theory of speech acts.

Cloaked beneath Austin’s decision to exclude from his general theory of speech acts the “structural parasitism” that constantly obtrudes is a metaphysical decision unaccounted for in Austin’s theory. Put differently, it is curious that the necessary feature of speech acts, that “infects all utterances,” is nevertheless excluded from a theory aiming at speech act theory *in general*. Derrida recognizes that speech act theory rests upon a broader theory of citationality—a “general citationality” or “general iterability”—that makes it possible to conceive of performative utterances in the first place. That I can access a convention, and that such a convention may be recognized as such by my words and context, suggests a minimum requirement of repeatability. Thus speech acts, along with language in general, are achievable by the possibility of recognizing marks (oral, written and gestural) in different contexts while retaining their communicative possibility. For a performative utterance to “come off,” to occur as an event in language, iterability is necessary at base. Derrida writes, “We should first be clear on what constitutes the status of ‘occurrence’ or the eventhood of an event that entails in its allegedly present and singular emergence the intervention of an utterance that in itself can be only repetitive or citational in its structure, or rather, since those two words may lead to confusion: iterable” (*LI*, 17-8).

Performative Paralysis

By way of reminder, constative utterances (i.e., classical assertions) are unlike performative utterances with respect to a referent or signified. Performatives have no *external* reference outside of the event of their utterance, argued Austin.²⁶¹ They effect a situation; they produce events in the world that had no ontological status prior to the event. In recent years, some homileticians have latched on to the distinction Austin makes between constatives and performatives as a way around the linguistic snares set by logical positivism and other foundational systems of thought. Inasmuch as they draw upon Austin's work these homiletics participate in the philosophical troubles that Derrida has uncovered:

. . . all the difficulties encountered by Austin in an analysis which is patient, open, aporetical, in constant transformation, often more fruitful in the acknowledgment of its impasses than in its positions, strike me as having a common root. Austin has not taken account of what—in the structure of *locution* (thus before any illocutory or perlocutory determination)—already entails that system of predicates I call *graphematic in general* and consequently blurs all the oppositions which follow, oppositions whose pertinence, purity, and rigor Austin has unsuccessfully attempted to establish. (*LI*, 14)

In like fashion, we must test the foundational assumptions of contemporary theologies of proclamation that rest upon an Austinian theory of locution in order to ascertain how a similar metaphysical blurring might be taking place. We will do this by inquiring about the context, eventfulness, and spacing of preaching.

Austin acknowledges that all conventional acts are necessarily exposed to failure.

We have already seen that Derrida challenges Austin for only considering the extrinsic

²⁶¹ Cf. Benveniste, 236: “[I]n the performative quality, that of being *self-referential*, of referring to a reality that it itself constitutes by the fact that it is actually uttered in conditions that make it an act. As a result of this it is both a linguistic manifestation, since it must be spoken, and a real fact, insofar as it is the performing of an act. The act is thus identical with the utterance of the act. The signified identical to the referent.”

aspects of conventionality. Derrida charges that Austin “. . . appears to consider solely the conventionality constituting the *circumstances* of the utterance, its contextual surroundings, and not a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act itself . . . Which extends, aggravates, and radicalizes the difficulty” (LI, 15). Homiletics is equally blind to such intrinsic elements of locution.

We attend to the formal elements of a sermon. We precede the sermon with a certain liturgical conventionality that is structured differently according to denomination. “Austin does not ponder the consequences issuing from the fact that a possibility—a possible risk—is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility” (LI, 15). The necessary possibility of infelicity never ceases to structure the possibility of felicity, of success. With regard to theologies of proclamation, success is structured according to the possibility of *Deus dixit*.

That God should speak through the human words uttered in the event of Christian proclamation is in no way structured by illocutionary or perlocutionary force of the preacher’s words. Rather, her words are always already haunted by an essential possibility that God will not speak. She can in no way get around this essential aporia because it is always already hardwired into the structure of iterability we call preaching, and that Derrida will call the graphematic in general.

Theologians and homileticians mirror Austin when they try to exorcise the parasitic and excise the playful, the “non-serious,” from Christian proclamation. The possibility that God may choose not to speak through our words is not necessarily a fault or a failure on the part of the preacher; rather, it is intrinsic to this risky business of preaching. Without the possibility that God may remain radically absent, what conditions of

possibility could arise for God's presence? The very risk, to paraphrase Derrida, is proclamation's internal and positive conditions of possibility (*LI*, 17).

Everything that has been written thus far—the semiotic structure of language, the ambivalence of writing as *pharmakon*, the *espacement* of the supplement—points to this, the culmination of proclamation in the event of preaching, *viz.*, that the conditions for proclamation are always already and essentially structured by an essential absence. Preaching is structured by *God's absence*. If God were *fully* present to believers in the context of Christian worship no signs would be needed. They would be redundant at best, and reductive at worst. However, because God is not *fully* present—whether we construe this presence empirically, psychically, or spiritually—we preach, all the while haunted by the very real possibility that our words will *do* nothing.²⁶² Christian proclamation is thoroughly infected by infelicity; there is no way around this *parasitism*, nor can we protect our discourse from that which is *internal* to our discourse.

Derrida does not settle these issues for us, nor is he interested in having the last word. That would inscribe the kind of violence away from which he is attempting to move. His is a “discussion that is both open and yet to come,” an invitation for others (like us) to join him in the conversation.²⁶³ Whether and how God might speak through human words is radically undecidable, it was always already undecidable. What remains to be accomplished is a theological articulation of the impossibility and undecidability of

²⁶² See Karl Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans., Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 124-5: “The word of God on the lips of man is an impossibility; it does not happen: no one will ever accomplish it or see it accomplished. The event toward which the expectancy of heaven and earth is directed is nonetheless *God's* act.” Derrida articulates this “impossibility” philosophically, writing, “A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but ‘once’ would not be a sign” (*SP*, 59). And in another essay, he avers, “As soon as a sign emerges, it begins by repeating itself” (*WD*, 297).

²⁶³ See Jacques Derrida, “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” in *Limited Inc.* trans., Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 111.

God's speech through human words in the event of preaching. I have argued throughout this dissertation that Derrida helps ask the right questions; he helps us to ensure that preaching is in trouble for the right reasons. Let us now turn to consider the impact of such questions on theologies of proclamation.

A *DIFFÉRANT* KIND OF PREACHING

This limited treatment of Derrida's deconstruction of several dominant strands—which is shown to be one and the same strand—of Western thought has uncovered metaphysical presuppositions that are unacknowledged by the same systems of thought. In searching for a more *scientific, pure, natural, or felicitous* system Derrida's interlocutors have succumbed to the "lure" toward what Derrida labels "logocentrism."²⁶⁴ In our survey of theologies of proclamation written since Derrida's early writings were made available in English, we may discern a philosophical (i.e., metaphysical) reliance unaccounted for in their respective theological proposals.²⁶⁵ That these homileticians and theologians have been "lured" to participate in the logic of the logos is doubly injurious, for it is these thinkers (with Chopp as an obvious exception) who have explicitly declared their work to be theological, i.e., not philosophical. In spite of their attempts to do theology unencumbered by philosophical commitments, the work of these scholars is

²⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology: An Interview with Julia Kristeva," in *Positions*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 22: "The exteriority of the signifier seems reduced., Naturally this experience is a lure, but a lure whose necessity has organized an entire structure, or an entire epoch; and on the ground of this epoch a semiology has been constituted whose concepts and fundamental presuppositions are quite precisely discernable from Plato to Husserl, passing through Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, etc." Hereafter this interview will be cited as *SG*.

²⁶⁵ Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 47, gets it right: "Perhaps we can find in Derrida, if not a new theology, at least a thinker who provokes us to consider the possibility of doing theology otherwise."

equally “. . . preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos” (*OG*, 14).

To repeat: my goal in engaging the work of these proclamatory theologians is in the service of drawing their declared intentions closer to the *theological* starting point that each desires. Since their foundations are bolstered by decidedly *philosophical* footings, it was necessary to deconstruct these footings. It is not the case that we have now excised all traces of philosophy and may now proceed to do theology proper unencumbered by such extraneous matters; something like philosophy abides, and it is imperative that we experience this reality in order to loosen its control over theology, to imagine, as Derrida notes, “[a] writing within which philosophy is inscribed as a place within a text which it does not command” (*OG*, 286). It is necessary that homiletics pass through philosophy, that it experience philosophy, in order to conceive a more theological way of proclaiming God’s Word.

This experience has opened up a new path. This path is always already encumbered with traps and snares that will again threaten to enclose our thought in a logocentric deadfall. In fact, it is the same path; within language there is only one path. This path does not sidestep the aporia of speaking God’s Word in human words; rather, by passing through the “epoch of logos” (*OG*, 12) we may point to an alternative mode of traversing this path that recognizes the troubles that beset proclamation necessarily and always while proceeding in a different way.

What follows is a constructive proposal on this different way of proceeding. This proposal keeps within its sights the philosophical realities germane to language, speech,

and preaching, but attaches a Derridean coefficient to each of them, which I will now explain.

Experiencing the Trace

If it is true that language is made possible according to an arbitrary and differential structure then something like Derrida's trace must originally "exist."²⁶⁶ It is naïve to declare that language has been "kidnapped", as Lischer does.²⁶⁷ Yes, from a certain perspective, language may appear to be used out of context.²⁶⁸ But Derrida shows us that it is not philosophy that has kidnapped language by pointing to the trace-structure necessary for language to function as such. The trace produces the possibility of employing language at all, which is always *in* a context. The trace is not language's kidnapper, but its *au pair*. It is precisely this tendency in the Western tradition to force language toward *closure*, to force it to operate according to our understanding of its proper context, that led to the heritage in which God is invoked to constrain the unwieldy sign. Derrida charges, "The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological" (*OG*, 14).

Necessary to the possibility of language is that sometimes words "wander and hide."²⁶⁹ Rather than trying to overcome this fact why can we not celebrate this as a gift? This is a fundamental aspect of the structure of language, or, as Derrida says, half in jest, "*its orientation is disorientation*" (*OG*, 216). We saw that Willimon retraces the movement of Western logocentrism by invoking God as an *outside* arbiter of meaning in

²⁶⁶ Derrida reminds us of the dangers associated with thinking the trace according to Being. This ontological deadfall entraps us all over again in logocentrism. As he states in the essay, "Ousia and Grammē, in *M*, 66, "There is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace."

²⁶⁷ Lischer, 82-3.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Derrida: "There is nothing outside context" (*LI*, 136).

²⁶⁹ Kay, vii.

order to fulfill the need of “theological refurbishment.”²⁷⁰ The goal ought not to be to protect language from its perceived fallenness, as Kay suggests, but to experience the trace-logic that calls into question the very opposition between fallen and redeemed language:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that the concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace. (*OG*, 61)

To rail against language because it will not do all that we want it to do, because it will not march to our tune, as they say, is to ignore a necessary feature of reality that Willimon did not miss: “Reality is linguistically constructed.”²⁷¹

Homiletics can do more than more than this. As we move toward a theology of proclamation that has experienced the trace as a necessary component of language, we can encounter the Word apart from a logic committed to self-sameness and self-presence. We can experience the Word in its radical alterity *through* language if we will but surrender our need to control language all the way down.²⁷²

The trace is not God. God is not a *feature* in language, but God is encountered in and through language and so the trace necessarily participates in the Divine self-disclosure through Christian proclamation. We can *think* the trace, but we cannot *know* it;

²⁷⁰ Willimon, 18-9.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁷² Cf. Derrida, *OG*, 98: “The infinite alterity of the divine substance does not interpose itself as an element of mediation or opacity in the transparency of self-relationship and the purity of auto-affection. God is the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge. From Descartes to Hegel and in spite of the difference that separate the different places and moments in the structure of that epoch, God’s infinite understanding is the other name for the logos as self-presence.”

it retains an alterity beyond control or totalization. What we need is a theology of proclamation that recognizes this simple fact: the Word encounters us through language.²⁷³ When we convince ourselves that God meets us anywhere else—as if there was an anywhere else—we ignore the fact that God has elected preaching and therefore language to reveal Godself. Experiencing the trace as an a priori of language will open up a new mode of proclamation that is more humble, less sure of itself, and more available to Divine encounter.

The Hinge of/in Speech

Derrida's notion of the hinge (*brisure*)—joint/fracture—of language as speech will be crucial for imagining a more theological foundation, which is necessarily a foundationless foundation, for Christian proclamation.²⁷⁴ The hinge opens, as an opening, a path beyond epistemological “phonologism,” which excludes or abases writing as an approach to “scientific” knowledge (*OG*, 102). This is a well-documented pattern in the theologies of proclamation we have examined.²⁷⁵

Derrida argues convincingly that the notion of full-speech, that is, speech that delivers a plentitude of meaning-as-presence, is the governing myth of logocentrism. He avers, “The hinge [*brisure*] marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and

²⁷³ This is not a novel claim and our engagement with Barthian theology of the Word vis-à-vis language will make this evident. What *is* novel is the attempt to think of theological language that is not already inscribed in a logocentric epistemology. That will be the task of this dissertation.

²⁷⁴ We are licensed to speak in terms of a foundationless foundation because of the *brisure*. As simultaneously fracture/rupture/break and joint/hinge/connection it recognizes simultaneously the impossibility of pure rupture or “epistemological break” and its necessity. Derrida writes, “Breaks are always, and fatally, re-inscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone. This interminability is not an accident or contingency; it is essential, systematic, and theoretical. And this in no way minimizes the necessity and relative importance of certain breaks, of the appearance and definition of new structures . . .” (*SG*, 24). This finds its theological corollary in the Protestant declaration that the Church is *reformata, semper reformatum* (“reformed and always reforming”).

²⁷⁵ E.g., Lischer, 67: “Words are for hearing.”

a signified, be produced within the plentitude of a present and an absolute presence. That is why there is no full speech, however much one might wish to restore it . . .” (OG, 69). Speech is always and already structured by a kind of writing (*arche-writing*) that makes the simple opposition between speech and writing in its common sense untenable.²⁷⁶

Both speech and writing rely on an a priori structure of representation, or iterability, and “representation does not suddenly encroach upon presence; it inhabits it as the very condition of its experience” (OG, 312). Writing and speech are “entangled” and this entanglement is not an obstacle to be overcome but a necessary feature of language. What this means for proclamatory theology is that we need to reconsider what this entanglement signifies theologically. It permits us to “no longer see disease in substitution” but to recognize that “the substitute is substituted for a substitute” (OG, 314).²⁷⁷ Is there a way of conceiving of speech apart from the speech/writing binary? What theological “hinge” might close-while-opening such a mode of discourse?

Whatever this approach looks like it cannot merely invert speech with writing, which would naively remain within the same logocentric structure it was trying to avoid. We need to think of speech *through* the hinge (of writing/representation/supplement/iterability/etc.). We need to find a way to *remain* in the hinge of speech while transcending it. Such an approach, I will argue, is provided by the New Testament concept of preaching as bearing witness.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Cf. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, 64 ff. Recall Derrida’s words: “The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing” (D, 110).

²⁷⁷ Cf. Kay, 20.

²⁷⁸ Derrida seems to gesture toward a similar path when he writes of “[s]pacing as writing [is] the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation [*derive*] the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence . . . All graphemes are of a *testamentary* essence.” Emphasis added., We will consider this in greater depth through the thought of

Playful Proclamation

Willimon rightly observes that it is we language-users who “adulterate the Word of God” by our speech.²⁷⁹ However, this is not to be understood as an obstacle to preaching, but the necessary condition for preaching’s possibility. We confess that God has graciously elected preaching to reveal Godself to humanity. If anything, this should not be viewed tragically, but comically.²⁸⁰ What is tragic is that we homileticians imagine that we can install a kind of theological valve to protect our preaching from adulteration.²⁸¹ This is a game we cannot win—by design. Derrida has already reminded us that with every attempt at communication we operate “*in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life [our] discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely.” We are only ever able to employ the system, says Derrida, by letting ourselves be governed by the system (*OG*, 158).

Recognizing a certain play, or give, in the system of signification we call preaching will help us move toward a more theological reconstruction than Chopp is able to offer. “Emancipatory transformation” is not robust enough when it merely critiques the governing logic out of which oppression and suppression arises by shifting the locus of proclamatory discourse from the pulpit to the academy.²⁸² Instead, reconstruction must *inhabit* the language, speech, and preaching of the preacher; it goes all the way down or

Paul Ricoeur, especially his appropriation of *dépouillement* as a necessary ingredient in testimony.

²⁷⁹ Willimon, 57-8. He notes in an earlier essay that a kind of adulteration is hardwired to the biblical witness itself, and, following William Placher, may teach us something profound about the God revealed therein. Willimon writes, “The text encourages and provokes uncentering, dislocation, and dislodgment. The very thickness of the text may be part of the text’s strategic assault upon our received world.” William H. Willimon, “Postmodern Preaching: Learning to Love the Thickness of the Text,” in *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, ed., Erskine Clarke (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 113.

²⁸⁰ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 8 recognizes the comedy of this situation, in which humans are summoned to proclaim God’s word, and appropriately suggests that preachers approach their task with a hearty sense of humor. See also Barth, *Romans*, 73, 392.

²⁸¹ Lischer, 22-3.

²⁸² Chopp, 124.

never really at all.²⁸³ Derrida writes that there is a “play of representation” already at work in all language. This “representation does not suddenly encroach upon presence; it inhabits it as the very condition of its experience” (*OG*, 311-2).

Representation, which arises from the differential and arbitrary structure of iterability, and play are at work in *all* modes of proclamatory speech—even promissory narration. Even as the speech-act of promising creates, as Kay insists, “a new state of affairs in the present,” it fails in its attempt to provide a new foundation for preaching.²⁸⁴ Moreover, we must put pressure on Kay’s claim that “the presence of a promise entails the ‘real presence’ of the promisor.”²⁸⁵ Compare Derrida: “given [the] structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through *present to itself and to its content*. The iteration structuring it a priori introduces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [*brisure*] which are essential” (*LI*, 18, emphasis added).

Theologies of proclamation fail to deliver on their promises to offer a *theological* starting point proper because they fail to recognize or choose to ignore the fact that their works are colluding with “a certain condition of knowledge”—“the epoch of logocentrism” (*OG*, 245)—that pre-determines the conditions of their respective projects. We see this clearly in Chopp’s work. By her account it is not preachers but feminist

²⁸³ This gesture is a feature of Derrida’s later work in particular. To say, “No,” is still, in a certain sense, to say, “Yes,” because electing to critique a particular feature deemed unjust is always also a choosing to participate in a particular economy of thought and language. Every “No” is already a “Yes, No.” See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans., Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁸⁴ Kay, 122. Homiletician David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 103 ff. too thinks that Austin and Searle “enables one to speak of truth in a certain way” (106).

²⁸⁵ Kay, 124. Moreover, even though Kay gestures toward “the logical force of language uncovered by linguistic analysis” (123), he fails to follow this through to its necessary ends—presence is always accompanied by a necessary absence—especially when he discusses the (representational) structure of promissory speech-acts in preaching, whereby the preacher repeats God’s promises revealed in Scripture as a kind of ambassador (124). Cf. Derrida (*LI*, 48): Isn’t the (apparent) *fact* of the sender’s or receiver’s presence complicated, divided, contaminated, parasite by the *possibility of an absence* inasmuch as this possibility is necessary inscribed in the functioning of the mark?”

theologians who proclaim the Word of God to the degree that they challenge traditional (patriarchal) ecclesial and societal structure.²⁸⁶ Feminist theologians too, in drawing from the marginalized *experiences* of women, inhabit a set of governing a priori commitments that structure their work, preventing it too from ever being fully present to itself; it too must be done under erasure (*sous rature*). As Derrida observes, “As for the concept of experience, it is most unwieldy here. . . . it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure [*sous rature*]. ‘Experience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence . . .” (*OG*, 60).²⁸⁷

What we require on the way to a theology of proclamation that has experienced, or worked through, the philosophy of Western metaphysics is a mode of thinking and a way of preaching that resists the lure to fall back into logocentric paradigms. We need a *différent* kind of preaching which Derrida does not give us. He charts the borders of this (promised?) land but does not lead us in himself. He gestures toward a possible solution, which is only one possible solution, when he writes,

This spacing [of *différance*] is the simultaneous active and passive (the *a* of *différance* indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be covered by or distributed between the items of this opposition) production of the intervals without which the “full” terms would not signify, would not function. (*SG*, 27)

Différance points to an originary tension at work in language that hovers in and between activity *and* passivity, presence *and* absence. In the pages that follow I will suggest that the *erotic witness* to the *Word* fulfills just such an intention and is already present within the tradition as its most primal mode of signification and knowledge.

²⁸⁶ Chopp, 21.

²⁸⁷ He continues, “At any rate, we must, according to this sort of contortion and contention which the discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience before attaining and in order to attain, by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation” (*OG*, 60).

CONCLUSION (AS BEGINNING)

The (philosophical) theology of proclamation I shall now sketch takes up a theology of the Word toward Christian proclamation. I argue that this approach is more theological than those theologies of proclamation discussed above because it is more philosophical. In other words, by embracing rather than ignoring or refuting that all of the words we use to signify God in preaching participate in a necessary structure of thought—a language—that is thoroughly covered with logocentric residue, we may more fully embrace *theo*-logy. Such is, to borrow Derrida's phrase, a "writing within which philosophy is inscribed as a place within a text which it does not command" (*OG*, 286). Theology is always in trouble (with philosophy) but I want to make sure it is in trouble (theologically) for the right reasons.

Such an approach necessitates that I borrow resources from the broad theological tradition in order to proceed toward a new articulation of theology vis-à-vis proclamation. I have found Derrida's conclusion in *Of Grammatology* to be fitting for my own purposes: "[I]t must borrow its resources from the logic it deconstructs. And by doing so, find its very foothold there" (*OG*, 314). Language is not neutral and theological language has proven to be less neutral than other verbal articulations.²⁸⁸ Therefore, let us proceed toward a fresh articulation of theology, one that is centered on the Word and oriented toward the event of Christian proclamation, and one that attends to the play of language that goes by the name, among many names, *différance*.

²⁸⁸ See Derrida: "Now, 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system" (*SG*, 19).

CHAPTER 3 THE WORD PROCLAIMED

The most pressing questions this chapter seeks to answer are these: How are we to reimagine the work of God in Christian proclamation in light of the poststructural critique of language? If our words about God are always already adulterated by a thoroughly human mode of discourse—tenuously held together according to socio-symbolic matrixes we call language—how might we understand the Word of God to be anything more than the best attempts at uttering the name “God,” but human attempts nonetheless? Before the God who has revealed Godself as worthy of worship and honor, what word-offerings are sufficient to the revealed majesty and holiness of such a God? Does not the deconstruction of contemporary modes of thought and discourse make the task of preaching all the more impossible? Would not Wittgenstein’s words be more apropos for preachers than any others: “What can be said at all can be said clearly and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence”?²⁸⁹

Moreover, and this challenge arises in conjunction with the first, if theology is always already “infected” by philosophy, and philosophy is a decidedly human enterprise, how might we begin again toward a theology for proclamation that is less philosophically encumbered? The solution, I will suggest, is counterintuitive: *in order to become more theological, we must first become more philosophical*. That is, the more deeply aware we are of the philosophical assumptions that inform and bolster theological propositions for preaching, the better prepared we will be to chart a different course.

Derrida himself recognized something like this when he said,

In general, to summarize very succinctly, the point would seem to be to

²⁸⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans., B. F. McGuinness and D. F. Pears (London: Routledge, 1961), 3.

liberate theology from what has been grafted onto it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical superego, so as to uncover an authenticity of the “gospel,” of the evangelical message. And thus, from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique. . . . And [the point would also seem to be] a real possibility for faith both at the margins and very close to Scripture, a faith lived in a venturous, dangerous, free way.²⁹⁰

The spirit of these words informs this entire dissertation. It has been re-animated more recently by theologian Walter Lowe, who contends that contemporary theology “must clean house”; in other words, it must “identify and expel from its vocabulary that entire lexicon of terms which serve the metaphysics of presence.”²⁹¹ Lowe, like Derrida, offers a glimpse of a theology purged of certain philosophical commitments that work against the intentions of theology. Deconstruction can thus be understood as a tool for such liberative work.²⁹²

Like the ancient Israelites, however, our (epistemological) liberation from (metaphysical) bondage necessitates a certain desert wandering in search of a (homiletical) Promised Land. Deconstruction cannot lead us to a new starting point for Christian proclamation. It invites us to the threshold of our liberation, to imagine a new way of being in the world. It makes no further promises. Deconstruction cannot be the *Sache* (theme or subject) of Christian proclamation, nor can it offer a viable method for

²⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” ed., James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Jane Todd, *Critical Exchange* 17 (Winter 1985), 12. Interestingly, Derrida names Karl Barth explicitly as one articulating a “positive sensitivity” that arises from Barth’s exegetical/hermeneutical practices.

²⁹¹ Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington & Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

²⁹² We saw this most clearly in Rebecca Chopp’s work in chapter one. Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) has also recognized that deconstruction can be used to liberate the “enslaved logic” at work in our preaching. She writes, “ready or not, like it or not, when we deconstruct a thing, we *will* see ourselves more clearly. Deconstruction, like therapy, permits us to uncover the masked priorities and power dynamics of a text that may warp its authority structures, and so create ingrown systems that lead to oppression and suffering. Or, to put it another way, when we deconstruct something, such as preaching, we allow it to *show itself more clearly* so that we can see the things that make it what it is” (xv). See also Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009), 46-74.

sermon development and delivery.²⁹³

In this chapter, I offer a new starting point for a theology of the proclaimed Word in Christian preaching. In route to the achievement of this task I take as a conversation partner the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). This might come as a shock to those who are only familiar with Barth's later theology arising from his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*, and even more so for those acquainted with his dogmatic treatise on preaching, *Homiletics*. Barth, and "Barthianism," has become associated with the most extreme forms of biblicism and conservative ethics that he hardly seems in good company with a thinker like Derrida.²⁹⁴

Nevertheless, a number of contemporary theologians have recognized a certain affinity between Barth and Derrida. Stephen Webb writes, "Barth and Derrida . . . share a similar theory of language. However, for Derrida, God, or the quest for unity, is the veil which philosophy uses to cover up the ambiguities of language; for Barth, God is the very reason why language can never achieve any permanent meaning."²⁹⁵ Language, or more

²⁹³ This is the major argument I have against Phil Snider's new book, *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

²⁹⁴ See David G. Buttrick's foreword to Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 7-11. Cf. the recent study by Angela Dienhart Hancock, "Preaching 'As If Nothing Had Happened': Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933" (Ph.D., diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 2011).

²⁹⁵ Stephen Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 147. I disagree with Webb's assessment that Barth and Derrida share a similar view of language. Barth, it seems adopts a nomenclaturist view of language, while Derrida maintains a post-Saussurian synchronic-systematic view of language. Barth writes, "Our words are not our property, but [God's]. And disposing of them as [God's] property, [God] places them at our disposal—at the disposal of our grateful obedience—when [God] allows and commands us to make use of them in this relationship too. The use to which they are put is not, then, an improper and merely pictorial one, but their proper use. We use our words improperly and pictorially—as we can now say, looking back from God's revelation—when we apply them within the confines of what is appropriate to us as creatures. When we apply them to God they are not alienated from their original object and therefore from their truth, but, on the contrary, restored to it." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, ed., G. W. Bromiley & T. T. Torrance, trans., T.H.L. Parker, et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 229, abbreviated hereafter, *CD*. Nevertheless, Webb's assertion typifies a trend in connecting Barth's theology and Derrida's philosophy. See also Walter Lowe, "Barth as Critic of Dualism: Re-Reading The *Römerbrief*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, no. 3 (1988): 377-95; Graham Ward, "Barth and Postmodernism," *New Blackfriars* 74 (1993): 550-6; Mark I.

specifically, discourse, is the tie that binds Barth and Derrida for Graham Ward as well. He writes, “It is the process of discourse, the logic of its referring and deferring in which the hermeneutical project is both disrupted and returned to, which is the focal interest of both Barth and Derrida.”²⁹⁶ Thus, the connection between Barth and Derrida is not as unfounded as it may first seem.

Throughout his vast oeuvre, Barth continually asks the question that impels this study: “How do we come to say, by means of our language, that which we cannot say at all by this means?”²⁹⁷ In a public address given several decades earlier, Barth wrote, “Our difficulty lies in the content of our task. . . . *As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. . . .* The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison.”²⁹⁸ It is only in acknowledging the utter failure of human words and concepts to measure up to the task of *theo-logy*, God-speech, that we may approach a route around—or better, through—this aporia.

In one of his later writings Barth notes, “Before human thought and speech can respond to God's Word, they have to be summoned into existence and given reality by the creative act of God's Word. Without the precedence of the creative Word, there can be

Wallace, “Karl Barth and Deconstruction,” *Religious Studies Review* 25, no. 4 (Oct. 1999): 349-54; and Philipp Stoellger, “Barth und die Postmoderne: Perspektiven auf eine prekäre Konstellation,” in *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 397-432. Of special note is Graham Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 235 ff. Not all have embraced the marriage of Barthian dialectics and Derridian deconstruction. The most strident opponent to this union has been Bruce McCormack. See for instance, his scathing review of Ward's book: Bruce L. McCormack, “Graham Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, no. 1 (1996): 97-109 and “Beyond Non-foundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology,” *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 13 (1997): 67-95, 170-94.

²⁹⁶ Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 245.

²⁹⁷ Barth, *CD* II.1, 220.

²⁹⁸ Karl Barth, “The Task of Ministry,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans., Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 186.

not only no proper theology but, in fact, no evangelical theology at all!”²⁹⁹ But recognizing a problem and providing a solution to the problem are not the same thing. Allow me a few more pages to defend my engagement with Barth’s theology of the Word as a path toward a theology of the Word fit for proclamation, and to delimit my use of Barth’s massive corpus toward these ends.

THE (PHILOSOPHICAL) THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

Barth faced cultural circumstances not unlike those now besetting the church in the West.³⁰⁰ Social change, political turmoil, the lingering effects of war, economic uncertainty, and theological skepticism textured his pastoral and theological landscape. His early work in particular arose amidst great political and cultural upheaval following the aftermath of Germany’s defeat in World War I. Like contemporary churchgoers, Barth’s audience faced an uncertain future that called into question God’s agency in the world (paralleled by the diminution of American Christendom) and the church’s role in inaugurating the Kingdom of God.

As a pastor, serving a small congregation in Safenwil, Switzerland, Barth had come to realize the enormity of the preacher’s vocation to rightly communicate God’s

²⁹⁹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans., Foley Grover (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 18.

³⁰⁰ Torrance provides a helpful overview of the precipitating culture out of which and against which Barth wrote: “The tragedy was that nineteenth-century Christianity had been unable to keep the warning, even if it had taken Feuerbach seriously it would have been quite unable, on its own premises, to rebut his attack, for it was only too guilty of what he accused it. It was natural knowledge, human religion, the universal spirit of man which constituted for it the presupposition, criterion, and the necessary framework for all understanding of God, of his revelation or reconciliation. Hence all knowledge of God became, as it were, the predicate of what is essentially and universally human, and hence even Revelation could only be acknowledged and handled as a confirmation of man’s own latent possibilities or of his own analysis and self-understanding. But in this way nineteenth-century theology made it impossible to derive any benefit from a genuinely transcendent and objective Revelation, or from its very starting-point it stripped the Christian Religion of the specifically *Christian* elements which militated against its humanistic and rationalistic presuppositions, so that it could only fall back into the morass of spiritualistic anthropomorphism.” Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), 60-1.

Word (2 Tim. 2:15). In the preface to the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* (1922), Barth remarks,

I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret, and longing to fulfill it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well-known ‘Awe in the presence of History’ which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation has been surrendered.³⁰¹

His sermons in Safenwil bear the weight of a pastor struggling to resource his congregation for the socio-political turmoil they faced, while the “liberal” theological reservoir amassed during his education at Marburg, Tübingen, and Berlin seemed increasingly insufficient for the task. More than anything, I believe it was his dissatisfaction with his education to provide adequate theological resources for his preaching—coupled with the close, conscientious attention he paid to the biblical text for sermon preparation and teaching—that impelled Barth’s “Krisis theology.”³⁰² Barth later confessed that his theology had its roots in his ministry in Safenwil.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans., Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 9. Though I quote from the sixth edition of this text, the text remained the same after the second edition, which differs markedly from the first, after which Barth sensed the need for a “new edition in which the original has been so completely rewritten that no stone remains in its old place” (2). Further references to this work will be parenthetically cited as *R II*.

³⁰² See Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, 1913-1921*, ed., Eduard Thurneysen (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), where Barth frequently comments to his fellow pastor the difficulties of the preaching task vis-à-vis his theological education. See also several recently translated sermons of Barth’s early preaching (1917-1920) published in Karl Barth and William H. Willimon, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). For a thorough treatment of Barth’s theology of *krisis* see Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth: Genèse et Évolution de la Théologie Dialectique* (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 79-118. On “krisis theology” as a theological response to the Great War see Gary Dorrien, *Theology Without Weapons: The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 47-80. N.b., The degree to which Barth’s theology is a specimen of “krisis theology” is debated. In *Romans*, Barth offers a deeper critique than mere cultural response: “Wherever [people] pray and preach, wherever sacrifice is offered, wherever in the presence of God emotions are stirred and experiences occur—there, yes! Precisely there, the trespass abounds. Precisely there, the invisible truth that before God no flesh is righteous, which may perhaps have remained invisible *from Adam to Moses*, becomes visible. Precisely there, [people] encounter God; and there breaks forth the KRISIS of God, the sickness unto death. (*R II*, 186).

³⁰³ See Karl Barth, *Letzte Zeugnisse* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1969), 19 cited in Eberhard

Barth's early training in Christian theology and his intellectual maturation in pre-war Europe during an era in which the ideals of the Gospel seemed to be drawing Western culture toward holy ends, lent an inherent confidence to his understanding of God and God's work in culture.³⁰⁴ As he noted in a letter written many years later,

Everything which I saw and heard in those surroundings had such a self-evident splendor. This world, represented by so many clever and gifted people, went on its way in a manner so certain of itself, that I would have laughed at anyone who would have predicted to me at that time that my own future could lie in any other direction than in some kind of extension of the Marburger, and especially, the *Christliche Welt* theology . . .³⁰⁵

However, such theological contentment was not to last. The young Karl Barth became disenchanted with the religious individualism and historical relativism of his teachers at Marburg, especially Wilhelm Herrmann, who had "influenced Barth most of all."³⁰⁶ Herrmann was deeply influenced by the idealism of Kant and Ritschl and he strove to meld their philosophical propositions with Schleiermacher's theology. Herrmann passed these philosophical-theological presuppositions onto his students, including Barth.³⁰⁷ As Barth began to question the philosophical assumptions inherent in his theology, his

Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans., John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 61.

³⁰⁴ This commitment is readily evident through his early correspondence with his good friend and fellow pastor Eduard Thurneysen. See, for example, the letter dated February 5, 1915, where Barth writes, "I have now become a member of the Social Democratic Party. Just because I set such emphasis Sunday by Sunday upon the last things, it was no longer possible for me personally to remain suspended in the clouds above the present evil world but rather it had to be demonstrated here and now that faith in the Greatest does not exclude but rather includes within it work and suffering in the realm of the imperfect." Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans., James D. Smart (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 28.

³⁰⁵ Karl Barth to Johannes Rathje (Apr. 27, 1947) in Diether Koch, ed., *Karl Barth: Offene Briefe, 1945-68* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984), 120, cited in Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 38.

³⁰⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 48. See also the extensive treatment on the influence of Herrmann on Barth in McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 49-67 and in Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123-69.

³⁰⁷ See Karl Barth, "The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann," in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans., Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1962), 238-71, esp. 238: "Herrmann was *the* theological teacher of my student years."

confidence wavered. The so-called *truths* of Christian theology he came to see as “nothing more than surface varnish” that occluded the true revelation of God to humankind.³⁰⁸

I believe it is on account of his theological pedigree and his subsequent excision of its philosophical presuppositions that Barth remained, throughout his career, hypersensitive to the lines delimiting theology from philosophy. It is in this regard that he is a particularly valuable conversation partner for this project. Barth always had whistle to mouth, so to speak, ready to call a false start on theology when its methods or warrants encroached beyond the limits of the *theological*. In a 1929 essay, Barth writes,

Theology claims to say more than philosophy can say. It claims to offer and to be human knowledge that rests upon a recognition of divine revelation. Yet theology can in no way make the truth of its claim directly visible, to say nothing of making it verifiable, simply because theology can never be and offer itself as anything other than human knowledge. . . . It can never say the specific thing which it has to say as theology such that the philosopher could not also say it in a pinch, perhaps meaning something completely different.³⁰⁹

As this quotation makes abundantly clear, however, Barth maintained the full-humanity of the theological task. He held no pretense that theology was somehow closer to God than philosophy. Only to the degree that theology relinquished its foundational claims to certainty, to absolute knowledge, did it approach *genuine* knowledge of God.

And yet, Barth refused to banish the philosophical from view, but recognized the importance of keeping it ever in mind while doing theology. In an essay written in 1960 honoring the work of his younger brother, Heinrich, who was himself a philosopher, Barth rightly recognizes the task and trajectory of the work of theology to be exactly

³⁰⁸ Barth, “Barth to Thurneysen (Sept. 4, 1914)” in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 26.

³⁰⁹ Karl Barth, “Fate and Idea in Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed., H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans., George Hunsinger (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 27-8.

opposite from that of philosophy. The paths of the philosopher and theologian “crisscross significantly and momentously enough,” and, at decisive points, their paths converge, inasmuch as both seek answers to decidedly human questions.³¹⁰ There is no “pure” theology; nor is there such a thing as “pure” philosophy, both are adulterated by the other. As he writes in his *Prologomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik* in 1927, “No one ever has the right . . . to preen and boast that at least *he* has purged himself of Hellenistic influences, that *he* has not diluted the New Testament with his own world view but simply lets the Bible speak for itself. That is simply not true.”³¹¹

It is important to note, however, that even if a certain amount of philosophical encroachment is inevitable, and even if theologies are never anything more than human attempts to understand God in relation to the created order, the two must be carefully parsed. Barth writes, “There never has actually been a *philosophia christiana*, for if it was *philosophia* it was not *christiana*, and if it was *christiana* it was not *philosophia*” (*CD*, I,1, 6).

Second, Barth is a valuable resource for this project because he recognized, particularly in his early writings, that a certain theological *approach* was ingredient in a proper articulation of the Word of God. In other words, *how* one goes about making theological claims is inseparable from the very claims that one makes. The medium is the message, so to speak.³¹² This is one of the features that Barth so admired in the preaching

³¹⁰ Karl Barth, "Philosophy and Theology," in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans., Robert Palma (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 79. See also his comment that a “little ‘non-religious’ language” from philosophy can be useful for theological communication. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans., John Newton Thomas & Thomas Wieser (Louisville, London & Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 59.

³¹¹ Karl Barth, *Prologomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1928), 404.

³¹² In the preface to his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth explains why he had started over again from the beginning rather than revising his *Göttingen Dogmatics*. He writes, “I wished to do so [that is, revise]. But I

and devotional writings of the famed Pietist pastor Christoph Blumhardt, as well as in the theology of St. Anselm of Canterbury: both begin without beginning, without prolegomena.³¹³ Their approach is entirely resting upon the foundationless foundation of the love of God experienced through faith.³¹⁴ At all points, such a theology is supported by God alone. In other words, these theologies take the first commandment (“Ye shall have no other God’s before me,” Ex. 20:3) seriously. Barth writes,

Nothing is less obvious than the notion that even theology has no other gods before the *deus ecclesiae*! . . . Theology (even theology!) is continually asked where its heart, its concern and interest really lie, and whether its heart might not be divided secretly between this God and the other gods. It is asked, for example, about the concept of the highest *good* or highest *value* presupposed in its work. It is asked about the *source* from which it deduces its statements. It is asked about the standard of *certainty* which it attributes to those statements. It is asked about the practical *motive*, the *intention* according to which it phrases those precise statements in that precise manner. It is asked where it really comes from and where it really is going. And on every side other gods, other grounds and objects of fear, love and trust beside the *deus ecclesiae* are seriously in the running, even and especially for theology.³¹⁵

could not do it in the same way. What option had I but to begin again at the beginning, saying the same thing, but *in a different way* (CD, I.1, xi, emphasis added). This is the seldom-recognized reason that Barth eschews sermon introductions (see Barth, *Homiletics*, 121-7). It is not that he has no concern for the listeners’ experience in the sermon (see *Ibid.*, 85), nor that he is unconcerned with relevance (see *Ibid.*, 114). It is rather a matter of *approach*. When the preacher assembles illustrations or offers prolegomena to the Word via introductions, she is communicating that preaching is something *she* can do, that *she* can mediate the Word. It is, contrariwise, on account of its utter human impossibility that preaching becomes the Word of God. Only when the preacher understands her words to be under a “constraint,” or “obligation,” an *anakē* (1 Cor. 9:16), only when she is stripped of her own “proposals and programs” (*Ibid.*, 49) are the human conditions for the possibility of preaching the Word sufficiently met.

³¹³ Cf. Barth, CD, I,1, 42: “. . . prolegomena to dogmatics are possible only as part of dogmatics itself. The prefix *pro* in prolegomena is to be understood loosely to signify the first part of dogmatics rather than that which is prior to it.”

³¹⁴ In commending a book of Blumhardt’s morning devotions, Barth writes, “We cannot read it as we are wont to read our books and articles. Blumhardt puts forward no guiding principles. He produces no historical and psychological deductions. He neither reasons nor discusses; he talks neither politics nor philosophy. . . . He does not expound his point of view, but rather, he lets us experience the echo which the Bible texts of the Moravian Brothers around within him from day to day.” Karl Barth, *Action in Waiting*, trans., Society of Brothers (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing, 1969), 20, 21. See also the adulation offered for Blumhardt in Eduard Thurneysen, *Christoph Blumhardt* (München: Chr. Kaiser/Verlagin, 1926). For a helpful treatment of how Blumhardt’s social praxis influenced his preaching and theology, see Klaus-Jürgen Meier, *Christoph Blumhardt: Christ-Sozialist-Theologe* (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, & Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1979).

³¹⁵ Karl Barth, “The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed., H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans., David Lochhead (Allison Park, PA:

Barth is principally suspicious of how every human epistemology and mode of discourse can supplant God with lesser (philosophical) gods, because he saw it happen firsthand.

Third, in Barth's own writings, we find his rhetorical style occasioned by his subject matter. And it is mostly in his second edition to his *Epistle to the Romans* (*R II*) that we will find a proper starting point for a theology of proclamation attuned to the philosophy of language and the (im)possibility of God-knowledge. Nowhere else in Barth's corpus do we find such care directed toward the rhetoric of theological argumentation. As Webb rightly notes, "Barth does not write about God [in *R II*] but reenacts the religious situation by displaying a theology under an impossible pressure, a discourse deprived of its subject matter. There is, thus, an *unavoidable connection between his style and the content of his theology*; one cannot be understood without the other."³¹⁶ The significance of this statement will unfold below.³¹⁷

Lastly, Barth is an enthusiastic conversation partner because of his unwavering attention to the Word of God *in preaching*. Trevor Hart does not overstate matters when he declares: "Karl Barth's entire theological project might legitimately be described as a 'theology of proclamation.'"³¹⁸ Barth himself writes, "The problem of the Word (that is, of course, the Word of God) in theology I understand to be the question of whether and how far theology recognizes its obligation of directing Christian preaching to the repetition in human words of what is said to men [and women] through God [Godself]

Pickwick Publications, 1986), 71.

³¹⁶ Webb, viii. Emphasis added.

³¹⁷ Thus, it will be insufficient to merely summarize Barth's writings in *Romans II*. We must attend closely to the style of his text as well as the content of his discourse. Such a close reading will open a way toward a new theology of proclamation.

³¹⁸ Trevor A. Hart, "The Word, the Words and the Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (May 1995): 81.

about God, in distinction to all which [one] can say to him [or herself] about God.”³¹⁹ In other words, homiletical discourse is completely dependent upon the Word of God for Barth. Moreover, theology has no independent status apart from the proclaimed Word. Christian proclamation is the raw content with which theology works. When it is about its proper business, theology tests and strengthens proclamation according to the very Word from which proclamation claims to originate. In Barth’s writings we find no clearer connection between the Word, proclamation, and theology.

BARTH AS RESOURCE

Barth’s theology has proven highly influential for theologies of proclamation. Beginning with Dietrich Ritschl’s direct appropriation of Barth’s theology of the Word for preaching to the more nuanced work of James Kay five decades later, Barth’s theology has served as a kind of foundation for homiletical argument.³²⁰ The problem with this is that Barth in no way intended for his work to ground anything, much less preaching!³²¹ His work is a witness to the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ, in Scripture, and in the preaching of the church. To read it as anything more than a signpost and a void—as a work under erasure—is to *misread* it. Barth said as much himself.³²²

³¹⁹ Karl Barth, “The Word in Theology From Schleiermacher to Ritschl,” in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans., Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1962), 200. Note: throughout this section I amend English translations of Barth’s writing to be more gender inclusive. In translations that are my own, I continue this practice of altering Barth’s own speech to reflect contemporary scholarly discourse.

³²⁰ Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960). Through Barthian spectacles, Ritschl sets out to write “not a book on ‘homiletics’ as traditionally defined. Rather, it is meant to be a study in the basic Biblical and dogmatical questions which, in my opinion, will inevitably come to every responsible preacher when he begins to think seriously about the proclamation of the Church in which he and his congregation have a part” (7). In other words, Ritschl is guided not only by Barth’s theology, but also his method.

³²¹ Quite the opposite in fact, for Barth argued explicitly that theology depends upon proclamation for its content, not the other way around: “Dogmatics serves Church proclamation. . . . As compared with Church proclamation, then, dogmatics cannot wish to be an end in itself” (*CD*, I,1, 83, 84).

³²² Barth pleads with his readers in his preface to the English translation to his *Epistle to the*

Another particular feature of Barth's influence on the church and theological academy is the way in which scholars have tried to make sense of the trajectory of Barth's massive oeuvre. Unfortunately, this has led to a fascination with Barth the man,³²³ with the contextual circumstances out of which and into which he wrote, and systematic treatments of the governing themes³²⁴ of his work and their interrelations. Note well, that I am not questioning the importance or merits of such an approach to Barth. I am suggesting, however, that such approaches fail to make sense of Barth's thought in relation to *preaching*.

Clearing the Ground

It is ironic that so much ink has been spilled on Barth the person, when such an angle of analysis is fundamentally antithetical to what Barth himself would have desired. Barth must decrease so that God might increase! What other use is Karl Barth to our theology of proclamation than that of being a witness to a way of life with God? Just as a wedding ceremony can stir up, or rekindle, love between attendees, so too does Barth's explosive encounter with the living God through Paul's Epistle churn our hearts and minds toward our first love. I will argue below that *Romans* II is something of a love-letter inasmuch as its force is radically distant from an objective, third party reader.

Romans that they read his text "as though they were for the first time confronted by what is the especial theme of the book." A failure to heed this admonition would make it "impossible for those who read it to take their part independently in the task which has been opened up by it" (*R* II, vii).

³²³ Herein I find alarming parallels to the "unique man of genius" motif of an early generation of German scholarship. In particular, I have in mind the writings that make up the "First Quest" for the Historical Jesus in the work of H. S. Reimarus and D. F. Strauss. See Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans., John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver, eds., *Jesus Two Thousand Years Later* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), 30-55.

³²⁴ See especially Hunsinger's sustained critique of approaches to Barth's corpus that try to discern a central theme to makes sense of the whole in George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

All this is to suggest that Barth is an indispensable resource for a theology of proclamation in direct proportion to his dispensability. His imitability is to be found in his ability to write himself into the shadows so that the “light inaccessible” may shine all the brighter. Barth’s theology of the Word is diaphanous. To borrow a concept from Derrida, Barth puts himself under erasure (*sous rature*) so that all that is left is the trace, the crater, the void, the question mark, the signpost, etc. This will prove central to a new theology of proclamation.

