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God's Absence is Not Nothing:
Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

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GOD'S ABSENCE IS NOT NOTHING:
THINKING THE AB-SOLUTE OTHERWISE

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AN ABSTRACT OF
A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FAULTY OF THE
JAMES T. LANEY SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES OF EMORY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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IN GRADUATE DIVISION OF RELIGION
THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

2015

ABSTRACT

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The discourse of God's absence alters both (1) the mission and manner of our thinking about God, and (2) our conceptions of holiness as separation. The holy as 'set apart' cannot be distinguished as an object present to possessive thinking, nor an object presented to others as absolute truth. Therefore, holiness—as conceived in discussions of God's absence or absolution—does not legitimate separation as invulnerability. Correspondingly the designation of God as "absolute" must be read apophatically as "absolute" to mark what *ab*-sence does to theological thinking. In conversation with philosophers and theologians, this dissertation argues that the ab-soluteness of the holy critiques our claims of:

- Abstraction—as if God were an essence, accessed only in one's rejection of mortality (Rosenzweig)
- Univocality—as if God were a calculation, universally accepted and adequate to our thinking (Heidegger)
- Ideology—as if God were an idea that could be digested, possessed, or forced, for our satisfaction (Weil)
- Totality—as if God were preserved by negating the transcendence of beings, or by evoking the neutrality of Being (Levinas)
- Purity—as if God were the basis for false dichotomies (Lacoste)
- Ultimacy—as if God's unambiguous reality rendered us capable of unambiguously representing God (Tillich)

These are *illusory* modes for any thinking the holy. God's holiness, as ab-solute, withdraws from these illusions; however, God's *elusive* absence is not their negation, nor sheer nothingness. Because the holy's ab-solution is neither reducible to God's presence to thought, nor adequated to our thinking of absence, it forges another mode for thinking: the *allusive*. The allusive mode thinks the way in which God's absence takes on a certain presence in our encounters with alterity. These encounters with alterity—whether poetic, aesthetic, ethical, liturgical, or symbolic—allude to the God that both eludes and refigures the desire for relationship. Holiness thus becomes the possibility to host what eludes thinking, even as this ab-solution entices thought into its most rigorous patience and humility. God's absence is not nothing. It is rather the gift of an expansive evacuation that opens thought, not to security or satisfaction, but to love.

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There is nothing more difficult to outgrow than anxieties that have become useful to us, whether as explanations for a life that never quite finds its true force or direction, or as fuel for ambition, or as a kind of reflexive secular religion that, paradoxically, unites us with others in a shared sense of complete isolation: you feel at home in the world only by never feeling at home in the world.²

Thank you, to Christian Wiman, for reminding that dissatisfaction and restlessness do not, in themselves, allow thinking to become more like love. My mind often flexes at each opportunity to note a distinction, an exception, an exclusion, a contrary; but he has pointed me toward a possibility I had nearly forsaken: community without totality.

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¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

reminiscent of Galatians 3:28. Among many beloved congregants, I am especially grateful to Hugh and Elaine Gainey, Jack and Ruth Wright, Eddie and Annette Sharp, James and Marla Walters, and Bob Randolph.

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INTRODUCTION

Simple Postulate

That which must be protected by the sword implies dissenting claims.

Not a Tautology

Only that which is incontestable can be considered Absolute.

Regarding Chapter and Verse

After Adam and Eve's envy of God's knowledge, the Self's belief in *birthright* was its most perilous sin.

Common Exegesis

Birthright is the failure of the Self to accept the *placeless* nature of being.

De Facto

Only the Absolute sleeps at night without the fear of the ancient, bloody sword.

Uncomfortable Thesis

The Tribe, in itself, is not holy.¹

I. THE TRUTH: THE WAY, AWAY...

SETTING:

In a land where there are no tribes, but nevertheless warring factions. A symposium has been initiated under the title, "Truth Without God: The Academy's Response to Divine Death." Several scholars, representatives of their factions, have gathered for the occasion. The representatives are situated on a stage, in a panel before ANYA.

CHARACTERS:

ANYA: a graduate student in philosophy; agnostic, skeptical, but despite herself, sincerely concerned with the issues at hand. She is the facilitator, acting on behalf of an unknown convener.

GAIL: Philosopher of science.² Formerly an Orthodox Jew, she seems proud of her intellectual progress, and its requisite shedding of her religious background.

¹ Ellen Hinsey, "Notebook B: On the Place and Territory of the Other, II. Origins," *Update on the Descent* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 44.

² This character is based on an interview between Rebecca Goldstein and Josh Epps, *The Philosophy of Belief with Rebecca Goldstein*, podcast audio, Point of Inquiry with Josh Epps and Lindsay Beyerstein, MP3, accessed March 10, 2014,

http://www.pointofinquiry.org/the_philosophy_of_belief_with_rebecca_goldstein/. Italicized words indicate quotes actually taken from the interview.

MARCEL: Astrophysicist. He speaks poetically about his discipline, and with a certain reverence. He makes eye contact when listening.³

JACK: An occasionally smug, but generally well-meaning Biblical scholar. He fidgets in his chair when he disagrees with a point.

BRADFORD: A zealous initiate of biological scholarship (particularly neuroscience). His associates, who were too busy to bother with the matter, sent him to the meeting.

GREGORY: Philosophical theologian. He is rather quiet, staring at the ground, until his face flushes and he begins to speak.

ANYA: Welcome, all—

GAIL: (*interrupting*) –Thanks. And who exactly are you? Forgive me, but our invitations didn't quite describe the event, except the implied assurance of an audience.

ANYA: No audience yet. We will continue as planned. I'm Anya, a student of philosophy.

GAIL: Have I taught you before? You look familiar.

ANYA: I don't believe so.

GAIL: Perhaps you came to one of my book signings?

ANYA: No, I don't usually join those sorts of idea rallies.

JACK: Well, here you are, before this unlikely group of scholars. Let the rally begin! (*to Gregory*) Am I right?

ANYA: This is far from a rally, as you might imagine. I am here to get you all talking, and to interrogate genuinely the matter of "God's death." Its consequences for your disciplines—

BRADFORD: Why appeal to the ghost of God at all?

ANYA: Ghosts haunt. Speak of the haunting if you like. You don't have to speak of God's existence. Tell me how you still live under the shadow, or illusion, or whatever, of 'God.'

JACK: So we're not assuming God's existence?

GAIL: Spare us all the ontological proofs, Jack.

BRADFORD: Well, if we're not here to speak of God's existence, what of this assumption of God's death?

ANYA: You tell me. I guess for a God to be declared dead this God must have lived in some way. Would you like to talk about how?

GAIL: Bradford, I'll take this one. I used to be an Orthodox Jew. And I can even admit that I was once excited by those proofs—ontological, cosmological... You know, God is the greatest possible reality, perfect being, greater than anything in existence and therefore is pure existence.

³ This character is based on two interviews with Marcelo Gleiser. Krys Boyd and Marcelo Gleiser, *The Limits of Science*, podcast audio, KERA Think with Krys Boyd, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.kera.org/2014/07/02/pushing-the-limits/>. Krista Tippett, Marcelo Gleiser, and Marilynne Robinson. *The Mystery We Are*, podcast audio, On Being, accessed, January 2, 2014, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/the-mystery-we-are/4910/>.

Or something like that. And then the cosmological idea that the world implies a designer—

MARCEL: --There is a great deal of design. The difficulty for any conversation about this design is whether we can discern between human invention of laws and our discovery of them.

JACK: And if discovered, are they extracted from the mind of God, or from some nebulous eternal beauty, or do we chalk it all up to the autonomy of math, yada yada...

GREGORY: Perhaps the differences are only semantic degrees, pointing us toward the same reality?

GAIL: We can get to these matters later. I was trying to share something personal that bears upon this very abstract topic. We can argue all day long about these things; but reason must have its personal elements, if it is to be convincing.

JACK: (*shrugs, edging on frustration*). Just remember that reason isn't everything when we come to belief later.

GAIL: (*placating*) Sure, sure. So I would just remind us all of the limitation of these arguments for God's existence. I remember as a young girl reading Bertrand Russell, and it startling me. Just brilliant. Especially his approach to the moral argument—that without God we would not know the Good. The truth is, *the good book isn't good. We need human reason to decide what is literal and what is metaphorical.*

GREGORY: I believe the early church fathers made this very point. Particularly Origen. Not as crudely as you put it. Nevertheless, no reader of the Bible is exempt from discerning between symbolic and journalistic truth...

JACK: ...Nor exempt from regard for history or genre. Exegesis of texts is a very rigorous process—one you must appreciate as a philosopher of ancient texts, Gail. You interpret what is historical fact, or scientific gesture, or symbolic exercise.

BRADFORD: I'd like to remind everyone here that not every discipline has a sacred text.

MARCEL: Perhaps yours is the body. You read it, in a sense.
(*BRADFORD concedes, nodding*)

GAIL: Might I steer us to the point? I'm sure many of you have heard Plato's argument through *Euthyphro*. The question posed: does God love what's good because it is good, or is it good because he wants it?

ANYA: Would you wish to pose this question to those gathered here?

GAIL: No, no, I assume we all understand the point. In the latter case, you have to assume that God is some sort of dictator who establishes the absolute good by fiat.

GREGORY: Or, in the former case, that the Good is absolute only insofar as it absolves from our every imperfect attempt to practice or know it, and we therefore link it with the name of God.