Barth is an apostle for the modern age. Like Paul before him, Barth was sent to proclaim the Gospel *out of* a particular set of religious and intellectual presuppositions. Nowhere is Barth’s eccentricity more evident—his ex-centricity—than in *Romans II*. Here we find our proper starting point for a theology of proclamation, not because it is in itself a starting point, an *Ursprung*, but because it strips bare (*dépouillement*) all theological pretense and philosophical certitude before the Word. In *Romans II* we find the logic that participates in the counter-logic of the Logos. It points to the originary freedom of the Word—free from all philosophical conditions of possibility—by deconstructing the principles of thought and modes of discourse established as proper to the task of theology. It is the greatest modern theological resource for preaching; in fact, we would have to return to the desert fathers and mothers for anything close to its equal.

Romans II is so resourceful for a theology of proclamation precisely because it unravels as a resource. It provides no foundation for theological reflection because its logic, as well as its rhetoric, unfolds over an abyss. It rips any stability from us and in so doing it gestures toward the necessity of faith and the promise of hope that draws us toward the Word. By that we leap from the philosophical substrate into the void—and a

void is beyond Being, by definition—in which we are held only by the love of God.

In *Romans II* we learn inductively that language works against us. Even our synthetic mental capacities prove to be a hindrance. A bandage does nothing to heal a wound. Rather, it forms a protective barrier so that the body can heal itself unencumbered by extraneous contaminants. *Romans II* is not a bandage on the “wound of reason” (Lowe); rather, it points us to the source of our wound: the *totaliter alius* in whose presence we are always already coming undone and in whose presence we recognize the end of words (e.g., Isa. 6:5).

Romans II charts an alternative course for theological reflection. It is not a negative theology, but it calls into question the very distinction between apophatic and kataphatic theology. It resists thematization. Like the great Impressionist works of the nineteenth-century, to look too closely or too selectively is to miss the work’s significance. As Hans Urs von Balthasar writes, “[Barth’s oeuvre] is so extensive, so varied and multifaceted that we will not be able to find our way through this vastness without a guiding thread; we must journey into this immense work presupposing some overall design.”³²⁵ As I will argue below, the only thematic possibility is centered on the radical alterity of God: “The kingdom of God is the kingdom of *God*. We cannot conceive of the transition from the analogies of the divine reality to human reality radically enough.”³²⁶ We forget this to our peril.

This is not to suggest that there is no value in investigating Barth the human being, Barth the philosopher, Barth the theologian, etc. Just as there is no intrinsic

³²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans., Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 59.

³²⁶ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, 1913-1921*, 325, cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 109.

problem with the quest for the historical Paul, or the historical Jesus. What I am suggesting is that such scholarly investigation is useless for a theology *of proclamation*. To paraphrase an oft-quoted line from Barth, we might say that such lines of inquiry touch upon a theology of proclamation as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it.

Barth's critique of Schleiermacher, Herrmann, Troeltsch, Werner, and Harnack, and even Bultmann in his later writings, holds true for "Barth studies": it can in no way illumine the *Sache* that motivates Barth's thought. If it is read as any more than a signpost, pointing the way to an encounter with God, if it is in any way more than a signature pointing to a prior accord (*R II*, 130), if it is anything other than a witness to the Word, it is read wrongly. Barth declares this himself, writing, "The purpose of this book was nor is to delight or annoy its readers by setting out a New Theology. The purpose was to direct them to Holy Scripture, to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, in order that . . . they may at least be brought face to face with the subject-matter of the Scriptures" (*R II*, x).

This being said, how should we approach *Romans II* as a resource for Christian proclamation? There is only one approach that will suffice. Like Inanna enters the realm of the dead in order to free her beloved Demuzi in the Sumerian myth,³²⁷ so must we enter Barth's text: naked. We must enter the text with a certain naiveté, stripped bare of our intellectual garments, in order to behold its subject matter in all its strangeness, in all its otherness. Only by divesting ourselves of our theological a prioris—even our Barthian a prioris!—can we encounter *Romans II* as it was intended to be encountered: as a proper

³²⁷ See Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 51-90.

witness to the Word. Like the desert fathers and mothers before him, Barth creates a generative space wherein our hearts and minds are purged—almost sacramentally—to encounter the Word of God.

A Different Approach to Barth

Where a theology of proclamation is concerned, the key is not to explain Barth's contextual circumstances, his academic lineage, his personality, or his philosophical influences. The full measure of our concentration should not be upon Barth himself, but upon the true subject matter of his commentary: the Word of God. This is my one guiding assumption.³²⁸ This is not to suggest that such matters are extraneous, merely that that they are hindrances where theologies of proclamation are concerned. Against the grain of interpretation, I contend that *Romans* II renders a theology of proclamation inasmuch as it opens an approach toward contemporary homiletical inquiry, and even emulation. It is itself something between a commentary and a sermon—a witness to a witness that is itself bearing witness—which makes it all the more powerful for the kind of theology of proclamation sufficient to answer the poststructural critique discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. In other words, Barth's "commentary" is focused upon the words of Paul, but not as an end in themselves, not as runes to be deciphered (*R* II, 7), but as a means of exposing himself to the Word in the words. Barth writes, "The Word ought to be exposed in the words. Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter; till the document seems hardly to exist as a document; till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so

³²⁸ Indeed, it is the very assumption that Barth maintains in spite of the criticism of his first edition. He assumes two things of Paul: 1) that in the Epistle to the Romans Paul did in fact speak of Jesus Christ, and not of some "anthroposophical chaos, to some relative-absolute, or to some absolute relative," and 2) that "God is God," and not some place holder for human aspiration or actualization (*R* II, 10-1).

well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself’ (*R* II, 8). In short, *Romans* II ought to be interpreted *as a sermon*—a 537 page sermon with one claim: God is God!³²⁹

Such an approach to interpreting Barth certainly cuts against the grain in Barth studies and thus it necessitates justification. In his preface to the second edition of *Romans*, Barth defends his work against the critiques of his contemporaries of the first edition on several fronts. With a homiletician’s eye, I see in his prefatory remarks the same kind of advice I provide to the students in my introductory and advanced preaching courses and it has profoundly shaped my reading of *Romans* II.³³⁰ I will treat each of these parallels in turn.

First, *preachers ought to engage the best of historical criticism, but this should in no way determine a sermon’s content*. In *Romans* I, Barth writes that the “historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place . . . But, were I driven to chose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification” (*R* I, v). He reasserts this claim in the preface to the second edition: “I had nothing whatever to say against historical criticism [in *Romans* I]. I recognize it, and once more say quite

³²⁹ N.b., I am not suggesting that Barth viewed his own text as a sermon. My argument is more on reader-response than authorial intention. And yet, as Roland Barthes concludes, “We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans., Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977 [1968]), 148. Said another way, my mode of reading Barth is intended to “experience” his work apart from its “author function.” See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed., Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 119.

³³⁰ I also find significant homiletical overlaps in his first edition of the *Epistle to the Romans*. However, given the significant differences in content and style between the two editions, and given the fact that *Romans* II manifests more clearly a theology of proclamation sufficient to the poststructural critique of language, I focus my attention there. When appropriate, I will nevertheless direct the reader to *Romans* I, to show either resonance or dissonance. See Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, Unveränderter Nachdruck der ersten Auflage von 1919 (Munich: EVZ Verlag, 1963). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *R* I.

definitely that it is both necessary and justified” (*R II*, 6). This measures up against the best advice for preaching. As homiletician Anna Carter Florence explains, the goal of sermon preparation is not to isolate the *meaning* of the text, nor is the aim of preaching to *explain* the text. Rather, Carter Florence encourages us to “put away our swords,” to bracket the tools of historical-criticism long enough to allow the message of the Text to be heard.³³¹ Or, consider the sage advice of Thomas G. Long:

Most good commentaries will cover the same historical, literary, and theological ground we have traversed, and they can refine and challenge our findings at each point along the way. The commentators are not the ones, though, who bear the responsibility of preaching, and eventually we must leave the seminar and cross the bridge ourselves from the text to the place where our congregation waits to hear the sermon. The commentators can, at best, go only halfway across with us. Most of them, in fact, bid farewell much sooner, and we must go without them to the final step of the exegesis.³³²

And Henry Mitchell, in his seminal text, *Black Preaching*, writes, “Within their unshakable attachment to the Bible, Black preachers have some interesting and creative ways of avoiding intellectual dead ends. The focus is not on scientific-historical truth, but truth for the life of the spirit.”³³³ All of these homileticians are in agreement: historical criticism is not to be neglected, but neither should it have the final word for the preacher.

Barth’s “commentary” is much closer to a sermon than it is to traditional biblical commentaries, and this point was not missed by Barth’s contemporaries. In fact, the lack of engagement with text critics and other biblical scholars of his day, and especially his failure to treat the first-century C.E. *Sitz im Leben*, were some of the central criticisms

³³¹ Anna Carter Florence, “Put Away Your Sword,” in *What’s The Matter With Preaching Today?* ed., Mike Graves (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 93-108. She concludes with a word resoundingly close to Barth’s: “Maybe the problem with preaching has less to do with form than with relationships—*our* relationships. Our need to preach sermons that were right, rather than true. Our need to illuminate a text instead of living in it” (106).

³³² Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 96.

³³³ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 60.

leveled against both editions of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. Even for a more theologically conservative scholar like Adolf Schlatter, under whom Barth studied at Tübingen,³³⁴ this was anathema:

Since the exegete does not wish to say anything to us about the history of Roman Christendom, of Israel, of Paul and Jesus, what is he then going to talk to us about? He becomes the exegete of his own life and the interpreter of his own heart; it is done not by placing before us what is his own, for that would be the refutation of the Letter to the Romans, which negates our whole work and shows us the righteousness and grace in all that is divine; but it is done by his own life situation and that of his contemporaries providing the content of the Pauline words, which would otherwise remain empty. It was this way with the old exegetes, and it is this way also with Barth.³³⁵

As this critique reveals, Barth's vision penetrates historical, cultural, and literary concerns that preoccupy biblical scholars to discern the theological pith of Paul's epistle precisely where it pierces the heart of Barth and his audience. Such an approach finds approbation only in the field of homiletics.

Second, *preachers are to abide in the Word, which precludes the possibility of objective detachment*. Homiletician David Lose argues that an intimately subjective—"confessional"—engagement with the text is the *only* means by which preachers have anything compelling to say. He continues, "In this sense, preachers strive to confess what is at stake for them in the given readings and worship service in light of the present circumstances of their congregations."³³⁶ And James H. Harris argues that thorough and faithful engagement with the text—"wrestling with the biblical text in all its nuances,

³³⁴ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 37.

³³⁵ Adolf Schlatter, "Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, vol. 1, ed., James M. Robinson, trans., Keith R. Crim (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 122. C.f. Emil Brunner, "The *Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth: An Up-to-Date, Unmodern Paraphrase," in *Ibid.*, 63: "He makes us aware, that only in the forward, but also—without pointing it out with his finger—in the work itself, that he is well acquainted with the methods and results of modern biblical studies, and beyond this—in contrast to many recent works—knows how to extract what is valuable from the older interpreters."

³³⁶ Lose, 109.

character, history, and context in order to present a word from a higher source”—is the “sine qua non to preaching.”³³⁷ Such a concern is present in Barth’s engagement with Paul’s Epistle.

In an early review of the first edition to *Romans*, Adolf Jülicher writes, with a tone of disapproval, “[Barth] hopes that we are now entering a period in which we will take a position of subjective commitment alongside Paul and no longer a position of passive detachment as observers.”³³⁸ This is an implication of Barth’s text toward which Jülicher is particularly indignant, as his review plainly reveals. In later reviews, especially reviews of *Romans II*, critics will chastise Barth for being “too conservative” in his refusal to adopt a “critical distance” from Paul and his letter (Bultmann).³³⁹

In the preface to the third edition, Barth takes up this critique of his “Biblicism” by arguing that the subjective position is actually the more radical position. Herein, Barth places himself as interpreter *beside* Paul as a fellow-interpreter who stands equally

³³⁷ James H. Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 6.

³³⁸ Adolf Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, 72. At one point in the review, Jülicher associates Barth’s exegesis with that of Marcion, the second-century heretic! (78). In the preface to the first edition, Barth writes, “It is certainly the case that those were times of hungering and thirsting after righteousness which those who were engaged with Paul naturally recognized. They could not remain unmoved spectators in his presence” (*R I*, vi). In his response to Jülicher in the preface to the second edition, Barth remains “unscathed,” but he does take the time to defend his translation of πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ as “the faithfulness of God,” writing, “My purpose in retaining the translation at certain points is to direct the attention to a particular nuance of the word, which would be missed were it rendered monotonously by *faith*, just as it would were I sufficiently pedantic to translate it always by *faithfulness*” (*R II*, 14). The critique of existential detachment was not reserved only for historical-critical biblical scholars. Of Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, Barth writes, “It opens the way for basic surmounting of Ritschlianism. Ultimate insights at least begin to appear, though the subject does not quite get moving because of the retention of a theological spectator attitude which is not compatible with a high degree of understanding of the object.” Barth to Thurneysen (June 3, 1919), in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 47.

³³⁹ Rudolph Bultmann, “Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* In Its Second Edition,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, 118-20. The existential involvement of the interpreter is an aspect of frequent praise in Brunner’s review, however. He delights in Barth’s “orientation to the divine” in which, quoting Barth, “This ‘other-worldly’ reality of ‘laying hold as one who has been laid hold upon’” is made manifest. Or, as Brunner puts it earlier in his essay, Barth expects the thoughts emerging from the Letter to the Romans to find access to that part of our souls which is “not imprisoned in the temporal and finite,” but is rather an “undisturbed reservoir for the voice of God, undistorted by the ‘culture’ and adaptation to the world of merely human knowledge.” Brunner, 70, 65.

judged by the true subject matter of the Epistle: the Spirit of Christ. He writes, “Anything short of utter loyalty means a commentary *on* Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, not a commentary so far as is possible *with* him—even to his last word.” By placing himself radically on Paul’s side—in seeking to discern the true subject matter of Paul’s proclamation—he submits himself to the same *krisis* under which Paul stands. Barth concludes by acknowledging that few commentators are able, or willing, “to accept the presupposition which such fidelity requires” (*R* II, 17).

Barth reveals poignantly the difference between a biblical scholar, who can maintain a sense of *objectivity*, and thereby comment *on Paul’s Letter*, and the Christian proclaimer, who maintains a *subjective, either-or* fidelity to Paul’s subject matter (i.e., the Spirit of Christ) and thereby comments *with Paul*. In his Warrack Lectures on preaching delivered in 1940, H. H. Farmer makes a similar argument; only he extends the relational engagement between preacher and God in the biblical text even further. He argues that it is not as if God creates a person and drops her into the world of persons “as a housewife makes a dumpling and pops it into the saucepan.” For Farmer, to come into existence as a person is to be incorporated in this world of the personal, to be in relation to persons—the divine person and human persons—and existence as a [person] is not possible on any other terms.³⁴⁰

Third, *preachers ought not merely explain the biblical Weltanschauung; but bring it into critical conversation with that of the present*. Barth contends, “The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible” (*R*, II, 7).³⁴¹ This was a

³⁴⁰ H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 38.

³⁴¹ This was the case in his first edition as well: “My whole energy of interpreting has been

point of both contention and commendation by Barth's reviewers.³⁴²

Homiletician and New Testament scholar Fred Craddock speaks precisely to this topic in his Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching. Craddock remarks that the fear behind serious consideration of the listener and her circumstances, questions, doubts, etc. is the fear of losing "objectivity" and "historical honesty." This fear, however, is founded upon a category mistake. Craddock explains,

The point is, in a laboratory or in a library the gathering of listeners would be an intrusion, an interruption of the proper business conducted in those settings. But in a classroom or sanctuary, listeners are not intruders; they are as ingredient to the proper business of the settings as equipment and formulae in the laboratory or books in the library. And the proper business in classroom and sanctuary is communication. To that end the teacher or preacher is servant and instrument; to that end, the subject matter is shaped and aimed.³⁴³

The purpose of Barth's "commentary" is hardly objective or scientific. The outside world of his "listeners" decidedly intruded upon Barth's engagement with Paul's Letter, but only to the extent that it led Barth to express the received message in a particular way.³⁴⁴

In his preface to the sixth edition of *Romans*, Barth notes that a "great deal of the scaffolding of the book" arose from his pastoral situation and the broader, global

expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit. What was once of great importance, is so still. What is today of great importance—and not merely crotchet and incidental—stands in direct connection with that ancient gravity. If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightest of his answers, those answers must be ours" (*R I*, v).

³⁴² E.g., Jülicher, 80: "The great gifts of the author make it possible for him to evoke a strong impression with his transferal of the Pauline world of ideas into the present. Because he knows so precisely how it concerns him, and what the whole of truth means for him, and because he has learned to control the spirits, he forces all of Paul into his own course. He believes he has placed himself on the side of Paul, while we others are content merely to observe him."

³⁴³ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, rev. and exp. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 104.

³⁴⁴ Barth writes, "When, however, I look back at the book, it seems to have been written by another *man to meet a situation* belonging to a past epoch" (*R*, II, vi, emphasis added.) Cf. Barth's reflections on his *Romans* commentary delivered in 1956 at the meeting of the Swiss Reformed Ministers' Association in Aarau, Switzerland: "Were we right or wrong? We were certainly right!... Beyond doubt what was then in order was not some kind of further shifting around within the complex of inherited questions... But rather a change of direction. The ship was threatening to run aground; the moment was at hand to turn the rudder an angle of exactly 180 degrees." Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 41.

conditions that structured those years (*R II*, 25). For Barth, as for preachers, context renders a *particular* reading of the Text.

In this regard, Barth is consistent with the best homiletical wisdom. Barth's words were in no way construed as a mirror of the general wisdom of his day—except perhaps as a way of exposing the reality of this wisdom by the true measure of wisdom. Long writes,

[W]e do not go to the Scripture to gain more information about life as we know it, but rather to have our fundamental understandings of life altered. The task of preaching is not to set out some reality in life and then go to the Bible to find extra wisdom. It is instead to tell the story of the Bible so clearly that it calls into question and ultimately redefines what we think we know of reality and what we call wisdom in the first place. The Bible becomes the key to unlock the true nature of life, not vice versa.³⁴⁵

What sets Barth's *Romans* apart from other texts was the way in which he brought the situational factors of his audience into conversation with the biblical text. In a letter to Thurneysen during his writing of *Romans I*, Barth remarks, "One broods alternatively over the newspaper and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds concerning which one should now be able to give a clear and powerful witness."³⁴⁶ Thus we may think of Barth's efforts as a display of what homiletician Lenora Tubbs Tisdale describes as "folk art," wherein the preacher finds ways of expressing the transformative message of the Gospel in terms of the "local

³⁴⁵ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 36.

³⁴⁶ Barth to Thurneysen (Nov. 11, 1918), in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 45. Earlier in the letter, Barth writes, "Just up again after an attack of the grippe, we must now get quickly in touch in these extraordinary times. But what goes on round about us? *What* is there to say? One stands astonished, does he not, and can only state how the face of the world changes visibly: on *this* side of things. But the *other* side: the meaning and content, the actual trend of it all, the movements in the spiritual ground that now take place, the doors of God that now open or close, the progress of standstill in the *eleutheria thes doxes ton teknon tou theu*? Who is there now with a comprehensive view who is able to see to the very roots of world events in order to speak and act from that standpoint?"

theology.”³⁴⁷

Fourth, *preachers are sent to the biblical text on behalf of a congregation to interpret and proclaim God’s Word for this people at this time.* Barth writes,

I, however, wish to understand and to explain the Epistle to the Romans, not to provide it with a series of illustrations. Moreover, judged by what seems to me to be the fundamental principle of true exegesis, I entirely fail to see why parallels drawn from the ancient world—and with such parallels modern commentators are chiefly concerned—should be of more value for an understanding of the Epistle in a situation in which we ourselves actually are, and to which we can therefore bear witness. (*R II*, 11)

As Emil Brunner states in his review, Barth has done the hard work of excising extraneous matters that occupy modern biblical scholars in order to make “the central thought of the Bible really the central point that influences everything else. This is the knowledge of the supra-worldly movement of the kingdom of God, which in Jesus came from hiding into clear site and which reveals in him its goal: Immanuel.”³⁴⁸

Romans II is well suited for homiletical reflection for two reasons. First, because here we find Barth interacting directly with Scripture. This is not dogmatics; this is exegetical engagement ordered toward proclamation. It is therefore less abstract and more closely aligned to the work of the preacher. Second, with *Romans II* we see the interaction of Text and context clearly articulated. *Romans II* cannot be read as a piece of systematic or even constructive theology: but as an open sermon to his fellow Swiss and Germans.

Long reminds us that all preachers “come to the pulpit from somewhere, and

³⁴⁷ Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 91 ff.

³⁴⁸ Brunner, 71. Consider also: “I regard it as one of Barth’s greatest achievements that he has dared to, and been able to, bring this timeless, supra-psychological ‘absolute’ nature of faith to light again, and that he manfully avoids all temptations to psychologizing, temptations which are so strong for modern man” (69).

unless we can name that place, we risk misunderstanding who we are and what we are supposed to be doing.” In other words, the preacher is always called, summoned by God to interpret the Text and proclaim God’s Word ever mindful of that summons. Long continues, “We are not visitors from clergy-land, strangers from an unknown land, ambassadors from seminary-land, or even, as much as we may cherish the thought, prophets from a wilderness land. We are members of the body of Christ, participants in the worshiping assembly, commissioned to preach by the very people to whom we are about to speak.”³⁴⁹

Fifthly, *at day’s end, preachers trust not in the power of their rhetoric or the force of their logic, but in the promise of God that provides the mysterious power and support for Christian proclamation.* In a memorable analogy, Barbara Brown Taylor compares the work of a preacher to that of a tightrope walker. She states,

Watching a preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tight rope walker climb onto the platform as the drumroll begins. The first clears her throat and spreads out her notes; the second loosens his shoulders and stretches out one rosin-soled foot to test the taut rope. Then both step out into the air, trusting everything they have done to prepare for this moment as they surrender themselves to it, counting now in something beyond themselves to help them do what they love and fear and most want to do. If they reach the other side without falling, it is skill but it is also grace—a benevolent God’s decision to let these daredevils tread the high places where ordinary mortals have the good sense not to go.³⁵⁰

A similar argument arises from the work of R. E. C. Browne, an Irish preacher and scholar who represents the homiletical wisdom a generation removed from Taylor.

Browne writes,

In a sense the sermon does not matter, what matters is what the preacher cannot say because the ineffable remains the ineffable and all that can be done is to make gestures towards it with the finest words that can be used.

³⁴⁹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3.

³⁵⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Crowley, 1993), 76.

. . . The preacher's use of words is his dance before the Lord; the thoughtless may consider his abandonment undisciplined, but his abandon is the fruit of habitual discipline begun in faith and continued in the reason that faith nourishes and by which he protects himself from folly and falsehood.³⁵¹

In the preface to the third edition, following critique and commendation about the *style* of *Romans* II, Barth counters Bultmann's critique in particular. Bultmann castigated Barth for failing to maintain a minimum "scholarly" distance from Paul's literary, cultural, and theological *Sitz im Leben*. Barth insists that it is preposterous to imagine that one can simultaneously acquiesce to the spirit of an author *and* remain critical of him. Barth writes, "Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document—of any document!—except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words?" (*R* II, 18). Such a priori faithfulness to read *with* Paul shapes the style of Barth's own text. He notes, "It is precisely a strict faithfulness which compels us to expand or to abbreviate the text, lest a too rigid attitude to the words should obscure that which is struggling to expression in them and which demands expression" (*R* II, 19). In other words, Barth writes with such a "desperate earnestness" because he is striving to discern the *Sache* of Paul's Epistle in Paul's own "literary style." Such a quest deals explicitly with the "ambiguity" of language in search of Paul's motivating vision: the Spirit of Christ.

A final argument concludes the defense of my approach to Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. What preacher who has returned to a sermon manuscript, or perhaps listened to a recorded sermon, some years later does not cringe. It is a peculiar sensation. On the one hand, we affirm the validity of those words occasioned by where we were existentially at the time and where our congregants were. On the other hand, if we are honest, we want to

³⁵¹ R. E. C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1958), 27.

deny what we earlier declared with such vehemence. We shrink from the choice of expressions, from the way we engaged the biblical text, and sometimes, from the conclusions themselves. Such is also true for Barth-the-preacher. In the preface to the sixth edition of *Romans II*, Barth confesses,

I do not wish the book to go forth once more without saying that, were I to set to work again upon the exposition of the Epistle, and were determined to repeat the same thing, I should certainly have to express it quite differently. I have, in the meantime, learned that in Paul there is on the one hand a far greater variety and on the other hand a far greater monotony that I had then attributed to him. Much would therefore have to be drastically curtailed, and much expanded. Much would have to be expressed more carefully and with greater reserve; much, however, with greater clarity and more emphatically. A great deal of the scaffolding of the book was due to my own particular situation at the time and also to the general situation. This would have to be pulled down. (*R II*, 25)

A question remains unanswered, however: why ought we privilege *this* commentary by *this* pastor as a guide toward a new theology of proclamation. Two answers will suffice. First, Barth maintained the same epistemological uncertainty that guides much contemporary skepticism, indeed, Derrida's skepticism. That such uncertainty is *always* and *already* at work in epistemological assertions is evident in Barth's entire corpus following his "turning-point" away from theological liberalism.

A telling illustration of this is found in Barth's Preface to the fifth edition of *Romans* (1926). He begins his Preface by expressing his immense dissatisfaction with the book that had since become a bestseller. He asks, "Have they [Barth's readers] been presented with what is really no more than a rehash, resurrected out of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and Cohen?" (*R II*, 22). More telling is the admission, "I often wish that I had never written it" (*R II*, 23). Nevertheless, and this is the experience of many pastors who re-visit old sermons on their better days, Barth is able to recognize that "something

has been brought out into the open through what has been observed and said in this book” and “it does mark the moment when a breach, however small, has been made in the inner and outer afflictions of Protestantism” (*R II*, 23).

Barth displays, in Derrida’s parlance, a deconstruction without end, or as John Caputo puts it, a “coefficient of undecidability.” His earlier *breach* through the *words to the Word* is unquestioningly a breach. It was ignited by a desire to know God that can only come from God Godself. Barth asserts the necessity of ever keeping before us the “uncertainty of our position” (*R II*, 24). What Barth realizes, and what will become increasingly apparent through our close engagement with sections of Barth’s *Romans*, is that the Word of God has no shelf life; knowledge of God is revealed in pursuit of such knowledge, or not at all (Jer. 29:13; Prov. 8:17). The best that Barth can say about his own endeavors that produced the *Epistle to the Romans*, and what he hopes it will impel in his readers, is a hunger for God. Reflecting on a poem submitted by a pastor, he writes, “I wish I could be such a Hound of God—*Domini canis*—and could persuade my readers to enter the Order” (*R II*, 24).³⁵²

Second, Barth understood better than any of his generation (and perhaps since) that language fails to adequately render the objective reality of God, but this in no way frees us from the responsibility to speak about God. He writes,

No human word, no word of Paul, is absolute truth. In this I agree with Bultmann—and surely with all intelligent people. What does the relativity of all human speech mean? Does relativity mean ambiguity? Assuredly it does. But how can I demonstrate it better than employing the whole of my energy to disclose the nature of this ambiguity? . . . we must learn to see beyond Paul. This can only be done, however, if, with utter loyalty and with a desperate earnestness, we endeavor to penetrate its meaning. (*R II*, 19)

³⁵² The poem reads: “God needs MEN, not creatures full of noisy, catchy phrases. Dogs he asks for, who their noses deeply thrust into—To-day, and their scent Eternity. Should it lie too deeply buried, then go on, and fiercely burrow, excavate until—To-morrow.”

With this warning in mind, let us now turn to a close reading of *Romans* II in order to see what resources it might yield toward a theology of proclamation sufficient to the emerging *epistémè* following Derrida's critique.

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS II: A CLOSE READING

What remains to be seen is *how* Barth's second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* renders a theology of proclamation sufficient to the contemporary epistemic situation facing the church in the West. Articulating such a theology of proclamation will be the task of the remainder of this chapter. I shall argue that the theology of the Word that emerges from this text presents a viable path beyond the binary configurations that suffuse Christian proclamation and thereby opens a way for understanding God's agency in preaching beyond the constraints of logocentrism.

The guiding presupposition that orders both editions of Barth's "reading" of Paul's epistle is that "God is God."³⁵³ The obverse side of this assertion is that *we humans are not God*. While the first of these claims is obvious—tautological even—the second requires argumentation. Such argumentation is the driving force behind Barth's *Romans*. Herein he confronts the alarming elision of God and humanity evidenced in the "liberal theology" of his day, and I believe it was this elision that prompted the writing (and re-writing) of *Romans*. The subtle commingling of God and human action (even the action of the church!) suffused Barth's homiletical context, and amidst this happy

³⁵³ We saw this clearly in the Preface to the second edition of *Romans*: "Questioned as to the ground of my assumption that this was, in fact, Paul's theme, I answer quite simply whether, if the Epistle is to be treated seriously at all, it is reasonable to approach it with any other assumption than that God is God" (*R* II, 11). The radical alterity of God was already noted in a lecture given in Basel in November 1915, when Barth declared, "World remains world. But God is God." Karl Barth, "Kriegszeit und Gottesreich," (15 Nov. 1915), cited in McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 129.

syncretism Barth's words felt like a "bomb dropped on the schoolyard of theologians."³⁵⁴ Barth argument is clear: "We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say 'God.' We assign to [God] the highest place in our world: and in so doing we place [God] fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things. We assume that [God] *needs something*: and so we assume that we are able to arrange our relation to [God] as we arrange our other relationships" (R II, 44). The key argument, which is sustained throughout Barth's *Romans*, is the paradoxical and dialectical relationship we have to God's revelation of Godself necessitated by the radical alterity of God.

By way of overview, Barth makes the following claims. On the one hand, God *really* (that is, objectively) reveals Godself to humankind, and most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, that which is revealed touches upon our (subjective) ignorance of God. Barth avers, "[God] is the hidden abyss; but [God] is also the hidden home at the beginning and end of all our journeyings" (R II, 46). In short, we do not have the epistemological and linguistic capacities to *fully* know God, even in God's revelation.³⁵⁵ But, in God's grace provided through faith, we can nevertheless claim to *really* know God. Thus, we might say that revelation from God to humanity concerning Godself is simultaneously revealed *and* hidden. To put it differently, God's transcendence is maintained in God's immanence.

Barth contends that all we ever learn, if we ever truly learn it, is that we are ignorant of God: "We know that God is [the one] whom we do not know, and that our

³⁵⁴ Karl Adam, "Die Theologie der Krisis," *Hochland* no. 23 (June 1926): 276-7.

³⁵⁵ Barth frequently refers to our epistemological *limitations* that prevent us from knowing God. For example, he writes, "When our limitation is apprehended, and when [God] is perceived who, in bounding us, is also the dissolution of our limitation, the most primitive as well as the most highly developed forms of human consciousness become repeatedly involved in a 'despairing humiliation,' in the 'irony of intelligence' (Cohen)" (R II, 45).

ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge” (*R II*, 45).³⁵⁶ As the Proverb declares: “Pious reverence (הַיִּרְאָה) of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7; cf. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Notwithstanding the excellent work of Barth scholars on *Romans*, this reading will be an attempt to read Barth on his own terms. Barth, we must remember, has asked from us nothing less.³⁵⁷ Then we will see that Barth’s content, as well as his rhetoric, reads like a passionate sermon, containing all the energy and oxymoronic rhetoric of a teenage love letter. He writes as one *disturbed* by love’s first touch and what follows is the result of such an experience beyond experience, the aftermath of an encounter with God. Barth reads as one smitten by the Word of God, as one awakened by a “great disturbance,” namely, that “God should first be the love that loves [humanity], and then display [Godself] as the God who willeth to be loved” (*R II*, 438).

In this section, I offer close readings of sections of *Romans II* that ramify under a revealed alterity: 1) the alterity of Being manifested in knowledge; 2) the alterity of consciousness manifested in experience; and 3) the alterity of time manifested in history. It is clear when one accounts for the socio-theological context in which Barth writes that

³⁵⁶ Recall that Thurneysen whispered to Barth in 1916 that a “wholly other” theological foundation was needed for their preaching and teaching. Barth reflects, “We tried to learn our theological ABC all over again, beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testaments, more thoughtfully than before. And low and behold, they began to speak to us— but not as we thought we must have heard them in the school of what was then ‘modern theology.’ They sounded very different on the morning after the day on which Thurneysen had whispered that phrase to me. I sat under an apple tree and began to apply myself to *Romans* with all the resources that were available to me at the time. I had already learned in my confirmation instruction that this book was of crucial importance. I began to read it as though I had never read it before. I wrote down carefully what I have discovered, point by point . . . I read and read and wrote and wrote.” Karl Barth, “Nachwort,” in *Schleiermacher-Auswahl* (München: Siebenstern Taschenbuch, 1968), 294, cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 97-8.

³⁵⁷ In his preface to the English edition, Barth writes, “I ask my readers to judge my work, at any rate to begin with, on its own merits. Only if this be done would it be possible to read the book as it was meant to be read in 1921, and as it evoked the discussions which have arisen as a result of it. If it be not thus approached, it will be impossible for those who read it to take their part independently in the task which has been opened up by it” (*R II*, vii).

his primary concern is this: “How can we claim to know God if God is radically other than the created order?” His sermonic argument presents an answer to this question while simultaneously deconstructing the top two contenders for rendering knowledge of God in his day: experience and history. There are, of course, other lines of inquiry we might pursue, but I believe that these angles of vision will illuminate Barth’s *sermonic intent*, so to speak, and thereby render a new way of thinking about the task of proclamation in the emerging *epistémè*.

Knowledge of God

Barth holds knowledge of God to be a *radical* impossibility for humans because God is totally other (*totaliter aliter*) than human beings. In other words, there are no human means by which we can obtain knowledge of God and our capacity is so limited that even if we were to receive such knowledge, we would have nowhere to store it, so to speak. Barth writes, “[The one] who receives the Truth receives God, the hidden, wholly, unknown God, who dwells in light unapproachable. . . . God’s *beyond* is beyond here and there” (*R II*, 288, translation modified).³⁵⁸ A double impossibility is evident from this assertion: 1) we *receive* the Truth inasmuch as we receive God (n.b., the passive dimension) and 2) God is so beyond human knowledge (“the hidden, wholly unknown God”) that we humans cannot even find a point of departure from which to seek God “who dwells in light *unapproachable*” (n.b., the impossibility of an active dimension). Moreover, the “beyond” of God so exceeds the capacity of the “here” of human finitude

³⁵⁸ Steven G. Smith, *The Argument to the Other: Reason Beyond Reason in the Thought of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 42 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 46, puts it well: “Barth’s argument is not that God *is* the Wholly Other. Such a statement, like any other direct theological predication, cannot stand before God. Barth’s point is that we must speak of God *as* the Wholly Other because of the actual position in which we find ourselves, in the light of revelation.”

that were the former to encroach fully upon the later, the result would be a rupture beyond reparability: “Explosions are the inevitable consequence of our bringing infinity within the range of human concepts fitted only for the apprehension of what is finite” (*R* II, 290).

The radical alterity of God is the immediate message of the Gospel. Barth writes, “The Gospel is not a religious message to inform [humankind] in their divinity or to tell them how they may become divine. The Gospel proclaims a God utterly distinct [*ganz anders*] from [humans]” (*R* II, 28). The non-immediate—or that which is mediated by faith alone—is the *nevertheless* of God. Knowledge of God becomes possible in spite of its impossibility through the gift of faith, and faith is to be distinguished from all human means of access to God (*R* II, 141). We are able to know God, vis-à-vis the impossibility of knowing God, because God gives us the means of knowing Godself (faith) and the content of such knowledge (revelation). It cannot be stressed enough how radically incapable Barth regards the human *capacity* for knowing God.³⁵⁹ And yet, by grace through faith, we can assert genuine knowledge of God. It is nothing short of a miracle: “[The one] who says ‘God,’ always says ‘miracle’ [*immer sagt Wunder, wer Gott sagt*]. . . [For] humanity has no sensible organ wherewith to perceive the miracle [*der Mensch für das Wunder kein Organ hat*]. Human experience and human perception end where God begins” (*R* II, 120, translation modified).

In a section of his commentary that Barth labels *The Theme* (*Die Sache*—Rom. 1:16-17) we find one of the clearest expressions of Barth’s understanding of the knowledge of God: God is known inasmuch as God is *unknown* (*unbekannte*). This is

³⁵⁹ The issue of “capacity” will be a major point in the argument between Barth and Brunner in 1934. See Karl Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed., Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 151-67.

what the Gospel reveals: not knowledge of God, but the *unknowability* of God standing in dialectical tension with God's knowability. By the Gospel we come to know that God is known insofar as God reveals Godself to be unknowable. The Gospel is therefore not a truth, but it stands as a question mark against all truths; it is not a door, but a hinge (*R II*, 35).³⁶⁰ It is *good* news because in the "supreme miracle" of the resurrection of Jesus God makes Godself known through the miracle of faith. Barth continues, "God is the unknown God . . . Therefore the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of [human persons]" (*R II*, 36).³⁶¹

The power of God is coterminous with the resurrection of Christ and such a power must be understood only as that which exceeds comprehension. Barth insists, "[The resurrection] must not be confounded with any high, exalted force, known or knowable. The power of God is not the most exalted of observable forces, nor is it either their sum or their fount." The resurrection of Jesus bears witness to the revelation of God by which we are oriented to a certain knowledge of God, which is nothing less than the otherness of God. Barth continues, "Being completely different [*das ganz andere*], it is the *krisis* of all power, that by which all power is measured, and by which it is measured as that which is something *and* nothing, nothing *and* something" (*R II*, 36, translation modified). Let us pause here to observe the non-binary logic at work in Barth's theological proclamation: The resurrection, inasmuch as it reveals the power of God beyond all power, upsets the oppositional logic that governs modern rationality. It calls for a completely other rationality sufficient to the *Sache* to which the Gospel points.

Recognizing that the resurrection itself is no *thing*—it is not even an event in

³⁶⁰ "Sie ist nicht eine Wahrheit neben andern sie stellt alle Wahrheiten in Frage. Sie ist Angel, nicht Türe." Barth, *Der Römerbrief II*, 11.

³⁶¹ See also *R II*, 85: "To us God is, and remains, unknown . . ."

history inasmuch as it occurs *beyond* time (*R II*, 30, 115)—the theme of the Epistle utterly frustrates our a priori frameworks for knowledge, and even our epistemological condition as knowers. The community that bears witness to the power of God revealed in the resurrection remains such only to the extent that they are hollowed out by this reality. They must remain nothing more than a “void,” a “signpost,” a “crater formed by the explosion of a shell” (*R II*, 36).³⁶² Only then can they claim to really know God in God’s unknowability, not as an *object* of knowledge alongside other cognitive assertions, but only as that which is *radically other* than all other forms of knowledge. This is the first point toward a theology of proclamation sufficient to our quest, namely, the preacher is called to be nothing more than a witness to the radical alterity of God revealed in Jesus Christ.³⁶³

In chapter eleven of *Romans* Barth makes this point even clearer when he articulates the *terminus ad quem* of Gospel proclamation. He states explicitly that this is a correction of the language that emerged in his first edition.³⁶⁴ In *Romans II* he states that

³⁶² This is also the case with the law for the Jews and Gentile God-fearers on Barth’s reading: “The law is the impression of divine revelation left behind in time, in history, in the lives of [people]; it is a heap of clinkers marking a fiery miracle which has taken place, a burnt-out crater disclosing the place where God has spoken, a solemn reminder of the humiliation through which some men [and women] had been compelled to pass, a dry canal which in a past generation and under different conditions had been filled with the living water of faith and of clear perception, a canal formed out of ideas and conceptions and commandments, all of which call to mind the behavior of certain other [persons], and demand that their conduct should be maintained., [Those] who *have the law* are [those] who inhabit this empty canal” (*R II*, 65).

³⁶³ Jesus, a historical figure who is revealed as the Christ through the radically *unhistorical* event of resurrection is the *signifié absolue*, not as a pure presence, but a presence manifesting an absence. We preach *Jesus Christ*, together, as one sign that points beyond history to the alterity of God. Barth proclaims, “In Him God reveals [Godself] inexorably as the hidden God who can be apprehended only indirectly. In Him [God] conceals [Godself] utterly, in order that [God] may manifest [Godself] to faith only. In Him [God] makes known [God’s] infinite love by allowing the miracle of [God’s] freedom and of [God’s] kingdom to be proclaimed with penetrating absence of all ambiguity” (*R II*, 369). The tendency to preach *Jesus or Christ* is prevalent in homiletical theory. Cf., for example, Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997) and James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

³⁶⁴ In 1919, Barth wrote, “The ‘depth’ of God is not [God’s] “‘inscrutability.’” (*R I*, 344).

the God to whom we bear witness retains God's *unfathomableness* (*Unerforschlichkeit*) entirely.³⁶⁵ Barth continues, "The Epistle moves round the theme (i. 16, 17) that in Christ Jesus the *Deus absconditus* is as such the *Deus revelatus*. This means that the theme of the Epistle to the Romans—Theology, the Word of God—can be uttered by human lips only when it is apprehended that the predicate, *Deus revelatus*, has as its subject *Deus absconditus*" (*R II*, 422).³⁶⁶ This is both the necessity and impossibility of theological proclamation because God's radical absence "can be neither written nor uttered" nor can it be "in any way an object of human endeavor" (*R II*, 422). Barth concludes, "The Moment when God, not [a human], speaks and acts, is the Moment of Miracle. And men [and women] have attained the utmost limit of their vigorous action when, possessing the status of John the Baptist, and filled with awe, they bear witness to God and to [God's] Miracle" (*R II*, 422). Thus the "impossible possibility" of preaching is reaffirmed at the limit of human knowledge and of all human capacities, which the Resurrection simultaneously marks and overcomes. Barth writes,

The Resurrection, which is the place of exit, also bars us in, for it is *both* barrier *and* exit. Nevertheless, that 'No' which we counter is the 'No' of God. And therefore *our veritable deprivation is our veritable comfort* in distress. The barrier marks the frontier of a new country, and *what dissolves* the whole wisdom of the *world also establishes* it. Precisely because the 'No' of God is all-embracing, it is also [God's] 'Yes.' (*R II*, 38, emphasis added)

³⁶⁵ Note that this does not mean there is no knowledge: As he will put it in the *Church Dogmatics*: "knowing God, we necessarily know [God's] hiddenness" (*CD*, II.1, 206). Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 24, explains, "What we 'know' (and what legitimacy does this word 'know' have when it is really a not knowing?) is an absence. More specifically, this absence becomes a positive property of God. The absence refers to, points to, is an index for, God."

³⁶⁶ Lowe's insights in his *Theology and Difference* are particularly illuminating in this regard. He recognizes in Barth a quest for a way of understanding revelation that is not constituted or construed as a presence (23). Moreover, Lowe recognizes that even in the process of revelation a certain concealment is maintained, even manifested. He writes, "The great temptation of the Enlightenment may be associated with its very name, that is with the implication that there can be an enlightening or a revealing which is *not* simultaneously a concealing" (30).

The Resurrection dissolves (*aufhebt*) and establishes (*begründet*) the conditions of possibility for knowing God. In relation to human sensory input, Barth confesses, albeit paradoxically, that we are able to claim knowledge of God because “in some way or other, we have penetrated the reality and meaning of the occasion, because we have seen through it. Yet, do we know it? No! We do not know it. We know our ignorance. But God knows it; and we believe, and dare to know what God knows” (*R II*, 155).³⁶⁷ The only capacity with which humans are endowed following the in-breaking of the Gospel is a capacity to ascertain the impossibility of God-knowledge. When such non-knowledge becomes anything other than a negation or disavowal of knowledge, it becomes idolatrous, an indictment that we merely possess knowledge of the No-God of this world: “What [people] on this side of the resurrection name ‘God’ is most characteristically not God” (*R II*, 40).

The second point that we must bear in mind as we move toward a theology of proclamation is that Barth teaches us that God-knowledge remains *God’s* knowledge. It is only by faith that humans are able to “penetrate” what is thoroughly human knowledge to approach the divine. In other words, Barth is able to understand knowledge apart from its subjective dimension. It is not a thing possessed by an autonomous subject; rather, knowledge of God remains the possession of God that we recognize as genuine knowledge only *in* God, that is, through faith in Christ.³⁶⁸ As McCormack reminds us, for

³⁶⁷ N.b., such a *penetration* is not a path or way to God that humans may follow. As McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 130, rightly observes, “there is no epistemological way which leads from the empirical world to its divine source.”

³⁶⁸ N.b. Even *in Christ*, God-knowledge is not ours: “Since the true conformity to Jesus is no human quality or activity, it cannot be either compared or contrasted with these experiences or dispositions. It nowhere swims into the ken either of the historian or of the psychologist, and no [person] can claim to possess it directly. That life of ours which is positively conformed to Jesus is the life which is hid with Christ in God, and which is only ‘ours’ here and now as the eternal future. This, however, is sufficient for us” (*R II*, 197).

Barth, “God and the knowledge of God are never the secure possession of human beings (but must be received anew in each moment).”³⁶⁹ Or, as Barth puts it, “The Gospel is the Word of the Primal Origin of all things [*des Ursprungs aller Dinge*], the Word which, since it is ever new, must ever be received with renewed fear and trembling. The Gospel is therefore not an event, nor experience, nor an emotion—however delicate! Rather, it is the clear and objective knowledge³⁷⁰ of what eye hath not seen nor ear heard” (*R II*, 28). Such logic runs counter to the natural attitude toward knowledge. Once we know something, we think of it as ours in some way. Barth proclaims a Gospel that upsets post-Enlightenment epistemology; it calls for an alternative way of knowing and understanding knowledge itself.

From these insights, we may deduce that a key component of Barth’s conceptualization of God-knowledge is founded upon God Godself. It is impossible as a feat of human achievement—no storming of the gates of heaven is possible,³⁷¹ neither through the “mist or concoction of religion” (*R II*, 49), nor through myths which are “suspended in mid-air,” nor by the “ecstasy” of mystical experiences (*R II*, 135). Only God can give God. As Barth avers, “For everything which we can know and apprehend and see belongs to this world. No soul-and-sense experience can bridge the gulf by which the old is separated from the new” (*R II*, 163). The One who reveals Godself as *beyond*

³⁶⁹ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 141. See also Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 36: “The knowledge of God as confessed by faith had been shown to be irreducible and objective, logically speaking, on the grounds that God’s self-revelation in history gives faith a share in God’s own self-knowledge as it is in eternity.”

³⁷⁰ Curiously, Hoskyns renders *Erkenntnis* here as “perception” in his translation. This is misleading and especially so given the adjective *objektive*, which modifies it.

³⁷¹ “Can we not now at last claim that we have stormed and occupied the stronghold—*God for us*? No, we must at once surrender it, for it is God’s fortress; and it is ours to occupy neither in the past, present, nor future. . . . When the stronghold ‘God-for-us’ is stormed, in every moment in time, whether past or future, when we stand once again outside the fortress boasting of a victory which, so far as can be observed, is always our defeat” (*R II*, 328-9).

can only be known *from beyond*: “The truth has encountered us from beyond a frontier we have never crossed; it is as though we had been transfixed by an arrow launched at us from beyond an impassable river” (*R II*, 238). Thus, the third point toward a theology of proclamation is that our knowledge of God is radically dependent on God. This is the *terminus a quo* of the Gospel toward which the *terminus ad quem* is the “universal secret of the righteousness of God which presses upon every person of every rank” (*R II*, 40). To say “righteousness” is to confess “otherness.” It is to render impossible the human hegemony of homogeneity. Barth’s logic signifies a secret that wants to be divulged. Or, as he puts it later in his commentary,

The righteousness of God in Jesus Christ is a possession which breaks through this twilight, bringing the knowledge which sets even human existence ablaze. The revelation and observation—of the Unknown God—whereby men [and women] know themselves to be known and begotten by [God] whom they are not; by [the One] with whom they have no continuity or connection; to whom there runs no road or bridge along which they can pass; who is their Creator and their Primal Origin—this revelation and observation, in so far as [God] reveals [Godself] and allows us to perceive [God] as Father, makes impossibility possible. It is grace. (*R II*, 226)

As we see in this quotation, *Romans II* is filled with examples of Barth’s dialectical logic. It displays a theology submitted to an unbearable pressure, and thereby shining with an alterity that subverts theology itself inasmuch as it claims to assert knowledge of God.