BRADFORD: I don't follow you. Absolves itself? How could we know something that absolves itself, and even call it good? Everything we can know is via the brain, not some sort of spiritual access.

MARCEL: He's right, we get into the 'binding problem' of how something absolute, and immaterial--or yet to be materialized in our imperfect attempts--could be joined to the material mechanisms of our knowing.

GREGORY: I apologize. We would have to get into Plato's cosmogony, and the Good Beyond Being, which I am happy to do—

GAIL: --happily there's no need. The point is that the Religious Right has been carrying on far too long as if they have access to the Good because their God tells them personally what that Good is. They can claim by fiat because their God has done the same. Such fascism dismisses reason and induces violence.

ANYA: It is the assumption of our joining today that whatever one protects by violating its opposition is not absolute. The absolute is not preserved by violence.

BRADFORD: Could you be more concrete?

ANYA: We will assume something closer to Gregory's definition, so as to avoid Gail's critique of the Good mandated by will to power or divine fiat. Both lead to nihilism. If there is truth or goodness, it may be best to assume that their status as absolute is what guides our attempts to understand reality, even as they escape those attempts. A withdrawal that gives.

GREGORY: And perhaps that is the closest to the word 'God' we can get.

BRADFORD: I really don't see what the good, or God, has to do with reality, or with the truth of my discipline. Biology is inherently amoral. There's randomness and contingency. But we needn't go making a morality out of how species self-select or how evolution determines our capacities. Morality is not the highest reality; it's there to make people feel better about the choices their brain has already determined for them. So I think we're wasting our time dealing with metaphysics here.

GREGORY: Have you read Hans Jonas, by chance, on nature and morality?

BRADFORD: Never heard the name. But I'm sure the link of physical reality and morality implies some leap from *is* to *ought*...

MARCEL: Of course, 'reality' bears different definitions, right? And even what one might call metaphysics—say, the Ancient Greek speculation about the universe, has greatly supported our scientific discoveries with regard to nature. Take for instance, you know, Democritus, a pre-Socratic who posited something like the atomic theory of the universe. You might call him a metaphysician because his theories were not tested. They were 'mere contemplation,' but--

BRADFORD: --Well excuse me if I think testability is the standard for verity.

MARCEL: I wouldn't wish to be rid of this standard. It is the scientific standard that makes every scientist open to revision, and open to the rigors of a certain consistency.

ANYA: So is it then the assumption that what is true, or real, is what is consistent?

GAIL: Certainly logical consistency is necessary! And we couldn't live without some empirical consistency either. Even our a priori understanding of time and space—

MARCEL: --Of course, but some of the greatest scientific discoveries have been initiated by speculation, by philosophical contemplation, even by a certain—pardon the expression—leap of faith. Often such speculative leaps were not honored in their day. Only centuries later, you know, can experimental physics verify or vindicate mathematical contemplation.

GREGORY: Let's just acknowledge, then, that every discipline has its heretics and its saints—and all too often, with time, the heretic is made the saint. Reminds me of Kierkegaard's notion of 'persecuted truth' actually...

JACK: And *I* would like to remind us that heresy comes from the Greek word for 'choice.' The choice to think otherwise than what has been proclaimed orthodox, or right belief. There is a certain danger one invites when treating the absolute as relative.... If one believes what is true, certain choices must be declared off limits.

GAIL: Let's not mire our conversation with words like belief or orthodoxy. You all have already missed the direction I was taking. The point is: *God is a redundancy*. Given the achievements of moral philosophy, or even of the sciences, we don't need to be told through some divine revelation what reality *is*.

MARCEL: Yes, of course. Revelation is tricky as it often avoids questioning its grounds or its conclusions. Revelation cannot replace scientific discovery or human achievement. And yet, the sciences...human reason...these are limited.

GAIL: Just because they are finite doesn't mean we need a religious supplement. Any good scientist would admit their own finitude, and the limits of their results.

BRADFORD: (*getting energized*) Exactly! Religious people can be so arrogant, thinking they have all they need to know in one little book.

GREGORY: Very few religious people restrict their lives to reading one text.

JACK: And I'll have you know that little book gathered a lot of rigorous discernment. There were ongoing councils in the early church, testing its verity. They didn't have the science of dating manuscripts, maybe, but they had similar hopes of exactitude. Biblical theology is not some fast and loose exercise in justifying personal beliefs. They agonized over wording in discerning the canon, and over metaphors in articulating theology. They, too, like any academic here, struggled to deliver the truth, and to test it in their lives.

ANYA: The councils were politically charged, and therefore not entirely devoid of personal loyalties.

JACK: Granted. But they were no different than any scientific conference in that regard. Everything's political. Truth is divisive. The Word is a sword. And I don't just mean the logos of Christ, or of scripture, I mean logos also as the laws of the universe. Don't you dare tell me, Gail, or Marcel, or Bradford, that there's no infighting in your disciplines.

ANYA: Would you say that the truth is measured by this quality of divisiveness?

GREGORY: May I intervene here? I imagine that the stakes of 'getting things right' are not the same thing as truth in itself. Divisiveness is not what makes us secure, but the false relation to what ought to be secure.

BRADFORD: I'm sorry guys, but again, how can we draw distinctions between what is, and what ought to be? Or even this distinction between the imperfect strivings for truth and 'truth in itself'?

GAIL: You should attend my lectures on Kant.

BRADFORD: I don't really care to do so. I know enough to say that noumena are beyond my realm of concern. The noumenal realm is not observable, I suspect. And if it's not observable by the senses, what's the point? You claim to be a philosopher of science, but you seem to want it both ways. You study Plato, and you mention Kant. You also, I know from the biography paragraph in this useless brochure (*he takes the folded brochure from his pocket*), study Spinoza.

GAIL: Well thanks for reading about me, Bradford. But before you go dismissing my respect for these philosophers, I'll remind you of their God. Their God was reason, not faith, not fanaticism, not "Jesus loves me this I know." No. Their God was the question they applied to God. Spinoza, for example, didn't believe in an afterlife. No evidence for it. But, he still thought that reason could grant us access to some sort of eternal view.

BRADFORD: So he could posit eternity without an afterlife? Aren't they the same promise?

GAIL: Listen, I'm just saying, reason is allowed its search for enduring truths. I grant that perhaps the only enduring truth is that everything is changing. True philosophers, like true scientists, are open to that change. Religious adherents are not. And frankly, you and I, Bradford, we have a mission to make America more reasonable.

BRADFORD: Amen!

JACK: You've got to be kidding me. You know you're evangelizing right now? You feel threatened when believers try to convert you, but you—and the rest of these ridiculous New Atheists—want to convert us to unbelief?⁴

GAIL AND BRADFORD: Yes!

⁴ Reza Aslan, "Sam Harris and 'New Atheists' aren't new, aren't even atheists," *Salon*, November 21, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/11/21/reza_aslan_sam_harris_and_new_atheists_arent_new_arent_even_atheists.

GAIL: To be fair, it's not a conversion to unbelief, but to reason. And what is the harm in that? *The only things on the table...are facts, and arguments that are accessible to everyone who signs on to the project of reason.* We can no longer afford to admit this talk of some special, spiritual faculty that only a few have.

JACK: Ah, so you're preaching democracy and elitism at once: accessible to everyone who agrees to your terms of what *reason* is. Spoken like a true churchgoer, Gail.

GAIL: Screw you, Jack. You don't even understand what it took for me to go from saying those rigid prayers to now having time to read poetry every morning. Do you understand the oppression of religion, and its narrow interpretations of reality? Do you understand the freedom in dismissing its ridiculous formalism?

JACK: I don't understand. I don't.

GREGORY: (*hesitant in delivery, but a quiet confidence*). Even poetry has its form. And it's not empty; it needn't be oppressive either. Constraints make meaning mobile. One person's oppressive, mandated prayer is another's poetic experience.

GAIL: That may be, but I don't need a God watching me pray and keeping record of everything I do. I don't need a God to legitimate my advocacy for marginalized groups. And I certainly don't need a God to justify how I arrive at a conclusion.

JACK: But you need an abstract appeal to impervious reason? You need reason to be your judge? Well, frankly, 'reason' has been historically as misguided as some theologies. You have to take the abuses of reason with its good, just as I take the abuses of the church with its gifts.

GREGORY: Gail, I wonder if you have any gratitude for the way in which your Orthodox Jewish upbringing gave you the ability to see marginalized groups, to enjoy reason or wrestling for truth?

GAIL: I can't tell whether you're stereotyping the tradition of my youth, or whether you're accusing *me* of being reductive with regard to it...

GREGORY: Neither actually. Just curious.

GAIL: Look, there are dead forms and there are living forms. There are forms that constrain more than they free. And reason is not one of them. Reason, poetry—they point to beauty. And when I say beauty, I mean the proliferating, multivalent nature of truth that only reason can keep up with. You know, I can't expect you to understand that my experiences of transcendence aren't tied to religious terms. But that doesn't mean I can only know transcendence with God. Here's my source of wonder...*that we material things are able to contemplate the universe at large.... We were spewed out of it, and yet we can contemplate it, we can discover it, we can be moved by the extraordinary beauty of the natural laws...*

BRADFORD: Yes, science is beautiful. The way the body maintains its equilibrium. The tessellations of protein structures...