It is important to remember, however, that dialectical logic does not provide a path to God, either. It is a result of an originary revelation. We might say that the degree to which Barth’s theology is dialectical, is the degree to which he manifests the discursive counter-logic of witness. His theology places human logic and language under erasure. And thus, it embodies a mode of discourse that depends fully and points definitively toward the God whom we only know as unknowable. This is the fourth point

toward a theology of proclamation. Barth's rationality, which emerges completely from the theme of Paul's epistle, brings his audience to the threshold of faith. Which is exactly where he wants us to be. As Barth writes,

Faith directs itself towards the things that are invisible. Indeed, only when that which is believed on is hidden, can it provide an opportunity for faith. . . . Faith is awe in the presence of the divine incognito; it is the love of God that is aware of the qualitative distinction between God and [humanity] and God and the world; it is the affirmation of resurrection as the turning-point of the world; and therefore it is the affirmation of the divine 'No' in Christ, of the shattering halt in the presence of God. (*R II*, 39)

Knowledge of God is not to be confused with knowledge of things in this world.

Barth refuses to operate within the framework where knowledge is possessed *by* a subject *of* an object fully accessible to consciousness. Remember, knowledge of God remains forever *God's knowledge*. In other words, God remains the subject of knowledge of Godself, but in the miracle of faith God invites those whom God has elected to genuinely *know* God.³⁷²

Here we encounter the final point toward a theology of proclamation. Arising from Barth's theology of the Word in *Romans II* we see that it is not only our words but also our logic, rationality, and epistemology that must be conformed to God's self-revealing love.³⁷³ Ironically, Barth argued that his form of logic was actually more

³⁷² See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 159: "True knowledge of God is participatory, personal knowledge. Barth carefully distinguishes between a merely external *Kenntnis* of God (such as can be acquired above all through the Law) and a relationally construed *Erkenntnis* of God. The step from the one to the other is 'absolute' because true knowledge of God can only be given by God Himself [cf. *R I*, 164]. There is no bridge which leads from the former to the latter. True knowledge of God is a knowledge in which "our logic" is renewed by being brought into conformity with the 'logic of God.' 'Our logic' refers to the exercise of human cognitive apparatus in engendering 'objects' of knowledge."

³⁷³ Barth's rhetoric, though consistent with that of the Expressionists, operates from a different presupposition. Nowhere does Barth suggest that there is another level of reality *beneath* that of lived experience. Rather, in light of the reality manifested through God's revelation of God self— most notably in Jesus Christ— human language and sense experience is incapable of organizing intuited experience toward such knowledge. The phenomenon is saturated, we might say. Therefore, I do not concur with

scientific than that of the “liberal” Protestant theology of the time, because the first point of scientific investigation was a method appropriate to the subject under investigation (see *R II*, 8). Torrance writes, “The scientific character of theology was bound up with its recognition that the *object* of its knowledge was, originally, and always would be, *Subject*.” And here he is writing of Barth’s theology, wherein Barth understood the “object” of knowledge to be given to theology through the proclamation of the Word and in the apprehension of faith. Torrance concludes, “[I]t was the task of theology, by making use of historical knowledge and critical reflection, to develop its understanding of it, but always in accordance with the nature of the object, that is, of God in [God’s] revelation.”³⁷⁴

In short, knowledge of God necessitates a different epistemological framework than that provided by the “liberal theology” of Barth’s day. Below I will trace Barth’s deconstruction of the dominant contenders—psychologism and historicism—making his positive claims about the possible impossibility of knowing God all the more clear. I will discuss this at greater length in the conclusion of this chapter, but for now I wish to quickly summarize Barth’s proclamation on the knowledge of God. 1) The human preacher (or theologian) can only point to God’s self-revelation of Godself; she can never be more than a *witness* to God-knowledge; 2) God retains possession of God’s revelation even in revealing Godself to humankind; 3) Our knowledge of God is radically dependent on God; 4) Human words embody a mode of discourse that depends fully and points

Webb’s assessment that Barth’s “whole approach bespeaks a kind of rhetorical Pelagianism, which attempts to use that gap between guiding humanity to convince humanity of the necessity for God” (17). Webb misses the mark when he writes, “[I]t is as if Barth thought that by piling up enough negative proclamations about God, some positive truth could finally be reached” (17). *Romans* is not a treatise of negative theology.

³⁷⁴ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 148. See also Barth’s response to Harnack in Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Zürich: TVZ, 1919) and Karl Barth, “Fifteen Answers to Professor Von Harnack,” in *Dialectical Theology in the Making*, 167-70.

definitively towards the God whom we can only know as unknowable; and 5) Not only our words but also our logic, rationality, and epistemology must conform to God's self-revealing love.

Experience of God

Before turning to a closer look at Barth's deconstruction of psychologism in *Romans* a bit of contextualization is in order. In an essay that Barth published in 1912 in the journal, *Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift*, he articulates a perspective on religious experience that is consistent with Schleiermacher, as well as Barth's own teacher at Marburg, Wilhelm Herrmann. Barth writes that faith is an "individual vitality," an "inward experience," it is the "impress made on our self-consciousness by the eternal content," and "the actualization of possibilities of our consciousness resulting from an a priori function."³⁷⁵ Moreover, in his famous early essay, "Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit" (1909), Barth argues that the Christian life consists of an individual (i.e., existential) appropriation of the "New Life" in Christ in her "inner life, volition, and thought." The New so affects the Christian in experience [*Erlebnis*] that her actions follow divine norms, her world becomes God's world, which works for good to them that love God.³⁷⁶ These articles clearly depict an experiential orientation in Barth's early theology, a theology he would later trace definitively to Schleiermacher.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Karl Barth, "Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte," *Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift* no. 29 (1912): 59, 63, 72, 51, cited in Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, ed., Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2004), 17.

³⁷⁶ Karl Barth, "Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 19 (1909): 318, cited in Fischer, *Revelatory Positivism*, 176. See also the extended discussion of religious experience vis-à-vis Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Herrmann in Bouillard, 79-85.

³⁷⁷ See Karl Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," in Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed., Dietrich Ritschl, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 264.

One of Barth's most clearly articulated "breaks" with the theological liberalism that nurtured him was an absolute rejection of such a facile relation between Christian faith and religious experience. Barth's "new starting-point," which McCormack describes as "critical realism,"³⁷⁸ or which Hunsinger will characterize as "objectivism,"³⁷⁹ in 1915 was to start *elsewhere* than the religious experience of the individual. This was a radical move for its time and context.³⁸⁰ In a pair of lectures given in Baden and Aarau on December 7, 1915 and January 16, 1916 respectively, Barth launched a full-scale attack on the elision between God and human experience.³⁸¹ The first lecture, "Religion and Socialism" articulates the dividing line between pious feeling (*Gefühl*) as the province of Religion from the proper Subject (*Sache*) of which Barth was concerned. The latter "is not only a feeling, with all the weaknesses and uncertainties which surround all feelings. It is a *fact*. It is *the* fact which alone is worthy of the name. It is the only secure and certain reality there is, the fixed pole in the flood of appearances."³⁸²

Just one month later, Barth would explicitly associate the security of inner piety or religious feeling with Religion, and the Christian Religion, in particular. Such he equates with the Tower of Babel: mere human attempts to construct a way to God. To the

³⁷⁸ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 129.

³⁷⁹ See Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth*, 35-9.

³⁸⁰ Ingrid Spieckermann reminds us, as nineteenth-century theology originated in a "turn to the subject," Barth's discourse evidences knowledge in theological *objectivism*. Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1985), 73.

³⁸¹ Note that this attack was against the collapse of the Gospel into religious experience. His direct attack on Schleiermacher as the source of this theological aberration would come some years later. In a letter to Thurneysen, Barth wrote that his "gun was now trained upon Schleiermacher and that he was ready to declare war upon him." *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen: Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, 489-92, cited in Dorrien, *Theology Without Weapons*, 43.

³⁸² Karl Barth, "Religion und Sozialismus," (7 December, 1915), 2, cited in McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 131. See also Barth's commensurate argument in 1919: "Our concern is *God*, the movement originating in *God*, the motion which [*God*] lends us—and it is not religion. . . . The so-called 'religious experience' is a wholly derived, secondary, fragmentary form of the divine. Even in its highest and purest examples, it is form and not content." Barth, "The Christian's Place in Society," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 285.

contrary, Barth asserts, “There is a fundamentally different way to come into relation with the righteousness of God. This *other* way we enter not by speech nor reflection nor reason, but by being still, by listening to and not silencing the consciousness when we have hardly begun to hear its voice.”³⁸³ The true God who reveals Godself to us only ever reveals Godself to be *righteous*, that is, *wholly other* than us. Thus, we do not approach God through the experiences we think we have of God, but by the path that is not a path, an impossible path, that God must transcend to reach us.

Romans II carries forward this critique of religious experience with vigor, and especially the reduction of Christianity to an inward experience of God. Barth argues that religious experience is no more than a void. He writes, “from such supposed direct communion with God—genuine only when it is not genuine, when it is not romanticized into an ‘experience,’ when it is at once dissolved and claims to be merely an open space, a sign-post, an occasion, and an opportunity—there emerged precisely all those intermediary, collateral, lawless divinities and powers and authorities and principalities that obscure and discolor the light of the true God” (*R II*, 50). Repeatedly, Barth asserts that God is the God who “dwells in light unapproachable” and this means that God must come to us. Further, he writes that no “impress of revelation,” no “emotion” or “experience and enthusiasm,” can guide us back to the light for all are “of this world.” Our flesh is imbued with a “pious worldliness,” and as such, we have no grounds to suppose that we have less reason to fear the wrath of God than others have (*R II*, 72).

The key to understanding Barth’s strident critique of religious *experience* is not to view it as a denigration of religious experience.³⁸⁴ Rather, it is a critique of the easy

³⁸³ Barth, “The Righteousness of God,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 23.

³⁸⁴ See William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations*

assimilation between all too human experiences and the divine. The cardinal flaw is not the experience itself, but the forgetting of the absolute difference between God and the created order *in* the experience. Commenting on Romans 1:22-4, Barth writes, “They had lost their knowledge of the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier, which must be crossed if men [and women] are really to advance from corruption to incorruption. The distance between God and [humanity] had no longer its essential, sharp, acid, and disintegrating ultimate significance” (*R II*, 49). The natural state of humanity is “blindness” to God and this blindness, coupled with “skillful assimilations and mixings more or less strongly flavored with sexuality,” exalts purely human experiences to be experiences of God (*R II*, 50). Such is the essence of Barth’s critique.

That Barth is not against religious experience per se is evident in the way he highlights genuine religious experiences of biblical characters. He asks,

How is it that there exists any far-seeing and intelligent men [and women]—real men [and women], living in the real world—who, like the Jews of the time of Jesus, have caught a glimpse of the Last Things, and to whom waiting upon God, upon God alone, is well-known? In such [persons] a miracle has occurred above, behind, and in them. They had encountered the grace of God; have met the incomprehensibility of God, as Job did—*out of the whirlwind*. They were terrified in their ungodliness and unrighteousness and were shaken out of their dreaming. It was as though the veil of the mist of religion was dispersed and the cloud of divine wrath was rent asunder; and they heard the undiscoverable, saw the negation of God! (*R II*, 59)

We might want to interrogate Barth’s method for parsing genuine religious experience from inauthentic experiences. The answer comes in one word: election.³⁸⁵ Note well, Barth is not denying that many in his day or before have had religious experiences, that

of Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 134-49, who traces the thread of experience through Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.

³⁸⁵ See, for example, McCormack’s helpful commentary on the “the sovereign freedom of the divine decision” which remains consistent in both editions of *Romans* (156-7, 208).

their hearts and souls were moved in the midst of religious observance. He is stating emphatically that *genuine* experience of God—the “encounter of grace”—only comes from God and is bestowed upon those whom God elects. Period. He does not deny that there are mystics and ecstasies who have relentlessly sought God, only that “the encounter of grace depends upon no human possession,” it has no “independent validity in the presence of God.” When God truly speaks, and it is recognized as such, we are unable to speak of human existence, possession, or enjoyment: “[The one] who has been chosen by God cannot say that he [or she] has chosen God. When room is found for awe and humility in the presence of God, that is, when there arises the possibility of faith, this is intelligible only as impossibility” (*R II*, 59).

Experience of God is paradoxical. It is neither fully present as an experience, nor fully absent as the lack of an experience. It is held in its impossibility of possession, and must be regarded as such. Any experience that arises from God *to any human person* remains inextricably tethered to its Benefactor. Barth writes, “Nothing can be put forward to account for and explain this emphatic ‘to’ and ‘me’; absolutely nothing. It all hangs in the air: it is a pure, absolute, vertical miracle” (*R II*, 60). Genuine God-experience, since it is paradoxical, requires an alternative rationality sufficient to it. Barth suggests dialectical thinking, writing, “every phrase descriptive of human experience is here irrelevant; for we cannot claim even to exist. We are once again faced by an undimensional line of intersection. The dialectic of the miracle of God is expressed in the words: *the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance*” (*R II*, 60).

Thus, for Barth, genuine experience of the Divine is only positive when it negates

itself, when it unravels as an experience.³⁸⁶ This is part of the paradoxical logic that manifests in Barth's commentary. Only when experience dissolves as an experience can it become what it ought to be: a witness. Barth writes, "The possessors of the law are the idealists, the especially favored, those who have an experience of God or, at least, a remembrance of such experience (ii. 14, iii. 2). Their impress of revelation, their religion and their piety, *demonstrate and bear witness to God*" (R II, 87, emphasis added). To this extent, the light of God shines through the experiences of the elect to the degree that their lives bear witness to the God who has called them. Their experience is not a sufficient grounding for their faith, but it points beyond every experience to the *true grounding*, which is God. In other words, their faith is affirmed inasmuch as it becomes a "void, an obeisance before that which we can never be, or do, or possess." Their religion is valid inasmuch as it consists of "the removal of every ground of confidence except confidence in God alone." And their piety is possible only as "the removal of the last traces of a firm foundation upon which we can erect a system of thought" (R II, 88). Religious experience is a trace of God in the created order that cannot be sustained as a grounding for the present.

It is important to point out that Barth is not arguing against the reality or validity of experience; when God encounters human persons it always results in an experience in

³⁸⁶ Such is reminiscent of Augustine's famous "experience" with God retold in the ninth book of the *Confessions*. He and his mother, Monica, were in Italy preparing to travel back to their native North Africa, when one day, deep in conversation, they wondered, what the eternal life of the saints would be like, concluding "that no bodily pleasure, however great it might be and whatever earthly light might shed luster upon it, was worthy of comparison, or even of mention, besides the happiness of the life of the saints." As they spoke, Augustine tells us, "the flame of love burned stronger" in them and raised them "higher toward the eternal God." Augustine goes on to explain that he and his mother "spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word was beginning and ending." Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1961), bk. IX, sec. 10, 197-8.

the fullest sense. What Barth contends with is the hardening of any religious experience as a *foundation* or *starting point* for theological argument. Barth continues,

When men [and women] who exercise themselves in the law hear the voice of the law pronouncing that God alone is just; when their religion dissolves religion, and their piety dissolves piety; when this historical and spiritual preeminence depresses every eminence; when every confident, arrogant mouth, every mouth that thinks it can give forth even one single truth, is stopped; when [people], as [people], have scaled the world's highest peaks, and there discover that *all the world is guilty before God*—then it is that their peculiar advantage is established, maintained, and confirmed; then it is that there is manifested the eternal meaning of history; then it is that God asserts [God's] faithfulness, and reveals that it has not been deflected by the unfaithfulness of [humanity]. (*R II*, 88-9)

What this passage so poignantly reveals is that the traces of experiences of the Divine—for all the elect—cannot ground theological claims. All that such experiences can signify is that the God who lies *behind* the experience is irreducible to the experience itself. Later in his commentary he articulates the same point as it pertains to the experience of God's grace:

Grace is and remains always in this world negative, invisible, and hidden; the mark of its operation is the declaration of the passing of this world and of the end of all things. Restless, and terribly shattering, grace completely overthrows the foundations of this world; and yet, on the Day of days, the creative Word of God veritably declares the operation of grace to be no mere negation. Grace is altogether 'Yes.' (*R II*, 103)

Religious experience, all experience, is exposed to a certain trembling—it is exposed to a “disturbance” (*Unruhe*)—before the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Barth asserts, “[People] are righteous only when their righteousness proceeds from God, and from [God] continuously. From this presupposition it is possible to adopt a critical attitude to the law, to religion, to human experience, to history, to the inevitability of the world as it is, in fact, to every concrete human position” (*R II*, 107). The experience of the Gospel is not a religious experience that can exist in peace and harmony with other experiences. It

is a “shattering disturbance, an assault which brings everything into question” (*R II*, 225). Barth calls out Schleiermacher in particular as the progenitor of this mistaken understanding of experience. “Nothing,” writes Barth, “is so meaningless as the attempt to construct a religion out of the Gospel, and to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others” (*R II*, 225). Because of the fundamental theme of the Gospel—*God is God*—no human experience can ever adequately serve as a placeholder for God. Stephen Smith gets it right when he observes that Barth’s “‘Other’ is not, strictly speaking, *anything*: it is only a *way* to speak of *something else*, something that may be quite definite but must remain, for one reason or another, out of direct view.” Smith continues, “For Barth the ‘something else’ is the God revealed in Christ, the Creator incommensurable with the creature, who nevertheless makes himself known to us, in a manner lacking all analogy in our experience.”³⁸⁷

Barth’s critical attack on religious experience as a foundation for theological assertions bears repeating in today’s North American ecclesial context. Every year a fresh trove of books appears, flooding the market with a message of *spirituality*, which is the *nom de jour* for religious experience. This, I would argue, is a re-animation of the very spirit that Barth combats in *Romans II*. When one reads, for instance: “I experience life to be more than I can embrace. To live it fully calls me beyond the limits of my human consciousness. I can, however, taste its sweetness and contemplate its eternity. When I do, I commune with the Source of Life that I call God,”³⁸⁸ or “If we are all one, which we know is true, and there is no separation between God and us, which we also know is true, then Hollywood is just one of the channels God can use to talk to with us about the

³⁸⁷ Smith, *The Argument to the Other*, 5

³⁸⁸ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 285.

truth of our lives,³⁸⁹ what are we to say? Many prominent Christian leaders have embraced an experiential, *spiritual* path toward knowledge of God. For instance, Brian McLaren writes, “We can all learn to tap into the quiet current of sacredness and love that runs from the Creator through all creation.”³⁹⁰ Our ability to “tap into” God is unequivocally rejected by Barth.

Psychologism has supplanted faith for the contemporary American Christian. Jeremy Lott writes, “The essence of the American Religion is ‘experiential.’” He goes on to argue that ancient creeds and ecclesial authority have become “impediments to the real point of religious experience, to wit, ‘being alone with God or with Jesus.’”³⁹¹ Thomas G. Long, though recognizing the nuances involved, identifies the movement away from religion through an embrace of new forms of spirituality as the rebirth of a “gnostic impulse” in the church.³⁹² Long argues that confronting the new gnosticism in the church is of the utmost concern for church leaders, it is a “signal pastoral and homiletical responsibility.”³⁹³ I believe that Barth’s sustained critique on religious experience as a foundation for knowledge of God can be received as an aid to such a responsibility. Barth does not defend a naïve dogmatism or a pre-critical orthodoxy. He is well aware that such an approach is merely “pseudo-thinking,” it is insufficient to the “tension of human life.” Instead, “The reality to which life bears witness must be disclosed in the deep things of

³⁸⁹ Susan D. Sammarco, *I’m Not Religious: I’m a Spiritual Person* (Durham, CT: Strategic Book Group, 2011), 57.

³⁹⁰ Brian D. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 12.

³⁹¹ Jeremy Lott, “American Gnostic: Harold Bloom’s ‘Post-Christian Nation’ Ten Years On,” *Books and Culture* 8, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2002), 36, cited in Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 80.

³⁹² Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, 64. He defines the “gnostic impulse” as “a counterforce, a reaction that erupts here and there in church history in response to what is seen as the bareness and oppressiveness of what the church is teaching” (65).

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

all observable phenomena, in their whole context – in their *krisis*” (*R II*, 425). Barth’s attack falls upon any human construct that sees itself as self-sustaining and self-supporting. Both the new gnosticism that Long challenges, as well as the institutional church, fall under Barth’s critique. Barth writes,

If the Church were seriously engaged in carrying out its proper program, it would veritably encounter the truth and the freedom and the righteousness of God. . . . No serious human piety or righteousness, no earnest-minded Church, can—as is seen on every page of the Psalter—remain satisfied with itself. And in fact all human piety does point beyond itself, for it knows that it can be no more than an imprint, a signpost and an intermediate station, a reminder and a negation. The Church—if it be aware of itself and is serious—sets fire to a charge which blows up every sacred edifice which [people] have ever erected or can ever erect in its vicinity. (*R II*, 375).

Or, as he puts it in an earlier essay, “There must be a crisis that denies all human thought.”³⁹⁴ Such is the extent of Barth’s critique of human experience.

History and God

A second obstacle toward a proper understanding of the theme of Paul’s Epistle is the problem of history inasmuch as it is viewed as the approach to knowledge of God. Barth’s “sermon” in *Romans II* is relentless in ferreting out every historicism that encumbers the *Sache*. Even a cursory reading of *Romans II* reveals a sustained critique of history as the starting point for exegetical reflection. This is an element that remains relatively consistent between both editions of *Romans*.³⁹⁵ What comes to the fore in *Romans II* is a nuanced understanding of eschatology in relation to history. History had been the major stumbling block for Barth’s hermeneutical endeavors as a pastor (*R II*, 9)

³⁹⁴ Barth, “Biblical Insights, Questions and Vistas,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 80

³⁹⁵ Barth states on the very first page of his preface that his “complete attention” (*ganze Aufmerksamkeit*) in interpretation has been done in the hopes of seeing “through and beyond the historical dimension into the Spirit of the Bible” (*R I*, v). Cf. *R II*, 9.

and it was precisely the subordination of exegesis to the provenance of the historians that fueled much of Barth's vitriol.

The key distinction that Barth makes is between history as seen through the eyes of the historian and history as seen through the eyes of faith. There is no overlap between these two perspectives; they are radically other. Barth asserts, "There is no fragment or epoch of history which can be pronounced divine" (*R II*, 57). Faith is the product of "no historical or spiritual achievement" because faith is nothing less than the "ineffable reality of God." The view from the point of view of faith is precisely the impossibility of any point of view: "[The person of God] knows what he is about when he adopts a point of view which is not point of view." In taking up this view from nowhere, she receives a different mode of perception, "the eternal ground of perception" (*R II*, 58). Barth's exegetical process is guided by such an unwavering commitment. In the preface to the English edition of *Romans II* Barth writes, "The purpose of this book neither was nor is to delight or to annoy its readers by setting out a New Theology. The purpose was to direct them to Holy Scripture, to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, in order that . . . they may at least be brought face to face with the subject-matter of the Scriptures" (*R II*, x).

In Barth's view, history is nothing more than a human framework for understanding and as such it "implies limitation and corruption" (*R II*, 85). Its "proper theme" is "not concerned with denying or affirming what [people] are *in themselves*; it is concerned with the perception of the uncertainty of [humanity] in relation to God who is their eternal Origin" (*R II*, 87). The central lesson of history is this: "No road to the eternal meaning of the created world has ever existed, save the road of negation" (*R II*, 87). In other words, when history is allowed to do its work, it signifies a temporal alterity

that is ingredient in the impossibility of God-knowledge. When history is engaged not as a quest for certain knowledge about humanity or God, Barth maintains that it teaches nothing other than original sin (*R II*, 85-6). It teaches, if only we will learn from it, that men and women are woefully removed from God and that their best-laid plans are incapable of rectifying this lesson.

History, and the methods of critical inquiry that it engenders, is a decidedly *human* project. Barth writes,

All existence must be tested, must be disturbed and weighed in balance. This critical point of view involves the apprehension that the world and human history are moving in a secular and relative context, which is in itself ultimately meaningless; but it involves also the apprehension that they have meaning as a parable of a wholly other world; that they bear witness (iii. 21) to a wholly other history; that they are reminiscent of a wholly other [hu]mankind; that they are, in fact, a parable, a witness, and a reminiscence, of God. (*R II*, 107)

History is “meaningless” (*bedeutungslos*) when viewed as an end in itself. It is contemporaneous with, though radically separate from, the revealedness of human history. This is what Barth means when he writes of the “secret of God” (*R II*, 106). In other words, those matters of ultimate importance that history tries to uncover through its methodologies and its assumptions are completely blind to matters of *ultimate importance*. Faith, for instance, “lies beyond the positive content of history and of inner religious experience” (*R II*, 132). Moreover, “The whole history of the Church and of all religion takes place in this world. What is called the ‘history of our salvation’ is not an event in the midst of other events, but is nothing less than the *krisis* of all history” (*R II*, 57). To the degree which history fails to signify beyond its possible limits—to a *wholly other* time—it fails, it is *meaningless*, for Barth.

The failure of history to deliver knowledge of God is sustained throughout Barth’s

“sermon” on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, but nowhere is it more salient than in his discussion of the Resurrection of Christ. Barth argues, “If we thrust the Resurrection into history . . . we introduce, as it were, a specter which devours every living thing” (*R II*, 115). The radical paradox of the Resurrection is the supreme limit-situation that Barth employs to deconstruct confidence in history vis-à-vis the Divine. The Resurrection is not just an event alongside other events. That is not radical enough. Barth presses for an “extreme radicalism,” one that is a “truly radical negation”: “Resurrection ceases to be resurrection, if it be some abnormal event side by side with other events” (*R II*, 115).

God’s Resurrection of Jesus proves that the God whom Jews and Christians worship is radically *other* than history. He writes, “That Other from which we have come is contrasted with all concrete, known, temporal, human existence can be in no manner wholly distinct unless it be in every manner wholly distinct. This complete Otherness is adequately protected only when it is quite strictly the Origin and Fulfillment of human existence, its final affirmation” (*R II*, 115). Thus history has absolutely nothing to say about the Resurrection of Christ. Since the event is radically singular it cannot be made to conform to the parameters of historical investigation.

It is important to note, however, that Barth is not *against* history. It has a proper role and plays its part best when it does not encroach upon the province of faith. He writes that “history itself bears witness to resurrection, the concrete world to its non-concrete presupposition, and human life to the paradox of faith which is its inalienable foundation” (*R II*, 116).³⁹⁶ Moreover, Barth maintains that God’s radiance shines with a

³⁹⁶ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 249: “Barth’s favorite way of describing this in *Romans II* . . . is to say, the Unintuitable (*das Unanschauliche*, God) must become intuitable; yet in such a way that no change in the Unintuitable is involved., So, in order that God remain distinct from the medium of revelation, He *veils* Himself in the medium.”

“non-historical radiance” throughout history (*R II*, 140). This is the “absolute Miracle” of faith by which the unknown and unintuitable God emerges into relation with humanity. Abraham is the father of faith because he was summoned beyond history, through the “impossibility of knowing” to encounter the God who elected to reveal Godself to Abraham (*R II*, 141).

A central component to understanding Barth’s de-centering of history as the proper approach for the believer, preacher, theologian, etc. is to pay close attention to the paradoxical logic that troubles history from within. In this regard, his understanding of history mirrors his understanding of experience. Barth writes, “God is pure negation. He is both ‘here’ and ‘there.’ He is the negation of the negation in which the other world contradicts this world and this world the other world” (*R II*, 141-2). Through history shines the “radiance from light uncreated,” (*R II*, 142) which is the light of faith. Thus, it is proper to view history—like experience—as a sign, a witness pointing beyond itself to the God who is wholly other than history, and wholly beyond time.

Faith is the proper ground of history (*R II*, 141) and it provides a way of reading history that is completely foreign to the historian. In times of “spiritual poverty,” writes Barth, “historical analysis is a method we are bound to adopt” (*R II*, 147). Barth deconstructs history as operating on an a priori foundation established in order for the synthetic work of history to be possible. Barth challenges the metaphysical presuppositions of historical method; it claims to be “pure” in its manner of reading the past, when in fact it projects the concerns of the present into the past and then forgets the initial gesture that impelled its study in the first place. History deconstructs itself by its own methods. Barth writes,

The past speaks only to those who are now, in the present, capable of hearing. It is possible to blot out the radiance with which the past is illuminated, and to describe the wisdom of the book of Genesis as a wisdom of the past. Abraham can be depicted as a Bedouin sheikh, belonging to a bygone age. If so, epochs have come and gone since his day and we are able to compare and contrast him with their rich and fascinating diversity. Abraham thus becomes one in a series of historical figures, strangely different from us and wonderfully apart. (*R II*, 147)

According to Barth, historians have forgotten, or chosen to ignore, that the “‘value of history’ is displayed in that which proceeds its historical investigation; for its value lies in the *krisis* within which all history stands, in the sickness unto death” (*R II*, 146). In other words, historians do not approach past events as a *tabula rasa*, but with an orientation to see in the events of the past concerns of the present. Thus, Barth concludes, “there is open to us no way of writing history otherwise than as it is written in the Book of Genesis” (*R II*, 147). In short, all history is fueled by an implicit faith. Barth maintains that the Christian is simply more honest in revealing her a priori framework for reading history: “And rather than claiming to be using the method of analysis, we had better openly adopt the other method. Whether we wish it or not, we are involved in a contemporary intercourse between the past and the present” (*R II*, 147).

To conclude, Barth maintained an ambivalent view toward history. On the one hand, God reveals Godself *in history*, so any attempt to ignore history is to miss what God has done in the lives and circumstances of humans through the ages. Thus Barth can assert unequivocally, “We have no desire to fear or cast suspicion upon the critical method” (*R II*, 148). History is valuable in bearing witness to the limits of human knowledge; indeed, it was ingredient in Barth’s own commentary: “I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognize it, and once more state quite definitely that it is both necessary and justified” (*R II*, 6). Historical-criticism, at its best,

becomes a witness to the God *beyond* history and *beyond* criticism; it hallows out human knowledge, pointing to the necessity of faith to make sense of past events.

On the other hand, history cannot assert its method as the one proper to Christianity. An unqualified “awe in the presence of history” (*R II*, 9) not only impedes the work of the preacher to bear witness to the Word of God beyond history, but it also displaces the role of faith as the proper starting point for knowledge of God. Barth writes,

If, however, the unhistorical be removed, the past remains dumb and the present deaf. However accessible the authorities and sources for the writing of history may be, the keenest historical acumen can discover nothing, if contemporary intercourse be not mingled with it . . . The judgment of history is that those devoted to its investigation are driven to a final deprivation: they become dumb before God” (*R II*, 88).³⁹⁷

As with Barth’s battle against psychologism, his critique of historicism is useful for the contemporary preacher. Invigorated in the past few years by a surge in “historical evidence” about the life of Jesus that has shaken confidence in an approach to the Christ of faith, historicism has regained its thrown. Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, and Markus Borg are representatives of a growing list of scholars who have found a way of making their scholarly research available to a broad audience.³⁹⁸ In conjunction with this scholarly push, the wildly popular *Da Vinci Code* and the subsequent movie starring Tom Hanks brought a certain historical method into the popular imagination with unquestioned approbation.

A number of biblical scholars and theologians have challenged the resurgence of historicism and its impact upon the church. Unfortunately, in spite of their robust

³⁹⁷ Or, as McCormack puts it, “Revelation is *in* history, but it is not *of* history.” McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 252.

³⁹⁸ See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

arguments, few of these scholars offer a satisfying response. New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn offers a firm riposte to his fellow Bible scholars in his *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. He writes, “To discount the influence that Jesus actually had, to strip away the impact that Jesus actually made, is to strip away everything and to leave an empty stage waiting to be filled by some creative amalgam of the historian’s imagination and values.”³⁹⁹ Dunn does not challenge the assumptions that underlie the historical-critical method; he accepts them, suggesting that *better* methods will overcome the charge of projection that he ascribes to others. In similar fashion, Bishop N. T. Wright argues,

All our historical study, then, must be done to energize the church in its mission to the world. This is not to say that we are not open to following the argument wherever it goes or that we are not open to reading all texts, both canonical and noncanonical, which may help us in following the historical trail. On the contrary. It is because we believe we are called to be people of God for the world that we must take the full historical task with utter seriousness.⁴⁰⁰

Wright too does not question the historical method. He merely sanctifies it for the service of the church, which raises a number of methodological questions about the *ends* of historicism.

Thankfully, another approach is also evident in biblical scholarship, one that would find Barth’s early theology a welcome ally. In her book *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, Harvard Divinity professor Elisabeth Schlüssler Fiorenza challenges the ideological biases at work in the various quests for the historical Jesus. In the book she questions many of the guiding assumptions of the historical-critical approach that aim to

³⁹⁹ See James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 34.

⁴⁰⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 31.

ascertain knowledge concerning the life and ministry of Jesus, but what I find most fascinating is a story she tells about some advice given to her by a senior colleague as she began her first faculty position at Notre Dame University. The senior colleague urged her to “never allow your students to ask what is the religious or theological significance of biblical texts and interpretations for today. If you allow this question, scholarship will founder on the slippery slope of relevance.”⁴⁰¹ Schüssler Fiorenza found such advice incredulous, for she recognized that the angle of one’s scholarly vision is inextricable from one’s theological and ideological commitments.

Similarly, Luke Timothy Johnson, who teaches New Testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, recognizes the value as well as the limits of historical-critical inquiry. In his book, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, Johnson draws a clear distinction between the historian’s Jesus and the living Jesus approached in faith. He insists that we must decide which methodological lens we will don as we encounter the Gospels: those of the historian or those of the Christian. There is no middle ground. Johnson writes, “We are pursuing the implications of a strong belief in the resurrection for knowledge of Jesus. If we are dealing not with a dead person of the past but with a person whose life continues, however mysteriously, in the present, then it is better to speak of ‘learning Jesus’ than of ‘knowing Jesus.’ . . . we can now direct our attention to the complex process of learning Jesus within the life of faith.”⁴⁰² For Johnson, the true quest for Jesus is the one embraced through the faithful yearning to *experience the mystery of Jesus*, rather than viewing Jesus’ life and ministry as a *problem*

⁴⁰¹ Schlüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, 56.

⁴⁰² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 57. See also Idem., *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

to be solved. Barth's theological contributions support such an approach and preachers would do well to re-visit his early theology as a vital resource for the contemporary homiletical context.

Conclusion

From the above analyses we can make several general observations. First, Barth's theology of the Word is guided by an unwavering commitment to the theme of Paul's Letter: the radical alterity of God. This has fundamental consequences for Barth's mode of exegetical engagement, a mode I have suggested bears uncanny resemblance to that of a preacher. As Smith observes, "[For Barth] the Other is invoked, not evidenced; invited, not coerced; appealed to, not disposed of."⁴⁰³ God's otherness remains beyond homiletical or exegetical appropriation, and this is the central aspect of Barth's *Romans* II.⁴⁰⁴ If we learn nothing else from *Romans* II we learn this: "God and [human] are not interchangeable terms" (*R* II, 84). Nobody summarizes this point more clearly than McCormack:

God is the God whom we do not know, the Unknown God who, if we are to know Him, must make Himself known, and must do so in such a way that he remains God even *in—precisely in—*His revelation. This means for Barth that God cannot "give" Himself to be known in such a way that He becomes (in the sense of "is transformed into") something directly given to our perception; something which we are then able to take into our secure possession. It matters not at all whether such a direct given be a historical magnitude or a psychological given. For both historicism and psychologism [*sic*], God is known directly. . . . that God is *God* means that God is God not only before He reveals Himself, but *as* He reveals Himself and *after* He reveals Himself.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Smith, *Argument to the Other*, 216.

⁴⁰⁴ This is clearly evident in *Romans* II, but it was also the guiding thread in *Romans* I: "'World remains world, but God is God.' One of Barth's central concerns in *Romans* I was to show how these two realities can be brought into relation with one another while maintaining and properly safeguarding the absolutely fundamental difference between them." McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 141.

⁴⁰⁵ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 249.

Second, on account of God's radical alterity, the epistemological limits of human finitude prevent us from gaining access to knowledge of God. The door is locked from the outside. Consequently, we can claim knowledge of God only in God's self-revelation. Yet, even in the genuine knowledge of God that manifests in the *event* of revelation, God-knowledge remains God's-knowledge. When humans attempt to build edifices upon the foundation of past revelation they re-enacting the hubris of Babel. When humans systems of knowledge claim anything other than their graced status as a witness to the God beyond the capacity of human knowledge, about whom we can only speak as *totaliter aliter*, they claim too much. At their best they are dried up canals signifying a river that once flowed, craters signifying a past explosion, signposts pointing to some destination beyond themselves.

Third, Barth models a way of engaging God's Word revealed in Scripture. This is a mode of engagement that refuses to operate according to the rules set by psychologism or historicism. It bears similarity to the approach of the early church fathers and mothers, and to the Reformers. Barth's hermeneutic emerges from a light that shines brighter than the Enlightenment; it receives illumination from the "light unapproachable" shining beyond the Modern *epistémè*. As William Stacy Johnson observes,

Barth's challenge to modernity is not merely "anti-modern," and even less is it premodern, but it points to a possibility that may be designated genuinely postmodern. It is not that he wishes to turn back the hands of time to an age that had yet to strive for the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and tolerance. It is rather that he wished to reorient modernity according to a theologically enriched understanding of its own high-minded goals.⁴⁰⁶

Barth's hermeneutical approach is guided by the needs and goals of the preacher. It sets

⁴⁰⁶ Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 154.

out in search of a Word from God for the people of God and does not rest until the frequency between God's revelation of Godself in Scripture reverberates through that of the contemporary site for revelation, namely, Barth's congregational context.

Fourth, Barth models a logic and a rhetoric that unsettles the reigning paradigms of thought and discourse. So guided is he by the Subject Matter of his quest that he is willing to bend the rules of logic to accommodate God's revelation of Godself. Many commentators have recognized the paradoxical and dialectical logic at work in *Romans II*. Walter Lowe, for instance, is right to note that the *dissolution* of history and experience by the Gospel is simultaneously a *grounding*—*Aufhebung* constitutes *Begrundung*. He observes, “The resultant phrase, translated as ‘dissolved and established,’ recurs so frequently as to constitute a fundamental trope of the Barthian argument (e.g., [R II,] 30, 36, 38, 46, 51).” Such paradoxical language gives the impression of one shirking the law of non-contradiction, but upon closer inspection, one discovers that the only mode of expression appropriate to God's self-revelation is precisely paradoxical. Lowe continues, “The language of dissolution provides a way of speaking of *krisis* without becoming entangled in opposition. It is as if the presumptive structures of this world collapsed under the weight of their own pretensions once they were immersed in the medium of the Gospel.”⁴⁰⁷

Genuine thought is broken thought in Barth's *Romans*. It is not until we have slogged our way through 400+ pages of Barth's bombastic, fractured, paradoxical prose that we are hit with the realization that all that has preceded it rests on the “radical assault” (*R II*, 427) upon human action. That through his rhetoric he seeks to *become* a “void in which the Gospel reveals itself” (*R II*, 36). It is in no way reducible to an

⁴⁰⁷ Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, 36.

“experience” (*R II*, 135), nor does it coalesce to what we label “history,” except to a “wholly other history” (*R II*, 107). The void that lived experience and human history manifests is nothing less than the “infinite qualitative distinction” (*R II*, 10), to the lack of relation between humanity and God.⁴⁰⁸

The depth and riches that lie within Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* cannot be exhausted in this brief treatment. Nevertheless, in route to a philosophical theology of proclamation, which drives this project, and in light of the hermeneutic framework that emerges from Barth’s text, we can see the contours of a theology of proclamation sufficient to the contemporary *epistémè* in the West. Such a theology, I will suggest, is summarized in a sentence: *the Word of God is Erotic*.

THE WORD EROTIC

Barth recognizes a point that has been lost in contemporary homiletics, namely that the subject matter of our discourse is always beyond the limits of theological language. We cannot, in the strongest sense, speak of God. However, we are simultaneously called to speak of God, and therefore can only speak of God according to an alternative logic. By this we fall back on signifying God as wholly other, knowledge as non-knowledge, possibility as impossibility, and linguistic signification as absence. Barth, ever mindful of the impossibility and necessity of the preacher’s task writes,

For the voice of the preacher, even though it be pitched in the key of absolute truth, warbles from note to note, is raucous, croaking and utterly unimpressive. It is, in fact, the cry of a Titan. And, whether the preacher himself be good or bad, he simply bears witness to the judgment which hangs over all Titanism. Human exhortation, therefore, is justified only

⁴⁰⁸ Barth avers, “The proper theme of history—is not concerned with denying or affirming what men [and women] are *in themselves*; it is concerned with the perception of the uncertainty of men [and women] in relation to what they are not, that is to say, in their relation to God who is their eternal Origin” (*R II*, 87).

when it is seen to be void of human justification; that is to say, when it is grounded upon the *mercies of God*. (R II, 429)

I have argued that Barth's prefatory remarks point to his homiletical orientation and that *Romans II* reads like a sermon. There is no doubting that Barth held this assessment up to his own preaching as well as his engagement with Paul's Epistle. Barth writes, "If, therefore, the Church is to be a place of exhortation, it must be a Church altogether aware of its final and indissoluble solidarity with this world of 'dry bones'; it must be a Church which has set its hope upon God only" (R II, 427-8).

The task of homiletics is to hold such reminders up to preachers while also providing an alternative to sheer silence. From Barth's *Romans II*, I want to suggest a path that homiletics might follow which is ever mindful of the theological and epistemological limitations germane to the preaching task. This path is the erotic path. The way of *eros* is not to be confused with sexuality, but with the way of love as a selfless orientation to the other. Barth writes, "This is the great disturbance—that God should first be the love that loves [humanity], and should then display [Godself] as the God who willeth to be loved" (R II, 438). That God-so-loved-the-world is central to the good news revealed in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). I wish to make this explicit for a theology of proclamation.

Our entire inquiry into the work of the young Karl Barth has been in the service of discerning an alternative theology of proclamation sufficient to the emerging *epistémè*. Having carefully engaged Barth's theology of the Word in the act of (sermonic) exegesis I offer the following proposal: the Word whom we encounter in God's revelation of Godself is the Word revealed in love. In short, inasmuch as the Word is revealed *as* wholly other, the Word is love.

It is important to state straight away that the erotic is not a theme derived from *Romans II*. The theme (*Die Sache*) is the righteousness (that is, otherness) of God. What I am suggesting is that the modality of the erotic provides a framework for gathering together the disparate strands of Barth's argument toward a theology for proclamation. It is a way of understanding the Subject of Christian proclamation—the Word—without reducing the Subject to an object of mere understanding. The Word remains the Word in Christian proclamation and the erotic way of knowing structures the preacher in relation to the alterity of God as the center of our theology. Let us, in summary fashion, revisit some of the most salient aspects of Barth's theology in *Romans II*.

We learned from Barth that anything we might designate as knowledge of God is simultaneously a non-knowledge. Scripture bears witness to an alterity that always already escapes human knowledge because we do not possess the capacity to fully receive God's self-revelation.⁴⁰⁹ Nevertheless, God's self-revelation is *genuine* knowledge of God. The frameworks for designating knowledge of God fail to do justice to such an epistemological surplus, such *saturated* experience. Neither kataphatic nor apophatic speech is sufficient to the revealed knowledge/non-knowledge of God, for both modes of speech participate in a binary logic insufficient to God's revelation. The erotic modality provides a way of approaching the revealed knowledge/hiddenness of God.

By way of analogy, we may think about the revelations that manifest between life-partners. A lover truly receives knowledge concerning his beloved. But in the very

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, 37: "The denial that revelation constitutes a presence susceptible of direct communication can now be appreciated as being of a piece with Barth's avoidance of oppositional constructions, which we have already observed. . . . An alleged presence is thought to be self-explanatory and self-sufficient. . . . In the very act of opposition whereby a purported presence is set apart as "self-sufficient," the term is in fact confirmed in its dependence upon a whole network of reference and exchange. Thus the Gospel—which is, as one might say with due trepidation, the one true presence—can be present to our awareness only in so far as it is simultaneously absent."

moment in which new knowledge is revealed, he recognizes that this new revelation cannot begin to approximate the fullness of his beloved; he is simultaneously exposed to the revelation of his beloved and his beloved's alterity. Those who have experienced such a relationship will readily recognize something similar in Barth's description of the Word-revealed.

Second, in order to receive knowledge of God as knowledge one requires a certain dispensation of *grace*. One does not possess the capacity in and of oneself to see through the appearances to the alterity of God that lies beyond all phenomenality. In other words, the Word grants not only a phenomenon of revelation, but also the means by which the phenomenon may be received as such. Love works the same way. A certain barrier is removed in the erotic relation. The barrier can only be dismantled by the *subject*—the giver—of the revelation. In other words, inasmuch as I seek to share myself more fully with my partner I must will for her to receive my love; I must supply not only new information about myself (my dreams, my desires, my fears), but I must do so in a way that communicates a prior decision to reveal myself fully.

Third, Barth teaches us that God's revelation is irreducible to an experience. His deconstruction of psychologism makes this point clearly. Nevertheless, Barth recognizes that genuine revelation is always also an experience. We do not possess a framework for describing an experience that is not an experience except by love. Revelation and love both manifest themselves as an *event*. It is not an event alongside other events but it calls all other mundane events into question.

St. Augustine describes something close to this in the ninth book of his *Confessions*. In "striving" and "yearning" to encounter God he and his mother, Monica,

were permitted to touch but not grasp and behold but not see the revelation of God.⁴¹⁰

This was very much an experience but one that so overwhelms the psychic capacities that it obviates the possibility of psychologism. As Barth observes, “The more [people] seem to speak deeply and really about God, the more unreal is what they say” (*R II*, 439).

Another way that the erotic modality is helpful as an analytic for the theology of the word is that it upsets the binary configurations that pervade Western epistemologies. One holds the experience of the other in dialectical tension. It sees through the façade of logocentrism, recognizing that the either/or configuration fails to do justice to the both/and reality one faces in love. As an example, we might think of the oxymoronic exchanges that pervade Shakespeare’s writing. In *Romeo and Juliet* for instance, we encounter language that upsets the binary logic, bearing witness to an alternative logic.⁴¹¹ As Barth puts it: “Being completely different [*das ganz andere*], it is the *krisis* of all power, that by which all power is measured, and by which it is measured as that which is something *and* nothing, nothing *and* something” (*R II*, 36, translation modified).

Lastly, God’s Word, like love, can only be approached in the second person. Any attempt at objective detachment, any historicism, will miss the Word entirely. Hence Paul’s words must become Barth’s. In other words Barth must “leap” into the void of Paul’s text to encounter the relation rendered and signified by the Text. This is a model for preaching! This theology will be developed in greater detail in chapter five of this dissertation, where I will discuss the *relation* between theology and proclamation. But for

⁴¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. IX, sec. 10, 197-8

⁴¹¹ “Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate, O anything, from nothing first create, O heavy lightness! Serious vanity! Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms, Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health, Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is! This love feel I, that feel no love in this.” William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1967), Act 1. Scene 1. 175-182, p. 61.

now, let me say that love resists totalization. It always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor. 13:7). Love sees through the eyes of faith. Love gives “to the other.” It never takes. Love deepens over time, but it never hardens into a foundation. Such will be the theological orientation toward a theology of proclamation unfolding through the rest of this dissertation.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROCLAMATION AS WITNESS

Our last chapter revealed several important features that guide the trajectory of this chapter and beyond. First, we saw throughout *Romans* II an attention to the philosophical in route to the theological. In addition, from Barth's theology of the Word, we discovered that God's revelation of Godself is radically removed from human agency; when God reveals God's alterity through the words of the preacher it is nothing short of a miracle. Moreover, we learned that neither experience nor history provide adequate foundations for proclamatory theology. Before the revealed Word of God one's epistemological mastery is forever coming together only to come undone; it is a fluid faith that never hardens. Lastly, I maintained with the early Barth that God's knowledge revealed in God's Word is simultaneously a revelation of God's mystery. There is not a measure of unknowing added to knowing, thus the distinction between kataphasis and apophasis runs aground on the rocks of its own (binary) construction. Rather, it is precisely in the revelation of Godself that the radical alterity of God is made manifest. Any alterity that *we* can imagine still participates in an anthropocentric dualism that shares nothing with the revealed alterity of God.

The Word of God who meets us in Christian proclamation is hidden in God's revealedness; God's illeity manifests God's alterity. This initiates a relationship between God and the created order that is irreducible to understanding. These points establish a proper *theological* frame of reference for a theology of proclamation, that is, one that is cognizant of its philosophical presuppositions. But, the radicality of this starting point has called into question the guiding assumptions of homiletics. How then, following our

examination of Barth's theology of the Word and in light of Derrida's critique, might we conceive of a theology of *proclamation*? In other words, what mode of communication is sufficient to the task? This is an impossible task to be sure, which is made possible by God *through* its impossibility.⁴¹² Such a communicative medium would have to be robust enough to handle (at least) three tasks simultaneously.

To begin, if God "is" beyond Being and in light of Derrida's challenges to logocentric thought, we would need a way of speaking that does not participate—that refuses to participate—in the logic of onto-theology. Accordingly, it would have to trace the differential and arbitrary contours of language, even if obliquely, in order to avoid the aporias germane to language itself. It would need to relate to *différance* in a certain way to avoid the metaphysical violence that inscribes the Word in a priori frameworks. Thus, we require a mode of signification appropriate to the Absolute, one that transcends the rationalistic and hegemonic totalities of the same, one that opens up an approach to the *totaliter aliter* by responding to God's illeity.⁴¹³

Moreover, and following from the first task, we require a mode of articulating the Word that submits to an alterity beyond comprehension without succumbing to nihilism or solipsism. It would need to follow the givenness of the Word in the fold of proclamation and allow that Word to forge its own epistemological networks to which we would then respond. This means that our modes of proclamation, inasmuch as they follow modes of Western logic—rationality—and Western assumptions about the

⁴¹² N.b. "The more [people] seem to speak deeply and really about God, the more unreal is what they say" (*R II*, 439); "As absolute Miracle, as pure Beginning, as that Primal Creation, faith brings the known condition and status of human life into relation with the unknown God" (*R II*, 140).

⁴¹³ Illeity (fr. *il y a*), following Levinas, is a term that attempts to express the originary and aporetic distance between the self and the other. Illeity signifies the impossibility of initially pronouncing a "thou" in some sort of reciprocity with the other person. Thus the moment of address in the second person comes after the impact of the face. It is more radical than the other given as object.

relationship between speech and writing, will need to shift in response to the Word of God.

Lastly, both Barth and Derrida recognize, in their respective ways, that the “God” about whom theologians and sometimes philosophers so casually speak, is *not* the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This in no way implies that Barth and Derrida are engaged in the same project. God is *not* reducible to *différance*.⁴¹⁴ Nevertheless, metaphorically speaking, Barth and Derrida are traveling the same path in different directions; where they meet is at an aporia, across from which they can see the other, but never touch. Derrida follows the path of language according to the logic of Western metaphysics and he shows how central themes in Western philosophy are predicated on a certain affinity between a concept such as “God” and the concept of the transcendental signified. Barth, on the other hand, proceeds from a radical skepticism about human projects in relation to God—particularly those articulated by Schleiermacher and his intellectual progeny—and how language is enmeshed in this philosophical project masquerading as theology.

Taking these contributions to heart, in this chapter I articulate a mode of proclamation sufficient to both the Derridian critique and a theology of the Word consistent with that of *Romans* II. In this task I employ the generative work of the French philosopher (and “ambivalent” theologian) Paul Ricoeur.⁴¹⁵ Ricoeur’s philosophy of

⁴¹⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-94* ed., Elisabeth Weber, trans., Peggy Kamuf, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 83; Derrida, *MP*, 6 and 26: “The unnameable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example.” Cf. Gasché, *Inventions of Difference*, 150-70.

⁴¹⁵ I am indebted to Andrea C. White, “In Sympathy and Imagination: The Theological Import of Ricoeur’s Agnosticism,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, November 20-23, 2010), for the use of the word “productive ambivalence” to describe Ricoeur’s relation to theology. It holds in tension Ricoeur’s own explicit insistence that his work is *not* theology and the clear “kerygmatic thrust” of his philosophy. This is a lively debate. See Stefan Orth, “From Freedom To God? The Impact of Jean Nabert’s Philosophy of Religion on Paul Ricoeur,” in *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur’s Unstable Equilibrium*, ed., Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto:

testimony, or bearing-witness, has significantly influenced homiletics and, with a few tweaks, it can help us articulate the Word in Christian preaching without succumbing to the metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy. Ricoeur gets us started down the right path—an aporetic and dangerous path, to be sure. By reading Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony we will merge with another route that witnessing might take.

I begin with a brief synopsis of Ricoeur’s influence on homiletics. In particular I show how his philosophy of testimony has bolstered the Longian “school” of homiletics, in which preaching is understood as bearing witness to the gospel. Emerging from his seminal essay, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” I will show the contributions and hindrances Ricoeur provides for a new theology of proclamation vis-à-vis Derrida and Barth. I argue that Ricoeur gains much from Jean Nabert’s reflexive philosophy, but that he also picks up several bad habits from Nabert that frustrate the general thrust of his project. Next, I will introduce some conversation partners who expand Ricoeur’s understanding of testimony. It is not that these other thinkers exactly *counter* Ricoeur’s proposal; rather, they help Ricoeur think of testimony in all its radicality—as an *absolute testimony of the absolute*—by transgressing the limits of Ricoeur’s philosophical imagination. I conclude with a way forward that arises from Ricoeur’s later work and corrects some of the problems his philosophy of testimony creates.

The Hermeneutic Press, 2003), 127. See also Jacob D. Myers, “Preaching Philosophy: The Kerygmatic Thrust of Paul Ricoeur’s Philosophy and Its Contribution to Homiletics,” *Literature and Theology* 27, no. 2 (May 2013): 208:26.

Homiletics of Testimony

Ricoeur's important essay, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," has invigorated a classical way of understanding the preaching task.⁴¹⁶ Especially in the work of Thomas G. Long and his homiletical progeny, the image of preaching *as witness* has dominated the guild for the past two decades.⁴¹⁷ Scholars of preaching have turned frequently to Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony to bolster their homiletical proposals. Three reasons account for Ricoeur's influence on the conceptualization of the preaching task. First, testimony, or bearing witness, resonates with the early church's understanding of its task in relation to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (e.g., Jn. 1:6-7, 8:14; Acts 3:15, 5:32, 22:15). Second, testimony provides a framework for leaping Lessing's infamous ditch, a concern shared by Kierkegaard as well as Barth.⁴¹⁸ Third, testimony best describes the task of the working preacher: proclaiming what she has seen and heard (in the text and in the world) and confessing God's agency therein.

⁴¹⁶ Ricoeur's philosophy of witness has greatly impacted theology as well, but here I focus on its impact upon proclamation. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology Of The Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 117 ff.; Idem, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 44; and Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1989), 62.

⁴¹⁷ Many of Long's students have tweaked his conceptualization of preaching as witness. See especially Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* and Cleophus J. LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011). David J. Lose, in his *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World*, is critical of aspects of Long's homiletic; nevertheless, he acquiesces to the dominant strand of Long's thought, seeing in it an opportunity for preaching beyond foundationalist epistemologies. Long's *The Witness of Preaching* remains one of the most popular texts for introduction to preaching classes in North American seminaries and divinity schools.

⁴¹⁸ See Gotthold E. Lessing, "Uber den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft," in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed., Paul Rilla (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1956), 8:12, 14 (English translation, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed., and trans., Henry Chadwick [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956], pp. 53, 55): "If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason. . . . That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap." Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed., and trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 182: "This [a historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness] is and remains the main problem with respect to the relation between Christianity and philosophy. Lessing is the only one who has dealt with it." Lastly, see Karl Barth, *CD*, I/1, 105.

The Witness of Preaching

No homiletician has employed Ricoeur’s philosophical insights more cogently or broadly than Thomas G. Long. In his introductory preaching text, *The Witness of Preaching*, revised and expanded in 2005 from its original version in 1989, Long articulates a theory of preaching based on the image of the preacher as a witness to the gospel. In the preface to the second edition, Long writes, “What sets *Witness* apart from the others is that I have tried to allow the theological image of *bearing witness to the gospel* to govern and organize every aspect of the process of creating a sermon from beginning to end—from the interpretation of a biblical text to the oral delivery of the sermon.”⁴¹⁹ Amidst other candidates—preaching as storytelling, heralding, pastoring—Long argues for preaching as bearing witness because it retains what is best in the other central images of preaching while avoiding those more encumbering aspects.

Several features of the witness metaphor are highlighted by Long. First, the witness is *summoned* to give her testimony precisely because she has seen something and is willing to tell the truth about it. Second, if the witness lies—bears false witness—then the court’s attempt to get at the truth of the matter is grievously thwarted.⁴²⁰ Third, the court has access to the truth only through the testimony of the witness: “The very life of the witness, then, is bound up into the testimony. The witness cannot claim to be removed, objectively pointing to the evidence.”⁴²¹

What is truly constructive about Long’s recuperation of the witness metaphor is found in the way its deployment impacts our understanding of preaching—both the event

⁴¹⁹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, ix.

⁴²⁰ Here Long begins a pattern that every other homiletician who will follow his use of Ricoeur will mirror, namely, citing Ricoeur’s claim that “False testimony is a lie in the heart of the witness.”

⁴²¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 47.

of preaching and the craft of preaching. First, and others will press him on this point, Long argues that this understanding of preaching stresses the preacher's authority in a "new way." He writes, "The preacher as witness is not authoritative because of rank or power but rather because of what the preacher has seen and heard."⁴²² By Long's approach, the preacher does not commence with sermon exegesis in order to uncover the underlying meaning of the text; she approaches the text in order to be transformed by God into a witness. Long's preacher is radically entwined with the text—*wrestling*, like Jacob (Gen. 32:24-32), with the Word. Hence comes her authority.

Understanding preaching as witness points to a new way of approaching the Bible as well. Long writes, "Witnesses testify to events, and the event to which the preacher testifies is the encounter between God and ourselves."⁴²³ In short, the *event* of preaching to which the preacher testifies is the self-revelation of God to God's people; it is revelation, and as such, it is genuine "knowledge" of God. The event-like nature of biblical engagement leads naturally to Long's insistence that the preacher as witness can never be a neutral observer. "The location of the witness," Long avers, "is critical, and the preacher is one who stands in and with a particular community of faith, deeply involved in the concrete struggles of that community of faith, deeply involved in the concrete struggles of that community to find meaning, to seek justice, and to be faithful to the gospel."⁴²⁴ Since the witness is called *from among* a particular group of people to

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid., 48.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 50.

give testimony *to* that community, the discrete demographic and ideographic makeup of a congregation is not something to be overcome, but to be embraced.⁴²⁵

While Long's witness metaphor for Christian proclamation arises from the Bible, Ricoeur's philosophy bolsters it. Ricoeur's "Hermeneutics of Testimony" essay in particular structures Long's central argument. Metaphorically speaking, the Bible gives Long his theological and homiletical coordinates, but Ricoeur's philosophy is his Global Positioning System, guiding him along a particular path, to which his homiletic bears witness.

Preaching As Testimony

Anna Carter Florence's book, *Preaching as Testimony*, is one of the most invigorating texts in the field of homiletics in the 21st century. Not only on account of her edgy, playful, and provocative prose, but also as a result of her powerful combination of historical, theological, and philosophical research, Carter Florence asserts herself as a major voice in the guild. Her passion for justice in the pulpit and homiletics classroom have expanded Long's work, breathing new life into the witness motif. Like Long, Carter Florence's understanding of preaching is guided by the central image of *testimony*. She acknowledges the significant overlap between these two terms,⁴²⁶ but opts for testimony

⁴²⁵ See Tubbs-Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Note that Long directed Tubbs-Tisdale's doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary, from whence her text originated.

⁴²⁶ Carter Florence, *Preaching As Testimony*, xxi, observes that "the word *witness* is derived from the Latin *testis* (a witness who testifies or swears on his virility, literally his 'testes,' as proof of honesty), and was later absorbed into the Greek *marturia* (the witness as 'martyr' who swears on his or her life, thereby blending *testis* with the root *smere*—'to remember,' 'to deliberate with much care,' and 'to be able to tell.'"

over witness because she deems it more apropos for describing the “preaching” of those marginalized by church and society.⁴²⁷

In route to her argument, Carter Florence charts the life and work of three diverse women—Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643), Sarah Osborn (1714-1796), and Jerena Lee (1783-?)—each of whom, in her own way, partook in the preaching life. Though separated by time, denomination, geographical location, and education, each of these women understood themselves to be practicing *testimony* (their “testimonies” bear an uncanny resemblance to what contemporary Christians identify as *preaching*). These bearers of testimony articulated a narrative and a confession that were disruptive of the established order, occupied a liminal space that danced upon the boundaries of what was considered a proper “women’s place,” and were proclamatory, prophetic, and embodied.

Carter Florence recognizes Ricoeur’s “The Hermeneutics of Testimony” for what it is: an approach to biblical interpretation not based on fact. She writes:

You simply can’t get to theories of testimony without passing through [“The Hermeneutics of Testimony”]. Or perhaps you can, but you will have neglected a crucial philosophical base, which Ricoeur has already built for you—on solid rock, not sand. When the rain falls, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat on my interpretive house, I want that house to be built on a foundation that Ricoeur has built, with a little help from Jesus.⁴²⁸

From Ricoeur’s essay Carter Florence distills three points: 1) testimony arises from a dispute and only ever arrives at probability, not certainty; 2) testimony calls for a “*decision of justice*” in which one of the positions will be validated over others; and 3) testimony implies *rhetoric*: persuasion through speech.⁴²⁹ She replicates Ricoeur’s pattern

⁴²⁷ Ibid., xxii: Testimony “invites us to rethink proclamation as a marginal practice of the church, and to rethink our ideas about freedom, power, and difference.”

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

of treating testimony in its *basic* or *everyday* sense and then “adds a biblical layer” in order to capture this image for homiletics. The main difference she sees between secular and prophetic testimony is that by the latter the narration of things seen “fuses” to a confession of faith.⁴³⁰ This fusion will be the central motif for Carter Florence: testimony is always narration *and* confession.⁴³¹

The theological crux of Carter Florence’s work is that God initiates the work of testimony by revealing Godself: “God is not altogether hidden and silent. God is manifest in this world; God can be seen and known, here and now. God breaks into human lives and reflections and gives us an *experience* of the divine. And when this happens we testify to it!”⁴³² Ricoeur’s philosophy corresponds to this theological conviction. She writes, “The most striking thing, Ricoeur says, is that the testimony no longer belongs to the witness but proceeds directly from God. God initiates it!”⁴³³ In other words, God gives the preacher testimony as a gift.

In both *The Witness of Preaching* and *Preaching As Testimony*, Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony lends a degree of sophistication to Long’s and Carter Florence’s theological and homiletical arguments. Given the enthusiastic reception of both of these works in the guild, it is evident that Ricoeur’s superstructure holds amidst the storms of criticism that tear through the academy. Having looked at the benefits of Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony for an approach to proclamation, let us now look at his important

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 63.

⁴³¹ Here she strikes a kind of synthesis between Long and Lose. If Long stresses narration in his homiletic of *witness* and Lose stresses *confession* in his homiletic of confessing Jesus Christ, then Carter Florence’s work stands in between, stressing the inseparability of the two. See Lose, 63 ff.

⁴³² Carter Florence, 63-4.

⁴³³ Ibid., 63. She continues, “Testimony about facts and events is linked to testimony about meaning and truth. This leads to an inevitable and surprising claim: faith is less about eyewitness accounts than about *preaching*.”

essay with greater detail in order to ascertain how it might prove generative for the theology of proclamation I am attempting to articulate.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF TESTIMONY

Testimony is only a problem when it must suffice for certainty. Testimony is incapable of fulfilling standards that measure speech according to certainty, and this is its greatest strength and greatest weakness. As homileticians have observed, testimony relies on the word of another who lays claim to an experience with transformative significance. The witness is more than an objective observer but one who confesses and signifies beyond proof and even (at times) beyond the bounds of empirical possibility. Only a witness can point to the impossible.

This feature, or problem, of testimony impels Ricoeur to interrogate the concept of testimony following the connotations that arise from its juridical, historical, biblical, and philosophical contexts. In his 1972 essay, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” Ricoeur’s reflections transcend the multi-century philosophical debate by which thinkers attempt to square truth-claims with sense data in search of a scientific or empirical *proof* that might render testimony unassailable. Ricoeur is searching for the conditions for possibility of bearing witness to the absolute—“a philosophy which seeks to join an *experience* of the absolute to the *idea* of the absolute . . .”⁴³⁴ For Ricoeur, following Jean Nabert, the question of a hermeneutics of the absolute is inextricable from a hermeneutics of testimony.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed., Lewis S. Mudge, trans., David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 119. Hereafter this essay will be cited parenthetically as HT. N.b. Ricoeur’s “absolute” is coterminous with the divine, with God.

⁴³⁵ Ricoeur owes much to Nabert. His doctoral dissertation, published in 1950 as *Philosophie de la*

Testimony is a proper philosophical question inasmuch as it “attest[s] to an intention, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history which nonetheless transcend[s] experience and history” (HT, 119-20). In other words, once it migrates from its juridical and historical usage—where it refers to an account of a witness who reports that which she has seen or heard—to attempt a signification *beyond* the empirical, testimony becomes philosophically fraught.⁴³⁶

Ricoeur, following the phenomenological trajectory of his earlier work, understands testimony as an intentionality *of* an object accessible to consciousness.⁴³⁷ He recognizes, however, the susceptibility of speaking of the absolute that devolves into ontological arguments or far-fetched *proofs* for the existence of God: “the debacle of onto-theology” (HT, 120). Testimony is an ideal mode of speaking of the absolute precisely because it retains a certain tenuousness that demands, on the subjective side, a total commitment on the part of the speaker and on the objective side, a mode of reference otherwise than ostention. Testimony is a valid way of signifying the absolute beyond the confines of logical positivism.⁴³⁸

Ricoeur’s argument in “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” unfolds in three major moves. The first line of inquiry that Ricoeur traces is an understanding of testimony, or

volonté: Le volontaire et l'involontaire (Paris: Aubrer, 1983) draws explicitly from Nabert’s publication of 1923, *L’Épreuve intérieure de la liberté*. Nabert’s influence is also evident throughout Ricoeur’s early work. See *L’Homme fallible* and *La Symbolique du mal*, which both draw from Nabert’s *Essai sur le mal* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1997).

⁴³⁶ Ricoeur will take this up in earnest in his essay “Manifestation and Proclamation,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, ed., Mark I. Wallace, trans., David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 48-67.

⁴³⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans., Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) and Idem., *A Key To Edmund Husserl’s Ideas I*, ed., Pol Vandavelde, trans., Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996).

⁴³⁸ “This is a hard saying for philosophy to understand. For the self-manifestation of the absolute here and now indicates the end of the infinite regress of reflection. The absolute shows itself. In this shortcut of the absolute and its presence is constituted an experience of the absolute. It is only about this that testimony testifies” (HT, 144).

witness, according to semantics. In other words, Ricoeur starts with the everyday, general understanding of testimony. In this vein, he articulates the way that testimony is employed in juridical and historical contexts. In both of these settings, an authority (the court, the historian, etc.) calls upon eyewitnesses to testify to an event. The truthfulness of the witnesses' testimony is in direct proportion to the objectivity of their testimony.⁴³⁹

In the next major section, Ricoeur moves from a semantics of testimony to an articulation of how testimony is displayed in the Bible. In particular, he shows how the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament evangelists display a sense of witness that differs from the generic understanding of testimony. Here the truthfulness of the witness is not measured so much against an objective standard as it is for the law or history. Instead, what is most important is the subjective conviction of the witness to his or her testimony.⁴⁴⁰ Ricoeur makes a crucial move as he transitions into his final section. He states that in no way does the biblical understanding of testimony supplant the ordinary understanding of testimony. Ricoeur writes, "The religious meaning of testimony arises in this semantic complex. With it occurs an absolutely new dimension that we are not able to deploy simply starting with the profane use of the word. But—and this counterpart is no less important—in this semantic revision the profane sense is not simply abolished but in a certain fashion conserved and even exalted" (HT, 130).

The heart of Ricoeur's essay articulates a philosophy of testimony, which Ricoeur argues can only be a *hermeneutics* of testimony. Experiences accessible to consciousness give something to be interpreted. At the same time, consciousness itself is called into

⁴³⁹ Ricoeur calls this "quasi-empirical" because it is not perception itself, but the narration of the event of perception (HT, 123).

⁴⁴⁰ The witness seals his bond to the cause that he defends by a public profession of his conviction (HT, 129).

question by such experiences, which initiate a hermeneutics of the self with regard to the experience. A hermeneutics of testimony arises in the confluence of “two exegeses”: that of historic testimony and that of the self in light of what he labels a “criteriology of the divine.”⁴⁴¹

In spite of the vast amount of commentary arising from Ricoeur’s important essay, in this section, I wish to detail Ricoeur’s teaching on the hermeneutics of testimony according to two seldom-mentioned aspects of his thought in homiletics: the original affirmation and the self-asceticism he labels *dépouillement* (divestment, stripping bear), before summarizing his philosophy of testimony in greater detail.⁴⁴²

The Original/Primary Affirmation

The original or primary affirmation (*L’affirmation originare*) that Ricoeur borrows from the French reflexive philosopher Jean Nabert expresses the orientation of desire. It signals the impetus to take an affirmative (existential) stance toward some idea, even if implicitly. This original affirmation structures subsequent intentional activities. As W. David Hall notes,

Primary affirmation confronts the self in the form of desire because it is the recognition of a value that exists solely in an image or sign of the ideas. Primary affirmation is an affirmation of the self that one wishes to become but is not yet. Thus, the affirmation of a value in the self is at the same time the experience of a lack of identity in the self. What the self recognizes in primary affirmation is both its possible ideal and its present inadequacy in light of this ideal. The lack of identity between present existence and future possibility is never completely overcome; identity is approached but not achieved.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹ Ricoeur continues, “Perhaps it will also be apparent that this double exegesis is a double trial and that this double trial characterizes in its own right the hermeneutics of testimony” (HT, 143).

⁴⁴² As I will show below, few homileticians who build their homiletic on Ricoeur’s testimonial superstructure notes these two features of Ricoeur’s argument, features that are essential to the argument as a whole.

⁴⁴³ W. David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension Between Love and Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 65.

In other words, original or primary affirmation is the originary—thus pre-linguistic—desire to respond coupled with the immediate realization that one is ill equipped to respond. Primary affirmation corresponds to a kind of linguistic system failure, for the drive to speak meets the impossibility of speech with such force that it rends the self from its possibility of affirmation.⁴⁴⁴ Original affirmation, as Ricoeur puts it, “has something of the indefinitely inaugural about it,” which is “in no sense an experience” (HT, 120). Nabert observes, “The being of the self can only be born from the understanding which it acquires concerning itself by an affirmation which engenders and regenerates it.”⁴⁴⁵ We must not pass too quickly over this point; the original affirmation is so original that it never quite manifests itself as an experience that is accessible to consciousness.⁴⁴⁶ It is proto-phenomenological.

The original affirmation participates in consciousness while exceeding it absolutely. It is an event *in* consciousness that transcends the bounds of experience by overwhelming and saturating it.⁴⁴⁷ Inasmuch as it exceeds the possible conditions for an experience the

⁴⁴⁴ This conundrum is nothing new, but it has been lost to the living memory of Christian thought. See St. Augustine, *De catechezandis rudibus*, in *Patrologia Latina* 40, caput II, 3: *Nam et mihi prope semper sermo meus displicet. Melioris enim avidus sum, quo saepe fruor interius, antequam eum explicare verbis sonantibus coepero: quod ubi minus quam mihi notus est evaluero, contristor linguam meam cordi meo non potuisse sufficere.* “For my part, I am nearly always dissatisfied with my discourse. For I am desirous of something better, which I often inwardly enjoy before I begin to unfold my thought in spoken words; but when I find that my powers of expression come short of my knowledge of the subject, I am sorely disappointed that my tongue has not been able to answer the demands of my mind.” See also the fascinating experience of a thirteenth century mystic who struggled to find a way to provide “absolute testimony to the Absolute,” in Nabert’s terms, in Stephanie Ann Paulsell, “*Scriptio Divina: Writing the Experience of God in the Works of Marguerite D’Oingt*” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993).

⁴⁴⁵ Jean Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, trans., William J. Petrek (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 47.

⁴⁴⁶ Though Ricoeur never uses this word in this 1972 essay, the phenomenon he is describing is captured by the word frequently employed by Levinas and Derrida: originary. Note that Ricoeur uses this word a lot in later essays, see Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language” and “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 37, 222; and Idem, “Toward A Hermeneutic Of The Idea Of Revelation” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1-2 (Jan-April 1977): 1-37.

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Jean Nabert, *L’expérience intérieure de la liberté et autres essais de philosophie morale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), 132: “The causality of consciousness, unrepresentable in

original or primary affirmation divests the self of the necessary condition of being-in-itself necessary for consciousness.⁴⁴⁸ It must be externalized outside of consciousness to be interpreted in consciousness.⁴⁴⁹ It is the “act” whereby the obverse conditions of possibility for consciousness—the alterity of the other—make a move on one’s autonomy. This autonomy is the sameness, the *idem*-identity of the *ego cogito*.⁴⁵⁰ An act of original affirmation is one that “accomplishes the negation of the limitations which affect individual destiny” (HT, 120). In other words, the original affirmation ruptures my self-sameness (*idem*) by that which is radically exterior to myself, thereby opening the possibility of speech beyond my conscious capacities. Another name for this experience that transcends experience is *dépouillement*.

Dépouillement

Dépouillement is a French word that loses much of its richness when translated into English. It is often rendered as “divestment,” but the term connotes far more than this. As Stewart and Reagan, the translators of Ricoeur’s essay into English, write,

The verb *dépouiller* and its noun form *dépouillement* are translated as “divest” and “divestment,” though this fails to capture the full meaning of the French which includes such diverse meanings as “to cast off,” “lay

itself, and always in advance of its expression, must incarnate itself through motives in the tissue of psychological life in order to reveal its content to us.”

⁴⁴⁸ In an earlier essay, Ricoeur posited a “permanent mistrust of the pretensions of the subject in posing itself as the foundation of its own meaning. The reflective philosophy to which I appeal is at the outset opposed to any philosophy of the Cartesian type based on the transparency of the ego to itself. . . . I would now dare to say that, in the coming to understanding of signs inscribed in texts, the meaning rules and gives me a self. In short, the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text.” Paul Ricoeur, Preface to Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), xv.

⁴⁴⁹ See Jean Nabert, *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté*, 132.

⁴⁵⁰ This will be important for my argument later. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans., Kathleen Blamey (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3, 18. Note that this is a development from Ricoeur’s earlier work toward a philosophical anthropology where he, following Nabert, writes of a “primary fault” and an “affective fragility” at the core of human consciousness. See Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, 3-15 and Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man: Philosophy of the Will*, trans., Charles Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 191-202.

aside,” abandon,” “rid oneself of,” and “to strip off one’s clothes.” Ricoeur is here giving an account of Nabert’s *Eléments pour une éthique*, and *dépouiller* is his term and is often rendered in the English translations of his work as “letting go.” Nabert’s use of the term evokes St. Paul’s call to “put off” or divest oneself of the old nature in Eph. 5:22. (HT, 153-4)⁴⁵¹

It is clear that Ricoeur carries the fullness of this word’s semantic range into his philosophy of testimony. He writes, “It is by this ‘divestment’ that reflection is brought to the encounter with contingent signs that the absolute, in its generosity, allows to appear of itself” (HT, 120).

In spite of the intense religious overtones that suffuse Ricoeur’s use of *dépouillement*, he insists that such a divestment is intellectual, even epistemological, rather than spiritual. Before the act of original affirmation, an act that coincides with the possibility for an original affirmation, the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) experiences a divestment. One important feature of Ricoeur’s teaching on *dépouillement* is that it is unclear whether this “act” is active or passive. Put differently, is an “absolute affirmation of the absolute” that which is made possible through *dépouillement*, a willful decision on the part of the subject, or is it done *to* the subject by the absolute? Nabert writes that the situation of “absolute affirmation” by which the self is affirmed as a self in reflexive consciousness turns the self into a passive receptacle into which an absolute affirmation enters. He writes, “Strictly speaking, the initiative of affirmation is wrested from me.”⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ This is an unfortunate scriptural reference on the translators’ part, for, notwithstanding the misogynist overtones this verse carries, Eph. 5:22 contains no verb in the Greek text. The verb they have in mind is actually a participle (ὕποτασσομένοι), which is rarely translated as “letting go,” but as “be submissive” or “submit yourselves.” The word comes from the verb, ὑποτάσσω, which literally means, “I place under, subject (myself) to.” In the middle or passive voice, such as it is found in Eph. 5:21, it means, “I submit; I put myself into subjection.” As I will argue later, a better Greek parallel is found in Phil. 2:7, which describes Christ’s self-emptying subjection to the will of God. The verb is κενόω. Exegetically, this argument is defensible on two fronts. First, in French translations of Phil. 2:7, the same verb is used to describe Christ’s kenosis as that employed by Nabert and Ricoeur (*mais il s’est dépouillé lui-même*). And second, the French verb used in Eph. 5:21 is not *dépouiller*, but *soumettre*: “vous soumettant les uns aux autres dans la crainte de Christ.”

⁴⁵² Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, 47.

Ricoeur carries forward his intellectual mentor's use of the term but also suggests that it is an intentional act of consciousness made possible by exposing the self to texts, reflection, and other people.

The divestment of the self is “numerically identical with real consciousness in each person” (HT, 120). Linking this “act” of *dépouillement* with notions of “reflection” and “asceticism,” on the one hand, which “only concerns the idea that the self makes of itself” (HT, 120), suggests a high degree of agency on the part of the subject. On the other hand, or perhaps, at the same time, *dépouillement* appears to be done *to* the subject, making her a passive participant in the work of the absolute. Ricoeur writes, “[I]t is when the thought of the unconditioned *has lost all support* in the transcendent objects of metaphysics” (HT, 120, emphasis added) that divestment occurs. *Dépouillement* seems to straddle the line between the active and passive tense. It simultaneously signifies a divestment (from the outside, by an other, indeed, an absolute other) and a stripping oneself bare, or letting go (from the inside, to make space for the other/otherness).

This concept refuses to participate in the Western occupation of logocentrism. It recognizes an alterity at work within the self that constitutes a particular mode of signification that Ricoeur will label testimony. He writes, “It is then that the claim of the absolute, reduced to the depth of an act immanent to each of our operations, remains steady for something like an experience of the absolute in testimony” (HT, 120). One of the most formative aspects of testimony for homiletics is that testimony opens up over an “abyss” that is incapable of justification by either empirical or rational methods. It brings the post-positivist quest of *cupido sciendi*, the passionate quest for intellectual certainty, to a halt.

Moreover, testimony inaugurates a special relationship with truth, understood according to a correspondence between ideas and contingent events. Ricoeur writes, “Absolute testimony, on the contrary, in concrete singularity gives a caution to the truth without which its authority remains in suspense. Testimony, each time singular, confers the sanction of reality on ideas, ideals, and modes of being that the symbol depicts and discovers for us only as our most personal possibilities” (HT, 122). Thus, a particular relationship is forged between internal and external occurrences that can be validated neither scientifically nor psychologically. The paradox that a hermeneutics of testimony seeks to resolve is the seeming impossibility of conjoining the interiority of a primary affirmation and the exteriority of acts in the world.

Ironically, the features of Ricoeur’s essay that homiletics has found most generative for conceptualizing the task of proclamation are actually the most problematic for a theology of proclamation, or at least those elements arising from the radical alterity manifested in the radical givenness of the Word. In route to solving the paradox of testimony, Ricoeur takes a detour through the semantics of testimony according to its “ordinary” (juridical and historical) uses toward the examples of testimony displayed by the Hebrew prophets and New Testament evangelists. Only after he has made his way through these detours does he return to the initial paradox that impels his study. Testimony opens a “dual relation” between the one who testifies and the one who hears the testimony (HT, 123). These two traits of testimony are significant in light of Ricoeur’s earlier reflection on the original affirmation and/as *dépouillement*: testimony demands an “intellectual asceticism” as a precondition for opening a relation to other persons.

Testimony is always already exposed to an alterity—the otherness of objects of experience in themselves and the otherness of the one who listens—and this alterity opens a space for hermeneutics even as it requires an interpretation.⁴⁵³ This need for a decision, a judgment, is a further aspect of testimony for Ricoeur. He notes, “The eyewitness character of testimony, therefore, never suffices to constitute its meaning as testimony.” In other words, a mere report of details or facts without a trajectory toward persuasion is not testimony. Ricoeur continues, “[T]his counts as ‘testimony’ only if it is used to support a judgment, which goes beyond a mere recording of facts” (HT, 124). By way of explanation, even as testimony arises in concert with a radical alterity (experienced in/as *dépouillement*), Ricoeur constrains the limits of such alterity by forcing it to conform to a priori modes of rational defense in route to judgment. Such, I will argue below, attenuates the force of his many great insights on testimony and its potential for guiding a theology of proclamation beyond the metrics of logical positivism.

PHILOSOPHY OF TESTIMONY/THEOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

Ricoeur recounts how testimony functions in trials and in history in order to incite a judgment or substantiate a thesis. In a later essay, Ricoeur writes, “Every testimony is produced in a trial-like process. There are false witnesses, just as there are false gods. This is why the criteriology of the divine and the discernment of testimony go together and mutually call for each other.”⁴⁵⁴ This is true, but it can lead us astray when we are trying to consider testimony theologically. Remember, Ricoeur is writing about the

⁴⁵³ Ricoeur makes too much of the *sense* of relation between the witness and her audience. He writes, “The witness has *seen*, but the one who receives his testimony has not seen but *hears*” (HT, 123, emphasis added). The one who “hears” another’s testimony never merely hears; she will measure the truthfulness of the testimony according to a certain sight. The eye movement, bodily gestures, tonal inflection, indeed, the total experience of another’s testimony, testifies in addition to what is said. Testimony’s veracity is embodied in the testimony of the witness.

⁴⁵⁴ Ricoeur, “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 116.

interpretation of testimony. In other words, he is investigating how we might ascertain the validity of another's testimony concerning an experience with the absolute. This situation is foreign to that of the preacher. I would argue that a mode of proclamation that aims to defend one's experience with God is something other than testimony.⁴⁵⁵ Let me articulate this claim through a closer reading of Ricoeur's essay.

In rhetoric, testimony is enlisted to "persuade the opposition" according to Aristotle, whom Ricoeur cites. Here testimony is entwined in "the network of proof and persuasion," which also orients testimony toward judgment (HT, 127). Following the historical-juridical-rhetorical detour, Ricoeur mentions that feature of testimony which threatens to unravel its effectiveness: false testimony. He defines false testimony as more than an error in the account of things seen; it is "a lie in the heart of the witness." He writes, "This perverse intention is so fatal to the exercise of justice and to the entire order of discourse that all codes of morality place it very high in the scale of vices. The extreme sanctions which in certain codes strike the false witness well marks the degree of indignation that false testimony evokes in the common conscience" (HT, 129). In short, false testimony threatens testimony originally.

Ricoeur insists that in testifying, the witness "seals his bond to the cause he defends by a public profession of his conviction, by the zeal of a propagator, by a personal devotion which can extend even to the sacrifice of a life" (HT, 129).⁴⁵⁶ He is right to note that just because someone is willing to die for his cause does not make it just; rather, the martyr serves as a "limit situation" for testimony: "Testimony is the action itself as it attests *outside* of himself, to the *interior* man, to his conviction, to his

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 47: ". . . it is precisely the law court origin of the witness metaphor that gives it power as an image for the preacher."

⁴⁵⁶ He points out that *martus*, as in martyr, in Greek means "witness."

faith” (HT, 130, emphasis added). In this definition of testimony it is important to note the movement (outside to inside) as well as the agency (active to passive) implied. Testimony is done *to* the witness. It arises *outside* of the witness and affects her at a fundamental level on her *inside*.

The prophetic-kerygmatic dimension of testimony does not abolish or supplant the historical-judicial sense of the term, but carries it to new levels. It is, as Ricoeur observes, an “irruption of the new meaning and the conversation of the ancient in the new together” (HT, 131). Ricoeur lists four ways in which the prophetic-kerygmatic understanding of testimony extends its common usage in legal and historical praxis.

From the biblical narratives, especially in the Hebrew prophets and New Testament evangelists, we find several features of testimony that structure its significance for proclamation. Ricoeur notes, “Originally, testimony comes from somewhere else” (HT, 131). A call to bear witness precedes testimony. This is crucial, for it structures testimony with an originary alterity that does not consume the irreducible particularity of the witness. So, the first feature of testimony is that the witness is not just anybody. She herself receives a summons to bear witness to God’s mighty acts in the world. Second, Ricoeur explains that biblical testimony is radical. It does not refer to the ancillary and accidental features of an event, but about the “radical, global meaning of human experience” displayed therein (HT, 131). In other words, the summoned witness is called to testify at the nexus of Being and beings. Testimony is made manifest at the “fold of givenness.”⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁷ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans., Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 68.

A third feature of biblical testimony is that it is oriented toward proclamation. The witness is called *in order to* proclaim what she has seen and heard. It is no wonder, therefore, why the best of contemporary homiletics have seized this analytic to structure the entire homiletical process. When the preacher understands herself as a witness, every feature of her calling, ministerial context, engagement with Text and world, and proclamation itself come together in a kind of homiletical Gestalt.

Fourth, Ricoeur writes, “Finally, this profession implies a total engagement not only of words but of acts and, in the extreme, in the sacrifice of a life” (HT, 131). Testimony, in other words, exposes the witness to the ultimate risk whereby her very self is inextricable from her testimony, even to the point of death. Ricoeur concludes from these observations a fundamental difference between testimony in “ordinary language” and testimony in the biblical sense: testimony does not belong to the witness, but “proceeds from an absolute initiative as to its origin and its content” (HT, 131).

Creating Tension

Ricoeur’s critical move comes with a simple gesture, so simple and innocent that no homiletician has thought to question it: he tries to forge a connection between biblical testimony and secular, or “profane” notions of, testimony. He contends that “the profane meaning is not abolished” but is “[i]n a certain way . . . taken over by the prophetic meaning” (HT, 132). This conclusion is not surprising based on how Ricoeur set up his approach to a philosophy of testimony. He began with secular notions of testimony and used those features as a baseline for differentiating prophetic and kerygmatic testimony. I believe this is a mistake that causes all sorts of problems for the rest of his argument. Ricoeur observes,

A tension is thus created between confession of faith and narration of things seen, at the heart of which is renewed the ever present tension between the judgment of the judge, who decides without having seen, and the narration of the witness who has seen. There is therefore no witness of the absolute who is not a witness of historic signs, no confessor of absolute meaning who is not a narrator of the acts of deliverance. (HT, 133-4)

What does the judge have to do with the testimony of the witness? I contend that judgment plays no part in the way and work of the witness herself; in fact, it is precisely without regard for the judgment of the powers and principalities that the witness is a *martyr*. In other words, what sets the witness apart from others is that she testifies to the Truth *whether or not anybody else believes or accepts her testimony*. It is precisely this radical disregard for rhetoric—for persuasion concerned with external affirmation, acquiescence, or validation—that sets the biblical witness apart from the secular witness.

If the testimony is oriented to *defense* of what one has seen and heard it can never be what Ricoeur hopes it will be: an *absolute affirmation* of the absolute. When the affirmation is conditioned by an imagined juridical context it cannot, by definition, be absolute. The juridical motif constrains testimony according to a priori frameworks of rhetoric, logic, proof, etc. It introduces a rationality (*ratio*) that pre-determines the testimony that “does not belong to the witness” (HT, 131). The witness must be radically free to confess what she has experienced even when it is beyond conscious experience.⁴⁵⁸ The court protests that such testimony is *out of order*, and holds the witness in contempt, deeming such testimony inadmissible as evidence.

⁴⁵⁸ This is a central argument in Nabert’s work. Ricoeur writes, “Because of a failure to understand this bond between the act and the sign, philosophy hesitates between the profession of an exiled freedom and that of an empirical explication, faithful only to the law of representation.” Ricoeur, “Nabert on Act and Sign,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 216.

Ricoeur's thinking is partly flawed because he takes the Isaiah 44 pericope as paradigmatic for testimony in general.⁴⁵⁹ Nowhere else in Scripture do we find God putting Godself on trial (cf. Job 38:4; Ez. 3:7-11). To the contrary, the biblical record is replete with examples that put *humanity*, and especially the elect, on trial rather than God (e.g., Mt. 7:21-3; Rom. 14:10-2; 1 Cor. 3:12-3; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 4).⁴⁶⁰ Even as testimony falls outside the parameters of empirical or rational standards, it must also resist the metrics of the judicial. I would argue that this problematic feature of Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony is a residue of his deep admiration for the reflexive philosophy of Jean Nabert.⁴⁶¹

Ricoeur Following Nabert

For Nabert the *concept* of "God" (the absolute) arises from self-reflection. The criteriology of the divine thus establishes the conditions whereby the "longing" for liberation might be accomplished.⁴⁶² This criteriology can but point in the "direction" of a hoped for revelation.⁴⁶³ In other words, one can only speak properly of the divine by interpreting signs of the divine in the testimony of others. Nabert recognizes in history testimonies to the absolute and his hierarchy of testimony becomes necessary to decide which testimonies bear absolute testimony to the absolute, measured according to the degree of freedom or liberation they evoke. He argues that absolute testimony is found in reflection of completely liberated freedom, which orders and deepens our understanding

⁴⁵⁹ This also gets appropriated as a way of understanding Christ: "The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit derives all its meaning in the struggle waged between Christ and the world before the court of history" (HT, 141).

⁴⁶⁰ This is a major critique that Lose makes of Walter Brueggemann's work. See Lose, 150-5.

⁴⁶¹ In his last major work, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 544, Ricoeur acknowledges that his entire oeuvre has participated in the reflexive philosophy in the French tradition.

⁴⁶² Nabert, *Le désir de Dieu*, 21.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 425.

of freedom.⁴⁶⁴ Put differently, testimonies are ranked higher in Nabert's criteriology the more they conform to his a priori rubric of freedom.

The major difference between Ricoeur and Nabert is that Ricoeur privileges historical testimony over self-consciousness. Ricoeur writes, "This originary affirmation has all the characteristics of an absolute affirmation of the absolute, but it is unable to go beyond a purely internal act that is capable of outwardly expressing itself or of even inwardly maintaining itself."⁴⁶⁵ For both Nabert and Ricoeur, originary affirmation blurs the lines between activity and passivity. Both thinkers share an appreciation for Kant's emphasis on "acts" of consciousness, whereby the self is viewed not as a passive mold for sense impressions. The act of "letting go" (*dépouillement*) is ingredient in originary affirmation. Ricoeur notes that on the one hand it is "still part of the reflective order." It is a willful disposition initiated by consciousness and thus it bears a family resemblance to Kierkegaard's famous leap, as well as the kenotic acts practiced by mystics. It is an intentional abnegation of consciousness. Ricoeur writes, "And it means renouncing not only empirical objects that are ordered by reason, but also those transcendental objects of metaphysics that might still provide support for thinking the unconditioned."⁴⁶⁶

Ricoeur transcends Kant (and Nabert) to look to testimonies, understood as accounts of an experience of the absolute. Ricoeur, in effect, does away with Nabert's criteriology, which like the Kantian mediation of the transcendental illusion, effaces the case before the rule and the person before the law. But even as Ricoeur leads us further

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 307: "*A la vérité, nous ne pourrions pas interpréter les témoignages où nous décelons par compréhension une trace de liberté, si nous n'avions acquis par nous-mêmes conscience de notre liberté; et l'on doit se demander si cette conscience, dans sa plénitude et dans ses exigences, n'est pas subordonnée à la présence d'autres êtres libres, dont la liberté, plus assurée et plus totale, nous apparaît comme le reflet d'une liberté . . . le témoignage absolu serait donc à l'origine de la croyance en notre liberté propre.*"

⁴⁶⁵ Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 31-2.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 32.

than Kant or Nabert, he smuggles in his own criteriology: “Only those events, acts, and persons that attest that the unjustifiable is overcome here and now can reopen the path toward originary affirmation.”⁴⁶⁷ Is this not still a clinging to a metaphysical affirmation of liberation/vindication/transcending? What about testimonial experience that resists resolution? How can testimony be “each time singular” (HT, 122)⁴⁶⁸ and at the same time be held to conform to pre-established paradigms? Would this too not be a case of dissolving the case before the rule?

Testimony “needs to be tested,” writes Ricoeur. He continues, “This tight bond between testimony and a process of examination is not abolished when testimony is transferred from a tribunal to the plane of reflection.”⁴⁶⁹ On the contrary, the judicatory dimension of testimony then takes on its full depth for Ricoeur. This is a mistake. The conditions and criteria for trial and judgment will not do for a consideration of testimony to the absolute because, by definition, the absolute’s revelation or disclosure of itself in history, experience, etc. exceeds the finite standards and rubrics of the judiciary. To the degree that the absolute manifests itself in lived experience any attempt to capture that manifestation in consciousness would exceed the capacity of consciousness absolutely.⁴⁷⁰ It would manifest according to what Jean-Luc Marion labels a “saturated phenomenon.” This is especially the case with something like revelation, which Marion labels a “paradox of paradoxes” or a saturation to a “second degree.”⁴⁷¹ By definition, the infinite bursts the a priori standards of the finite. Something like revelation, “the idea of

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 33.

⁴⁷⁰ This is why I offer a careful examination of Marion’s phenomenology in the following chapter: he offers a way of honoring Ricoeur’s many insights concerning testimony while providing a way around some of the problems Ricoeur’s Kantianism and Naberianism create.

⁴⁷¹ Marion, *Being Given*, 242.

revelation,” transcends the limits of ideation and consciousness.

While immensely helpful in assisting us to articulate an appropriate response in proclamation to the revelation of God that exceeds our cognitive abilities, Ricoeur’s work falls short. Any philosophy of testimony worthy of the name must follow through on its course. It cannot decide in advance upon a criteriology of testimony. It cannot judge by any fixed standards or measures what counts as testimony to the absolute. This is true for a philosophy of testimony, but much more so for a *theology* of testimony.

Conclusion

Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony opens up a path toward a mode of speech sufficient to the task of Christian proclamation of the Word of God manifested in its mystery: an absolute affirmation of the Absolute. His work has offered philosophy—as well as theology and homiletics—a mode of speech that begins to avoid the pitfalls of logical positivism. Moreover, Ricoeur has recognized the “dual relation” forged by testimony between the one who speaks a word of testimony and the one who hears the word. This is why Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony conforms, and rightly so, to a *hermeneutics* of testimony.

Testimony is the privileged mode for proclamation because it hovers above the passive and active dimensions of speech and knowledge. As Ricoeur notes, “The meaning of testimony seems then inverted; the word no longer designates an action of speech, the oral report of an eye witness about a fact to which he was witness. Testimony is the action itself as it attests outside of himself, to the interior man (*sic*), to his conviction, to his faith’ (HT, 130). Ingredient in testimony is the total engagement of the

witness. Thus, no simple opposition between facts given to a consciousness and the internal appropriation of such facts in understanding is possible.