MARCEL: But there's a false aspiration for beauty in science, too. I don't disagree with you both; as an astrophysicist, I could talk at length about

the beauty of the universe. But I remember something that used to trouble me, perhaps it burdens many physicists: the appeal to the beauty of totality. *It's very Platonist in its essence, you know, that the essence of nature is mathematical. There is one big symmetry out there and that symmetry is beautiful and beauty is truth. And hence, you know, there has to be that sort of idea in nature as well. And a lot of people, including Einstein — Einstein spent 20 years of his life looking for this Theory of Everything, this unifying theory, and of course he didn't find it.*

I went to grad school trying to find it too, right, and after many years doing this and talking to lots of my colleagues I came to the conclusion that that's impossible. That the Theory of Everything is an impossibility as a matter of principle. The way we understand the world is very much based on what we can see of the world, right? Science is based on measurements and observations. And the notion that we can actually come up and have a theory that explains everything assumes that we can know everything, right? That we can go out and measure everything there is to measure about nature and come up with this beautiful Theory of Everything. And since we cannot measure all there is to measure, since our tools have limitations, we are definitely limited in how much we can know of the world.

So you can even build a theory that would explain everything that we know now. But then two weeks from now, someone else will come and find something new that does not fit in your theory. And that's not a Theory of Everything anymore because it doesn't include everything that can be included.⁵

ANYA: Well said, Marcel. Certainly, the tendency to try to know everything—whatever the discipline—is to forget that we exist in constant change, in a sort of infinite extension that outpaces us, even our knowledge.

BRADFORD: I think I agree with that. But I really wouldn't use this language of 'infinite.' Sounds too theological or speculative. The body is finite; it experiences ongoing changes, yes, but it is mortal. And the brain, we think, will one day be modeled perfectly by computers. Its networks aren't receiving some sort of input from an infinite source, so to speak. Again, it's not like certain people get this radio transmission from a soul or God station. Our finitude means more predictability, not less. I'm not saying the brain is a simple closed system. I'm saying it's a very complex one. It is not opened to some sort of immaterial infinite. It is material, no more, no less—which is more than enough for me to study for a lifetime.

ANYA: I understand your hesitation with the word infinite. Though I would ask you to consider such things as Gödel's 'incompleteness theorem,' and Turing's 'halting problem,' before outright dismissing the ways in which a brain, or a computer, has structural infinities.

⁵ As a reminder, italicized text is a direct quote gleaned from interviews. (Ibid.)

BRADFORD: Okay, I see your point about structural recursions, or material infinities, then. But not immaterial ones.

ANYA: Can you locate software as a material object in the hardware of a computer?

BRADFORD: Look, we're getting outside of my biological expertise. Are you making a metaphor between the brain and hardware, software and consciousness?

ANYA: Maybe. Originally, I was only suggesting that there has to be an openness, an infinity, to what escapes one's system. Science, for example is not confirmation bias; it must by definition be open to what it excludes.

BRADFORD: Just so long as what it is excludes isn't accounted to feed some overwrought system, I think I agree. Science certainly has to be open to what it doesn't know.

JACK: So does faith.

GREGORY: But in different ways, perhaps.

JACK: I thought you'd be proud of my comparison, Greg!

GREGORY: Oh, I think it's a fine parallel—that science and theology both must remain open to the unknown. That's their discipline in holiness. But the objects of scientific discovery cannot be God. And neither should theology try to be a science with God as its object.

JACK: Understood.

ANYA: So to recap: we have not explicitly discussed God's existence, or which God can be said to exist...or die. We have it up for debate still whether God is redundant. But we all seem to be comfortable talking, to a degree, about beauty.

GREGORY: If I'm not mistaken—Gail, you might confirm this—the Good beyond being—for Plato—cannot be known in itself. It can only be intimated by beauty.

GAIL: Well—

JACK: (*interrupting*)—Surely you wouldn't say, then, that we cannot know God? Or that we should rather steep ourselves in Puccini's arias, or commune with a beautiful landscape, or give up theology and study the beautiful structures of scientific observation?

GREGORY: Yes and no. In your case, I wonder if you couldn't explicate the beauty of Christ?

BRADFORD: The Christ thing is a detour. I don't really see the point.

JACK: Well our topic is the death of God. Anya, are you meaning the historical death of God in Jesus?

ANYA: I was only told to gather you all here and take notes on how each of you interpreted it. So, I suppose that's one way to interpret it.

GAIL: I think we all know about the death of Christ. We don't need to rehash it. I don't know what you are or were, Bradford, in terms of religious tradition. But Marcel and I were raised in Jewish households, and even we know the story.

BRADFORD: I'm pretty indifferent to it. If I didn't get to run tests on his body, I don't have an opinion.