These benefits notwithstanding, Ricoeur does not take us as far as he wants to because of the way he has set up his argument. Recall that his declared intention is to articulate a philosophy of testimony that might bear absolute witness to the absolute. His Kantian preoccupation with limits and his Nabertian concern for criteriology causes his philosophy of testimony to falter just as it is preparing to take flight. It is important to remember that Ricoeur, following Kant and Nabert, is articulating a *philosophy of testimony*, not a *theology of testimony*. In other words, the “absolute” is not God; Nabert’s *divine* is not the *Divine*. For we who seek to bear witness to the God who reveals Godself in God’s radical alterity, it is imperative that we in no way constrain the revelation on God’s side by an encumbered mode of proclamation on the human side.

In Ricoeurian fashion, let us now take a “detour” that will enable us to actualize what Ricoeur aspires to achieve by looking at experiences that transcend experience and at historical events that transcend the bounds of history. This will leave us in a better position to articulate a mode of proclamation sufficient to the manner of God’s revelation. The notion of witness, or testimony, is carried beyond the bounds of representation and recognition when we are forced to encounter testimonies of those who have survived trauma and endured the horrors of the Shoah, experiences which transcend a priori limits and criteriologies.

TRANSCENDING TESTIMONY

In spite of the many benefits of Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony we have seen that it is not without its problems. It is particularly important for a theology of

proclamation seeking to bear witness to the God who reveals Godself in God's radical alterity that we interrogate such complicating factors. Taking as our test cases experiences that approximate *absolute testimony of the absolute*, garnered from trauma theory and the experiences of survivors of the Shoah, we will be pushed further toward a more appropriate homiletical response to the kind of theology of proclamation we seek.

One of the most commented upon aspects of Ricoeur's philosophy in general is the manner in which he goes about setting up his arguments. Ricoeur himself described his project as a return to Kant through Hegel.⁴⁷² David Tracy, Ricoeur's colleague of many years at the University of Chicago Divinity School, notes that despite Ricoeur's "almost labyrinthine detours," Ricoeur's self description is accurate and illuminating.⁴⁷³ Ricoeur, like Kant, was a thinker of *limits*, and rarely does Ricoeur blur the boundaries of his philosophy. He knows precisely where, for example, phenomenology ends and hermeneutics begins. More notably, he is aware of the limits of philosophy, and even if he acknowledges a shared border with theology, he is careful not to cross it.⁴⁷⁴

Ricoeur's (Kantian) preoccupation with limits and his wariness for transcending them becomes clear when we examine his philosophy of testimony under greater

⁴⁷² Paul Ricoeur, "Interview with Charles Reagan, October 26, 1988," in Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work*, 112. See also, Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 412-6; Idem, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans., Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 197-204, 221; Idem, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, ed., Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 215; and Robert Piercey, "What is a Post-Hegelian Kantian? The Case of Paul Ricoeur," *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 26-38.

⁴⁷³ David Tracy, "Ricoeur's Philosophical Journey: Its Import for Religion," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed., Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), 201

⁴⁷⁴ A poignant example is found in the final pages of *Oneself As Another*, 355, when Ricoeur writes, "Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute my very self, or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place. With this aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end." Cf. Tracy, 202: "Unlike some of his admirers, Ricoeur himself never allows philosophy or theology to be confused or conflated."

scrutiny. He is able to discern the trajectory of his inquiry into the possibility of *absolute testimony to the absolute*, but he is unable to follow its course. Like Moses, Ricoeur is permitted to behold the expansive vista of such a “promised land,” but not enter it himself. Thus he recognizes that a philosophy of testimony must always be a *hermeneutics* of testimony. His work falters, in spite of his influence in homiletics, to offer an adequate method for bearing witness to the *totaliter alius*: God.⁴⁷⁵

I contend that it is Ricoeur’s method, and particularly his wariness to transcend the limits of philosophy, that mitigate his work’s usefulness for a theology of proclamation arising out of God’s radical alterity in God’s revelation of Godself to God’s church. Thus, in this section, I aim to lead us beyond the Ricoeurian limits, to take us where Ricoeur himself cannot or will not go. It seems obvious to me that any theology of proclamation worthy of the name ought to bear witness not only to the God who manifests knowledge of God in the work of Christian proclamation, but also to the fact (*à la* Barth) that this is an utter impossibility for us to accomplish on our own. Preachers nevertheless cling to Jesus’ words that what is impossible for mortals is possible for God (Mt. 19:26).

In light of the impossible possibility of preaching—my declared assumption and hope—I wish to push Ricoeur’s philosophy beyond the limits to make it more malleable for our purposes. In order to articulate an approach to Christian proclamation that is conditioned by God’s (originary) approach to humankind, it is necessary that we transcend the borders of philosophy. We cannot ignore them; we must, like Abram, leave the land that we know and follow God to a new land that God will reveal to us only after we embark upon the journey (cf. Gen. 12:1). Thankfully, and in keeping with this

⁴⁷⁵ It is often overlooked by homileticians that Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of testimony merely offers a way of reading the testimony of others. It is not a method for bearing witness in and of oneself.

navigational imagery, we have several sets of coordinates bequeathed to us by scholars who have braved such perilous terrain. Such places are radically foreign to systems and methods of philosophy, and only rarely receive theological sojourners. There we lose our bearings and would be unable to return without the aid of those who have spent time there, facing the uncanniness and finding words that approximate the experience.

In order to arrive at a method or approach that would mark the beginnings of a homiletic submissive to the alterity of God in God's revelation we must transcend the limits of philosophy. Particularly, we must move beyond the limits of experience, where we are able to find linguistic frameworks to articulate our being-in-the-world. The field of trauma studies—particularly the “theory” of trauma that is always aware that trauma, by its very nature, exceeds the bounds of anything as stable as *theory*— provides a point of reference that leads us beyond the testimonial philosophy of Ricoeur. By listening to the work of trauma theorists we may catch a glimpse of what it might look like to witness beyond the limits of experience.

Along the same lines, what might it mean to bear witness outside the bounds of history? History is the name we give to those events in time that coalesce around a unified framework. History is greater than the sum of individual experiences for it maintains a status as *ob-jective*, as *cast outside* the judgment of individuals. Trauma experts and Shoah scholars teach us that the experience of absolute evil and suffering transpires beyond the bounds of history. In the modern era, no historical event has rent the fabric of human experience more completely than the Shoah. The extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis occupies a privileged place of horror *outside* of history because it took place beyond the bounds of representation. The allied soldiers who liberated the

death camps found captives who were literally rendered mute by the experiences they had endured collectively. Words fail before such horror. As Primo Levi describes with harrowing detail, “[In the death camps] we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man (*sic*).”⁴⁷⁶ By seeking to understand the attempts and failures of those who try to bear witness to absolute evil we may better understand what it means to bear witness to the absolute, and even more, to God.

Beyond the Limits of Experience: Trauma

For the past several decades, literary theorists have applied the methods and approaches of psychoanalytic theory to the study of texts as a way of accessing unexplored reservoirs of meaning. Following the works of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Deluze and Guattari, in particular, scholars have discovered frameworks for reading literary works in a new way. Trauma theory provides one such entre to the obverse side of literary works, moving beyond the attainment of the *meaning* of a work or the *authorial intention* behind it. Trauma theorist and literary scholar Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “the impossibility of knowing.”⁴⁷⁷ Experiences of extreme trauma impact the subject to such a degree that she is blocked from accessing the experience in itself or to organize it in such a way that it might be incorporated as knowledge.⁴⁷⁸ Or, as Geoffrey

⁴⁷⁶ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans., Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 26.

⁴⁷⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 10.

⁴⁷⁸ This is especially the case for women’s experiences of trauma. As Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Feminist Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed., Cathy Caruth (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 101, argues, “human experience” almost always means “male experience.” This is exacerbated by the tendency to discount women’s experiences in general. See Luce Irigaray, “The Language of Man,” in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, trans., Gail Schwab (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 227-36 and Nancy Tuana, *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman’s Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Hartman puts it: “Trauma theory . . . does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a *traumatic* kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion.”⁴⁷⁹

Constructive theologian Shelly Rambo describes trauma as “[s]hattering any straightforward access to the past,” calling into question how one might retrieve past events that are marred by traumatic experiences.⁴⁸⁰ Along the same lines, Caruth asks “how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access.”⁴⁸¹ Trauma may thus be understood as a roadblock to experience, preventing any *straightforward* or *simple* access, and thus it shares a border with a testimony affected by the Absolute.

Trauma theory looks to the ways in which experience does not occur as *knowledge*. Here knowledge is understood as that which can be recognized and thereby assimilated into cognitive frameworks in some meaningful way. Trauma ruptures the possibility of direct *reference*, which is necessary for meaning making. Trauma “realigns reference” to such a degree that experience is “*not fully masterable by cognition*.”⁴⁸² Rambo puts it clearly when she writes, “Trauma is not only a fragmenting of a self (an inability to speak and physically integrate the past experience); in its aftermath, trauma poses a fundamental challenge to the constitution of human relationships.”⁴⁸³ When it comes to

⁴⁷⁹ Geoffrey Hartmann, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *New Literary History* 26, no. 3 (1995): 537. He defines a traumatic experience thusly: “Something ‘falls’ into the psyche, or causes it to ‘split.’ There is an original inner catastrophe whereby/in which an experience that is not experienced (and so, apparently, not ‘real’) has an exceptional presence—is inscribed with a force proportional to the mediations punctured or evaded.”

⁴⁸⁰ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 27.

⁴⁸¹ Caruth, *Trauma*, 6.

⁴⁸² Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.

⁴⁸³ Rambo, 36.

bearing witness to personal experience, Hartmann reminds us that interpretation is a “feast not a fast.”⁴⁸⁴ In other words, trauma creates a *surplus of meaning* that overwhelms our cognitive machinery.

Even as she acknowledges that there is no firm definition for trauma, Caruth defines trauma as “an *overwhelming* experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”⁴⁸⁵ She asks “What would it mean . . . to conceive of an experience that is constituted by the very way it escapes or resists comprehension? . . . In what ways could we define a politics or ethics that derives from a position in which full understanding is not possible?”⁴⁸⁶ What are we to make of a kind of reference that bears witness to “uncontainable truths,” one that “is an encounter with the collapse or failure of theory but, simultaneously, the birth of something new emerging from this failure?”⁴⁸⁷ This is where trauma theory helps to lead us beyond the limits of experience. In this regard, it is akin to an experience of the absolute inasmuch as it scrambles our ability to render meaningful testimony: “The challenge of trauma is the challenge of witnessing to a phenomenon that exceeds the categories by which we make sense of a world.”⁴⁸⁸ Rambo leads us in the right direction when she describes the experience of trauma as forming “cracks in the dominant logic” and producing in the subject “continual elisions” that mottle experience and thus knowledge.

⁴⁸⁴ Hartmann, 552.

⁴⁸⁵ Cathy Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” *Yale French Studies* no. 79 (1991): 181. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁸⁷ Rambo, 31.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.* She continues, “Trauma theory shares with deconstruction a common misperception: that it is a theory to be applied. Instead, trauma theory and deconstruction both enact ways of reading that expose certain dimensions of texts. Trauma theory that draws from deconstruction is a practice of unmasking, unearthing, and tracking what escapes interpretation.”

The key point of contact between trauma theory and Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony is found in the notion of recognition, or recognizability.⁴⁸⁹ Ricoeur's criteriology of the divine operates *prima facie* as recognition. In other words, the hermeneut recognizes and thereby judges testimony to the absolute according to an a priori metrics. But such a facile notion of recognition is called into question by trauma theory. What happens to the subject when an experience is so traumatic that it exceeds a person's capacity to re-cognize, to order her mind in light of the event? Rambo observes that traditional conceptualizations of testimony "rely on the assumption that witnesses are able to clearly discern the message and movements that they proclaim or imitate. These models assume that the witnesses can identify the substance or subject that they witness."⁴⁹⁰ Or, as Kelly Oliver puts it, "Recognition seeks only itself and not the other. Recognition is not open to otherness, but only to confirmations of itself."⁴⁹¹

In her essay, "Beyond Recognition: Witnessing Ethics," Oliver articulates a notion of witnessing as an alternative to recognition as a basis for subjectivity. Like Ricoeur, she recognizes both the religious and juridical connotations of the term, in which the latter connotes "seeing with one's own eyes" and the former signals "testifying to that which cannot be seen." She writes, "It is this double meaning that makes *witnessing* such a powerful alternative to *recognition* in formulating identity and ethical relations."⁴⁹² The backbone of her argument consists in showing how major thinkers in contemporary

⁴⁸⁹ In one of his later works, Ricoeur recognized a "slippage," "looseness," and "vagueness" with the use of the word *recognition* in philosophy. He detours through the writings of western philosophers, pointing to the equivocation on the term, and eventually charting his "course" of recognition. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans., David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2005), esp. 1-22 and 247-64.

⁴⁹⁰ Rambo, 39.

⁴⁹¹ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 206.

⁴⁹² Kelly Oliver, "Beyond Recognition: Witnessing Ethics," *Philosophy Today* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 31.

philosophy (like Ricoeur, though she doesn't mention him) take the Hegelian concept of recognition as the starting point for their widely diverse perspectives. Oliver argues convincingly that when one begins from a Hegelian notion of recognition it leads toward some measure of antagonism as a precondition of selfhood. She observes, "It is difficult to find a contemporary social theory that doesn't in some way employ a notion of recognition."⁴⁹³ By this measure, a subject—whether autonomously or interdependently conceived—still dominates every other according to the hegemony of sameness. She notes further that even robust theories of the other (e.g., Levinas) work against the other inasmuch as they use the other to establish selfhood. This challenges Ricoeur's uncritical assumption that the self can recognize the otherness of experience.

Trauma ruptures the limits of experience ordered according to sameness and causes recognition to collapse in on itself. Such a rupture demands a reformulation of our understanding of testimony. Rambo offers just such an approach with her "alternative theology of witness" that "reworks" the relationship of witness to word and body.⁴⁹⁴ In particular, Rambo provides us with a helpful way of understanding testimony beyond the limits with her notions of *remaining* and *the middle*.

Ricoeur recognizes that testimony necessarily involves the self and the other. What Rambo offers as a way of deepening the relation is her understanding of bearing witness to the middle. "The truths emerging from the middle," she writes, "orient persons differently to each other at the limits of understanding. The form of communication in trauma speaks to a transmission of what cannot be fully known, to truths handed over in

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 32. She has in mind Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans., Joel Anderson (Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1995); Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁹⁴ Rambo, 37.

the context of death.”⁴⁹⁵ The point of the middle, and its facility for trauma theory, is that it helps us abide in the chaotic space beyond the limits of experience, to vacillate between the space of knowing and unknowing: “Witness is the hinge linking the shattering and remaking, the undoing and the regeneration. Witness is the hinge between death and life, as it is experienced through trauma and traumatic survival.”⁴⁹⁶

Ricoeur recognizes that testimony happens over an abyss (beyond certainty, beyond empirical verifiability). What he lacks is an articulation of how this abyssal form of communication participates in this murky relation forged between the same and the other.

Rambo helps, writing,

Witnessing occurs at the tenuous intersection of death and life; it is a middle activity. Witnessing, as I explore it here, is largely defined by its positioning. This tenuous middle placement allows the witness to see, but never directly; to hear, but never directly; and to touch, but never directly. This indirectness allows the witness to acknowledge and attend to that which rarely emerges into speech.⁴⁹⁷

She calls this “witnessing from the middle.” Rambo’s “middle” describes in greater detail the originary affirmation that accompanies testimony—particularly testimony beyond the mundane, beyond the limits. The middle gathers up the tension and puts it to productive use in her theology of *remaining*.⁴⁹⁸

Remaining describes the orientation of the one caught in the in between space beyond the limits where the middle is ruptured by the binary to which recognition conforms. “What is the truth there?” she asks. “The continual elisions of the object of witness turn our attention away from some *pure presence* or *true message*. Instead, we

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹⁸ Richard L. Rubenstein has articulated a similar theology in his *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed., (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) emerging from the social psychology of dissonance reduction. See especially his work on the Shoah as an “unmastered trauma” (81-123).

gaze into a territory of remaining.”⁴⁹⁹ Remaining helps us to understand testimony beyond recognition or communication. It aids Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony as a theological response to *dépouillement*. Moreover, it articulates a homiletical approach to the God who reveals Godself in God’s mystery—beyond the simple opposition between presence and absence; God’s presence is revealed in God’s absence and *mutatis mutandis*, God’s absence accompanies God’s presence. Barth taught us this.

Rambo’s theological category of remaining finds its philosophical corollary in Oliver’s understanding of vigilance. Oliver writes, “Witnessing means testifying to both something you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see.”⁵⁰⁰ With Levinas (and to some extent, Derrida), Oliver advocates a certain attitude of self-reflexivity through which individuals are constantly interpreting the processes by which we become who we are. She advocates for a

[v]igilance in performance, in testifying and witnessing, vigilance in listening for the performance beyond meaning and recognition. Vigilance in listening to the performance not just as a repetition of the law of exclusion but as a repetition of an advent of what is impossible to perform. Vigilance in listening to the silences in which we are implicated and through which we are responsible to each other.⁵⁰¹

Trauma theory helps us articulate modes of experience that transcend the limits of recognition. As such, it deepens Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony and moves us closer to articulating an absolute testimony to the absolute. “Witness is not a straightforward access to an event, an account of something seen or heard in any traditional form,” as

⁴⁹⁹ Rambo, 40. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰⁰ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 86.

⁵⁰¹ Oliver, “Beyond Recognition,” 39.

Rambo reminds us. “Instead, . . . it is a tenuous orientation to suffering that presses central theological claims about death and life in and against themselves.”⁵⁰²

Beyond the Limits of History: Shoah

The Shoah (from the Hebrew, meaning *catastrophe*) was the most horrendous event of the twentieth-century. It approached the absolute from an angle unparalleled in Western history. The absolute encountered in the Shoah is not the absolute to which the Hebrew prophets and Christian evangelists testify, and this is why the name “Holocaust” is an inappropriate appellation.⁵⁰³ The Shoah is an event of absolute evil. As such, it provides a sobering test case for understanding testimony beyond the limits of history. In his moving speech in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel writes,

We thought it would be enough to tell of the tidal wave of hatred which broke over the Jewish people for men everywhere to decide once and for all to put an end to hatred of anyone who is “different”—whether black or white, Jew or Arab, Christian or Moslem—anyone whose orientation differs politically, philosophically, sexually. A naive undertaking? Of course. But not without a certain logic.

We tried. It was not easy. At first, because of the language; language failed us. We would have to invent a new vocabulary, for our own words were inadequate, anemic.

And then too, the people around us refused to listen; and even those who listened refused to believe; and even those who believed could not comprehend. Of course they could not. Nobody could. The experience of the camps defies comprehension.

Have we failed? I often think we have.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰² Rambo, 42.

⁵⁰³ Rubenstein, 83 notes that the word *Holocaust* signifies “‘a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering.’ Use of the word to denote the destruction of Europe’s Jews assimilates genocide to the world of religious faith and implies that the victims offered up their lives in the tradition of Israel’s ancient martyrs *al Kiddush ha-Shem* (for the sanctification of the divine Name).”

⁵⁰⁴ Elie Wiesel, “Hope, Despair, and Memory,” Nobel Prize Speech, accessed December 9, 2012, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html.

Several scholars have taken a close look at the failure of historical witness to the Shoah by those who experienced it firsthand. This point is rendered cinematically by Claude Lanzmann's 1985 documentary film, *Shoah*. As literary scholar Shoshana Felman notes, "*Shoah* gives us to witness a *historical crisis of witnessing*, and shows us how, out of this crisis, witnessing becomes, in all the sense of the word, a *critical* activity."⁵⁰⁵ *Shoah* renders a consistent message of the collapse of witness to such absolute evil. Dori Laub, a psychiatrist who founded the Holocaust Survivors Film Project and still directs the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, notes that the traumatic experiences of Shoah survivors "bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but, specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end*."⁵⁰⁶

In a seminar Lanzmann led at Yale University in 1990, students were invited to engage the director of *Shoah*. He says, ". . . don't forget, these were testimonies, the testimonies of the Jews, testimonies under terror. They are witnesses under terror because they lived under terror and what they remember is marked, stamped by this terror. The purpose was to communicate, to transmit."⁵⁰⁷ But one of the central features of the film is the failure of communication. In seeking words to articulate such absolute evil, the witnesses bear witness *beyond history*. Their stammers, their silences, even their body

⁵⁰⁵ Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 206. In the preface to the transcription of the film, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "*Le grand art de Claude Lanzmann est de faire parler les lieux, de les ressusciter à travers les voix, et, par-delà les mots, d'exprimer l'indicible par des visages*." Simone de Beauvoir, préface to *Shoah*, by Claude Lanzmann (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 9.

⁵⁰⁶ Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, Or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 67.

⁵⁰⁷ Claude Lanzmann, Ruth Larson and David Rodowick, "Seminar With Claude Lanzmann 11 April 1990," *Yale French Studies* no. 79 (1991): 94. "Levinas' thoughts of face, language-trace, and the other can be articulated with Lanzmann's film, a film that is dominated by faces and voices. In survivor testimonies, the film gives us that which cannot be killed or annihilated., It brings us face to face with the irreducibility of these witness accounts as language-trace of the Holocaust." Jill Robbins, "The Writing of the Holocaust: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," *Prooftexts* 7, no. 3 (Sept, 1987): 253.

language testifies to events that escape representation in language. As Jill Robbins notes, “Language is incommensurate with this event, and so is the understanding. Finally, the remoteness and inaccessibility of the event are also due to its effacement: only traces of the event remain. For this reason, the film, as Lanzmann has explained in interviews, is built on its own impossibility. He had to work with ‘the disappearance of traces . . . with traces of traces of traces.’”⁵⁰⁸

Robbins clearly articulates the power of the Shoah to deepen our understanding of testimony beyond the limits of history. The absolute evil manifested through the Shoah calls into question Ricoeur’s insistence that the historical understanding of testimony is retained in testimony to the absolute. The provenance of history is the province of representation and truth. The ineffable horror of the Shoah makes such facile conceptualizations naïve at best. As Robbins writes,

The film [*Shoah*] is about the relation between truth and threshold: about the impossibility of telling the truth, and about the consequent historical necessity of recovering the truth, precisely past a certain threshold. And it is this threshold that now needs to be historically and philosophically recrossed. Inside the crematorium, “on the other side of the gate” where “everything disappeared and everything got quite,” there is loss: of voice, of life, of knowledge, of awareness, of truth, of the capacity to feel, of the capacity to speak. The truth of this loss constitutes precisely what it means to be inside the Holocaust.⁵⁰⁹

Laub teaches that testimony to absolute evil does not participate in the rationality of facts—nor in the Hegelian correspondence between the rational and the real. In bearing witness to an “unimaginable occurrence,” such as the Shoah, issues of *accuracy* that concern historians are incredulous. Here accuracy matters less than the “fact of the

⁵⁰⁸ Robbins, 252.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

occurrence”⁵¹⁰ Or, as Caruth writes, “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.”⁵¹¹ In other words, the testimonial signified never fully arrives; in the ambivalence, the stammers, the attempts at representation through language, the traumatic witness signifies beyond the possibility of grasping the event qua history and in language.

History has tended to privilege a certain detachment from events. In order to verify—that is, establish the truth of—an historical event, history weighs the testimonies of those outside the event higher than those inside the event. In other words, the third-party observer is deemed a better judge of what actually took place than the one who endured the experience firsthand. The third-party observer has an *objective* position with respect to the event and, it is presumed, is less susceptible to distorting the facts of the matter than those occupying the *subjective* position.

Historical methods fail, however, when events transpire beyond the limits of objective verifiability. Historical testimony to the absolute can only ever occur on the *inside* of representation. In other words, to be an historical witness is to be caught up in the historical event to which one bears witness. The very notion of eyewitness testimony is predicated on one’s position inside the event. Laub argues that what is central to the Shoah experience is the way it renders witnessing impossible, a “collapse of witnessing.”⁵¹² Laub writes,

⁵¹⁰ Laub, “Bearing Witness,” 60.

⁵¹¹ Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience,” 187.

⁵¹² Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992),

What I feel is therefore crucial to emphasize is the following: it was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event.⁵¹³

An absolute testimony to the absolute places one on the inside and is completely foreign to historical or juridical witness. This rends, or tears (*dépouillement*) the self-same to the other and establishes the conditions for the possibility of absolute testimony, which is an impossibility.

Furthermore, both Laub and Felman recognize a key feature of testimony vis-à-vis absolute evil: testimony to the absolute requires testimony on the *inside* and this condition marks precisely the impossibility of testimony. Testifying from out of the inside of the Holocaust demands a mode of testimony that arises from the inside of death, where language ceases and the witness's voice is silenced: "the crucial task and the concrete endeavor that separates *Shoah* from all its filmic predecessors is, precisely, the attempt to witness from inside."⁵¹⁴

With Felman we may ask, "What does testimony mean, if it is not simply (as we commonly perceive it) the observing, the recording, the remembering of an event, but an

80. He clarifies, "Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its victims."

⁵¹³ Ibid., 81.

⁵¹⁴ Felman, "Return of the Voice," 228. Moreover, "To testify *from inside Otherness* is thus to . . . testify not merely in a foreign language but *from inside the very language of the Other*: to speak from within the Other's tongue insofar precisely as the *tongue of the Other* is by definition the very tongue *we* do not speak, the tongue that, by its very nature and position, one by definition *does not understand*. To testify from inside Otherness is thus to bear witness from inside the living pathos of a tongue which nonetheless is bound to be heard as mere noise."

utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical *position* with respect to an occurrence?”⁵¹⁵

Laub argues that what was missing—or better, stolen—was “the human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time.”⁵¹⁶ In the *middle*, in the void where meaning implodes and language falters, we find not a full presence but a “gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence.”⁵¹⁷

Laub’s careful observation of Shoah survivors presses us to understand absolute testimony beyond the limits of history. He writes,

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. The absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness,’ a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.”⁵¹⁸

The Shoah transcends history by rending the limits of history absolutely. It makes it impossible to master experience through representation, through thought and language.

Shoah survivor and philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes the mastery of experience in representation as “total . . . , it is being accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to noemata.”⁵¹⁹ What this means for our analysis is that

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 206.

⁵¹⁶ Laub, “An Event Without a Witness,” 84-5. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. IX, sec. 10, 197-8, where he describes having to leave his “spiritual harvest” behind in order to return to the realm of speech and language following a Divine encounter.

⁵¹⁷ Laub, “Bearing Witness,” 65. He continues, “The impossibility of speaking and, in fact of listening, otherwise than through this silence, otherwise than through this black hole both of knowledge and of words, corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and of forgetting, otherwise than through the genocide, otherwise than through this ‘hole of memory.’”

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁵¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 123-4.

representation operates according to a necessary reduction of the absolute to that which can be thought by an autonomous subject (*noema*). Levinas puts it better: “In the intelligibility of representation the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced.”⁵²⁰

Levinas also observes another fundamental (and problematic) aspect of representation in his analysis: representation is reducible to a *pure present* and a *radical activity*. Levinas notes that in order to capture that which is other in representation—in such a manner that the other can be conceptualized in the clarity of thought—the other must be flattened temporally and agentially.⁵²¹ In other words, the other’s relation to time must be suspended so that the subject can hold the other in consciousness as a *noemata* and the other’s relation to agency—to function according to its own will and freedom—needs be stymied so that representation is possible. Said differently, any object appropriated by my consciousness in the act of representation must be rendered inert in order for me to think this other: “The ‘I think’ is the pulsation of rational thought. The identity of the same unaltered and unalterable in its relations with the other is in fact the I of representation.”⁵²²

This will not do if we seek *absolute* testimony of the *absolute*. Levinas teaches us that

[t]o be intelligible is to be represented and hence to be a priori. To reduce a reality to its content thought is to reduce it to the same. The thinking thought is the locus where a total identity and a reality that ought to negate it are reconciled, without contradiction. . . . To represent is not only to render present “anew”; it is to reduce to the present an actual perception

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁵²¹ Ibid. Levinas writes, “Representation is a pure present. The positing of a pure present without even tangential ties with time is the marvel of representation. It is a void of time, interpreted as eternity. . . . representation involves no passivity.”

⁵²² Ibid., 126.

which flows on. To represent is not to reduce a past fact to an actual image but to reduce to the instantaneousness of thought everything that seems independent of it; it is in this that representation is constitutive.⁵²³

Put otherwise, Levinas is suggesting that reduction of the other to the same is a necessary facet of representation, and hence, intelligibility. The Shoah disrupts such intelligibility. It is unequivocally an event in history that transcends history. It ruptures our paradigms and our ability to organize experience into a unity sufficient to the label, *history*. The Shoah is an absolutely singular event of absolute evil. It teaches we who would seek to testify to the absolute that absolute testimony is otherwise than that which is conceived within the bounds of history.

CONCLUSION: WITNESSING BEYOND WITNESS

So, having followed the “long route” beyond the limits of experience and history, how are we to understand our role—the human role—in Christian proclamation? Let us recap where our journey with Ricoeur and our subsequent “detour” have taken us. I began by noting the merits of understanding the preaching task as that of bearing witness to the gospel. Among other possible candidates (preaching as pastoring, storytelling, teaching, etc.), preaching as witness emerges as the best approach for getting the preacher’s momentum moving in the direction of the biblical witness to the God who reveals Godself in God’s hiddenness, revealing Godself to us in experience and history (and most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ), but also beyond experience and history.

We saw, however, that homileticians pick up a few bad habits along the way. Even as bearing witness surpasses those language games that conform to the precepts of logical positivism, ostensive (historical) reference, and/or rhetorical patterns of rational

⁵²³ Ibid., 127.

defense, it can quickly lead us back to a mode of proclamation always already conformed to a priori philosophical (logocentric) precepts. Preaching as witness or testimony is thus the best worst option for Christian proclamation.

On the one hand, it embraces a mode of proclamation beyond certitude, but on the other hand, it loses its footing when faced with the impossible possibility of preaching beyond the limits of experience, history, and even language. When I encounter signs of the absolute, that is, when they appear before my consciousness, my selfhood is thrown off kilter. In an understatement, Ricoeur explains that this “difficulty” that one encounters before the absolute manifests itself as a kind of epistemological system failure.⁵²⁴ I know the absolute when I experience it because I know the limits of my selfhood; I know not to the degree that I think, but to the degree that my thinking fails. Or better, the absolute calls into question the binary structure that would distinguish between thought and the unthinkable. When faced with such circumstances the self can chose either to double-down on consciousness to the exclusion of the sign or submit itself to the other, letting consciousness be called into question by the other. It is, as Ricoeur notes, a decision to treat the other as that which “brings about understanding” rather than that which “must be understood.”⁵²⁵

Our close reading of Paul Ricoeur’s “Hermeneutics of Testimony” essay exposed us to the root of the problem: testimony is too comfortable within the limits of speech and is too committed to a priori frameworks (Ricoeur’s criteriology) that determine in advance what authentic testimony should look like. It views testimony too positively. In other words, it ignores the negative movements of testimony—saying what goes

⁵²⁴ See Ricoeur, “Nabert on Act and Sign,” 211.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

unspoken in the saying and refusing to remain in the “middle,” in the void punctured in the fabric of the possible by the impossible.

In this final section, I will attempt to articulate a philosophy of testimony better equipped to proclamation beyond the knowledge of God. Put differently, I will employ philosophy to open up our theology to the radical alterity of God manifested alongside God’s self-revelation. This argument will arise in three moves: an engagement with Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy of testimony that expands Ricoeur’s work beyond the limits; a re-engagement with Ricoeur’s philosophy through his later work on attestation and the call of the other; and an acknowledgement of the ways that witness delimits proclamation in spite of its many merits.

Amphibolous Testimony, Absolute Testimony

Testimony is too preoccupied with being. Even as it is less ontologically fraught than other modes of signification, it still picks up some bad habits through its unexamined commitments to presence, givenness, and manifestation. This is a problem it shares with phenomenology. Testimony, like other forms of reference, thematizes transcendence—the obverse side of manifestation-as-immanence—in the logos. Indeed, it is ill equipped to think manifestation apart from the binary logic that already divides manifestation from hiddenness. To employ Levinas’s terminology, it buries the *saying* in the *said*.

Testimony as speech is always already testimony in the said. The saying is “[a]ntecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of

signification.”⁵²⁶ Saying bears a family resemblance to Ricoeur’s notion of originary affirmation inasmuch as it is prior to consciousness and prior to experience. It is an originary rending of the self by the other even as the self tries to muster to the call of the *ego cogito*.

This does not mean that saying is otherwise than language. Levinas asserts that the “pre-original saying does move into language, in which the saying and said are correlative to one another,”⁵²⁷ but the said nevertheless dominates the saying. The saying is forced into submission by the said. The said “betrays” the saying, which is “*otherwise than being or being’s other* outside of the themes in which they already show themselves, unfaithfully, as being’s *essence*.”⁵²⁸ Levinas writes, “The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands.”⁵²⁹ The originary trace of the saying is nothing less than the face-to-face encounter. Responsibility itself. As Levinas scholar Jill Robbins notes, “In the face-to-face encounter, responsibility in its most original form of response, or language-response, arises.”⁵³⁰

In the subsumption of the an-archival, non-original saying in the said which thematizes it, Levinas fears that the other is always already reduced to the same, that responsibility runs aground on the shores of discourse. He wonders “whether one can at

⁵²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 5.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.* In a review essay of *Otherwise than Being*, Ricoeur writes, “It is, indeed, always necessary to tear oneself away, through the *otherwise than . . .*, from the very thing whose reign one attempts to suspend or interrupt; but at the same time, some linguistic articulation must be ventured.” Paul Ricoeur, “Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*,” trans., Matthew Escobar, *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 82.

⁵²⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 6.

⁵³⁰ Jill Robbins, “*Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas’s Totality and Infinity*,” *Yale French Studies* no. 79 (1991): 135.

the same time know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology.”⁵³¹ What this means for our interrogation of testimony is that it introduces the question of how we might conceptualize a mode of discourse that does not abnegate the pre-original responsibility that is betrayed by the collapse of the saying in the said. How might we invite the pre-original saying to be heard in the testimonial said?⁵³²

The beginning of a solution appears in what we might label *amphibolous testimony*.⁵³³ Just as that which is otherwise than being “glimmers in the amphibology of *being* and *beings*—in which beings dissimulate being,”⁵³⁴ testimony as witness can be made to *embody* the otherwise than being by embracing the very dissimulation that homiletical discourse seeks to overcome. In other words, amphibolous testimony will not try to arrest the play of testimonial signification within the limits of history, experience, or speech. Rather, it will follow the trace structure of language, allowing a plurivocity of testimonies to resonate through the preacher’s testimony. This will require a radical move on the part of the preacher. She will have to learn to embody an originary signification to the face of the other while simultaneously bearing witness to the givenness of the other in the fold of being. She will have to find a way of bridging in her person the being and otherwise than being of God’s revelation. This will not be easy. Levinas writes, “To

⁵³¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7.

⁵³² This is the guiding question of John McClure’s penetrating study, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

⁵³³ Amphiboly refers to an ambiguous grammatical structure, in which a sentence or group of sentences gives rise to a plurality of meanings simultaneously. In Levinas’ use of the term, he points to an equivocation necessary to language in which the originary saying is dissimulated by the Said. He asks, “Can this *saying* and this *being unsaid* be assembled, can they be at the same time?” Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7. Both for saying/Said and Being/beings (in Heidegger) the answer is negative.

⁵³⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7. He continues, “The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*.”

conceive the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as skepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility.”⁵³⁵ In other words, it calls for a mode of witness that traffics in an “ambiguous or enigmatic way of speaking”⁵³⁶ according to the said through the total embodiment of the originary responsibility to the other, the saying.

Levinas’ influence on Ricoeur is evident here. For instance, a corollary to Levinas’ argument is found in one of Ricoeur’s later essays. He writes,

A dialogic structure of testimony is indicated here between testimony as act and testimony as narrative. Someone gives a sign of the absolute, without intending to do so or knowing that he or she does so. Another person interprets this as a sign. It is in taking up the second form of testimony that reflective consciousness grants the absolute testimony of the absolute through that movement of divestment by which the consciousness is rendered less inadequate to the desire for God, as a desire to fully comprehend oneself.⁵³⁷

The preacher as witness displays in her person the embodied tension between the saying (testimonial act) and the said (testimonial narrative). She thereby manifests what Levinas will label a “secret diachrony” in her amphibolous testimony, which gets us as close as possible to Ricoeur’s absolute testimony to the absolute.⁵³⁸ By insisting on diachrony, Levinas resists the synchronic structure that chooses (in advance) between a *saying* and a *being unsaid*. The “secret” is that the synchronic structure that orders language (c.f. Saussure), is marked by a pre-original (“anarchical”) element irreducible to temporal arrest. After all, for Levinas, “in general signification signifies beyond synchrony,

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ricoeur, “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony,” 117. It is in the productive tension between testimony as act and testimony as witness that gives rise to what Ricoeur will label “testimony to the third degree,” which is internal testimony experienced as reflection.

⁵³⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7. Robbins, “*Visage, Figure*,” 144, notes a similar relation in the “quasi-synthetic turn from my vision to the other’s voice.”

beyond essence.”⁵³⁹

The only way I can imagine this necessary impossibility to manifest itself in the preaching event is for the preacher to bear witness in body as well as voice. She can thereby animate an an-archic relation to the other that is otherwise than being, while, at the same time, giving voice to this experience that transcends experience: absolute testimony to the absolute. Levinas writes,

Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other, this sincerity. Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said. Saying saying saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again. Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure; it is to expose the exposure instead of remaining in it as an act of exposing.⁵⁴⁰

The saying and the said are mutually correlative and corrective in such an approach.

Testimony as (Self)Attestation

Moving further toward a practical theology of proclamation sufficient to our task and cognizant of the complicating factors that stymie an approach to absolute testimony to the absolute, we may once again follow Ricoeur’s lead. Like Levinas, Ricoeur finds Heidegger’s philosophy insufficient to the task of testimony.⁵⁴¹ In particular, Ricoeur argues that “Heidegger’s whole strategy is to draw something valuable from the superior force of attestation issuing from *Gewissen*, without according it the slightest status as transcendence.”⁵⁴² Thus, Ricoeur works to re-appropriate Heidegger’s notion of attestation in a way that would engage the transcendent, the absolute.

⁵³⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁴¹ See Ricoeur, “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony,” 109-13.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 110. A few lines later he writes, “An exteriority without otherness corresponds to this height without transcendence.”

By Ricoeur's reading of Nabert, attestation is assurance without ever settling to the position of "doxic certitude." It is an assurance "bound to acts."⁵⁴³ In his magisterial *Oneself As Another* Ricoeur writes of the "polysemy of otherness, which . . . will imprint upon the entire ontology of acting the seal of the diversity of sense that foils the ambition of arriving at an ultimate foundation, characteristic of cogito philosophies."⁵⁴⁴ For Ricoeur *attestation* characterizes the "alethic (or veritative) mode of the style appropriate to the conjunction of analysis and reflection, to the recognition of the difference between selfhood and sameness, and to the unfolding dialectic of the self and the other."⁵⁴⁵ I would argue that the work of attestation, as it arises in Ricoeur's later philosophy, is a Levinasian inspired upgrade to testimony.

Ricoeur writes, "To my mind, attestation defines the sort of certainty that hermeneutics may claim, not only with respect to the epistemic exaltation of the cogito in Descartes, but also with respect to its humiliation in Nietzsche and his successors. Attestation may appear to require less than one and more than the other."⁵⁴⁶ Attestation becomes the *tertium quid* between the exalted subject (Descartes) and the humiliated subject (Nietzsche); it bears witness to an experience of the other without reducing the other to an object bounded by history, experience, or even language. Attestation participates in the originary act of consciousness experienced in the "letting go" (*dépouillement*) of self-sameness (*idem*-identity). As Ricoeur explains,

What is set in opposition to attestation is fundamentally the notion of *epistēmē*, of science, taken in the sense of ultimate and self-founding knowledge. And in this opposition attestation appears to be less demanding than certainty belonging to the ultimate foundation. Attestation

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 21.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

presents itself first, in fact, as a kind of belief. But it is not the doxic belief, in the sense in which *doxa* (belief) has less standing than *epistēmē* (science, or better, knowledge). Whereas doxic belief is implied in the grammar of ‘I believe-that,’ attestation belongs to the grammar of ‘I believe-in.’ It thus links up with testimony, as the etymology reminds us, inasmuch as it is in the speech of the one giving testimony that one believes.⁵⁴⁷

Attestation works in the service of the mode of proclamation appropriate to God’s self-revelation in God’s alterity because it retains a “special fragility” and “vulnerability of a discourse aware of its own lack of foundation.”⁵⁴⁸ Ricoeur argues explicitly that attestation works by another approach than the criteriology he insisted upon in his earlier work: “. . . a phenomenology of attestation, which cannot be reduced to a criteriology suited to description.”⁵⁴⁹

Moreover, attestation draws together discourse with experience without reducing the saying to the said; it doesn’t dominate and thereby betray the originary saying of the absolute. With Anscombe, Ricoeur sees attestation as a “very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting.”⁵⁵⁰ Attestation is generative for the radical mode of proclamation beyond the limits precisely because it escapes sight, if sight is expressed in propositions held to be true or false. And as such, it moves us in the direction of an approach sufficient to the task of Christian proclamation.

The Summoned Self

Another feature central to this understanding of testimony and that which makes testimony possible is the preacher’s originary status as a “summoned subject.” This is a

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 22. He continues, “[A]ttestation can be defined as the *assurance of being oneself acting and suffering*. This assurance remains the ultimate recourse against all suspicion; even if it is always in some sense received from another, it still remains *self-attestation*” (22-3).

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 73. See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 57.

unique discursive situation for the preacher because unlike the trauma victim, she is marked by an originary summons to bear witness to the Absolute. Ricoeur explains, “Here the self is constituted and defined by its position as respondent to propositions of meaning issuing from the symbolic network I have previously described. Before any explication or interpretation, this phrase diametrically opposes itself to the philosophical hubris of a self that absolutely names itself.”⁵⁵¹ The saying of the witness that precedes the said is inaugurated by the other. This is where Ricoeur’s distance from Nabert is most telling. Reflecting on Nabert’s reflexive philosophy, Ricoeur writes, “Because we do not enjoy immediate self-possession and always lack perfect self-identity . . . we must endlessly appropriate what we are through the mediation of the multiple expressions of our desire to be.” Originary affirmation is understood as “both difference and relation between pure consciousness and real consciousness.” It is simultaneously a “law of expression” and a “law of concealment.”⁵⁵² Inasmuch as the preacher is summoned to bear witness to God on behalf of a particular community of faith, he fulfills the difference/relation criteria necessary for an originary affirmation.

Another way of putting this is that the self that is equipped to bear witness to God in God’s revelatory alterity is the self that has been summoned.⁵⁵³ Ricoeur observes, “If a theological interpretation of conscience is to be possible, it will precisely presuppose this intimacy of self and conscience. It is to the dialogue of the self with itself that the response of the prophetic and the christomorphic self is grafted.”⁵⁵⁴ This brings Ricoeur

⁵⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 262.

⁵⁵² Ricoeur, “Nabert on Act and Sign,” 222.

⁵⁵³ This does not mean that only ordained preachers are equipped to bear witness. This was Carter Florence’s concern with the witness motif. It is not that every summoned subject is a preacher, but that every preacher is (or ought to be) a summoned subject.

⁵⁵⁴ Ricoeur, “The Summoned Subject,” 271.

back into proximity of the “extreme” philosophy of Levinas. Levinas writes, “Witness, this way for a command to sound in the mouth of *the one that obeys*, of being revealed before all appearing, before all presentation before a subject, is not a psychological wonder, but the modality in which the anarchic Infinite passes its command.”⁵⁵⁵ We might think of Ricoeur’s summoned subject, who is exposed to an originary alterity that gives rise to her speech, as an agent exposed to the “glory of the Infinite” in Levinas’s terminology.

Levinas writes,

The Infinite passes in saying. This is what could be understood, when we see that saying is irreducible to an act, a psychological attitude, a state of soul, a thought among others, or a moment of being’s essence, through which, one knows not why, man would double up his essence. Of itself saying is witness, whatever be the ulterior destiny into which it enters through the said in a system of witness, whatever be the ulterior destiny into which it enters through the said in a system of words. The saying from which this system derives is not the babbling infancy of this system and of the circulation of the information in which it functions. For one can show how this new destiny is inscribed in the witness bourne. But saying without the said, a sign given to the other, a witness in which the subject quits his clandestineness as a subject, by which the Infinite passes, is not something added on as information, expression, repercussion or symptom, to some experience of the Infinite or its glory, as though there could be an experience of the Infinite, and something else than glorification, that is, responsibility for the neighbor.⁵⁵⁶

Only the subject who has been summoned (originarily, in time immemorial) can bear absolute witness to the absolute. Levinas reminds us of a point resonant with Barth’s theology:

The statement of the beyond being, of the name of God, does not allow itself to be walled up in the conditions of its enunciation. It benefits from

⁵⁵⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 147. Emphasis added., Levinas continues, “The saying in the said of the witness born signifies in a plot other than that which is spread out in a theme, other than that which attaches a noesis to a noema, a cause to an effect, the memorable past to the present. The plot connects to what detaches itself absolutely, to the Absolute.”

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-8.

an ambiguity or an enigma, which is not the effect of an inattention, a relaxation of thought, but of an extreme proximity of the neighbor, where the infinite comes to pass. The Infinite does not enter into a theme like a being to be given in it, and thus belie its beyond being. Its transcendence, an exteriority, more exterior, more other than any exteriority of being, does not come to pass save through a subject that confesses or contests it.⁵⁵⁷

What Levinas describes is a coming to fruition of Ricoeur's desire; furthermore, Ricoeur's latter philosophy bears marked signs of Levinas' influence. That human beings are summoned to bear witness in *and* beyond experience and history to God is nothing short of impossible, but this is precisely why it opens proclamation to a mode of testimony that does not thematize the source of its witness. It exposes proclamation to an otherwise than proclamation that brings us to the threshold of a homiletic sufficient to the task that lies before us.

However, homiletics requires more than a delimitation of impossibilities. We cannot content ourselves with merely viewing the expansive vista that Ricoeur, and to a certain extent, Levinas, portrays. We must find a way to enter *into* the otherwise than being. We require an approach that does not silence the originary *saying* in the homiletical *said*. In the following chapter, I will offer what I believe to be a valid approach, an approach that supplements preaching as witnessing. This approach is marked by an originary alterity that simultaneously drives and fulfills it. This approach is the erotic approach.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 156. He continues, "Here there is an inversion of order: the revelation is made by him that receives it, by the inspired subject whose inspiration, alterity in the same, is the subjectivity or psyche of the subject. The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this 'perhaps' belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the Infinite resists the univocity of an originary or principle. It belongs to an ambiguity or an ambivalence and an inversion which is stated in the word God, the *apex* of vocabulary, admission of the stronger than me in me and of the 'less than nothing,' nothing but an abusive word, a beyond themes in a thought that does not yet think or thinks more than it things" (156).

Employing the work of Jean-Luc Marion, in the following chapter I will articulate a way of bridging the revelation of God given in God's alterity and the human task of bearing witness to that revelation in Christian proclamation. This journey will take us beyond the ways of knowing described by modern epistemologies. I argue below that the erotic forges an originary and radical connection between God and preacher that will lead us to the conclusion of this project: *witnessing the Word erotic*.

CHAPTER 5: THE WORD EROTIC

Thus far in our conversation I have been leading us toward a certain approach that opens between God and Christian preachers in route to proclamation. We have discovered a way of understanding the subject matter of Christian Proclamation—the Word—according to Barth’s treatment of the radical alterity of the Word. Such an understanding, I argued in chapter three, is necessary if we are to imagine a theology of proclamation cognizant of the metaphysical presuppositions that have clouded contemporary homiletical scholarship. Moreover, in chapter four, I introduced a way of understanding the relationship of the preacher to the Word according to a radicalized treatment of Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony. Now it remains for us to establish a proper relation between theology, on the one hand, and proclamation, on the other.

In order to overcome some of the primary philosophical hang-ups prevalent in the homiletical literature, and which Derrida deconstructs in the Western intellectual tradition, it is imperative that we follow an approach that respects the radical otherness of the Word without giving up on the project altogether as an absolute impossibility (it is of course a *relative* impossibility—relative upon God’s action). This is achieved not by denying the impossibility of Christian proclamation, but by living more fully into the impossibility and in so doing, give thanks to God for the miracle of preaching. Moving straight to the thesis that I will attempt to substantiate: a viable homiletical approach to the Word is opened according to an *erotic* epistemology. In this chapter I will articulate this way of understanding the relationship between the Word and the witness and defend this proposition in light of Derrida’s critique.

In service of this task I take as my conversation partner the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion because he sketches better than anyone the kind of approach that I find most viable for Christian proclamation vis-à-vis the contemporary *epistémè*. I shall begin with a presentation of Marion’s phenomenological method—or “counter-method,” as he calls it— showing how his work opens toward a respect for the alterity of the Word on the one hand and for the work of the preacher as witness on the other.

Marion’s phenomenology is an appropriate conversation partner for the theology of proclamation I seek for two reasons. First, it is aware of the philosophical conditions that have occluded phenomena under the hegemony of metaphysics, and thus it seeks ways toward phenomena that refuse to participate in such schemas. Second, Marion’s phenomenology holds above all else respect for the otherness of objects of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) beyond the consciousness of a subject. Marion’s reiteration of Husserl’s battle cry, “To the things themselves!”⁵⁵⁸ can be read as a philosophical corollary to Barth’s declaration, “God is God!” Marion’s brand of phenomenology is most appropriate to a theology of the Word consistent with that of the early Karl Barth inasmuch as Marion appropriates the “gravitational center of phenomenality . . . by assuming the origin of its own event.”⁵⁵⁹ Marion’s phenomenology, which is focused on

⁵⁵⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans., F. Kersten (Dordrecht, Boston, & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), §19, p. 35.

⁵⁵⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans., Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 248. Further citations from this work will be cited parenthetically as *BG*. By this Marion radicalizes Husserl’s “principle of principles,” which frees phenomenality from the metaphysical requirement of a ground: “every originarily giving intuition is a source of right for cognition—that everything that offers itself originarily to us in intuition must simply be received for what it gives itself, without passing beyond the limits in which it gives itself.” Husserl, *Ideas*, I, §24, p. 44.

a givenness beyond the limits of metaphysics, brings us to the threshold of something like Revelation.⁵⁶⁰

Next, I shall lead us into a close reading of Marion's erotic phenomenology, showing how this mode of relation overcomes several of the key problems arising from a logos-dominated orientation to the divine. In his book, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion articulates a phenomenology of love, arguing against its omission from the corpus of Western philosophy. I shall put this important work to use for the theology of proclamation I envision to re-imagine the way in which God's revelation of Godself is given to the work of proclamatory witness.

I conclude this chapter by revisiting several of the key arguments that Derrida makes against logocentrism, and especially those which have been noted in relation to the preaching task. I argue that the erotic relation, which I hold to be an originary or first principle for homiletics, provides a viable path through the aporias structured by Western metaphysics.

MARION'S THIRD PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

Metaphysics is preoccupied with certainty. Beginning from Descartes, this preoccupation has centered upon the thinking subject who knows beyond doubt.

⁵⁶⁰ Like Ricoeur, Marion strives to respect the boundaries separating philosophy from theology. Marion writes, "Revelation (as actuality) is never confounded with revelation (as possible phenomenon). . . . But phenomenology, which owes it to phenomenality to go this far, does not go beyond and should never pretend to decide the fact of Revelation, its historicity, its actuality, or its meaning. It should not do so, not only out of concern for distinguishing the sciences and delimiting their respective regions, but first of all, because it does not have the means to do so. The fact (if there is one) of Revelation exceeds the scope of all science, including that of phenomenology. Only theology, and on condition of constructing itself on the basis of this fact alone (Karl Barth or Hans Urs von Balthasar, no doubt more than Rudolf Bultmann or Karl Rahner), could reach it" (*BG*, 367, fn. 90). See also: "Revealed theology could, on the other hand, be defined as a thought of the gift without reciprocity because without transcendent condition external to it. I cannot, however, evoke it here—first, out of respect for the distinction of disciplines and the fact that I stick strictly to philosophy, and above all, because to unravel this thought of the gift as such, it would be necessary to engage in an examination of Trinitarian theology, outside the scope of phenomenology as well as of metaphysics" (*BG*, 114-5).

Metaphysics, in other words, seeks to prove that its methods, arguments, etc. are beyond question. Phenomenology, though founded upon metaphysical presuppositions and oriented toward the scientific, offers what Marion argues is a non-metaphysical mode of thought.⁵⁶¹

Marion supplants the thesis, “So much appearance, so much Being”—common to Husserl and Heidegger—with a more radical thesis: “so much reduction, so much givenness.” He shows how the appearance of objects of lived experience in consciousness (Husserl) and the manifestation of *Dasein* inasmuch as phenomenon are given to consciousness (Heidegger) sustains certain philosophical hegemonies: transcendental and ontological. Phenomenology under Marion’s third reduction is preoccupied not with proving, but with showing. Marion writes, “To show implies letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to be received exactly as they give themselves” (*BG*, 7). Thus, even as phenomenology participates in epistemology as a *way* of knowing, it transcends epistemology inasmuch as it seeks to bracket the subject who knows (*vis-à-vis* Descartes and Kant) in relation to the object that gives itself in appearance.

Phenomenology has as its primary goal nothing other than that of reaching the apparition in appearance of that which gives itself. It seeks to transgress every perceived impression available to consciousness on behalf of the alterity of the thing (*Sache*) itself. Phenomenology does not seek to arrive at the thing *in* itself, but to approach the thing in full awareness that the objectivity of objects of experience is beyond full epistemological

⁵⁶¹ To fully appreciate this assessment one needs to follow Marion through his methodical deconstruction of Husserl and Heidegger’s phenomenological arguments in his ground-breaking *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans., Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998). Hereafter abbreviated *RG*.

appropriation. Another word that phenomenologists use interchangeably with this privilege of appearing in its appearance is manifestation.

Manifestation privileges the alterity and autonomy of that which gives itself by allowing the other to give itself starting from itself and as itself. Manifestation goes beyond any mere showing or apparition, since apparition is mediated by the intentional gaze of a subject, and as such is still grounded in the subject. Manifestation, on the other hand, is dedicated to letting apparition show itself in its appearance according to its appearing. Such a paradoxical description by which phenomenology is oriented toward manifestation is necessary. Marion writes,

The first move therefore should be completed as second: the movement from showing to letting *itself* show, from manifestation to self-manifestation starting from the self of what shows its *self*. But letting apparition show *its self* in the appearance and appearing as its own manifestation—that is not so self-evident. For a fundamental reason: because knowledge always comes from me, manifestation is never evident by itself. Or rather, it is not so self-evident that it can't run its own course, coming from itself, through itself, starting from itself, in short, that it can itself manifest its *self*. The initial and final paradox of phenomenology stands precisely from this: that it takes the initiative in losing it. (*BG*, 8-9)

Another way of talking about this self-effacing methodology in phenomenological parlance is by that of the *reduction*. The phenomenological reduction acknowledges and holds in abeyance a priori theories, schematics, principles, etc. that tend to occlude the manifestation of the other according to itself/herself/himself. By bracketing a priori attitudes and concepts, the phenomenologist is able to facilitate the possible manifestation of objects of lived experience to a greater degree than by occluding epistemological frameworks that determine objects in advance.

Marion explains that “the method [of bracketing] does not so much provoke the apparition of what manifests itself as it clears away the obstacles that encircle it and

would hide it” (BG, 10). Put differently, the reduction is a process of putting the self and its a priori schemes under erasure. It is necessary that the reduction be utterly forgotten once it is initiated. Marion explains,

The reduction must be done in order to undo it and let it become the apparition of what shows *itself* in it, though finally without it. Or rather, the reduction opens the show of the phenomenon at first like a very present director, so as to then let this show continue as a simple scene where the director is necessary, to be sure, but forgotten and making no difference—with the result of that, in the end, the phenomenon so dominates the scene that it is absorbed in it and no longer distinguished from it: self-directing. (BG, 10)

Bracketing—the phenomenological reduction—facilitates manifestation because it seeks nothing else than the other. In Marion’s brand of phenomenology, at least, we find a method by which the preacher as witness might approach the Word with regard for the Word’s alterity. Marion recognizes that the phenomenological reduction cannot *guarantee* the manifestation of the other in itself. Rather, it is an *orientation* that we might appropriate for the Christian preacher that would follow from a theology of the Word experienced as miracle.

That which Barth will label *miracle*, and which I have described as the beyond of the necessary conditions for the possibility of Christian proclamation, is that the Word of God would *give* itself in the event of preaching. Preaching as witness is best suited for such a theology of proclamation because it begins with the divestment (*dépouillement*) of the preacher, thereby clearing a path beyond a priori foundations upon which the Word might manifest itself. Marion teaches us that phenomenology in and of itself is

insufficient for “something *like* revelation,” for its historical constructions have smuggled in a priori philosophical commitments.⁵⁶²

The governing maxim for Marion’s phenomenological approach is this: “The more reduction, the more givenness” (*BG*, 16). Or, as he puts it in *Reduction and Givenness*, “Givenness is deployed according to the direct measure of the reduction: the more the reduction is radicalized, the more givenness is deployed. . . . The more the reduction reduces (itself), the more it extends givenness” (*RG*, 203). In other words, the more human interpreters are able to bracket their own a priori schemas the more space they provide for the other to give itself/herself/himself according to its/her/his own measure.

The guiding principle by which (Marion’s brand of) phenomenology operates offers a philosophical corollary to Barth’s theological maxim—“God is God.” Both Marion and Barth are biased against the post-Enlightenment project centered upon the self as subject. Moreover, both Marion and Barth are attuned to the same suspicion that propels Derrida’s project of deconstruction, namely, that we humans have a propensity to reduce otherness to sameness in a veiled effort to dominate the otherness of the other according to a self-same hegemony.

Marion’s phenomenological reduction is apropos for mapping the route of the Christian preacher to the Word of God vis-à-vis the contemporary *epistémè* because it is hypersensitive to the metaphysical conditions that structure proclamation a priori. Marion writes, “The phenomenology of givenness follows the paradigm of the unconditional given, quite possibly saturated with intuition and therefore un-objectifiable. It can

⁵⁶² Marion, like Ricoeur, goes to great lengths to keep from slipping into theological arguments. Nevertheless, he argues convincingly that philosophy cannot be true to itself if it delimits out of hand the *possibility* of Revelation from beyond the mundane sphere of existence: “within a framework that is overburdened with meaning owing to an indiscreet debt to theology . . . the notion of givenness has no need, since Husserl, of a theological passport to intervene in phenomenology” (*BG*, 72).

therefore do justice to the unconstitutable, which constitutes for us what is essential in our world (the idol, event, flesh, and face), indeed in what passes beyond it” (*BG*, 321). By charting a course beyond the frontier of metaphysics, Marion offers a way of articulating the necessary orientation of the preacher before the Word.

Phenomenology of Givenness

Marion’s “principle” of givenness is the key to understanding his phenomenological critique in *Being Given* and *Reduction and Givenness*. He writes, “The principle of givenness is precisely that nothing precedes the phenomenon, except its own apparition on its own basis.” Another way of putting this is that “the phenomenon comes forward without any other principle besides itself. In short, the principle, inasmuch as it is a principle of givenness, leaves primacy to the phenomenon—it is therefore not an issue of a first but rather a last principle” (*BG*, 18). The commitment to letting the other give itself/herself/himself according to itself/herself/himself under the reduction of the self (expressed as intuition) not only frees phenomena from a priori principles that structure aporias between the self and the other, it also deconstructs the foundational assumptions that pre-determine the conditions by which the other might give itself/herself/himself. The other must give itself/herself/himself starting from itself/herself/himself; otherwise, that which is perceived and appropriated through other (phenomenological) methods might be nothing more than the self’s projection of the other according to a priori metrics. Givenness is thus the “nongrounding yet nonetheless absolute condition of the phenomenon’s ascent to its own apparition” (*BG*, 18).⁵⁶³ The principle of givenness is the

⁵⁶³ Later Marion will put this even stronger: “The correlation between appearing and that which appears, therefore the very definition of the phenomenon, rests entirely on givenness” (*BG*, 21). Further, “It

central theo-philosophical operation structuring the relationship between the witness and the Word.

Marion's parsing of *givenness* from the *gift* further facilitates the kind of approach necessitated by our theology of the Word and the preacher as she who bears witness to the Word. Following from but ultimately superseding Heidegger, Marion articulates the necessary difference between the giving and the gift. He writes,

The giving (*Geben*) is held back from the gift (*Gabe*), from its visibility and its availability, precisely because in giving it it undoes itself and withdraws from it, therefore turns itself away from the gift and abandons it to itself. By an inescapable consequence, the giving can never appear *with*, or still less *as* the gift given by it, since to give it not only does it leave it behind; it also differs from it. The giving gives the gift fully only by abandoning it decisively—therefore by withdrawing from it. (*BG*, 35)

What this means for our present concerns is that the gift of the Word cannot ever fully encapsulate the Giver behind the givenness.⁵⁶⁴

If Marion is correct, and I believe he is, the Giver must recede in order for the gift that is made manifest for proclamation to appear as such.⁵⁶⁵ Givenness can only ever appear *indirectly*, in the “fold of the given” (*BG*, 39). This insight moves us in the direction of an approach to the Word in Christian proclamation because, arising from the phenomenological reduction that brackets the self and its epistemological a priori vis-à-vis the other, it looks to the gift that manifests itself before the gaze as a key to looking beyond the gift to the Giver. It does not confuse the gift with the Giver. Marion argues

is not so much the case that givenness belongs to phenomenology as it is that phenomenology falls entirely under the jurisdiction of givenness” (*BG*, 27).

⁵⁶⁴ I will discuss this further in the conclusion of this chapter, but already we may discern an approach sufficient to the poststructural critique of a metaphysics of presence beyond an economy of sameness.

⁵⁶⁵ Again following Heidegger, Marion insists upon the “enigmatic it” preserved in the “it gives.” He writes, “This enigma must be preserved from all metaphysical regression that would interpret the ‘it’ in the sense of an ‘indeterminate power,’ one too hastily determined, to the point where it would appear as an ontic agent” (*BG*, 36).

that givenness is made manifest on the *surface* of the given. In order to gain access to the phenomenon as given requires a bracketing of all a priori conditions that seek to determine givenness. This requires the excision of any “nongiven residue” (*BG*, 39). By “nongiven residue” Marion signifies the remains of objectness (Husserl) and Being (Heidegger) that cloud givenness with preoccupations that are otherwise than givenness.

In a lengthy example, Marion describes the givenness of a work of art that unfolds on the surface of the given. He writes that “to see a painting is not enough to see it” because “the ontic visibility of the painting is added as a super-visibility, ontically indescribable—its upsurge” (*BG*, 47). The same, I would argue, holds for a sermon: *to hear a sermon is not enough to hear it*. By this I mean that it is not enough to receive the words of a sermon in their phenomenality, nor even to understand a meaning that might arise from the words proclaimed. One must have “ears to hear” (cf. Mt. 11:15; Mk. 4:9, 23); one must be able to follow the trace of givenness behind the gift in order to receive the witness as a “nonontic coming forward” (*BG*, 48).⁵⁶⁶ Marion explains, “[I]t is not so much a matter of seeing (or hearing) it as it is of re-seeing (or re-hearing) it again and again. This liturgy of re-vision, which compels us to make a trip to re-see this or that canvas (re-visitation), suggests that the painting does not consist in its being (then it would be enough to have seen it just once), but in its mode of appearing (which can be repeated each time in a new way)” (*BG*, 48). The re-hearing, or re-seeing, rests upon the possibility of an “event” made manifest in the fold of givenness.

The sermon, like a work of art, does not reveal any *object* nor any *being*; rather, it “accomplishes an act—it comes forward into visibility” (*BG*, 49). If this is true, if the

⁵⁶⁶ We will discuss this further below, but Marion already articulated this argument in one of his earlier books, *God Without Being*.

sermon indeed provokes an *event* in the presence of the congregant, an event that bears witness beyond itself in the fold of (Divine) givenness, then preaching has a new orientation to the preparation and delivery of sermons. So-called “teaching sermons” fail to bear witness to the *event* of God in Christian proclamation. They presuppose a bias toward objectness (as propositional content) and a Beingness (as Truth) that rehearses the metaphysical assumptions counter to the “pure phenomenology” that Marion seeks to articulate. Marion asserts,

It could not be said any better: whether painting or object (in the sense of a phenomenon of the world in general), appearing always has the rank and function not of a representation submitted to the imperial initiative of the gaze of consciousness but of an event whose happening stems not so much from a form or from real (therefore imitable) colors as from an upsurging, a coming-up, an arising—in short, an effect. “Effect” obviously must be understood here with *emotion that invades the one gazing*, effect also as the indescribable combination of the tones and the lines that irreducibly individualize the spectator. . . . The effect makes the soul vibrate with vibrations that evidently *represent neither an object nor a being* and which *cannot themselves be described or represented in the mode of objects or beings*. And yet, only this “effect” in the end allows us to define the phenomenality of the painting and therefore, with it, the phenomenality of what shows itself in itself and starting from itself. (*BG*, 49, 50-1, emphasis added)

Inasmuch as the “effect” of givenness that “vibrates” in the soul of the witness is beyond representation, only a way of speaking of this event and its effect beyond representation will suffice. Marion’s phenomenology of givenness provides homiletics with a rigorous way of describing the unfolding of the Word as a gift for Christian proclamation.⁵⁶⁷ His work marks out philosophically that which theology struggles to describe, namely, the space created between the Word and the preacher as a necessary condition for the

⁵⁶⁷ He writes, “Givenness opens the unsurpassable space of the given in general” (*BG*, 56).

possibility of Christian proclamation.⁵⁶⁸ We can discern several points for reflection, and here I interpolate Marion's philosophy toward the theological/homiletical ends which his work is particularly fecund.

First, according to Marion's phenomenology, givenness is radically beyond the control of the witness: "Givenness alone is absolute, free, and without condition, precisely because it gives" (*RG*, 33). Givenness is an act.⁵⁶⁹ It makes room for the given to appear and sets the stage for the phenomena. He declares, "Givenness comes forward and accomplishes, arrives and passes, advances and withdraws, arises and sinks away. It does not subsist, persist, show itself, or make it so seen. It is on the make; it makes the events without itself making up an event" (*BG*, 60-1). What this signifies for Christian proclamation is that the preacher who might receive the gift of the Word (and here the preacher is in a privileged position only insofar as she has been summoned to expose herself, repeatedly, to the ravages of the Given "discerned at the very heart of a given" [*BG*, 64]) is that she only ever beholds the givenness of Godself in the Word as an event. It is an absolute miracle. She has no power over the possibility of givenness and is utterly dependent upon the event of revelation, for the phenomenon is defined as that which "shows *itself* only inasmuch as it gives *itself*" (*BG*, 322).

This does not mean, however, that the witness is utterly *passive* in bearing witness to the givenness of the Word. In fact, the theological situation requires a philosophical

⁵⁶⁸ Consider, for example, the theological implications of this philosophical declaration: "Givenness gives and gives itself, therefore confirms itself, not because it possesses itself, but because it abandons and abandons itself, does not hold itself back and does not hold back. It makes itself completely in that it makes itself by and for the sake of a given; it assures itself of itself by dispossessing itself of itself, by producing an other besides itself in whom it disappears, the given" (*BG*, 60).

⁵⁶⁹ Marion writes, "Showing itself therefore amounts to giving itself. The fold of givenness, in unfolding itself, shows the given that givenness dispenses. For the phenomenon, showing itself is equal to unfolding the fold of givenness in which it arises as a gift. Showing itself in giving itself play in the same field—the fold of givenness, which is unfolded in the given" (*BG*, 70).

revision of such binary categories. Employing the traditional terms, the witness is *active* in the event of givenness (i.e., the event of revelation) through the reduction of her philosophical horizon that phenomenology will label the *reduction*. Marion writes, “Givenness is deployed according to the direct measure of the reduction: the more the reduction is radicalized, the more givenness is deployed. . . . The more the reduction reduces (itself), the more it extends givenness” (*RG*, 203). She is an agent of revelation inasmuch as she renounces her capacity as an agent of revelation.

Second, we must distinguish theologically between the phenomenon of the Word, the *event* of givenness, and the Giver glimpsed beyond them both. Marion teaches us that

[e]very given manifests givenness because the progress of its event unfolds it. Givenness opens at the fold of the given: the gift given *insofar as* it gives itself in terms of its own event. Givenness unfolding itself articulates a gift given (eventually without origin, genealogy, or dependence—it matters little) along the progress of its advent. (*BG*, 65)

The preacher is summoned to bear witness at the fold of the given. He cannot reduce the Word to a propositional claim, nor to an inner experience, but always *through* the fold of givenness to the Giver glimpsed in the giving.⁵⁷⁰

Third, the magnitude, or force, of the given exceeds the epistemological capacity of the preacher as witness. Phenomenologically speaking, this means that the givenness to which the preacher exposes herself, or is exposed (recall that the witness hovers between the active and passive tense), exceeds categorical intuition. Marion argues, “Categorical intuition remains in need of givenness, far from givenness being in need of it in order to

⁵⁷⁰ Phenomenologically, this means that the witness signifies beyond intentionality (which would reduce the Gift to an *object* of lived experience): “Appearing must thus remove itself from (if not always contradict) the imperial rule of the a priori conditions of knowledge by requiring that what appears force its entry onto the scene of the world, a band seen in person without a stuntman, double, or any other representative standing in for it. This advance is named, from the point of view of the one who knows, intentionality; from the point of view of the thing-itself, it is called givenness” (*BG*, 69).

be achieved as a givenness of the *is*, and therefore of being in its beingness. Categorical intuition only allows one to take the measure—henceforth without measure—of givenness” (*RG*, 38). The gift given appears in the event of “bursting on the depthless surface of consciousness.” It penetrates the consciousness of the witness with eyes to see and ears to hear: “The given is exposed because it explodes” (*BG*, 69). This will require a radicalizing of phenomenology itself beyond its own limits—beyond its point of maximum saturation.

Fourth, though always personal, the givenness of the gift is reducible neither to a subjective capacity of the witness, nor to mere objectivity. Marion writes,

Between that which is turning giveable and the gaze that receives it as to give, the relation is not immersed in subjectivity (for the gaze does not provoke the givable) nor in reality (for givability is not summed up in a real predicate). The relation of givenness summons them with the same name. It lays hold of both the one and the other with a single authority, that of the mode of appearing that belongs to what shows itself as givable the one who sees it as about to be given. (*BG*, 107)

The *space* (for lack of a better word) of givenness calls into question the binary operations of subjectivity and objectivity. The saturation of givenness *exploding* at the site of conscious intentionality rends the space between self and world and thereby renders a new relationship between them.⁵⁷¹

Lastly, and following from the previous four points, a new space and a new relation is forged at the fold of givenness. Marion describes this *space*:

Hence, in a flash givenness opens a new horizon of visibility, yielding to the joy beneath my heart, this thing in us that gives. This givability defines the lived experience of the giver of the reduced gift. The gift is given as

⁵⁷¹ Marion describes this at much greater length, and with more philosophical rigor, in *Reduction and Givenness*: “Intuition does not only make objects of the world present, it makes *the* world itself present; intuition does not simply fill the world, it superimposes itself on the world in order to coincide with the whole worldliness of its presentification” (17).

such, in pure imminence, and without objective transcendence, when the potential giver feels the burden of giveability. (*BG*, 107)

This space is marked by its dissimilarity to every possible space and to every known site of knowledge. Here the traditional *rules*—bolstered by metaphysics—no longer apply. The articulation of this space (which we will come to designate as *erotic*) will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

The Gift Given

Before turning to the erotic, Marion’s phenomenology of givenness requires us to take a closer look at the gift of revelation. The gift, and particularly the ways in which it participates in and evades certain metaphysical concerns, has received great attention by both philosophers and theologians.⁵⁷² The purpose of this section is not to rehearse these arguments, but to show how Marion’s philosophy of the gift overcomes several of the lingering problems arising from logocentric understandings of the Word for Christian proclamation.

Marion writes, “The phenomenon shows itself inasmuch as it unfolds in it the fold of givenness . . . The given testifies, by the trembling with which it still and always vibrates, not only to its irreversible and intrinsic difference, but also to its incessantly lost and repeated happening” (*BG*, 321). The “trembling” to which Marion refers participates in the work of deconstruction and it does so originarily. As Derrida taught us in chapter

⁵⁷² See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans., W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990); Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans., Stephen E. Lewis (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans., Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Idem, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, 2nd ed., trans., David Willis (London & Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999); and Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 47-61.

two, deconstruction is not necessarily something that we do *to* texts, institutions, concepts, etc., but rather, deconstruction is always already taking place at the origin (prior to any origin) of conceptual frameworks of meaning-production. Marion's phenomenology serves a theology of proclamation for the emerging *epistémè* in that it aids us in experiencing the originary tenuousness and fragility of the Word given in Christian proclamation.⁵⁷³

Inasmuch as the gift is an apt designation for the Word given in its alterity, Marion's philosophy serves the kind of (philosophical) theology of proclamation needed to address the poststructural critiques of Western epistemology, a critique shared by those steeped in the emerging *epistémè*. "The way in which the gift gives itself coincides exactly with the way which the phenomenon shows itself" (*BG*, 115), writes Marion. Thus, showing and giving share a common space. He continues, "The visible arrives to the I as a gift and, reciprocally, because the phenomenon arises, offers itself, rises toward itself—and takes form in it. I will call this identification of the phenomenon that gives *itself* and the gift that shows *itself anamorphosis*" (*BG*, 117). Such a conceptualization of the gift given opens up a theology of proclamation beyond economics, metaphysics, and the hegemony of the *I (ego cogito)*.

Beyond Economics

A central critique leveled by Derrida and others against the Western intellectual tradition is its propensity to return to the sameness (the "law of the house," *oikos-nomos*,

⁵⁷³ Marion writes, ". . . the gift can, at the very least, sometimes not coincide with the object it puts into operation. Better, it must be suggested as a fundamental rule that the more considerable a gift appears, unless it is realized as an object and by means of a transfer of property. . . . Or: the more the gift is radicalized, the more the object is reduced to the abstract role of support, occasion, symbol. Reciprocally, the gifts that give the most decisively give nothing—no thing, no object; not because they deceive expectation, but because what they give belongs neither to reality nor to objectness and can thus surpass all expectation, indeed fulfill a desire" (*BG*, 106).

economics). It approaches the other only as a means of returning to self-sameness. Such an approach is incapable of approaching the otherness of the other as such—without appropriation, censure, or annihilation. Following our engagement with Barth’s theology of the Word—experienced as *totaliter aliter*—an economic approach will no longer suffice. We must find a way of approaching the other in his/her/its alterity *without* totalizing the other epistemologically, linguistically, theologically, etc.

Marion rightly observes that in the tradition of philosophical reflection on the gift, economics dominates: “To think givenness would thus always be equivalent to thinking the system of exchange between terms, a system regulated by causality and the principles of metaphysics” (*BG*, 75). As soon as givenness fades into the economic, through the introduction of reciprocity or exchange, givenness disappears. All that remains is economy. Marion writes,

The economic interpretation of givenness as a system of exchange not only freezes giver and givee as parties to commerce, but also submits the exchanged gift to the gaze that they direct toward it, and this exchanging gaze fixes only on an object of exchange. The permanent visibility of the gift, reifying givenness in a subsisting objectness, therefore seals the system of exchange and excludes from it givenness as such. (*BG*, 77)⁵⁷⁴

The gift of the Word—given inasmuch as shown in and according to *itself*—cannot be thought according to the economic and retain its designation as *Word*. When the economic intervenes, either by reducing the gift to presence or in foregoing the possibility of the gift in absence, the Word vanishes. Marion’s phenomenology of the gift gets around this philosophical aporia by refusing to treat the gift according to exchange. He writes, “The fold of the given with givenness cannot be read on the basis of the gift

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Derrida, *Given Time*, 13: “There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol, in a partition without return and without division, without being-with-self of the gift-counter-gift.”

because the latter does not visibly bear the mark of givenness, but lets it escape and disappear entirely, like water on sand” (*BG*, 78). What this means for our purposes is this: the gift requires a “strict and particular phenomenological gaze” (*BG*, 112), namely, a gaze wherein conscious intentionality is inverted, becoming the intention *through* the fold of givenness.⁵⁷⁵ Put simply, the givee brackets his intentional gaze to such a degree that the givenness of the gift gives itself in the fold of givenness.

In reference to his argument for a kind of gifting that would not participate in economic exchange Marion writes of a certain non-knowledge. Such is not a hindrance to knowledge, but is a “special way of access.” He writes, “If the giver could be known in the way in which the gift is known, he would become a given gift, but would not appear as giver. To cross this divide, to recognize the giver without cognizing him, demands more than recognition (of the known gift)—only love could risk it. It is precisely because the giver withdraws (reduction) that the givee could risk loving him (or not)” (*BG*, 101). Marion has rightly observed that recognition participates in an economy: the other is known only insofar as she is reduced to that which has already been determined, allocated, thematized by my cognition.

Phenomenology, and particularly the articulations of phenomenology espoused by Husserl and Heidegger, is not philosophically sophisticated enough to describe a mode of

⁵⁷⁵ “Less a gift of meaning than a meaning of the gift; coming from the gift, it sees the fact as a gift because it envisages it on the basis of givenness. For if the gift *itself* decides, it decides in terms of the power of givenness, which weighs equally on the giver and the givee. The insistent power of givenness makes the gift decide *itself* as gift through the twofold consent of the givee and the giver, less actors of the gift than acted by givenness” (*BG*, 112). This argument will become an important component of Marion’s erotic phenomenology treated below: “Intentionality does not have as its object the immanence of lived experiences, but the transcendent object; it aims, through these lived experiences, and by polarizing them toward itself, as the objective of the intentional object. Intentionality renders consciousness intentional of something other than its own lived experiences, namely the object itself.” Jean-Luc Marion, “The Intentionality of Love,” in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans., Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 78.

cognizing the other that would not reduce the other to the *law of the house*.⁵⁷⁶ Holding the Word as a gift given—and therefore never fully *held as gift apart from its givenness*—opens a path beyond economics whereby the alterity of the Giver is protected beyond the fold of the given. The law of sameness cannot intervene between the Giver and the gifted precisely because the gift retains a certain quality that resists objectification and thereby circumvents intentionality and objectivity. As he writes elsewhere, “The intentional object is not an object, erected after the fact into the object of an intention; on the contrary, it is an intention that gives rise to an objective, without ever doing so adequately and without remaining an object.”⁵⁷⁷ At day’s end, “the gift contradicts exchange as economic” (*BG*, 113).⁵⁷⁸

Beyond Metaphysics

By articulating a phenomenology of the gift according to its givenness Marion admits the given beyond metaphysics—without ground or presupposition. He admits, however, that this project leads to a suspicion that is equally metaphysical, namely, the revival of transcendence. He asks, “Can the fold of givenness be understood as a phenomenon, or does it boil down to a metaphysical mechanism disqualified as such?”

⁵⁷⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans., Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 36: “In economy—an element in which one will can have control over another will without destroying it as a will—there occurs the totalization of absolutely singular beings of which there are no concepts and which, by reason of their singularity itself, resist addition. In the transaction, the action of one freedom over another is achieved.”

⁵⁷⁷ Marion, “The Intentionality of Love,” 79.

⁵⁷⁸ See further, “To be sure, to win the figure of the gift, we must take our direction from givenness, and not from economic exchange between real terms; but above all, it must be admitted that the gift, of itself, never permits access to givenness, which by contrast it masks. Hence, all the objections that could be addressed to givenness on the basis of insufficiencies or contradictions in the gift, such as the essays on the ‘gift’ understand it, become obsolete. For me, it is not a matter of understanding givenness in terms of the gift, but of radically redefining the gift (*Book 2*) in terms of givenness (*Book 1*). This has been attempted” (*BG*, 113).

(*BG*, 71). The main fear is that Marion's phenomenology has released transcendence from the phenomenological *epokhē*, and "God" (understood as *Grund*) along with it.⁵⁷⁹

It is important to note that Marion makes a clear distinction between theology as metaphysics and what he labels "revealed theology." He parses the difference thus: "Theology, in the sense of revealed theology (*sacra doctrina*), is in no way to be confused with *theologia rationalis*, which belongs to *metaphysica specialis* and arises solely from metaphysics. Rightfully, it should be opposed to it, as the Revelation of the Wisdom of the Word is opposed to the wisdom of the world" (*BG*, 72). Or, as he puts it in his most rigorous critique of metaphysics, *God Without Being*, "The Christian religion, does not think God starting from the *causa sui*, because it does not think God starting from the cause, or within the theoretical space defined by metaphysics, or even starting from the concept, but indeed starting from God alone, grasped to the extent that he inaugurates by himself the knowledge in which he yields himself—reveals himself."⁵⁸⁰ Whatever theological possibilities emerge from Marion's phenomenology of the gift given, such are possibilities stripped completely of metaphysical assumptions.

Marion's phenomenology of the gift under the realm of the third reduction (to givenness) contrasts that of the "natural attitude" by choosing to think the gift beyond

⁵⁷⁹ See Husserl, *Ideas I*, §58, pp. 133-4. In an important footnote on this point, Marion writes, "Again it must be noted that here the bracketed 'God' is defined only as the ground (*Grund*) of the facticity of the world, therefore according to its metaphysical sense as a transcendent being outside the world. This narrow sense would therefore leave intact any definition of God not based on a transcendence of this (metaphysical) type. Now, it is precisely the case for revealed theology that it approaches God by immanence as well as by transcendence: for instance, according to St. Augustine, God is discovered as 'interior intimo meo' (*Confessions* 3.6.11). Would this immanence more radical than the region of consciousness also fall beneath the blow of the reduction? At the very least, this would have to be demonstrated" (*BG*, 343, fn. 4).

⁵⁸⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans., Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 36.

exchange. Far from letting metaphysics gain a foothold, such an approach excludes the metaphysical to an even greater degree than the “natural attitude”:

In short, the gift is accomplished all the better according to givenness as the reduction delivers it from the transcendencies that hid it. The reduction of the gift to givenness goes hand-in-hand with the reduction of the reduction of transcendencies, those of objectness as much as those of theology—or at least, of what one claims by this name, for thinking the gift in terms of a transcendent efficient cause defines not revealed theology but, in the best of cases, the rational theology of *metaphysica specialis*. (*BG*, 114)

Marion’s threefold reduction of the gift according to giver, givee, and gift excludes the possibility that metaphysical transcendence might subsist.

Under Marion’s phenomenological bracketing of the gift according to the principle of givenness, metaphysical transcendence is placed in line with phenomenal immanence. Marion explains, “The phenomenon’s taking form in its gift is deployed according to the axis of the visible and its intentionality. It therefore accomplishes imminence, rather than threatening it. More generally, givenness does not cut through the gift transitively; it stays there permanently. It belongs to the fold of givenness to organize the gift, and to manifestation to unfold it. Givenness is discovered as the instance par excellence of immanence” (*BG*, 117). The bracketing of the gift rallies against “the flood of presence” (*RG*, 16) that marks the gift according to objectness and/or Being. Thus we see a philosophical path that runs parallel to the theological path marked in chapter three of this dissertation: one in which the subject is radically reduced to a witness, or, as Marion will put it in a later essay, “On principle, a phenomenology of the given frees (or tries to free) the phenomenon from all transcendental subjection.”⁵⁸¹

⁵⁸¹ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Banality of Saturation,” in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed., Kevin Hart, trans., Jeffrey L. Kosky (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 407.

Beyond the Ego Cogito

By attending closely to the gift given in the fold of givenness, Marion offers an approach that sufficiently deconstructs the subject before the Word without annihilating the subject (Nietzsche, Foucault). The givenness revealed in the gift creates a condition of the *I*, the *ego*, appropriate for our conception of preacher as witness. Marion writes that beginning with the *ego* as subject creates an aporia between the self and the other. When the *ego cogito* is established as a first principle we once again slip into a phenomenological mode of relation that forbids alterity.

The *ego* asserts itself in its cogitations inasmuch as it is active. But, before the fold of givenness, the subject is transformed from a nominative into an accusative. Such a “radical reversal” before the given displaces the *I* as subject to an “‘unto whom/which,’ a receiver to which/whom the phenomenon shows itself by giving itself always ends up arriving. . . . The receiver remains—if you will—a ‘subject,’ but one emancipated from all subjectivity because first free of all subjectness and through with all substrata” (*BG*, 261). Because the other gives itself and shows itself according to its *self*, according to its own “unpredictable landing,” the self as witness is relieved of any transcendental claim of the *I*. Marion writes, “The receiver can no longer claim to possess or produce phenomena. It no longer stands in a relation of possession to the phenomenon, but in a purely receiving relation” (*BG*, 249).

Nevertheless, the subject is not eviscerated under Marion’s phenomenology of givenness; rather, s/he is displaced. Marion writes,

I will contest the claim that [the I] occupies this center as an origin, an ego or first person, in transcendental ‘mineness.’ I will oppose to it the claim that it does not hold this center but is instead held there as a recipient where what gives itself shows itself, and that it discloses itself given to

and as a pole of givenness, where all the givens come forward incessantly. At the center stands no ‘subject,’ but a gifted, he whose function consists in receiving what is immeasurably given to him, and whose privilege is confined to the fact that he is himself received from what he receives. (BG, 322)

What this does for our purposes is provide a way around the aporia structured by the hegemony of the self in the economy of sameness.⁵⁸²

Phenomenologically, when my status as subject is put under erasure by the gift that gives itself inasmuch as it shows itself, I become not the *ego* who cogitates, but the *gifted* who intends. In short, I receive my flesh. Marion explains:

With flesh, indeed, a phenomenon gives me to myself in my absoluteness: alone and first in the world, which is phenomenized for that matter only by me, this phenomenon gives me to myself [*moi*]. With flesh, it is a matter of the first and of the only saturated phenomenon, which delivers the *ego* to itself—which delivers *l’adonné* to itself in putting it ‘under house arrest’ within itself alone. . . . If a subjectivity must surmount the destruction of the metaphysical subject, it can only come from flesh, where hetero-and auto-affection are mixed.⁵⁸³

The *ego* as flesh not only inverts the process of epistemology, it releases the *I* from the fetters of metaphysics. Marion explains that within the bounds of metaphysics the relativity of the empirical *I* underscores all the more the absolute priority of the constituting and, in this sense, autonomous *I*. As flesh, the other “‘interpellates *me*, the self [*moi*] that it imparts to *me*.” It does not designate any transcendental, autarchic and

⁵⁸² “If the ‘subject’ is defined as constituting objects, then it can only objectify the Other (Descartes, perhaps Sartre) or appresent him in ordinary inter-objectivity and therefore miss him as such (Husserl). . . . It is entirely different with the gifted: defined as he who receives and receives himself from the given, he can receive, according to the ordinary procedures of givenness (no predetermined horizon, no a priori principle, no constitution), among other givens, the paradox classified as icon, the face. For in the realm of givenness, the phenomenon of the Other, for the first time, no longer counts as anything like an extraterritorial exception to phenomenality, but belongs to it officially, though with the title paradox (saturated phenomenon)” (BG, 323). C.f. this sense in which the subject is defined in terms of her status as receiver with Ricoeur’s notion of the “summoned self” discussed above.

⁵⁸³ Jean-Luc Marion, “Flesh or the Givenness of the Self” in *In Excess: Studies in the Saturated Phenomenon*, trans., Robyn Horner and Vincent Berrand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 100-1.

unconditioned *I*, but refers back only to the interpellation itself. Marion continues, “The trial of the *me* that I hear *myself* say [*que je m’entends dire*] offers no proof of any transcendental *I*; it entrusts me to a new name, which is improper because spoken beforehand from elsewhere, in assigning me to the claim” (*RG*, 199).

The transposition of the *I* and the other finds its ultimate test case, or privileged example in the phenomenon that exceeds the intentional capacity of the *ego*: the saturated phenomenon. Here the phenomenon escapes the reduction of the *I* that would objectify it under his gaze. Marion explains, “There is no drift or turn here, not even a ‘theological’ one, but on the contrary, an accounting for the fact that in certain cases of givenness the excess of intuition could no longer satisfy the conditions of ordinary experience and that the pure event that occurs cannot be constituted as an object . . . The constituting subject is succeeded by the constituted witness.”⁵⁸⁴ To this saturated phenomenon we now turn.

The Saturated Phenomenon

Stephen Lewis astutely observes that Marion’s investigation of the saturated phenomenon parallels the de-structuring and de-centering of the *I*. Such a situation gives birth philosophically to an offspring we have already conceived theologically: the witness. Lewis writes, “Thus, integral to Marion’s understanding of phenomena as given is his understanding of the *I* affected by the given as called forth, or given birth to, in the very givenness of that which gives. This *I* receives herself from what she receives (*ED*

⁵⁸⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans., Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 44.

366/BG 266); she is the ‘witness constituted by what gives itself.’”⁵⁸⁵ The situation that marks the witness as gifted most completely is the saturated phenomenon.

In brief, the saturated phenomenon is defined as an object of experience marked by its superabundance of intuition exceeding intentionality.⁵⁸⁶ It is a phenomenon “par excellence,” transcending the conceptual capacities of the subject who intends objects of lived experience.⁵⁸⁷ In terms of the possibility of revelation through preaching, were such a phenomena to give itself according to Marion’s Husserlian-inspired vocabulary, it would be given as a “saturated phenomenon” of the second order. Marion writes, “The bedazzlement and the disappointment of intentionality by the saturated phenomenon imposes on the aim the necessity of confronting directly—without the mediation of the concept or the screen of the object that it permits constituting—the excess of intuition. This excess that pours itself out without intermediary over my gaze affects it, constrains it, and wounds it.”⁵⁸⁸

In *Being Given*, Marion describes certain kinds of phenomena that exceed the capacity of consciousness to intuit them as objects of experience: “here the I of intentionality can neither constitute nor synthesize the intuition into an object defined by a horizon” (BG, 226). Such phenomena are given to such a degree—to the point in which the subject is overwhelmed by such a display of givenness—that the intentional act

⁵⁸⁵ Stephen E. Lewis, “The Phenomenological Concept of Givenness and the ‘Myth of the Given,’ in Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, 3.

⁵⁸⁶ Marion notes, “The saturated phenomenon in the end establishes the truth of all phenomenality because it marks, more than any other phenomenon, the givenness from which it comes. The paradox, understood in the strictest sense, no longer runs counter to appearance; it runs with apparition” (BG, 227).

⁵⁸⁷ Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 25. In his essay, “Phenomenology of Givenness and First Philosophy,” Marion asks us to follow his revised reflections on the saturated phenomenon arising in §§23-24 of *Being Given*, rather than his earlier essay. Thus, in the remainder of this section I honor his request by focusing on his later work. See Marion, “Phenomenology of Givenness and First Philosophy,” 29, fn. 41.

⁵⁸⁸ Marion, “The Banality of Saturation,” 406.

cannot contain it. The *event*, the *idol*, the *flesh*, and the *icon* are all classes or types of saturated phenomena according to the way in which they overwhelm or saturate intuition (via quantity, quality, relation, or modality, respectively). All saturated phenomena bear a common trait: they are never constitutable as objects within a horizon vis-à-vis a subject. A cursory explanation of Marion's project at this point will illuminate his thinking in relation to a (philosophical) theology of proclamation.

The first saturated phenomenon Marion treats is the event carried to its apex. Here he has in mind powerful and incomprehensible historical events (e.g., September 11, 2001) that far exceed the limits of spatio-temporal fixity necessary to objectify an event as an event reducible to experience. With respect to such events, nobody can claim a *hic et nunc* that would permit her to describe the event exhaustively and constitute it as an object (*BG*, 228). Thus the event is saturated according to its quantity.

The second saturated phenomenon is the idol. In the idol the subject is bedazzled by the surplus quality it gives: "the idol is determined as the first indisputable visible because its splendor stops intentionality for the first time" (*BG*, 229). Here the phenomenon gives itself with an intensive magnitude without measure, beyond the conceptual anticipations of perception, to such a degree that the subject is "blinded" inasmuch as the idol cannot be borne by the gaze. In a memorable phrase, Marion notes, "When the gaze cannot bear what it sees, it suffers bedazzlement" (*BG*, 203). This is the excessive quality of the idol.

The third saturated phenomenon Marion labels the flesh. He defines this phenomenon alternatively as the identity of what touches with the medium where this touching takes place (Aristotle) or the felt with what feels (Husserl) or the affected with

the affecting (Henry). The saturation according to relation, the flesh, is essentially an auto-affection, it gives me back to myself (*BG*, 231). By this Marion means that inasmuch as the flesh gives itself it blocks the space in which the ecstasy of intentionality would become possible. Phenomenologically, for a subject to render meaning from an object of experience within consciousness it must first instantiate a gap between the intended and the fulfillment, between and I and its object. The flesh obviates the possibility of such spacing by forcing the subject back upon itself in an unconquerable and incurable solipsism. Marion identifies this saturated phenomenon with Heideggerian anxiety in the face of nothingness and Kierkegaardian fear and trembling.

The fourth saturated phenomenon, which is given according to modality, is the icon. He calls this type of saturated phenomenon the icon because it no longer offers any spectacle to the gaze, but rather, exerts its own gaze over that which meets it. Here the mode of intuition is saturated to the point of reversal: the gazer takes the place of the gazed upon: “the icon because it no longer offers any spectacle to the gaze and tolerates no gaze from any spectator, but rather exerts its own gaze over that which meets it” (*BG*, 232). In *Being Given* as well as *The Erotic Phenomenon* and “The Intentionality of Love,” Marion likens this modal saturation to the experience of the worshiper vis-à-vis (literally) the icon. The intentionality of the subject is inverted as he realizes that his gaze finds no assignable place for its intuition to land in the black wholes of the two pupils.

Each of these phenomena is saturated to the first degree, according to Marion. If such a phenomenon were to give itself by revealing itself, it would constitute a saturation to a *second* degree.⁵⁸⁹ Revelation is the maximum of saturated phenomenality, which

⁵⁸⁹ “The phenomenon of revelation not only falls into the category of saturation (paradox in general), but it concentrates the four types of saturated phenomena and is given at once as historic event,

nevertheless must remain an ultimate possibility of the phenomenon inasmuch as it concentrates the four types of saturated phenomena and is given at once as historic event, idol, flesh, and icon. Revelation would be a fifth type of saturation, but of a different order than the others for it saturates phenomenality to the second degree. Marion calls this the “paradox of paradox.” He writes, “If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality” (*BG*, 235). In short, phenomenology cannot decide if revelation can or should ever give itself.⁵⁹⁰

Revelation Given

In light of the claim of revealed theology, that God gives Godself through God’s Word in Christian proclamation, the givenness of said Word would follow a parallel track to that of the saturated phenomenon. Indeed, it would constitute a phenomenality beyond even that articulated by the saturated phenomenon—a saturation to the second degree.⁵⁹¹

idol, flesh, and icon (face). This concerns a fifth type of saturation, not that it adds a new one (arbitrarily invented in order to do right by the supposed right of the ‘divine’) to the first four (the sole describable ones), but because, by confounding them in it, it saturates phenomenality to a second degree, by saturation of saturation” (*BG*, 235).

⁵⁹⁰ In his more theological works (e.g., *God Without Being*) Marion assumes the opposite: “Gød crosses out our thought because he [*sic*] saturates it” (46). This has led Kathryn Tanner to wonder not whether phenomenology is a useful method for describing the givenness of Revelation, but whether Marion “manages to think Revelation too well in phenomenological terms.” She continues, “Revelation thereby becomes what is not at all surprising to phenomenology but just what phenomenology most expects from givenness when givenness is most itself.” Kathryn Tanner, “Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology,” in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed., Kevin Hart, trans., Jeffrey L. Kosky (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 204. She further argues, “Marion refigures the character of phenomenological reduction according to givenness so that phenomenology itself—as a philosophical enterprise—can never be itself disrupted by Revelation, never come to its limit, never meet its match. Phenomenology, just because it has become such an apt instrument for describing a God beyond measure, becomes God’s measure.”