ANYA: Perhaps it would help, if I just gave each of you some time, in turn, to say whatever comes to mind when you think about the 'absence of God' from your discipline, or secularity as it lives in the shadow of the sacred. We'll start with you, Gail, if you'd like.

GAIL: I dream of a future where reason occupies the throne where God once sat. Maybe that's too dramatic, but I'm saying it as the most anti-dramatic possibility. I mean, all of the holy wars, all of the errors of the religious fundamentalists as they distract true democracy...I just, I think we would have a less violent understanding of truth with reason at the helm. And a more supple understanding of what it means to be human—to have reasoning faculties—without God.

ANYA: Jack?

JACK: Gail, I think you are making a very big assumption about which God you want to be 'without.' There's a God who speaks of justice for the poor, and the end of violence. Everything inspiring about what you said could be traced back to the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible, to the prophets. It's this ingratitude, this lack of appreciation for the ways in which our virtues are shaped by the Biblical tradition, that irritates me. God is not dead. God is just ignored by his adolescent children, thinking that they raised themselves, that they gave themselves their wisdom. Ha. It's such a mockery of holiness. I can't even...I just get so frustrated with a world that speaks about God as a redundancy. You'd never speak of a human person that way—so why say that of God?! You'd never say, 'I don't need my mother, my neighbor, my colleagues, my teachers, my philosophical lineage, my students to help me reason. Eliminate them!' God is the basis of respecting singularity, and of desiring unity!

GAIL: Oh, and what of the Biblical texts, the accounted genocide my own p—the Jews—inflicted as they acquired the Promised Land? Or on a smaller, more asinine level, what of those who want creationism taught in schools because they don't understand the symbolic, fictional nature of the Genesis account? I just think Scripture causes more trouble than it can possibly solve. We need reason, not God.

JACK: I never meant to imply that Scripture is God. Or that God is against reason.

GREGORY: What of the many people who have linked God with the heights of reason, with the rigors of questioning? In a way you could argue that about Plato, or Kant—depending on whether you can link God with the Good Beyond Being, or Truth, as many theologians in the early church did. Or let's think more currently, with someone like Paul Tillich, who says that God's 'existence' can be articulated symbolically as the joining of logos and abyss—the ground of reason and mystery?

Certainly God and reason were not always assumed to be mutually exclusive. You just happen to be exposed to a certain popular piety that thinks reason threatens faith. And why not? Certain well-reasoned

programs of humankind have done great violence, too. We're all messed up. And our views of God will be equally messed up, at times. But that doesn't mean believers bear all the burden for mistakes just because they bring God into their lives. A believer's God is not his license of infallibility. If it were, I wouldn't be doing what I do.

Only a God whose existence depends upon fanaticism, or the power of a fallible institution, or dogmatism of any kind—and that includes scientific—can die. If God, instead, is the possibility for reason's approach to mystery, to humility, to wonder and love, we ought never to speak of—nor imagine flippantly—God's death.

BRADFORD: Okay, okay, you guys don't need to gang up on Gail. It's already clear that there are too many gods going on here. If anything, we're suffering not from the death of God but from the proliferation of gods. And that makes me uncomfortable. But I'm starting to see some logical inconsistencies. It seems like you all want God—either as something to support or refute your ability to believe in or dismiss God. God is assumed no matter what. Even if that God is a God that can die or be dismissed.

GAIL: I don't assume God's existence. I do assume that I have to deal with people who use it to legitimate their view of the truth, at any cost.

BRADFORD: I know, I know.

ANYA: Well, Bradford, how would you respond to the 'Death of God'?

BRADFORD: I guess, I just want to admit that when Anya says 'Death of God,' I think of the—thank God!—end of imprecise appeals to soul! I can't stand that shit when I hear about it in my neuroscience class. It shouldn't even come up, frankly. So the God that implies an immaterial soul, that God is dead to me. Computers are going to be able to simulate the brain; it is lunacy to account for some immaterial soul in that simulation.

But then I think of the 'hard problem' of consciousness: how we can't get at the essence of what consciousness *is* yet, or *why it is* at all. I get that the brain is neurons and synapses connecting to one another, and they engender us with a sense of self, a sense of continuity. That alone is amazing! And like Gail said, the wonder of it all, that the brain can observe itself, its experiences, like there's something looking out from behind our eyes. Is it a God-given soul? I don't really want to say that because of all the baggage of salvation implied in 'soul.' But what if, I mean, what if consciousness—I guess, the mystery of that—is a good analogy for what God, or the Absolute, could be? We cannot figure out, like David Chalmers says, the essence of our subjective experience. And maybe there's something to subjectivity that is holy?

GAIL: My husband, a cognitive psychologist, actually talks about this—about the mystery of subjective understanding... I think I follow you, Bradford. I cannot prove to you my subjective experience, per se, or that I even am another consciousness like you. Except that I pass the Turing

Test, or what have you. In any event, on the day to day, you almost have to take it in faith that I am experiencing subjectively as well.

MARCEL: There's enough holiness to the beauty of the universe without having to appeal to the holiness of religion, right? The holiness of religion sets itself apart, perhaps violently, from the holiness of matter.

ANYA: Maybe what another age called the immaterial or the metaphysical has helpfully informed our understanding of the material, the physical.

BRADFORD: But why maintain that distinction now?

ANYA: That's a great question. Maybe there's something in our desires to articulate what is absent, or what is not readily present to us, as an object for examination or experiment?

GAIL: Maybe we like to imagine? And maybe imagination, even fiction, has a place in truth.

ANYA: Yes. What is the point of articulating an alternative to what is readily present to our understanding, or our material grasp?

GREGORY: Both the mind and the hand grasp. Who cares if we call their grasps immaterial or material? The real issue is how the mind, how the hand, holds its objects, how it cares for them, and respects them.

BRADFORD: I didn't mean to take us into this hippy-dippy speak.

GREGORY: Sorry.

BRADFORD: But I think I follow the question: what is the point of speaking about something otherwise than what is reducible to what we know now, or otherwise than what is accessible?

JACK: I mean, I can tell you the critiques of it, based on the ones I've incurred. People tell me there is no point; and they then accuse me of wanting some secure investment in a world beyond this one.

ANYA: That sounds a little reductive. I'm sure I've said it before, but I'm hearing it differently now.

JACK: Thanks, I guess.

ANYA: So maybe this question is an inflection of the original one. Forget the question of God's absence. What is so important about treating as holy whatever absolves itself from what we think we know, or think we see...?

MARCEL: On the one hand, to be open to an otherwise, is to be open to error.

ANYA: Yes, good. Leverage to critique one's methods or results.

GAIL: Or room to critique others. If religious fundamentalism, or any other regime of self-given authority, claims to have a monopoly on reality, it's important to perceive what's excluded from their claims.

ANYA: Okay, so attention to what is excluded could be considered a holy discipline of sorts.

GAIL: I could agree to that. Reason is excellent at exposing biases by revealing what's not present to them. And that, to me, is as close as I would come to what might be called a spiritual discipline.

BRADFORD: I guess, in my case, honoring what is presently absent from the simulation of mind—consciousness, subjective experience—is to

honor something irreducible about the human person. The mystery of it humbles my scientific inquiry, even as it provides the fuel for it.

ANYA: Okay, so the absence is again some sort of withdrawal that gives.

BRADFORD: I don't know. You keep saying that, but I'll have to think about it. Still too poetic for me.

GREGORY: Anya, I think you're trying to find a structure of absence that isn't pure absence because it has to give something to be thought, or dreamed, or frankly noticed. Maybe a distance that touches? ... There has to be a structure mixing what is and is not accessible, a skin that knows when it's touching something only by not being adequate to it...

JACK: There you are, bordering on mysticism again. I'll stick to my Christ metaphor.

ANYA: Christ. Isn't Christ too... too known by believers, or too much of an unquestioned given to be helpful here?

JACK: For some. Others might say Christ is like the skin of God, to borrow from Greg. Christ is an interface between the consciousness of God that we cannot know or prove, and the touch of God we yet feel upon our history, our lives. So, a certain absence or hiddenness, a certain intimacy.

BRADFORD: This is getting weird, guys.

GAIL: I agree. I'm out. I've got another gig, so, um... Sorry, Anya, if we didn't solve the problem for you, of God's death or whatever. We never did really hear from you which God you had in mind.

MARCEL: I think that's best.

ANYA: I think so, too. My God is hardly a God. More and more, I realize I don't believe in God so much as have a strong sense of what cannot be God. Maybe negations, of a kind, are kin to belief.

The landscape of the sciences, religious studies, literary studies, and philosophy are much more variegated than what has been pictured in this dialogue. However, what follows will be less a detailed analysis of this variability within views, and more an interrogation of what happens when thinking—across disciplines—becomes distorted as a result of territorial distinctions. I will not explicitly examine the debates of science versus religion, of philosophy versus theology, or even of mathematics versus mysticism. For one matter, these distinctions are blurry given certain shared genealogies.⁶ More

⁶ In this manner, I resonate with Jean-Yves Lacoste's position on thinking as a shared practice of philosophy and theology. His book *From Theology to Theological Thinking* tracks how the distinctions between disciplines (namely theology and philosophy, but also the sciences) originate in a thinking that

significant to my project is how thinking, regardless of disciplinary distinctions, might prepare itself for a perpetual openness to alterity.