⁵⁹¹ “Phenomenology cannot decide if a revelation can or should ever give itself, but it (and it alone) can determine that, in case it does, such a phenomenon of revelation should assume the figure of the paradox of paradoxes. If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality” (*BG*, 235).

The givenness of God's revelation of Godself would thus receive a degree of philosophical sophistication from Marion's radical phenomenology. Marion declares, "*God gives*. The giving, in allowing to be divined how 'it gives,' a giving, offers the only accessible trace of He [*sic*] who gives."⁵⁹² Such a theological argument—more of a confession, really—offers itself as a way of talking about the Word in Christian proclamation without sliding back into the throes of metaphysics. Marion writes,

If the Revelation of God as showing itself starting from himself alone can in fact ever take place, phenomenology must redefine its own limits and learn to pass beyond them following clear-cut and rigorous procedures. . . . Otherwise, it will repeat the absurd denegation on which metaphysics and the 'question of Being' stubbornly insist: better to erase or disfigure the possibility of Revelation than redefine the transcendental conditions of manifestation in order to admit the mere possibility of a phenomenon of revelation. (*BG*, 242)

What remains to be seen is how exactly Marion's philosophy avoids the metaphysical stumbling blocks that have plagued the Western intellectual tradition, and preaching along with it.

Following from the alterity of the Word and the response to the manifestation of God in proclamation, we can safely make the following observations. First, a radically reduced phenomenology serves a revealed theology (like Barth's) by refusing to inscribe the gift of God's revelation of Godself within limits: conceived by so-called rationality or even phenomenality: "As we know," writes Marion, "theology contradicts logic. We would therefore preserve rationality by banishing the question of the maximum point of phenomenality" (*BG*, 234). Marion's entire project has been in the service of expanding the possibility of phenomenality.⁵⁹³ If God reveals Godself as otherwise than the natural

⁵⁹² Marion, *God Without Being*, 105.

⁵⁹³ "The maximum of saturated phenomenality must remain an ultimate possibility of the phenomenon—the last, but still under the heading of possibility. This twofold and at first glance

attitude (cf. Job 38:4), that attitude must be always already exposed to an alterity that calls the natural attitude into question. Marion avers,

God can give himself [*sic*] to be thought without idolatry only starting from himself alone: to give himself to be thought as love, hence as gift; to give himself to be thought as a thought of the gift. Or better, as a gift for thought, as a gift that gives itself to be thought. But a gift, which gives itself forever, can be thought only by a thought that gives itself to the gift to be thought. Only a thought that gives itself can devote itself to a gift for thought. But, for thought, what is it to give itself, if not to love?⁵⁹⁴

Second, following the deconstruction of the *ego*, the *I*, before the alterity of the Word, the preacher as witness becomes not only a helpful way of describing the task of preaching, but an absolute philosophical necessity. The witness is designated by an alterity given. The key to this entire dissertation might be summed up in the following sentence: The Word *gives* itself inasmuch as it shows *itself*.

The preacher as gifted, as witness, is invited into a usufructory relationship with the Word, wherein she receives the Word without ownership. As a summoned *subject* she is always too late to assert her subjectivity; the moment in which she would assert herself as subject before a givenness beyond the conceptual limits of intuition, she is already designated as gifted by the Word as Subject. This requires a heightened awareness on the part of the preacher as he intends objects of experience that give rise to an excess of intuition.⁵⁹⁵ Only then does the preacher receive her summons to *bear* witness. As Marion describes it elsewhere:

This *veritas redarguens* turns its merciless evidence upon and therefore against he who sees it (or rather can no longer see it). It can therefore be

contradictory requirement is carried out with what I will now call the phenomenon of *revelation*” (BG, 235).

⁵⁹⁴ Marion, *God Without Being*, 49.

⁵⁹⁵ Marion writes of the “halo of invisibility that begins to appear (aureole and inverted glory) around the visible. By not paying attention at the very moment when it sets itself on the visible, the gaze abolishes the visible, dismisses it from any pretension to erect itself as first visible (idol), annuls it without having to annihilate it.” Marion, *God Without Being*, 115.

defined as a light counter to my sight, a light that goes up against my [fore-]sight, rendering it confused and me with it. I become confused before this light, in all senses of the term: my sight loses its clarity and grows blurred, I lose my confidence, my good sense, and my security—to such a degree that this truth, that accuses me of untruth, can indeed be called a “counter-truth.” But here counter-truth does not at all mean the contrary of truth or the simple lie that I could oppose to it, but *the truth that counteracts he whom it affects*—me. It counteracts me; for it requires of me, if I am to see it without danger, that I love it and lend myself to its radiance by conforming myself to its purity.⁵⁹⁶

THE EROTIC APPROACH

The central approach, attitude, or orientation that the preacher ought to take toward the Word of God given for Christian proclamation is expressed in Marion’s philosophy of the erotic. Only love structures a relation between the Word and the witness beyond epistemological reduction (totalization) and metaphysical speculation. Moreover, love provides another path toward genuine knowledge than logic. Such is desperately needed for preaching in the emerging *epistémè* because Western rationality has so thoroughly affected language and thought that it limits Christian theology and homiletics a priori. In this section I will sketch, following Marion’s erotic phenomenology, an approach to the Word that refuses to participate in logocentric epistemological frameworks.

The erotic, it should be noted, does not constitute a change of direction for Marion’s phenomenology. From his earliest work on Descartes through his radical phenomenology, love has remained a distant summit greater than the many peaks Marion climbs. At the end of *Being Given*, for example, he argues that the apogee of a phenomenology of givenness lies at the threshold of *haecceitas*, that absolute unsubstitutability of the other, approached in love or not at all. Marion writes,

⁵⁹⁶ Marion, “The Banality of Saturation,” 406.

For I neither want nor should only face up to him as the universal and abstract pole of counter-intentionality where each and every one can take on the face of the face. I instead reach him in his unsubstitutable particularity, where he shows himself like no Other can. This individuation has a name: love. But we have for a long time now been without the concept that would do it justice, and this name remains the most prostituted of words. Nevertheless, phenomenology claims to make it its privileged theme. (*BG*, 324)

Regarding love as a “privileged theme” draws philosophy close to the best of Christian theology.

“God is love” (1 Jn. 4:7). This is one of the most direct and concrete theological assertions found in the Bible and yet the Western intellectual tradition has been much more comfortable associating God with *logos*. I will argue with Marion that the former can be thought to shape the later and that both love and *logos* are given a different meaning through God’s revelation of Godself than that of the natural attitude. Marion declares, “Love does not suffer from the unthinkable or from the absence of conditions, but is reinforced by them. For what is peculiar to love consists in the fact that it gives itself. . . . Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; he thus loves without limit or restriction.”⁵⁹⁷

Through much of the history of Western thought, rationality has been synonymous with logic. The *logos* and *ratio* are one; this is the natural attitude. Words that are rational, measured, sensible, etc. are weighed according to an a priori standard measured according to the *ratio*. Such words are then used to substantiate the rationality of the very measure by which words are deemed “rational.” This economic logic of exchange between words and rationality determines the norm, the center, the same, and as Derrida has taught us, such a rationality is co-terminus with logocentrism.

⁵⁹⁷ Marion, *God Without Being*, 47.

Logic and love—*logos and erōs*—are often viewed as antonyms. They are folded into a binary logic that divides logic, rationality, sameness, presence, Being, etc. from its imagined opposite: affect, madness, alterity, absence, and nothingness. As Marion mentions repeatedly, “the only measure of love is love without measure.”⁵⁹⁸

An erotic approach to the Word participates in the somewhat kenotic theology of Barth (as radical submission) and the epistemological divestment (*dépouillement*) of Ricoeur. Marion draws the best of revealed theology and hermeneutical phenomenology together:

The more that that which or the one who reduces reduces radically, the more things give themselves amply to it or him. But likewise, that which or the one who reduces lets itself or himself be measured by the dimension of what gives itself and be identified with and by the identity of that givenness in such a way that the amplitude of what gives (itself) always also anticipates the determination of that which or the one who reduces.
(*RG*, 203-4)

An erotic approach facilitates the kind of reduction that facilitates givenness without conditions.

Love does not participate in the traditional rules of epistemology, but gives rise to thought and genuine knowledge nonetheless. “Love (even and especially if it ends up causing thought, giving rise—by its excess—to thought) does not pretend to comprehend, since it does not mean at all to take,” writes Marion. We will see that this is the primary difference between love and logic—the former gives without condition, the latter takes without remorse. Marion continues, noting that love “postulates its own giving, giving where the giver strictly coincides with the gift, without any restriction, reservation, or

⁵⁹⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans., Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10, 46, 92. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically as *EP*.

mastery. Thus love gives itself only in abandoning itself, ceaselessly transgressing the limits of its own gift, so as to be transplanted outside of itself.”⁵⁹⁹

Marion tries to think of love *as* knowledge—a “preeminent knowledge”—and his thesis is that “only love opens up knowledge of the other as such.”⁶⁰⁰ Even though this argument dominates his later work, we also find it in his earlier writings. Marion writes of a certain *attitude* that is necessary to prepare the ground for the possibility of givenness. He writes that “we are looking for an attitude where the gaze no longer would see any idol, though still not pretending to the impossible *agapē*; a gaze, therefore, that would see nothing that it does not immediately transpierce, and that nothing would come to envisage; a gaze, in the end, that would see nothing and that would not discover itself seen . . .”⁶⁰¹ The erotic gaze operates according to such a manner: it alone can “transpierce” the objectivity of the other and thereby catch a glimpse of the other’s alterity in as much as the other finds the freedom to show itself according to itself.

Marion recognizes (with Ricoeur) that to articulate that which exceeds the possibility of articulation—an absolute testimony of the Absolute—necessitates a bit of philosophical acrobatics on our part. Given that our words are always already inscribed in a certain *logos* that simultaneously structures the possibility of expression and the impossibility of certain expressions, we must proceed in search of an alternative rationality that is better suited to proclamatory witness.

Love is such an alternative. As Marion puts it, “A serious concept of love distinguishes itself by its unity, or rather by its power to keep together significations that

⁵⁹⁹ Marion, *God Without Being*, 48.

⁶⁰⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, “What Love Knows,” in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans., Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 160.

⁶⁰¹ Marion, *God Without Being*, 111.

nonerotic thought cuts apart, stretches, and tears according to the measure of its prejudices” (*EP*, 5). The problem arises from a decision, which is already operative according to a certain logic, a certain rationality. This decision is to treat love as a concept like any other concept open to philosophical scrutiny. So, even when love and logic are not separated, a kind of rupture has already taken place, which determines in advance what love can be.

The only philosophical recourse to such a scenario is to let love appear *prior* to logic, and thus to any logical a priori. The initial decision to think love *through* a rationality that does not predetermine love according to essence or ontology is found in the phenomenological method. The first step in this direction will consist in restoring the unity of love that has been severed by the Western intellectual tradition, which, following Plato and Aristotle, has tried to divide and thereby classify love according to its use.

Defining Love: *Erōs/Agapē*

Love resists conceptualization. In other words, any attempt to draw together the disparate manifestations of love under a unifying idea or mental picture merely reinscribes love in an a priori logic. Such a move, though reasonable, beneficent even, blunts love’s possibility to give itself according to itself. Marion argues that “we have no concept whatsoever of love. Without a concept, each time that we pronounce the word ‘love’ or reel off ‘words of love’ we literally no longer know what we are saying and, in fact, we say nothing” (*EP*, 4).

Moreover, as with our notion of witnessing, the erotic absconds from the logic of recognition. Despite the strongest emotions, love’s non-conceptuality escapes descriptions that which might stand as a paradigm for future experiences. Marion notes,

Without a concept, we can even make for ourselves a very clear idea of a love we have experienced, but never an idea the least bit distinct—one that would allow recognition of when it is and is not the case, which behaviors arise from it and which in no way concern it, what logic necessarily binds them or not, what possibilities are opened or closed to action, etc. (*EP*, 4)

One of the initial problems with philosophical considerations of love as a concept of investigation is the almost immediate division that occurs between different types of love—from siblings, parents to children, friends, sexual partners, God, etc.⁶⁰² Marion insists that such a decision gets us started on the wrong path because it submits an erotic rationality to the principles of logic, thereby reinforcing the schism between *logos* and *erōs*. “Love,” Marion insists, “is only told *one way*” (*EP*, 5).⁶⁰³ He continues:

A concept of love must be able to give a rationality to all that nonerotic thought disqualifies as irrational and degrades to madness: certainly desire and oaths, abandonment and promises, sexual enjoyment and its suspension, jealousy and lies, children and death, all of these events escape a certain definition of rationality—one that fits with the things of the world, objects of order and of measure, and with their calculation and their production. But this clean getaway surely does not imply that these events lie in exile outside all rationality; it suggests rather that they fall under another figure of reason, a “greater rationality”—that which does not limit itself to the world of things nor to the production of objects, but which instead rules our hearts, our individuality, our life and our death, in short that which defines us deep down in all that concerns us in the final instance. . . . Love falls under an *erotic* rationality. (*EP*, 5)⁶⁰⁴

In addition to the guiding precepts that must be realigned under an erotic rationality in order to approach the erotic apart from a philosophical (i.e., logocentric) rationality,

⁶⁰² Philosophy is to blame for this division. Marion writes, “The concept of love succumbed because philosophy simultaneously refused love’s unity, its rationality, and its primacy (and to begin with, its primacy over being)” (*EP*, 4).

⁶⁰³ Marion is thus trying to reverse a trajectory that has gone unquestioned since Plato. See Plato, *Symposium*, trans., W R. M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), which structures much later philosophy on love. See further Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans., Philip S. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁶⁰⁴ On the connection between *eros* and madness, see Lynne Huffer, “Foucault’s Eros: For an Ethics of Living in Biopower,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed., Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary and Jan Sawicki (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 436-53 and Idem, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Marion observes that in order to get at love, we must forsake the Western proclivity to think love according to Being. To begin with the presupposition that love *is*, that it has or must have its own being in the world as a precondition for serious thought belies the truth about love: we can love *beyond* being. I can love my grandparents who are now dead; one can love one's ancestors. I can love that which is not yet and even something the being of which remains undecided. Marion concludes, "The search for a concept must therefore describe the erotic phenomenon in its own proper horizon—that of a *love without being*" (EP, 6).

Beyond the question of Being, Marion and others have attempted to think love according to desire. Theologian Wendy Farley argues, for instance, that "Eros is the power of love in the form of desire."⁶⁰⁵ Theological historian Charles Stang writes that "*Erōs* is the love that carries us outside ourselves, thereby allowing us to take flight."⁶⁰⁶ Stang, like Marion, engages deeply in the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. This is not without reason, for Dionysius is often charged with supplanting the biblical notion of *agapē* with the Greek notion of *erōs*. What is clear when one pays close attention to Dionysius's writings, however, is that Dionysius employs both words to describe the Divine Love.⁶⁰⁷ He argues that just as "four" is equivalent to "twice two," so ought we realize that *agapē* and *erōs* are "equivalent."⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁵ Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 101.

⁶⁰⁶ Charles M. Stang, *Apotheosis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 162.

⁶⁰⁷ See Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans., Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 4.10 708A-B.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.10 709B. He continues, "To those listening properly to the divine things the name 'love' (*agapē*) is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term 'yearning' (*erōs*)." *Divine Names*, 4.12 709C.

We see in Marion's writings a development with regard to his understanding and deployment of love. In *God Without Being* (pub. in French in 1982) he frequently describes love as *agapē*: "*Agapē* surpasses all knowledge, with a hyperbole that defines it and, indissolubly, prohibits access to it."⁶⁰⁹ In *The Erotic Phenomenon* (pub. in French in 2003), Marion prefers to think of love as *erōs*, but this is not in opposition to love as *agape*, writing, "every concept of love is weakened and compromised as soon as one allows oneself to distinguish competing divergent, or indeed irreconcilable, meanings—for example, by opposing from the outset, as if it were an unquestionable evidence, love and charity (ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη)" (*EP*, 4-5).

A consistent theme through Marion's oeuvre is the irony that love is so often employed in philosophical discourse and so rarely defined. He writes, "We live with love as if we knew what it was about. But as soon as we try to define it, or at least approach it with concepts it draws away from us."⁶¹⁰ Love, in classical philosophical formulations (Descartes, Spinoza) is defined by its ignorance of the other.⁶¹¹ Moreover, such deployments of love ignore the paradoxical quality inherent within it: "If we stick to the definition of love as a fabric woven from the lived experiences of my consciousness, we turn all love back upon ourselves, with a reciprocity that poses no difficulty, because it lacks exteriority."⁶¹²

For our purposes, love will be employed without differentiating between *agapē* and *erōs* because, from the preacher's point of view, as we will see, the distinction dissipates before the other intended beyond totalization: the Word. Marion writes,

⁶⁰⁹ Marion, *God Without Being*, 108.

⁶¹⁰ Marion, "The Intentionality of Love," 71.

⁶¹¹ Marion, "What Love Knows," 157.

⁶¹² Marion, "The Intentionality of Love," 77.

In order to approach the question of charity, it is above all important not to suffer the influence of what metaphysics has thought about love. For today, in this tradition, love and charity have suffered similar devaluation. Love is reduced to ‘making love,’ charity to ‘doing charity’—words prostituted in the first case, betrayed in the second, each equally submitted to the iron law of ‘making or doing,’ and thus from objectification.⁶¹³

In order to move in this direction, it will be necessary to state clearly the various aspects of love that are ignited under the erotic reduction.

Love’s Partners

To avoid merely reinscribing the philosophical assumptions concerning the erotic it will be necessary to briefly discuss the various aspects that an erotic approach deploys. Especially following Marion’s radical phenomenology, we must not take this task lightly, or we risk occluding love by smuggling in metaphysical concepts. This treatment of love’s partners—the self, the other, and the intervening force at work between them—will rehearse several of the key components of Marion’s radical reduction.

The Self

Let us begin with the self, not because the self is preeminent vis-à-vis love, but because the self is the most problematic element therein. The epistemological approach that would honor a theology of the Word beyond ontotheology and that of a witness beyond recognition, must begin by deconstructing the self as a primary condition of the erotic. As long as the *I* remains, love is impossible. Marion avers, “The erotic reduction renders destitute all identity of self to self” (*EP*, 37). When I enter into the erotic sphere of knowing, my subject-position is brought under erasure by the very measure that I aim to love the other.

⁶¹³ Marion, “What Love Knows,” 168.

That this point need be asserted suggests that the erotic is unnatural, or contrary to the natural attitude. In actuality, the erotic is more originary than the rational for it constitutes the self prior to a will to selfhood. Marion writes, “Man is revealed to himself by the originary and radical modality of the erotic” (*EP*, 7). My most primal experience, and that which forms my consciousness beyond all expressions of my will to selfhood, is found in my condition as a beloved. I came to self-awareness swaddled in the love of my parents; before I could think, I was loved. Even now, as a fully-formed subject (developmentally, though hardly epistemologically and even less, spiritually), it is not that which I know or think that defines me as much as my awareness that I am loved (by my partner, by my friends, by my daughter, by God) and according to the degree that I love others. I love, therefore, I am.⁶¹⁴

Thus, we may think of the self’s relation to love to be one of remembering one’s status as beloved. Or, perhaps it would be more fitting to speak of the self against the Cartesian myth, whereby my selfhood is constituted by a solipsistic will to knowledge—to think, so that I can be. Farley points out that “[i]n the ecstasy of love the lover belongs not to himself or to herself but to the beloved. This mutual, ecstatic emptying into the beloved is union, care, and desire.”⁶¹⁵

The self relinquishes its claim to primacy, to selfhood, in the moment and for the duration that one loves.⁶¹⁶ As long as the intentionality of love is put into play my claim

⁶¹⁴ Descartes omitted the modalities of love and hate from his definition of the *ego*: “*Ego sum res cogitans, id est dubitans, affirmans, negans, pauca intelligens, multa ignorans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque et sentiens*” (“I am a thinking thing, who doubts, affirms, denies, who understands little, is ignorant of much, who wills, who does not will, who imagines and also feels”). Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed., C. Adam and P Tannery, Nouvelle presentation, vol. VII (Paris: Vrin, 1964-76), 34, cited in *EP*, 6.

⁶¹⁵ Farley, 102.

⁶¹⁶ Marion devotes a good bit of time to the temporal dimension of love. For instance, he writes, “Charity plays itself out in the present: in order to know if I love, I need not wait, I have only to love; and I know perfectly well when I love, when I do not love, and when I hate.” Marion, “What Love Knows,” 154.

to selfhood is utterly forgotten; all that remains is the other and the love I intend toward her. The erotic initiates what Marion will describe as an alternate modality of understanding. He writes,

I think myself in feeling myself, and according to the modality of feeling, in an immediacy that abolishes the separation that is proper to representation; contrary, then, to thought under the modality of understanding. Thought according to understanding in effect proceeds according to the universal, works upon the universalizable, and operates by universalizing. . . . thought as understanding is deployed only on the express condition that it not include persons and that it not be singularized (which is what distinguishes scientific and juridical discourse from the words of poets, writers, and theologians[!], and sometimes even philosophers). Properly speaking, thought as understanding is addressed to all, because it belongs to no one and designates no author, but instead offers itself to the appropriation of all those who reason by understanding. It thus owes its perfection to its refusal to be individualized. (*EP*, 39)

But love that is universalizable disqualifies itself as love. This is a point proven by a phenomenology of givenness, for consciousness can only ever be consciousness *of something* supported by intuition and intentionality. A gaze that could be universalized would lack intentionality, thus love (like all possible knowledge) must focus upon the particular manifestation of objects of experience (and the objectness of the other is precisely what love renders impossible) to consciousness.⁶¹⁷

Love is not only a constraining factor for the self; it also allows the self access to a certain knowledge that is beyond (because it exceeds) intuition. Saturated phenomena can only be known insofar as they are intended beyond the limits of intentionality. They skirt the authority of the intentional gaze that marks subjectivity as much as selfhood. Given that Revelation floods consciousness with an excess of intuition, it stands to reason that

⁶¹⁷ We might note parenthetically that what is impossible for humans is possible for God. God has revealed Godself as being beyond the constraints of intentionality (e.g., Jn 3:16). God is able to love beyond specificity (“For God so loved *the world* . . .”). We humans, however, are not God, a fact often overlooked in philosophy as well as theology.

Revelation—the Word—can only be *known* insofar as the Word is loved. Marion writes, “. . . If there be a saturated phenomenon, it will not affect a ‘subject’ or a ‘subjectivity’ precisely because both the one and the other function only in a metaphysical situation where it is a question of constituting and not of admitting an affection, of constituting objects, phenomena poor in intuition or common law phenomena.”⁶¹⁸ By choosing to love the Word, the self relinquishes its hegemonic intentionality that would turn the Word into a mere object of experience, and thereby rendering knowledge of the Word impossible. By loving God as God manifests Godself in the fold of givenness I lose myself (cf. Lk. 9:24) and in so doing experience an ec-stasis that allows me to experience myself as the gifted, as a witness.

The Other

The erotic must, by definition, include an other beyond the self. Marion devotes many pages in *The Erotic Phenomenon* to investigating the possibility of self-love in and by oneself. What this produces is an aporia in the self from itself, for to love myself according to myself I would first have to reduce myself to an object of my experience, in which case the love I feel for myself would not be the love of an *other* (who must always be a subject), but merely an object of my experience. The *me* to which I would necessarily reduce myself can then no longer be the *I* who loves. Marion writes, “Thus in the erotic reduction, nothing and no one assures me—the lover that I have become under the erotic reduction—except myself, who by definition cannot do so” (*EP*, 41).

⁶¹⁸ Marion, “The Banality of Saturation,” 407

Paradoxically, the path to love of self turns out to be a cul-de-sac: not only do I discover the impossibility of self-love, but I end up hating myself along with everyone else.⁶¹⁹

The other comes on the scene, phenomenologically speaking, only as an *I* beyond the intention of my gaze. If the other is captured under the light of my gaze he is immediately totalized, reduced to an object of my experience. This, however, forecloses on the possibility of knowledge of this other whom I intend because only *objects* may be intended, and thus, knowable. The other—manifested as icon or face—arises as such by suffusing and saturating my intuition. Marion reminds us that “[w]hen a givenness is made manifest beyond intentionality—as a saturated phenomenon—the impact will be radicalized into a *call*, and the receiver into the *gifted*” (*BG*, 266). Only when I lose my status as *ego* by the call of the other experienced in his or her face—which is the fold of the other’s givenness beyond intentionality, in Marion’s terminology—does the other escape totalization.

Marion writes, “The difficulty no longer consists therefore in deciding if the Other can appear . . . But in grasping how the Other shows himself by giving himself to the gifted that I remain” (*BG*, 323). Under the erotic reduction the notion of witness as signification is radicalized. Inasmuch as signification degrades the other according to that which may be signified—an object—it prevents me from bearing witness beyond objectivity to the radical alterity of the other. Marion writes, “Signification . . . must above all not present the other to me, but must prepare me to receive alterity” (*EP*, 98). In deciding upon an erotic approach to the other, in loving to love, I mark a space wherein

⁶¹⁹ Marion concludes, “Thus, unable to precede myself, to exceed myself, or to cross the distance, I can neither think nor perform the formula ‘I love myself’” (*EP*, 47).

my capacity to signify the other is inverted as a space of radical passivity in which I wait upon the advent of the other. In short, signification must come to me.

How then, Marion asks, can a signification ever lead me to experience the alterity of the other in her *haecceitas*? He answers: such an impossibility only ever touches upon possibility when my intentionality as witness is overcome by a “counter-intentionality—exteriority’s irrefutable shock, contradicting my aim, my forecast, and my expectation” (*EP*, 98). He explains,

In order for the other to manifest him- or herself to me as a whole phenomenon, I must not wait for the contribution of an intuition, but rather the unpredictable arrival of a signification, coming to contradict my intention *with its own*. In order to see the other, I must not attempt to make him or her appear like a phenomenon oriented according to my centrality; on the contrary, I must wait for a new signification to thwart my own significations and impose upon me, for the first time, an alterity that transcends even my advance toward loving to love. (*EP*, 98)

Only a counter-intentionality made manifest by the invisible gaze of a face that faces up to me would fill such an order. The face—always already beyond the phenomenality of surface features—furnishes me with no new intuition, but holds me in a gaze that overcomes the force of my gaze.

Following Levinas, Marion writes, “The face thus imposes upon me a signification, which is opposed to the empire of my *ego*, which up to this point has met no resistance . . . The face opposes itself to me; it thus imposes upon me a signification, one that consists only in the ordeal of its exteriority, of its resistance, and of its transcendence in relation to me” (*EP*, 100).⁶²⁰ The other only ever arrives as a phenomenon when I refuse—by an

⁶²⁰ The imposition of the face that opposes my gaze with its own counter-intentionality manifests itself under the injunction: “Thou shalt not kill.” Beyond the literal oath to not kill the other, Marion writes, “In hearing ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ I can and must, by virtue of begin a lover, hear ‘Do not touch me’—do not advance here, where I arise, for you would tread the ground that, in order for me to appear, must remain intact; the site where I am must remain untouchable, unassimilable, closed to you in order that my

oath—not to take hold of it. A phenomenological apophasis is necessary in order to bear witness of that which I cannot touch or even approach.

By way of the erotic advance, the lover is able to bear witness beyond signification and intuition by signifying nothing: a void, an empty place prepared for the possibility of the gift of the other's intuition, the other who is absolutely exterior to me. The impossibility of signifying the other's alterity is overcome by acknowledging its impossibility, of embracing and protecting it unequivocally. The impossibility never dissipates *for me*, but becomes possible for the other by putting my own intuition under erotic erasure: the other always gives according to her/his/its originary right *not to give itself*: "The other thus must not only say to me, 'Here I am!' in the moment, but she must also promise it for every moment still to come. She must not tell me the signification, she must promise it to me. The signification, which alone allows my intuition to make the phenomenon of the other appear to me, arises like an *oath*—or it is forever lacking" (*EP*, 104). In other words, the other invites me to share her signification and that is how I can bear witness to her beyond objectification, in love. Or, as Marion puts it in an earlier essay, "Charity empties its world of itself in order to make place there for what is unlike it, what does not thank it, what—possibly—does not love it."⁶²¹

The Force of Love: Yearning/Desire

Between the self and the other under the erotic reduction swirls an invisible force. This force is commonly called *yearning* or *desire*; it is the weight behind an intention aiming through the fold of givenness that dis-possess the *ego* of itself. Marion writes,

exteriority remain open to you—the exteriority that alone will fix your intuition and make visible to you a full-fledged phenomenon" (*EP*, 101).

⁶²¹ Marion, "What Love Knows," 167.

It consists only of the position or rather the exposition of the *ego*, which places itself at the disposition of the other—a sort of passage from the nominative to the vocative in the first person, wherein I let myself be summoned by the other, who appears from that point as the dative, to which I assign myself. In pronouncing the words ‘Here I am!’ I pass from the status of the nominative *ego* to the status of he who lets himself be called and summoned in the vocative . . . (*EP*, 106)

Yearning for the other beyond totalization, or reduction to a datum ready-to-hand, structures the love of the one for the other without itself giving itself as a given. It belongs to neither party, but intervenes between them. It is a negative space given as such in order to stage the erotic reduction. Desire, even as it escapes the intentional gaze, “inhabits” the lover to such a degree that it inverts her intentionality, divesting her of everything for the sake of the other beyond possession.⁶²² Marion writes, “Born of the pure lack of the other, the lover’s desire affects him without his truly knowing why, nor through whom—and that is what individualizes him deep down” (*EP*, 108). In other words, yearning/desire for the other beyond possession, beyond a totalization that would reduce the other to an object of *my* experience, structures the lover more fully than any will to knowledge or possession.

Another feature of the force of love is its paradoxical structure. Farley observes,

Desire is insatiable not because the goods of the world are too few, too uniform, or too bland. Desire burns through the goods of the world, even though these goods are not false or intrinsically unsatisfactory. The dissatisfaction of desire arises from desire itself; it cannot be satisfied with any finite thing or even an infinite number of finite things, and the attempt to achieve satisfaction can be destructive. Desire is not like physical hunger. There is a correlation or proportion between physical hunger and its satisfaction: one hungers, then eats, then is satisfied (until later). Desire is simply desire. It yearns, but it never eats; it delights in things but is

⁶²² “Nothing belongs to me more than that which I desire, for *that* is what I lack; that which I lack defines me more intimately than everything that I possess, for what I possess remains exterior to me and what I lack inhabits me; such that I can exchange what I possess, but not the lack that possesses my heart” (*EP*, 108).

never satisfied. It might be thought that desire turns to heaven because it discovers the earth is a meretricious fraud.⁶²³

The force of love is paradoxical because the more it is fed the hungrier it becomes. This is another way in which the erotic approach runs contrary to the natural attitude. With the latter, fulfillment is the *telos* of externality; the quest for knowledge is satisfied by its attainment. Not so with love. Love inverts the common experience by rendering the self of the possibility of satisfaction removed from the experience of the lack of satisfaction: desire.

Moreover, yearning or desire, displaces the self and the other under the erotic reduction. Marion declares, “As a lover, I allow myself to be struck by the seal of that which comes upon me, to the point that, in receiving it as the mark of the other, I also receive myself. I do not individualize myself by self-affirmation or -reflection, but by proxy—by the care that the other takes with me in affecting me and allowing me to be born of this very affect” (*EP*, 110). The lover, who becomes such upon the erotic path toward the other, endures a triple passivity: she is rendered passive according to the oath (“Here I am!”), the advance (“Does anyone love me?”); and the risk (“Can I love first?”) (*EP*, 110-2). She is thus put under erasure (Derrida) or divested of her selfhood (Ricoeur) according to the apophasis initiated by the erotic.

The apophasis of the self under the erotic reduction is central to the argument of Pseudo-Dionysius toward knowledge of God. Stang argues convincingly that *Divine Names* 4.13 is the “climax of this chapter and perhaps the entire treatise.”⁶²⁴ It begins, “This divine yearning (*erōs*) brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the

⁶²³ Farley, 13

⁶²⁴ Stang, 165.

beloved.”⁶²⁵ Stang points out the double entendre at work in the phrase “divine yearning” (ὁ θεῖος ἔρως) signifies at once *our* yearning for God the beloved: “a love that carries us outside of ourselves so that we are beholden both to God *and* to others,” and *God’s* yearning for us. “In other words,” argues Stang, “we yearn because we have been yearned for.”⁶²⁶

Desire is only frustrated by the possibility of having its intuition satisfied: “Desire, in love with impossibility, enables us to see creation as it really is: living and open, always lit by the beauty and compassion of God.”⁶²⁷ Desire is the absurd that holds open the possibility of a hope beyond possibility. Any possibility will not satisfy the thirst that yearning creates and by which it appears on the scene of the erotic. Marion argues that the economy of proportionality, correlation, and possession shares no part in the economy of desire. Reality does not empty into anything; it is not ever finished or complete. Farley concurs, writing,

Desire, precisely by *not* possessing what it desires, is infinitely more deeply connected to its beloved. Relationship to any object is by its nature superficial; it cannot touch us deeply. To the extent that other people become objects of our needs, fears, and longings, our relationship to them is likewise limited. In desiring beyond the world we do not desire a different object or even a different kind of object.⁶²⁸

Farley signifies a desire that is not an object of any sort, and “holy desire is not the sort of thing that desires objects, even holy ones.”⁶²⁹

⁶²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 4.13 712A.

⁶²⁶ Stang, 165-7.

⁶²⁷ Farley 15. See also: “Desire shatters the economy of things; it disputes the tyranny of objects. It longs for the great emptiness, which is beauty and love without limitation. Christians call this ‘God’ because we need some word to specify our desire. But any name draws desire back into the economy of objects and is therefore both an expression and a violation of desire” (13).

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*

In the end, my desire to know is funded by desire itself, which my knowledge can hardly take into account. This originary desire is often omitted and all that remains is the subject in route to knowledge. Even as I cannot doubt my existence inasmuch as I am the I who doubts, my calculus fails to account for the very impulse to know that constitutes my existence. Thus, to re-phrase Descartes, I am able to know that I am because I love, and it is this originary love that conditions my desire to think.

Conclusion: The Intentionality of Love

We may conclude, following Marion's phenomenological determination of love, that love is a situation in which two definitively non-objectifying gazes meet and cross one another. Inasmuch as the gaze of (one or both of) the lover(s) is launched under the erotic reduction, wherein the self brackets itself through the force of love, love gives itself. Phenomenologically, love gives no objective phenomenon to consciousness, it renders nothing for an intentional gaze to rest upon and is therefore invisible to every gaze other than that of the lover(s). Phenomenology teaches us that "[i]ntentionality opens only onto the objectivity of intentional objects, and never directly to another subject: in the field of the aim, only one origin, one intentionality, one *I* can be at play."⁶³⁰ The erotic gaze launches the force of love (desire/ yearning) precisely because it thwarts intentionality by offering no place for the gaze to land.

To love requires a gaze beyond intentionality, and thus beyond objectivity. The other must remain a subject—forever retaining her alterity and *haecceitas*—for me to truly love her. The moment she becomes an object of my experience, the erotic gaze falls from the grace of the face-to-face encounter to mere objectivity, where alterity is

⁶³⁰ Marion, "The Intentionality of Love," 80.

removed from my gaze entirely. The erotic gaze would thus manifest itself in the following way:

If I want truly to gaze on the other, I attach myself neither to her silhouette, however pleasing it might be, nor to some voluntary or involuntary sign that her bearing might reveal, but to her face; I face up to her (*je l'envisage*). “Facing up” to her does not mean fixing my gaze on her mouth or some other emblematic element but fixing exclusively on her eyes, and directly in their center—this ever black point, for it is in fact a question of a simple hole, the pupil. Even for a gaze aiming objectively, the pupil remains a living refutation of objectivity, an irremediable denial of the object; here, for the first time, in the very midst of the visible, there is nothing to see, except an invisible and untargetable (*invisible*) void.⁶³¹

Only when the other gives no objective content to the intentional gaze can love give itself.

When gazes are exchanged beyond objectivity or objectification, the self-other relation is inverted. No longer am I the subject intending objects of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Under the erotic reduction I surrender the intentionality of my gaze for an erotic gaze that divests me of my subject-position before the other. Marion writes, “I do not reach the other by means of the consciousness I have of him; he forces himself upon me by means of the unconsciousness to which he reduces my consciousness.”⁶³²

Along with the divestment of the self, rent of consciousness before the (saturated) face of the other, the phenomenality of the other emerges on the scene—not as object of my experience—but as a subject who holds me in his gaze. Marion describes this situation thusly:

But with love, it is a matter neither of objects nor of appropriation. In contrast, it is a matter of the other as such, irreducibly distinct and autonomous. If I were somehow to appropriate this other for myself, I

⁶³¹ Ibid., 81.

⁶³² Marion, “The Intentionality of Love,” 83. Furthermore: “The rights of the *I* collapse beneath the infinite obligations that come down to *me*. I can never say anything to the other except my shortcomings and my belatedness” (86)

would first have to reduce it to the rank of a slave, of an animal object, and thus lose it as other. Indeed, what explains the perception of the object—namely, its constitution in terms of lived experiences of my consciousness—is the very thing that forbids love, for love should, by hypothesis, make me transcend my lived experiences and my consciousness in order to reach pure alterity.⁶³³

What renders the other decidedly other than me is that she too intends objectively, she too constitutes objects. The other must be free to reduce me to an object of her experience and thus to rob me of my flesh.⁶³⁴ I have no control over the gaze of the other. I can only control my gaze, but in this I possess an immense power, *the power to love*.

The intentionality of love opens up the possibility of an erotic way of knowing the other. Indeed, this is the *only* way of knowing the *other*: “In short, in order for the other to appear to me, I must first love him. If phenomenology is able to lead up to this point, it does so only at its limit and aporia. Only a thinking of charity can advance further.”⁶³⁵

The ground of the erotic is cleared by way of the erotic reduction. Only love opens the space where the gaze of the other can come forth. The other is always beyond my summons, but by creating a space for the other, I invite him beyond seduction to come (*à venir*). Marion writes, “The other appears only if I gratuitously give him the space in which to appear; and I have at my disposal no other space than my own; I must, then, ‘take what is mine’ (John 16:15), take from myself, in order to open the space where the other may appear.”⁶³⁶ The mode of love is thus the “mode of advent.” It is a fecund space marked by heightened expectancy, even hope, that the other whom I love will manifest himself to me. “When I nurture an atmosphere of expectation fueled by a desire to know

⁶³³ Ibid., 75.

⁶³⁴ In another essay Marion writes, “In the taking of flesh, I am given without return to myself, according to appear given—given utterly to myself in order to spend my time there.” Another way of speaking of the union of the soul and the body is the taking of flesh.” Marion, “Flesh or the Givenness of the Self,” 96.

⁶³⁵ Marion, “What Love Knows,” 164.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 166.

the other beyond objectification,” writes Marion, “I inhabit that which can come upon me from elsewhere and without which no present or past would matter to me (*EP*, 37). The intentionality of love, that is, *love’s* intentionality, overcomes the objectifying intentionality of the *ego cogito* and thereby opens a way of knowing God without disclosing upon God’s radical alterity.

AN EROTIC EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE WORD

Tracing the development of Marion’s phenomenology to its apogee—love—we are now in a position to appropriate his thinking for a theology of proclamation. The rationality of Western philosophy, which funds all kinds of knowledge (scientific, psychological, sociological, etc.), knows in a particular way. Knowledge is oriented toward certainty, and thus toward mastery. If I can know, really know, an object of investigation then I can control it. In the West, knowledge tends toward totalization, which is another word for certainty.

Marion observes that knowledge is also oriented toward security. If I can know an object external to myself with certainty, then I can guard myself against its potentially noxious effects; I can preempt or forestall any threat this object may pose to me. In short, knowledge protects my selfhood. Along with this sense of self-preservation that is oriented against the other comes the pleasure generated from knowledge. Marion writes, “Confirmed as more essential than the desire to know is the desire to safeguard oneself, that is to say, to enjoy oneself” (*EP*, 12). As an example, we might look to the quest for knowledge of cancer. Billions of dollars are committed to this pursuit. Our desire to know the causes of cancer and how to mitigate them is directed to the defeat of cancer. This is so precisely because cancer threatens our being with death.

The problem with this form of knowledge, which is perfectly suited to such laudable tasks as the curing of cancer, is that it has usurped the conditions for knowing *in general*. One does not approach one's children as one approaches cancer. Thus knowledge of other persons cannot be concerned with matters of certainty. Objectifying knowledge reduces things to their permanence; the other thus presents a problem for knowledge because the other is irreducible to permanence and thus fails to satisfy the conditions of knowledge (*EP*, 12).

Knowledge of others creates a completely opposite condition for the self. When one proceeds in search of knowledge of objects, with its requisite condition for certainty, one detaches oneself from the object of knowledge. In order to really know other persons, the subject must move toward the other, thereby exposing one's vulnerability and risking one's self before the other. Moreover, as Marion points out, an *ego* can only have (self) certainty as long as the *ego* is focused on itself in the act of thinking. This was Descartes' concern. However, I cannot simultaneously direct my intentionality toward an object of my experience and to myself as the one certifying objects qua *ego*. I am limited by my capacity to think one thing at a time. To be sure, I am able to think the *relation* between myself as *ego* and an object as object, but this is at the expense of both a focus upon myself as subject *and* the object as object.

Knowledge is further complicated when we follow the Cartesian quest for certainty of self and objects for herein a caesura is created between the "saturated phenomenon" that is the other and the "poor phenomena of objectness" (*EP*, 14). What does it mean to me if the mastery of an object of my experience returns me to myself as an *ego*? Only phenomena that are poor in intuition can be deemed rich in certainty, and thus banal, they

are incapable of holding my gaze, which is necessary to maintain both certainty and myself as *ego cogito*.

Arising from Barth's theology of the Word we may take Marion's erotic epistemology as a way toward knowledge of the Word beyond metaphysics. Everything that Marion describes pertaining to the self-other relation can be employed theologically to describe the relation between the Word and the witness. Moreover, Marion's saturated phenomenon approached according to an erotic way of knowing satisfies the conditions for the possibility of bearing witness to the Word (absolute testimony to the Absolute) following Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony. Marion's erotic epistemology supplements Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony in that it provides a way of knowing the Word beyond the limits of experience and history. The Word of God, given in the event of Christian proclamation, "is" the saturated phenomenon par excellence.

An erotic epistemology of the Word proceeds according to the erotic reduction. This should be the governing principle for preaching as witness. It satisfies the conditions for the possibility of "absolute testimony to the Absolute," following Ricoeur's philosophy. Moreover, it accomplishes the divestment of the self that is a precondition for testimony. But what makes the erotic approach especially useful for the kind of proclamatory theology I envision is that it charts a clear course from the witness to the Word.

This new course runs counter to the natural attitude, with its preoccupation with sufficient reason, reciprocity, and the reduction of knowledge to objectness. It opens up with a decision to love. Thus, it affirms the agency of the witness. But at the same time the erotic reduction unfolds according to the divestment of the preacher as subject. Thus,

the preacher's subjectivity trembles with a certain objectivity, the nominative cannot hold back the power of the accusative, the activity of the preacher is troubled by the passivity of the witness. We can therefore see that such an approach skirts the aporetic binary logic that has plagued the Western intellectual tradition. Only under the erotic reduction is preaching possible beyond logocentrism.

Moreover, the erotic reduction presents a sufficient response to Derrida's critique by recognizing a necessary absence as a condition for the possibility of a presence. The intention behind the erotic gaze does not aim objectively at any present object. It aims beyond intentionality toward a space that is marked by a certain absence—opened up by the erotic reduction itself—in the hope that the Word might give itself according to itself.

Marion writes,

Because the lover possesses nothing, and must do so, it remains for him *to hope*. Hope indicates here a privileged mode of access to that which can unfold within the phenomenality opened by the erotic reduction, precisely because one can only hope for that which one does not possess, and for as long as one does not possess it. In the strict sense hope does not and cannot have an object . . . Hope and possession cross one another, inversely proportional. (*EP*, 88)

Love only becomes thinkable according to the mode of the hoped for, of that which can only come upon me as radically unseen and beyond the scope of my vision.

The Word is only ever known in as much as the Word gives itself to be known. An erotic approach to the Word respects the alterity of the Word: "The other does not stop me like a wall or an inert and delimited lump, but offers herself to me like a path that opens, always continuing in proportion to my entry forward; the advance thus requires a permanent fresh start, wherein I remain in the race and alive only by repeating my imbalance . . ." (*EP*, 83-4). In other words, we don't charge in, swords drawn under a

battle cry—not even the battle cry “to the things themselves” (Husserl)—rather, the preacher under the erotic reduction approaches the Word in radical humility. He approaches the threshold of the citadel by laying down his arms, vowing to take nothing and to give all in service of the Word. Only then is the necessary space created whereby the Word might give itself according to itself. Only then does the Word remain *subject* in the event of proclamation.

Under the erotic reduction the notion of witness as signification is radicalized. Inasmuch as signification degrades the other according to that which may be signified—an object—it prevents me from bearing witness beyond objectivity to the radical alterity of the other. Marion writes, “Signification . . . must above all not present the other to me, but must prepare me to receive alterity” (*EP*, 98). In deciding upon an erotic approach to the other, in loving to love, I mark a space wherein my capacity to signify the other is inverted as a space of radical passivity in which I wait upon the advent of the other. In short, signification must come to me.

How then, Marion asks, can a signification ever lead me to experience the alterity of the other in her *haecceitas*? He answers: such an impossibility only ever touches upon possibility when my intentionality as witness is overcome by a counter-intentionality—exteriority’s “irrefutable shock, contradicting my aim, my forecast, and my expectation” (*EP*, 98). His words, quoted above, bear repeating here:

In order for the other to manifest him- or herself to me as a whole phenomenon, I must not wait for the contribution of an intuition, but rather the unpredictable arrival of a signification, coming to contradict my intention *with its own*. In order to see the other, I must not attempt to make him or her appear like a phenomenon oriented according to my centrality; on the contrary, I must wait for a new signification to thwart my own significations and impose upon me, for the first time, an alterity that transcends even my advance toward loving to love.” (*EP*, 98)

In sum, the counter-intentionality at work in the other's gaze structures the "unpredictable arrival" of the Word for Christian proclamation.

Only an erotic epistemology satisfies the conditions for the possibility of bearing witness beyond objectification. As Marion states, "Knowledge does not make love possible, because knowledge flows from love. The lover makes visible what she loves and, without this love, nothing would appear to her. Thus, strictly speaking, the lover does not know what she loves—except insofar as she loves it" (*EP*, 87).⁶³⁷ Furthermore, an erotic approach to the Word for Christian proclamation allows the preacher to bear witness to the Word *beyond Being*. The erotic reduction takes the preoccupation with beingness out of play. As Marion notes, "At one stroke the lover is freed from the emblematic limit of metaphysics, the difference between being and not being—for she loves just as much what is not as what is; indeed, she loves all the more freely by loving that which is not yet"—(this is the ingredient of hope funded by a necessary absence discussed above)—"that which no longer is, or even that which does not have to be in order to appear" (*EP*, 88). Preachers will resonate with this argument for it captures, with a high degree of philosophical sophistication, what many of us have experienced through close engagement with the Word for preaching, namely, the joy of discovering the limit-breaking power of God revealed through God's Word.

Marion's erotic phenomenology opens up a further way of approaching the Word. By way of the erotic advance, the lover is able to bear witness beyond signification and

⁶³⁷ See further: "Finally: the lover loves, or at least can sometimes love, *without seeing*. Indeed, a lover cannot know what she loves in the way she would know an object, and in fact she has no need; if she knew in such a manner, she would be able to reconstitute it and size it up once and for all; neither does she know it as a subsistent being, whose presence and persistence in identity she could verify at any moment; nor does she know it as a being read-at-hand, of which she could, at the opportune moment, make a use that is adapted to her needs, her desires, and her projects (*EP*, 87)."

intuition by signifying nothing: a void, an empty place prepared for the possibility of the gift of the other's intuition, the other who is absolutely exterior to me. The impossibility of signifying the other's alterity is overcome by acknowledging its impossibility, of embracing and protecting it unequivocally. The impossibility never dissipates *for me*, but becomes possible for the other by putting my own intuition under erotic erasure: the other always gives according to her/his/its originary right *not to give itself*: "The other thus must not only say to me, 'Here I am!' in the moment, but she must also promise it for every moment still to come. She must not tell me the signification, she must promise it to me. The signification, which alone allows my intuition to make the phenomenon of the other appear to me, arises like an *oath*—or it is forever lacking" (*EP*, 104). In other words, under the erotic reduction, the preacher as witness is invited to share a signification with the Word and that is how the witness is able to bear witness to the Word, beyond objectification, in love.

Finally, an erotic epistemology of the Word opens a space where the force of love—yearning—can have its way with the preacher. Marion writes, "Nothing belongs to me more than that which I desire, for *that* is what I lack; that which I lack defines me more intimately than everything that I possess, for what I possess remains exterior to me and what I lack inhabits me; such that I can exchange what I possess, but not the lack that possesses my heart" (*EP*, 108). Through an erotic approach opened by the reduction to radical givenness, the preacher is made aware of that originary truth that gripped Augustine: "To praise you is the desire of [men and women], a little piece of your creation. You stir [us] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for

yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁶³⁸ An erotic epistemology unfolds this our greatest desire before the Word: “Born of the pure lack of the other, the lover’s desire affects him without his truly knowing why, nor through whom—and that is what individualizes him deep down” (*EP*, 108).

CONCLUSION: WITNESSING THE WORD EROTIC

We began this investigation in search of a theology of proclamation sufficient to the emerging *epistémè*. Such an angle of analysis has led us to the border that separates (and conjoins) theology and philosophy—at times shuffling back and forth between sides and at other times pointing to the ways in which theology is always already philosophy. The philosophical conversation that this question prompts calls into question the binary configurations that have structured the guild of homiletics. Recall that the so-called crisis of preaching has tended to bifurcate according to the challenge of preaching *theologically* on the part of the preacher and that of a failure of *hearing* on the part of congregants. I questioned the binary conceptualization of the crisis of contemporary preaching and decided to take a both/and approach, whereby the crisis of preaching could be examined along theological *and* epistemological lines. More concretely, the issue I have tried to address is that of conceiving a theology of proclamation *through* the emerging *epistémè*.

IN SUM: THE WORD EROTIC

In surveying the homiletical literature, I discovered that some of the most prominent scholars of preaching rehearse the governing assumptions inherited from the

⁶³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. I, p. 3.

Western metaphysical tradition. With the seminal figures in Western philosophy, many homiletics harbor certain philosophical presuppositions that govern the shape of their theological arguments. Following the early work of Jacques Derrida, I showed how these homiletical presuppositions participate in *logocentrism*, or the a priori operations whereby otherness is structurally excluded in order to protect a culturally privileged concept. Because I reject the binary logic that has governed much of Christian theology in the West my project has taken shape as a deconstruction of such logic by tracing the epistemological assumptions ingredient in contemporary theologies of proclamation. The intended aim of this was to open up a way of understanding preaching in emerging Western contexts free from (or at least cognizant of) the philosophical biases that subvert theology at base.

Thus, the thesis I have attempted to substantiate is that contemporary homiletics smuggles unexamined philosophical presuppositions into theologies of proclamation. The theological crisis for proclamation—that which threatens theology from within—is that the words (*logoi*) we use in reference to God (*theos*) are always already encumbered by a certain rationality (*logos*) and unless we expose this feature of theo-logy and experience the features that simultaneously structure the possibility and impossibility of theology, our quest will never quite reach its intended destination; it will never quite be *theological*. The solution, therefore, that I offered in response to the contemporary crisis of preaching is to proclaim God's Word apart from the metaphysical assumptions that have always already encumbered it. My constructive proposal in light of this critique I labeled *witnessing the Word erotic*.

In chapter one, following a close engagement with the writings of Richard

Lischer, Charles Bartow, William Willimon, James Kay, and Rebecca Chopp, I concluded that a failure to engage the theological crises that trouble preaching from within undercuts the constructive aims of homiletics. A consistent problem that I uncovered in the best of proclamatory theologies (found in all by Rebecca Chopp's work) is a failure to understand or account for the work of language in and upon theology. Next, I argued that a troubled understanding of speech frustrates contemporary theologies of proclamation. The uncritical praise of speech as a mode of conveying (God's) presence in the here and now of Gospel proclamation must be questioned. I made the case that theologies of proclamation ought to attend to the relationship between speech and meaning, but to do so we must rid ourselves of the naïve assumption that speech is somehow *pure* and that, as a filter of thought, it bypasses the "fallenness" of human language in general. Lastly, focusing upon preaching itself, I argued that both speech and writing participate in the play of absence and presence; they are partners in the play of death and life. Writing is not the mere representation of speech, nor does it adulterate some imagined purity of speech; all modes of signification are representational inasmuch as they require a priori signifiers that are already attached to signified concepts.

In an effort to think through what this might mean theologically, as well as homiletically, I next led us to a close engagement with the deconstructive "readings" initiated by Derrida upon the Western philosophical canon. By *testing* the foundations of contemporary homiletics I was able to offer us deeper insight into the challenges and possibilities germane to the preaching task. With the help of Derrida I was able to show that the metaphysical presuppositions that fund many theologies of proclamation are shaky, resting on metaphysical assumptions that undercut certain theological arguments.

Deploying Derrida's neologism, *différance*, for preaching, I sketched several of the key markers for a theology of proclamation less encumbered by philosophical—particularly metaphysical—commitments over and against those of theology. I argued that it is necessary for homiletics to pass through philosophy, that is, to *experience* philosophy, in order to conceive a more theological way of proclaiming God's Word. By exposing theologies of proclamation to a certain *trembling* in the foundations of its discourse, I pointed to the aporetic structure always already at work in Christian proclamation: God's Word in human words is a radical impossibility. The way forward is not to sidestep the aporia, but to abide in it. Specifically, I suggested that homiletics ought to embrace the trace-structure that opens the possibility of language. By so doing, theologians need not invoke a metaphysical concept—"God"—to constrain the unwieldy linguistic sign. The goal ought not to be to protect language from its perceived fallenness, but to experience the trace-logic that calls into question the very opposition between fallen and redeemed language.

As we move toward a theology of proclamation that has experienced the trace as a necessary component of language, I argued that we might encounter the Word apart from a logic committed to self-sameness and self-presence—beyond *logocentrism*. We can experience the Word in its radical alterity *through* language if we will but surrender our need to control language all the way down. Experiencing the trace as an a priori of language will open up a new mode of proclamation that is more humble, less sure of itself, and suppler for Divine encounter.

Next, I showed how Derrida's notion of the hinge (*brisure*)—joint/fracture—of language as speech could be deployed as a way of imagining a more theological

foundation, which is necessarily a foundationless foundation, for Christian proclamation. The hinge opens, as an opening, a path beyond epistemological *phonologism*: the myth of an accessible full-speech, that is, speech that delivers a plentitude of meaning-as-presence. Both speech and writing rely on an a priori structure of representation, or iterability, and I argued that such entanglement ought not be viewed as an obstacle to be overcome, but a necessary feature of language. I asserted the need to find a way to *remain* in the hinge of speech while transcending it. Such an approach, I suggested, is provided by the New Testament concept of preaching as bearing witness.

Lastly, in recognizing a certain *play*, or *give*, in the system of signification we call preaching, we can move toward a more *theological* reconstruction beyond the limits of metaphysics. I contended that we require a theology of proclamation that has experienced, or worked through, the philosophy of Western metaphysics as a mode of thinking and a way of preaching that resists the lure to fall back into logocentric paradigms. *Différance* points to an originary tension at work in language that hovers in and between activity *and* passivity, presence *and* absence. In the pages that follow I will suggest that the *erotic witness* to the *Word* fulfills just such an intention and is already present within the tradition as its most primal mode of signification and knowledge. By embracing rather than ignoring or refuting the fact that all of the words we use to signify God in preaching participate in a necessary structure of thought—a language—that is cloaked with logocentric residue, we may more fully embrace *theo*-logy.

In chapter three, I led us from the deconstructive task necessary for liberating Christian proclamation from the fetters of logocentrism to consider how we might reimagine the work of God in Christian proclamation in light of the poststructural critique

of language. I accepted *prima facie* that if our words about God are always already adulterated by a thoroughly human mode of discourse—tenuously held together according by socio-symbolic matrixes we call language—then how we understand the Word of God can be nothing more than the best attempts at uttering the name “God,” but human attempts nonetheless. In short, I concluded that the deconstruction of contemporary modes of thought and discourse make the task of preaching all the more impossible.

Secondarily, I reasoned that if theology is always already “infected” by philosophy, and philosophy is a decidedly human enterprise, then all theologies of proclamation would be forever encumbered philosophically. In light of these two assumptions, I offered a counterintuitive solution: *in order to become more theological, we must first become more philosophical*: the more deeply aware we are of the philosophical assumptions that inform and bolster theological propositions for preaching, the better prepared we might be to chart a different course.

In spite of its usefulness toward a theology of proclamation aware of its ideological biases, I argued that deconstruction could not lead us to a new starting point for Christian proclamation. It invites us to the threshold of our liberation, to imagine a new way of being in the world. It makes no further promises; it offers no way forward. Deconstruction cannot be the *Sache* (theme or subject) of Christian proclamation, nor can it offer a viable method for sermon development and delivery. In search of a theological starting point that opens with a deep awareness and healthy suspicion of philosophical—and especially metaphysical—commitments that work against a proper theological *terminus a quo* for Christian proclamation, I introduced the early theology of Karl Barth.

From Barth's early essays, lectures, and sermons—and especially from his highly influential second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*—I displayed Barth's awareness of the impossibility of preaching in light of the fallenness of language.⁶³⁹ Moreover, Barth declared, "Our difficulty lies in the content of our task. . . . *As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. . . .* The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison."⁶⁴⁰ Barth offers, I argued, a *philosophical* theology and his engagement with the emerging *epistémè* of his day, following the Great War and the economic, social, and intellectual fallout it produced, offers us a viable point from which to reconsider the Word of God for Christian proclamation.

I argued that it was on account of Barth's theological pedigree (whereby he felt ill-equipped for the preaching task) and his subsequent excision of its philosophical presuppositions that led Barth to his hypersensitivity with regard to the lines delimiting theology from philosophy. It is in this regard that I found Barth to be a particularly valuable conversation partner for this project. To reuse a helpful metaphor, Barth was a theological referee; he always had whistle to mouth ready to call a false start on theology when its methods or warrants encroached beyond the limits of the *theological*. Barth, I argued, is also helpful for the present concerns because he refused to banish the philosophical from view, but recognized the importance of keeping it ever in mind while doing theology. Thus I noted Barth's assistance in keeping us from merely re-inscribing some of the philosophical faux pas in route to a new theology of proclamation.

Furthermore, I argued that Barth was a valuable resource for this project because he recognized, particularly in his early writings, that a certain theological *approach* was

⁶³⁹ Recall that Barth asked the question, "How do we come to say, by means of our language, that which we cannot say at all by this means?" Barth, *CD*, II.1, 220.

⁶⁴⁰ Barth, "The Task of Ministry," 186.

ingredient in a proper articulation of the Word of God. In other words, *how* one goes about making theological claims is inseparable from the very claims that are made. Barth's approach rests entirely upon the foundationless foundation of the love of God experienced through faith. At all points, such a theology is supported by God alone. Accordingly, I took Barth to be an enthusiastic conversation partner because of his unwavering attention to the Word of God *in preaching*—recall Trevor Hart's apt pronouncement that, "Karl Barth's entire theological project might legitimately be described as a 'theology of proclamation.'"⁶⁴¹

I argued that Barth's approach toward the Word of God revealed in Christian Scripture bears many salient commonalities with that of homiletics and I showed, from his own texts, that he shared a concern that God's Word would be heard with minimal philosophical interference. This, however, was only possible if the preacher/theologian remained keen enough to discern the philosophical and wary enough to suspect its encroachment at every point. The young Karl Barth understood better than any of his generation (and perhaps since) that language fails to adequately render the objective reality of God, but this in no way frees us from the responsibility to speak about God. This led me to a close reading of the second edition of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, which worked upon Barth's theological readership to deconstruct many of the governing assumptions theological constructions of the Word.

The key argument, which is sustained throughout Barth's *Romans II*, I argued, is the paradoxical and dialectical relationship we have to God's revelation of Godself necessitated by the radical alterity of God. We do not have the epistemological and linguistic capacities to *fully* know God, even in God's revelation. But, in God's grace

⁶⁴¹ Hart, "The Word, the Words and the Witness," 81.

provided through faith, we can nevertheless claim *really* to know God. Thus, we might say that revelation from God to humanity concerning Godself is simultaneously revealed *and* hidden. To put it differently, God's transcendence is maintained in God's immanence. Such language resonates loudly with the deconstructive thought arising from Derrida's texts. Through the close readings of sections of *Romans* II that ramify under a revealed alterity—1) the alterity of Being manifested in knowledge; 2) the alterity of consciousness manifested in experience; and 3) the alterity of time manifested in history—Barth's deconstructive impulse came increasingly to support theologically that which Derrida argues philosophically.

From Barth's theology of the Word I was able to make several summarizing statements. First, Barth's theology of the Word is guided by an unwavering commitment to the theme of Paul's Letter: the radical alterity of God. This has fundamental consequences for his mode of exegetical engagement, a mode I have suggested bears uncanny resemblance to that of a preacher. Second, on account of God's absolute otherness, the epistemological limits of human finitude prevent us from gaining access to God via rationality. The door is locked from the outside. Consequently, we can claim knowledge of God only in God's self-revelation (i.e., when God unlocks the door and enters the human scene). Yet, even in the genuine knowledge of God that manifests itself in the *event* of revelation, God-knowledge remains God's-knowledge. Third, Barth models a way of engaging God's Word revealed in Scripture. This is a mode of engagement that refuses to operate according to the rules set by psychologism or historicism. And fourth, I argued that Barth models both a logic and a rhetoric that unsettle the reigning paradigms of thought and discourse. So guided is he by the Subject

Matter of his quest that he is willing to bend the rules of logic to accommodate God's revelation of Godself.

I concluded my chapter on Barth's theology of the Word by noting that Barth recognizes a point that has been lost in contemporary homiletics, namely, that the subject matter of our discourse is always beyond the limits of theological language. We cannot, in the strongest sense, speak of God. However, we are simultaneously called to speak of God, and therefore can only speak of God according to an alternative logic. By this we fall back on signifying God as wholly other, knowledge as non-knowledge, possibility as impossibility, and linguistic signification as absence. I thus made the following proposal: the Word whom we encounter in God's revelation of Godself is the Word revealed in love. In short, inasmuch as the Word reveals itself/himself/herself *as* wholly other, the Word "is" love. I suggested that the modality of the erotic provides a framework for gathering together the disparate strands of Barth's argument toward a theology for proclamation; it is a way of understanding the Subject of Christian proclamation—the Word—without reducing the Subject to an object of mere understanding. The Word remains the Word in Christian proclamation and the erotic way of knowing structures the preacher in relation to the alterity of God as the center of our theology.

In chapter four, I turned to the human agent necessary for the possibility of Christian proclamation: the preacher. In light of Derrida's challenges to logocentric thought, I argued for the need of a way of speaking that does not participate—that refuses to participate—in the logic of onto-theology. We require, I argued, a mode of signification appropriate to the Absolute, one that transcends the rationalistic and hegemonic totalities of sameness, one that opens up an approach to the *totaliter aliter* by

responding to God's illeity. Moreover, and following from the first task, I argued that we require a mode of articulating the Word that submits to an alterity beyond comprehension without succumbing to nihilism or solipsism. Such would need to follow the givenness of the Word in the fold of proclamation and allow that Word to forge its own epistemological networks to which we would then respond.

Taking these contributions to heart, I articulated a mode of proclamation sufficient to the Derridian critique and a theology of the Word consistent with that of *Romans II* following the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's philosophy of testimony, or bearing-witness, has significantly influenced homiletics and while I agreed with Ricoeur to a large extent, I argued that he too fails to offer the solution we seek. Nevertheless, Ricoeur gets us started down the right path—an aporetic and dangerous path, to be sure. By reading Ricoeur against himself we were able to merge with another route that witnessing might take.

Through a close reading of Ricoeur's seminal essay, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," I argued that Ricoeur offers a viable path that the preacher might follow in carrying out the task of proclamation less encumbered by metaphysical presuppositions. Furthermore, his philosophy of testimony provides a philosophical corollary to Barth's theology of the Word. I noted, however, that Ricoeur fails (in his earlier work at least) to push testimony beyond the limits of experience and history. This was precisely where Barth led us through his theological deconstruction of the reigning philosophical presuppositions of his day. I showed that testimony is too comfortable within the limits of speech and is too committed to a priori frameworks (Ricoeur's criteriology) that determine in advance what authentic testimony should look like. It views testimony too

positively. In other words, it ignores the negative movements of testimony—saying what goes unspoken in the saying and refusing to remain in the “middle,” (to borrow Shelly Rambo’s phrase) in the void punctured in the fabric of the possible by the impossible.

Thus, in conversation with trauma theory and Shoah studies, I pushed Ricoeur’s philosophy of testimony beyond the limits imposed upon it. Among other possible candidates (preaching as pastoring, storytelling, teaching, etc.), preaching as witness emerged as the best approach for getting the preacher’s momentum moving in the direction of the biblical witness to the God who reveals Godself to us in experience, history, and most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ without becoming reducible thereto. I concluded this chapter by recognizing several aspects of Ricoeur’s more mature philosophy (inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas) that avoids some of the philosophical hang-ups of his earlier “Hermeneutics of Testimony.”

In the fifth and final chapter, I offered a careful treatment of Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology, proceeding from his famous third reduction in route to his phenomenology of love. I argued that the guiding principle by which (Marion’s brand of) phenomenology operates offers a philosophical corollary to Barth’s theological maxim—“God is God.” In route to this argument, I showed that Marion and Barth are biased against the post-Enlightenment project centered upon the self as subject. Moreover, both Marion and Barth are attuned to the same suspicion that propels Derrida’s project of deconstruction, namely, that we humans have a propensity to reduce otherness to sameness in a veiled effort to dominate the otherness of the other according to a self-same hegemony.

I contended that Marion’s phenomenological reduction is apropos for mapping the

route of the Christian preacher *to* the Word of God vis-à-vis the contemporary *epistémè* because it is hypersensitive to the metaphysical conditions that structure proclamation a priori. By charting a course beyond the frontier of metaphysics, Marion offered us a way of articulating the necessary orientation of the preacher before the Word.

Marion's "principle" of givenness, I argued, is the key to understanding his phenomenological critique. Moreover, I showed how his principle of givenness might provide for a theo-philosophical operation that could structure the relationship between the witness and the Word in Christian proclamation. Inasmuch as the "effect" of givenness that "vibrates" in the soul of the witness is beyond representation, only a way of speaking of this event and its effect beyond representation will suffice. I defended the claim that Marion's phenomenology of givenness provides homiletics with a rigorous way of describing the unfolding of the Word as a gift for Christian proclamation.⁶⁴² This argument unfolded according to several observations.

First, according to Marion's phenomenology, givenness is radically beyond the control of the witness. Second, we must distinguish theologically between the phenomenon of the Word, the *event* of givenness, and the Giver glimpsed beyond them both. The preacher is summoned to bear witness at the fold of the given. Thus, she cannot reduce the Word to a propositional claim, nor to an inner experience, but she ought to bear witness *through* the fold of givenness to the Giver glimpsed in the giving. Third, the magnitude, or force, of the given exceeds the epistemological capacity of the preacher as witness. Phenomenologically speaking, this means that the givenness to which the preacher exposes herself/is exposed exceeds categorical intuition. Fourth, though always personal, the givenness of the gift is reducible neither to a subjective capacity of the

⁶⁴² He writes, "Givenness opens the unsurpassable space of the given in general" (*BG*, 56).

witness, nor to mere objectivity. Inasmuch as the gift is an apt designation for the Word given in its alterity, Marion's philosophy serves the kind of (philosophical) theology of proclamation needed to address the poststructural critiques of epistemology, a critique shared by those steeped in the emerging *epistémè*. Such a conceptualization of the gift given, I concluded, opens up a theology of proclamation beyond economics, metaphysics, and the hegemony of the *I* (*ego cogito*).

Furthermore, with Marion I argued that the *ego* as flesh not only inverts the process of epistemology, it releases the *I* from the fetters of metaphysics. This release is occasioned by the saturation of intuition beyond the self-same capacity of the subject's intentionality. Accordingly, Marion's concept of the saturated phenomenon is defined as an object of experience marked by its superabundance of intuition exceeding intentionality.⁶⁴³ In light of the claim of revealed theology, I argued that inasmuch as God gives Godself through God's Word in Christian proclamation, the givenness of said Word would follow a parallel track to that of the saturated phenomenon. Indeed, it would constitute a phenomenality beyond even that articulated by the saturated phenomenon—a saturation to the second degree.⁶⁴⁴ The givenness of God's revelation of Godself would thus receive a degree of philosophical sophistication from Marion's radical phenomenology. Marion's own words in this regard bear repeating:

If the Revelation of God as showing itself starting from himself alone can in fact ever take place, phenomenology must redefine its own limits and learn to pass beyond them following clear-cut and rigorous procedures. . . .

⁶⁴³ Marion notes, "The saturated phenomenon in the end establishes the truth of all phenomenality because it marks, more than any other phenomenon, the givenness from which it comes. The paradox, understood in the strictest sense, no longer runs counter to appearance; it runs with apparition" (*BG*, 227).

⁶⁴⁴ "Phenomenology cannot decide if a revelation can or should ever give itself, but it (and it alone) can determine that, in case it does, such a phenomenon of revelation should assume the figure of the paradox of paradoxes. If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality" (*BG*, 235).

Otherwise, it will repeat the absurd denegation on which metaphysics and the ‘question of Being’ stubbornly insist: better to erase or disfigure the possibility of Revelation than redefine the transcendental conditions of manifestation in order to admit the mere possibility of a phenomenon of revelation. (*BG*, 242)

I concluded my engagement with Marion’s erotic phenomenology with the following observations. First, a radically reduced phenomenology serves a revealed theology (like Barth’s) by refusing to inscribe the gift of God’s revelation of Godself within limits: conceived by so-called rationality or even phenomenality. Second, following the deconstruction of the *ego*—the *I* before the alterity of the Word—the preacher as witness becomes not only a helpful way of describing the task of preaching, but an absolute philosophical necessity. The witness is designated by an alterity given.

Bringing Marion’s argument into conversation with the concerns of this dissertation, I asserted that the central approach, attitude, or orientation that the preacher ought to take toward the Word of God given for Christian proclamation is captured by the erotic. Only love structures a relation between the Word and the witness beyond epistemological reduction (totalization) and metaphysical speculation. Moreover, love provides another path toward genuine knowledge than logic. Such is desperately needed for preaching in the emerging *epistémè* because Western rationality has so thoroughly shaped language and thought that it limits Christian theology and homiletics a priori. An erotic approach to the Word participates in the theology of Barth and the epistemological divestment (*dépouillement*) of Ricoeur.

Love, I argued, does not participate in the traditional rules of epistemology, but gives rise to thought and genuine knowledge nonetheless. Marion recognizes (with Ricoeur) that to articulate that which exceeds the possibility of articulation—an absolute

testimony of the Absolute—necessitates a bit of philosophical acrobatics on our part. Given that our words are always already inscribed in a certain *logos* that simultaneously structures the possibility of expression and the impossibility of certain expressions, we must proceed in search of an alternative rationality that is better suited to proclamatory witness.

Love is not only a constraining factor for the self; it also allows the self access to a certain knowledge that is beyond (because it exceeds) intuition. Saturated phenomena can only be known insofar as they are intended beyond the limits of intentionality. They skirt the authority of the intentional gaze that marks subjectivity as much as selfhood. In light of the givenness of Revelation—inasmuch as it floods consciousness with an excess of intuition—it stands to reason that Revelation—the Word—can only be known insofar as the Word is loved. This new course, I suggested, runs counter to the natural attitude, with its preoccupation with sufficient reason, reciprocity, and the reduction of knowledge to objectness. It opens up with a decision to love. Thus, it affirms the agency of the witness.⁶⁴⁵

But at the same time, the erotic reduction unfolds according to the divestment of the preacher as subject. Thus, the preacher's subjectivity trembles with a certain objectivity: the nominative cannot hold back the power of the accusative, the activity of the preacher is troubled by the passivity of the witness.⁶⁴⁶ We can therefore see that such an approach skirts the aporetic binary logic that has plagued the Western intellectual

⁶⁴⁵ Marion, "The Banality of Saturation," 408: "In short, the witness plays his part in the interval between, on the one hand, the indisputable and incontestable excess of intuition lived and, on the other, the never compensated lack of the concepts that would render this experience an objective experience—in other words, that would make it an object."

⁶⁴⁶ Marion writes, "The lover, who becomes such upon the erotic path toward the other, endures a triple passivity: she is rendered passive according to the oath ("Here I am!"), the advance ("Does anyone love me?"); and the risk ("Can I love first?")" (*EP*, 110-2).

tradition. Only under the erotic reduction is preaching possible beyond logocentrism.

A final way in which the erotic reduction presents a sufficient response to Derrida's critique is that it recognizes a necessary absence as a condition for the possibility of a presence. The intention behind the erotic gaze does not aim objectively at any present object. It aims beyond intentionality toward a space that is marked by a certain absence, that is opened up by the erotic reduction itself, in the hope that the Word might give itself according to itself.

In conclusion, *Witnessing the Word Erotic* offers contemporary preachers a theology of proclamation sufficient to the emerging *epistémè* insofar as it does not seek to overcome the differential and arbitrary structure of language, but sees it as a felicitous construct that bears witness to the radical alterity of the Word. As a way of thinking about the task of preaching it provides a way of bearing witness to the subject matter of Christian proclamation beyond certainty. Such an approach, funded as it is by the modality of the erotic, embraces play as a way of living into the productive tension established by the originary trace structure of all language. It provides—at least it aims to provide—a theology sufficient to the Word which transcends history and experience while remaining at work within both. The preacher as witness recognizes herself as always and already a belated witness because the witness is born in the wake of an originary giftedness that precludes the possibility of any constructivist epistemology.

Witnessing the Word Erotic offers a way of overcoming the metaphysical binary that divides presence from absence and privileges the former in the speech-event of preaching. It recognizes that the Word gives an absence-in-presence to the gifted, the preacher, and thus the preacher as witness testifies not only to presence, but also to

absence. Indeed, this aporia becomes a space for yearning after God and thus coming to know God more fully. Confessing the radical alterity of the Word means that presence is always in play with absence. The erotic modality allows us to lean into this non-binary operation at work within language as a way of knowing the Word without reducing the Word to an imagined presence, and thus reducing revealed theology to metaphysics.

THE EROTIC WITNESS

Readers will undoubtedly be aware by this point in my dissertation that the central concern of this project is theoretical. Engaging the field of homiletics at its foundations—indeed, below its foundations by questioning its foundationalist assumptions—has demanded focused attention upon the theological and philosophical assumptions that structure preaching before a preacher ever puts pen to paper for sermon development. By extension, such focused reflection upon a (philosophical) theology of proclamation has meant that I have devoted very little attention to the actual practice of preaching. At this late hour in my project it is unfeasible to fully explicate how witnessing the Word erotic impacts the sermon development and delivery process. Nevertheless, I can provide a sketch of how these theological and philosophical reconsiderations bear upon homiletical praxis. Such practice finds expression under the guise of the erotic witness.

There are five necessary conditions for the possibility of preaching. Depending upon one's theological and denominational orientation, other features might be considered indispensable; but I contend that these five are necessary for *every* denomination and theological position. First, and this often goes without saying (which is problematic), preaching arises within the auspices of the cosmos. That the wider world impacts sermon development and delivery is often assumed *prima facie* by homileticians

and preachers. Eunjoo Kim reminds us, however, that a theology of preaching is necessarily a theology of diversity in our globalized realities, and particularly in post-Christendom contexts in the West. In a recent essay, Kim writes, “Post-Christendom culture challenges the Church to reconsider its identity and relationship with God and others and demands another paradigm shift in theology and practice.”⁶⁴⁷ Charles Campbell has also argued convincingly that we must consider the broader economic and political conditions that impact local aspects of faith and existence. In particular, his treatment of the counter-narrative offered by the “powers and principalities” (esp. global capitalism) shapes the homiletical *Sitz im Leben*.⁶⁴⁸ I open this section on homiletical praxis by looking at the situation of the erotic witness in the world.

Second, and moving closer to the locus of discrete homiletical acts—spatially, at least—is the congregational context out of which and into which preaching takes place. Preaching always takes place in a place that is shaped by cultural and situational factors that preachers ignore to their own detriment. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale was the first to devote a book-length treatment to congregational “exegesis,” though others before and after her have also stressed its importance.⁶⁴⁹ Preaching as erotic testimony demands great attention to the life and work of particular congregants.

Third, preaching always requires a preacher. The person who bears witness to the Word erotic is called out of the world by God and a particular congregation to bear

⁶⁴⁷ Eunjoo Mary Kim, “A Theology of Preaching in Post-Christendom: Seeking a New Paradigm,” in the papers of *Societas Homiletica* Biennial Meeting (Wittenberg, Germany, 2012), 1. See also Idem, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

⁶⁴⁸ See Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

⁶⁴⁹ See Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). See also Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 1st ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 9-15. Nor was Tubbs Tisdale the last to stress this fact. See Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching in the Congregational System,” *Encounter* 60, no. 4 (Aut 1999): 551-82 and Ronald D. Sisk, “Preaching in a Congregational Context,” *Review & Expositor* 100, no. 3 (Sum 2003): 375-82.

(erotic) witness to God's work in the world and church. Recently, homiletics has seen a marked challenge to the supposed authoritarianism of the preacher as solitary speaker through an emphasis on congregational collaboration, or "roundtable" preaching.⁶⁵⁰ By this approach, the solitary preacher is supplemented or supplanted by a group of preachers (even the entire congregation) in the event of preaching. I contend below that such praxis ought to have a place in the life of the church, but that when it subsumes the preaching event it sacrifices much more than the preacher's authority. Having personally participated in many of these roundtable style services, and flowing from my theological philosophical arguments above, I find such an approach an attenuation of the Word, which robs communities of experiencing a compelling Word from God for the people of God.

Fourth, preaching requires the Bible. Preaching requires deep engagement with a passage of Scripture because the Bible bears witness to the Word of God. Preaching requires the Bible as a witness, but, as a witness, Scripture opens itself up to theological interrogation guided by faith (*credo ut intelligam*). As Karl Barth once declared,

[Theology's] searching of the Scriptures consists in asking the texts whether and to what extent they might witness to [God] . . . Every possible means must be used: philological and historical criticism and analysis, careful consideration of the nearer and the more remote textual relationships, and not least, the enlistment of every device of the conjectural imagination that is available.⁶⁵¹

How one chooses to engage the biblical text for preaching will vary from tradition to tradition, and even within denominations, opinions vary. Nevertheless, that the Bible is

⁶⁵⁰ See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995) and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). For a far less rigorous attack on speech-making ("speaching") see Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse Press, 2011).

⁶⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 34-5.

necessary for a Christian sermon is seldom challenged.⁶⁵² Witnessing the Word erotic views Scripture as a witness to the Word's agency in and beyond contemporary contexts.

Fifth, and finally, preaching requires a certain byproduct of the engagement by the preacher with the world and the biblical text for a particular time and place.

Conventionally, this byproduct is called a sermon. Preaching is impossible without a sermon and thus I show how the sermon takes on nuanced qualities by erotic preaching. The sermon is the point at which all of the theological, philosophical, contextual, and exegetical considerations come together. It is by a sermon that one's theology of proclamation shows its true form. Unlike some recent homiletics texts that present bold arguments for homiletical reform at the level of theory but bear little sign of change at the level of practice, witnessing the Word erotic will lead to sermons of radically different substance and timbre than is found in most mainline and evangelical Protestant churches in the West.

The World of Erotic Preaching

The (philosophical) theology of proclamation outlined above requires a different attitude toward the world than is found in most contemporary homiletics texts. Many preachers and homileticians divide the world from the congregation and/or from the (world of the) Text.⁶⁵³ Such a distinction rests on a metaphysical foundation and relies

⁶⁵² See Reginald H. Fuller *The Use of the Bible in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981) for a treatment of the various approaches to the Bible for preaching. See also, with a look to the use of Scripture to fashion theological arguments, David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 1999).

⁶⁵³ See Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (London & New York: Continuum, 2006) whose very approach provides a testimony to the division between Word in Text versus Word in the World in homiletics through her separate treatments of what she labels dialectical, analogical, and sacramental imaginations. A marked exception to this trend is found in African American homiletics, which have a much greater sense of the permeability of the Word between Text, congregational context and world. See Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville:

upon a binary logic that presupposes the possibility of such bifurcation. Both the congregation (including the preacher) and the biblical Text are always in the world. To borrow a well-known image, the world relates to both Text and congregational context the way a sunken ship relates to the ocean: while the ship contains only a part of the ocean, the ocean contains all of the ship. Erotic preaching resists such a philosophical bifurcation and thereby opens homiletics up to consider afresh the necessary relationality between world and Text/congregational context.

Another feature of erotic preaching vis-à-vis the world is that it opens a mode of signification where God is held as simultaneously present and absent in the world. Under the erotic gaze, which seeks the presence of the Word in the world while recognizing a necessary absence that is ingredient in intentionality and representation in general, the preacher intends the Word beyond objectification and totalization. What this means is that she cannot point to discrete events in history or experience and presume that they signify either the presence or the absence of God; the two aspects of God are inextricable and necessarily so. Thomas G. Long articulates this point in his helpful text, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*. In his deep engagement with the philosophical and theological aspects of theodicy (the problem of reconciling belief in a God who is good and just given the presence of evil and suffering), Long cautions preachers to avoid trying to pick and choose which aspects of experience and history signify God's presence and which do not. Reflecting on Jesus' parable of the weeds (Mt. 13:24-43), Long concludes, "God's power in the world is ambiguous. It doesn't look like power—in fact, it looks surprisingly like a worthless weed that we'd like to root out of the field—but it is nevertheless working, in stealth fashion, to produce something of great

size and pervasive impact.”⁶⁵⁴ In other words, when we intend events in the world of history or experience, we can never be absolutely certain that those events bear witness to the presence or absence of God.

Furthermore, under the erotic reduction, preaching does not seek to reduce objects of experience in the world to discursive acts; rather, erotic preaching engages deeply in the world in order to prompt congregational engagement with the God who is simultaneously in and beyond objectification. One might go so far as to say that to say erotic preaching is to say eschatological preaching. It bears witness to an already/not yet aspect to which the preacher under the erotic reduction aims to draw into congregational consciousness. Given that the world is in the Text, church, and preacher, the erotic sermon aims to open up, to unfold, to reveal (apokaluptein) the Word at work to which the Text, preacher, church, and sermon bear witness.

Lastly, the world bears significantly upon erotic preaching inasmuch as it operates according to metaphysical constructs that the Word of God calls under deconstructive erasure. Like the yeast that is smuggled into a vast measure of flour (Mt. 13:33), the Word is at work in the world as a corrosive element, destabilizing the reigning powers and principalities. The task of erotic preaching is to bear witness to this power at work in the world and to evoke congregational participation in the very work of the Word in the world signified by the Text.

The Congregation and Erotic Preaching

Inasmuch as language is a contextually dependent, socio-symbolic matrix where meaning is generated, preaching is dependent upon the discrete socio-symbolic currents

⁶⁵⁴ Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 149. See my review in *Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (2013): 262-4.

at work in *congregational contexts*. As Saussure scholar Paul Thibault reminds us, “The sign is not a picture or a photographic replica of something else in the outside world. . . . The point is that the semiological relationship between signifier and signified is the means whereby language users selectively orientate to and give structure to the analogue flux of perceptual phenomena in the outside world.”⁶⁵⁵ Thus, congregations may be understood to be necessary participants in erotic preaching insofar as they contribute to the socio-symbolic milieu where meaning is made. In other words, they provide the glue that holds systems of signification together.

The church is a community of (non)discursive thought, as space where meaning takes place *between* world, church, preacher, and Text in the sermonic event. Erotic preaching recognizes this fact and aims to ignite a plurality of meanings rather than narrow meaning to a single (the preacher’s) perspective. The church may thus be viewed as a space created in the world for erotic play, where a group of people aims to suspend or bracket the objectification at work in language and culture whereby others are reduced to mere objects of experience. Erotic preaching calls up the called-out ones (*ek-klesia*) to abide in a space of (non)discursive play. They are led—or can be led—to experience the sermon as more than propositional content transfer, but as an event of communal divestment. Here the community is invited—for fifteen minutes—to intend the Word beyond signification, in Text, church and world. Quite simply, under the erotic reduction opened by the preacher in partnership with the church and under the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is called to participate in an erotic (foolish) dance that sets the community’s being-in-the-world in critical relation to the world.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵⁵ Thibault, *Re-Reading Saussure*, 214.

⁶⁵⁶ On the foolishness of preaching see Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching*

The Preacher as Erotic Witness

The preacher is called by God and a community of faith and justice as one set apart for the task of proclamation. Thus the preacher is the first to enter under the erotic reduction and is summoned to a life of erotic awareness in the world and in the church. This is not a simple task nor is it a quaint calling to a life of ease. It means a continual stripping bear (*dépouillement*) of the self for the sake of the Word and the community. Recall that such divestment was deemed a necessary first step toward testimony according to Ricoeur.⁶⁵⁷ The preacher as erotic witness finds no clearer calling than that expressed by the Apostle Paul when he evokes the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2: 5-8:

You must have the same consciousness (*phroneó*) that was also in Christ Jesus. Who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as worthy of desire. Instead, he emptied himself, taking the humble position of a slave and was born in the likeness of a human being. And having taken the visible form of a human, he further humbled himself (*etapeinōsen heauton*) in obedience to God and submitted himself to death, even death on a cross.

Before the Word under the erotic reduction, the preacher is called to participate in the consciousness of Christ by bracketing her own subject position so that the Word of God might dwell there abundantly. This is the erotic preacher's task and the abdication of the preacher's subject position provides a marked shift between erotic preaching and most contemporary preaching.⁶⁵⁸ This task clings to a promise that God will honor her sacrifice by exalting (*hyperypsōsen*) her speech as that appropriate to the Divine.

Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

⁶⁵⁷ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony 120-1.

⁶⁵⁸ See, for example, the popular introductory preaching text by Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 99ff. Allen's "starting points for sermon preparation" in no way suggest the divestment of the preacher; in fact, the most he has to say on the person of the preacher is this: "We need to be self-aware, but not self-preoccupied" (54). Consider also Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), the most widely used introductory preaching text in evangelical Christian seminaries. Robinson's "road from text to sermon" (73ff.) does not even mention the consciousness of the preacher, much less his divestment.

The epistemological reduction initiated by the erotic preacher out of love for God's Word, God's people, and the world God loves is motivated *theologically*. Nevertheless, such a theological activity encroaches upon aspects long regarded under the provenance of philosophy. It is only by a theologically motivated divestment that the preacher under the erotic reduction gains the sight to move beyond the philosophical binaries structured by the Western metaphysical tradition.

Divestment takes place all the way down or not at all. In other words, in deciding to love the preacher-as-self/same subject is brought under erasure so that her consciousness is allowed to participate in the kind of self-abnegating love modeled by Christ Jesus. This is more than philosophical or theological abracadabra, as Barth once recognized. Rather, it is an act of the will motivated by unconditional love for God, world, Text, and congregation. The erotic reduction structures a certain relation to these elements. To borrow John's words, "For him (Christ) to increase it is necessary that I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). Hereby the relation that is established is one in which the self is barred from objectification or totalization. It opens the ground of the "Here I am!" argued vigorously by Levinas and Marion. As Marion observes, "The other appears only if I gratuitously give him the space in which to appear; and I have at my disposal no other space than my own; I must, then, 'take what is mine' (John 16:15), take from myself, in order to open the space where the other may appear."⁶⁵⁹

The Text as Erotic Witness

Under the erotic reduction the preacher as erotic witness is able to approach the Text beyond objectification. When this takes place, the post-Enlightenment concern with

⁶⁵⁹ Marion, "What Love Knows," 166.

representation as an obstacle to be overcome dissolves. The preacher is able to approach the textuality of the Text—as resting upon a necessary semiological representation structured by language in general—as a felicitous construct, rather than a nefarious one. In other words, the spacing (semiotic and temporal) at work in the textuality of the Text carves out a fecund space for erotic intentionality. Under the erotic reduction the Text's permeability becomes visible. Here the preacher can bear witness to the Word at any point between Text, world (history/experience), congregation, or preacher. As homiletician Lance Pape notes,

When it comes to the Bible, to speak only of symbols and metaphors, to speak only of poetic reference achieved through the subversion of reference to the world of everyday experience, to speak, in other words, exclusively of a textual world that is poetically rendered is to forfeit the 'historic density' of what the Bible claims and what Christians believe.⁶⁶⁰

A feature of the text, when considered following the poststructural critique, is that it refers in many directions at once.

What this means for erotic preaching is that the Text opens itself up to a kind of archeology of the Word erotic in critical and productive tension with the world and the church. Such an approach deepens the importance of biblical and historical scholarship for the preacher. Even the etymologies and historical nuances of the language deployed by the Text present themselves to the preacher under the erotic gaze and are fodder for sermonic discourse.⁶⁶¹ Attention to these textual, symbolic, metaphorical, poetic, narratological, etc. aspects of the Text does not mean a diversion away from a proper

⁶⁶⁰ Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 69-70.

⁶⁶¹ We saw such an approach defended by Barth's own engagement with Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where Barth suggested that such "critical freedom" was employed by John Calvin under the auspices of "Verbal Inspiration": "Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document—of any document!—except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words?" (*R II*, 18).

theological starting point. Contra Kay's binary logic, the more theological we wish to be in our preaching the more philosophical we must be.⁶⁶²

When the Text is treated under the erotic reduction preachers become passive observers of the work of the Text in the world and the work of the world in the Text. As biblical scholar Brennan Breed has recently argued, we who attend to the Text are invited to "follow" biblical Texts through history and particular contexts, not in order to close down the significance of the Text to one, discrete meaning or interpretation, but to allow the semiological pluriformity to ring more fully.⁶⁶³ Such an approach opens the preacher and congregation up to the Absolute; it establishes conditions whereby the Text is suppler for Divine encounter.

Lastly, it is important to remember that for erotic preaching the Text is viewed as an erotic witness, pointing through its spacing, its *différance*, to the Word. By saturating the preacher's intentional gaze with a surplus of meaning the Text simultaneously testifies to God's activity while safeguarding God's alterity. In the biblical Text we witness an alternative logic played out, an erotic logic that subverts the so-called rationality by which logic is thought to operate. In the Text preachers may catch a glimpse of the Word at the fold of givenness, for, as I argued above, the Word gives itself inasmuch as it shows itself.

The Sermon as Erotic Witness

All of the above features—the world, the congregation, the preacher, the Text—are ingredient in the erotic sermon. This is where the theoretical work painstakingly

⁶⁶² Cf. Kay, *Preaching and Theology*, 1-6 and my discussion of Kay's text in chapter one of this dissertation.

⁶⁶³ See Brennan Breed, "'Engraved on a Rock Forever': Reception History and the Hebrew Bible," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2012).

argued through the many pages of this dissertation is deployed. The sermon as erotic witness participates in an alternative rationality afforded by the saturation of intuition and the divestment of the preacher. This alternative rationality produces a sermonic event that is utterly foolish by the world's standards. Like a love letter, or a Shakespearian sonnet, the erotic sermon plays in between discursive and non-discursive thought.

Nearly all preaching conforms to discursive modes of expression; that is, it aims to communicate information by aligning with a priori forms of expression. Expository preaching conforms to patterns of rational argument; narrative preaching employs the rubrics of storytelling. Erotic sermons operate according to an intention that exceeds formal expression. It arises out of a frenzied desire to put into words that which has been experienced through the trace of the Word in the Text, the world, the congregation, and the preacher herself, coupled with the recognition that words fail to render the erotic experience without dissimulation, the sermon becomes the hinge (*brisure*) where meaning is at once opened and closed. Thus, erotic preaching demands that the preacher search for new, non-discursive modes of expression in order to bear witness to the Absolute in and beyond the realm of language.⁶⁶⁴ It will open up congregations to a kind of preaching that has found expression only in the African American preaching tradition as the *dénouement* of sermonic discourse.⁶⁶⁵

Erotic preaching moves in the direction of sermon development by following the erotic path laid out by Marion. It begins by the oath ("Here I am!"), a radical openness

⁶⁶⁴ Preachers can learn much by exploring the works of those thinkers who have sought new modes of expression, like the apophatic mystics (e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius, Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Angela of Foligno, Marguarite D'Oingt) and Modern writers who explore the frontiers of non-discursive thought like Georges Bataille, Hélène Cixous, and Jean Genet.

⁶⁶⁵ This is variously referred to as "moaning," "whooping," "tuning," or "zooning." See Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 89: "The most widely sought Black preachers in the country tend to use intonation only in climactic utterance or celebration, if they use it at all."

initiated on the part of the preacher to the world, the congregation, and the Text. It is the first step because it is necessary to prepare a space for the Word through a divestment of the preacher's consciousness. The oath opens the possibility of an advance ("Does anyone out there love me?"), which directs the preacher's intentionality out into the world (of the text) in search of a Word from the Lord. The last step is described by Marion as the risk ("Can I love first?"). It prepares the way for testimony, for only by first deciding resolutely to love is the erotic reduction sufficiently initiated and the stage set for sermon development.

An erotic sermon—like a love-letter, like Barth's "sermon" in the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*—bears witness to a saturated encounter. In other words, because it intends a Word that exceeds the preacher's capacity for intuition, it gives rise to a surplus of thoughts and feelings. Only if the preacher resists the urge to collapse this plurality by restricting her speech to such that is predetermined for rational discourse, will the Word remain free to have its way with the preacher and congregation in the sermonic event. To put it concretely, the preacher will need to experiment with both discursive and non-discursive modes of speech. She will need to play in the spacing that unfolds between the (written) Text and her (spoken) sermon. This will necessitate sermons that are more poetic, more aphoristic, and less conditioned by linear patterns of speech. Her sermon will bear greater semblance to an ecstatic prayer than a well-reasoned discourse.⁶⁶⁶ This will allow her to bear witness to the Word as absence/presence through

⁶⁶⁶ This is true for both traditional sermons and the so-called "roundtable" sermon, but it is particularly problematic for the latter. I have no problem whatsoever in the preacher engaging her congregants when interpreting the biblical Text. However, at day's end, I believe that it is the preacher herself who is summoned to a life of divestment that opens the possibility of erotic witness. Only she is charged with this weighty responsibility. One might imagine a small community where mystical contemplation and prayer are governing virtues of faith and praxis. In such a context the roundtable sermon could have a place. Such a community is not intimidated by McClure, Rose and others, however. Their

the creative and effusive embodiment of the sermon as a trace event.

In short, under the guise of the erotic witness a sermon is a public act of divestment that creates a fissure—a generative space—for the Word between world, church, preacher and Text. When a congregant beholds an erotic sermon s/he is invited into an erotic space where s/he is invited to participate in the event of preaching in her soul. While this might seem like a radical proposal for sermons—and it is—it is surprisingly common in everyday experience. Consider how the emotional effusiveness of athletes in the intensity of a sporting event can draw fans in to experience a piece of that emotional intensity. Consider how the love professed in word and deed at a wedding ceremony can draw the congregation into an erotic space where they are able to taste a small sample of the love flowing between the soon-to-be-wedded couple. The aim of erotic preaching should not be to kindle such emotional experiences. What I am suggesting is that the path of the erotic reduction opens up a site of erotic intentionality. The preacher is called to bear witness to the Word erotic. When this happens, congregations—indeed, the world—cannot help but experience the trace of the God who decided to love first (Jn. 3:16).

conversational homiletic is prompted by an a priori belief in the subjectivity of believers in the strongest sense (as *ego cogito*) and they think that by diffusing the subjectivity truth will be more likely to emerge.

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