In another time, this reverence for alterity would have been named a relation to the holy. It might even require something called faith.⁷ Unfortunately, these terms carry with them the mire of rigid distinctions; they are belabored by the stalemate of false dichotomies. Faith is suggested where reason fails, holiness thought in opposition to secularity.⁸ Indeed, we might have holiness to credit for the possibility of these distinctions as it values the action of ‘setting apart.’⁹ The capacity of thought to make distinctions is, by definition, a holy enterprise. But often these distinctions mask the object of their thought; they are too severely held so as to suffocate what they name.

implies theory and practice. *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, trans. W. Chris Hackett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

⁷ Tillich locates in Aquinas the “roots of that deterioration of the term ‘faith’ by which is it understood as belief with a low degree of evidence and which makes its use today almost impossible.” He suspects that faith, as belief without confirmation, perpetuates the supposition that faith is only a matter of will and subjection to authority. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 18. Thus Tillich prefers that faith be more akin to immediate awareness of the unconditional—an awareness that is neither knowledge, nor experience, nor intuition, but closer to the awareness of an unconditional demand that becomes a matter of existential concern for the ultimate. (Ibid., 22-24.) Levinas’ definition of faith avoids both fideism with regard to theology, and rationalism with regard to philosophy. It is therefore helpful in moving faith from its false opposition to ‘reason.’ “Faith is not knowledge of a truth open to doubt or capable of being certain; it is something outside of these modalities, it is the face to face encounter with a hard and substantial interlocutor...” Emmanuel Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 41. See also Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-101. John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006). Bruno Latour’s definition of faith might also prove helpful for those who, reading Levinas and Derrida, remain unconvinced by their respective critiques of the present or presence: “We might move forward a bit, if we were calling *faith* the movement that brings us to the close and to the present, and retaining the word *belief* for this necessary mixture of confidence and diffidence with which we need to assess all the things we cannot see *directly*.” Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 122.

⁸ For a clear summary of the stakes involved in such distinctions, see Jean-Yves Lacoste, “On Knowing God Through Loving Him: Beyond ‘Faith and Reason,’” trans. Jeffrey Bloechl, *Christianity and Secular Reason: Classical Themes and Modern Developments* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 127-151.

⁹ Not that this is a point explicitly made by Marcel Gauchet, but I recall his book *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. He argues that, over time, religion’s need to preserve God’s transcendence leads to the waning of religion itself. His book maps God’s holiness as it is transposed upon political structures and eventual freedom from God. Marcel Gauchet, *Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Holiness is not invulnerability; it is not the license to make absolute by force. So how might we conceive holiness as otherwise than these rigid distinctions and the indifference they might perpetuate? Even the term otherwise is used here not to suggest the opposition of one mode of holiness (differentiation) to another (reverential relation), but the proliferation of holiness across the boundaries we draw. Holiness preserves both the integrity of difference, and the possibility for reverential relation *because of* difference.

In many ways, my project calls for an otherwise than the fundamentalist understanding of holiness—not the ‘being set apart’ that makes our stances impervious, but the opening to the stranger, the gracious conversation with whatever might challenge our security. Holiness requires then, a rethinking of what the fundamentalist position—whether religious, scientific, or philosophical—calls ‘absolute truth.’¹⁰ Claims about the absolute are implied in any appeal to holiness, because of their shared definition of being uniquely set apart. The absolute—absolved, cut away, separated from relation—connotes a certain holiness. Both the absolute and the holy can license violence in order to preserve distinction. But how to think otherwise the ‘absolute,’ that thinking itself might be an exercise in engaging what absolves itself, necessarily, from both secured knowing and learned indifference?

¹⁰ Fundamentalism can often serve as a means of dismissing, without nuance, widely different strands of religious traditions. I do not invoke the term in order to shun popular piety across traditions. I use the term to connote a manner of thinking that does not permit the interrogation or qualification of its discourse, even as it intends deep respect for its object. As Edward Farley notes, “Insofar as the face of popular religion, at least as a discourse, is the face of mythology and literalism, the theology of God cannot avoid a demythologizing and deliteralizing relation to popular religion. But popular religion is inevitably more complex and subtle than its discursive façade.” Thus, with Farley, when I write ‘fundamentalist’ I am more concerned with the tendency—in religion and in other disciplines—to prize one’s constructs without the possibility of “piety-rooted qualifiers and negations.” Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1996), 137.

In linking the holy and the absolute, I am nodding to both the theological and philosophical terms for a reality radically set apart from relation.¹¹ These terms provide leverage for thinking exteriority and transcendence; as such, they are the beginning of respect for alterity. However, as Mayra Rivera has noted in *Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*, transcendence without relation could not be known as such. Thus she modifies exteriority not as absolute, but as irreducible or inexhaustible. As she concludes in her reading of Argentinian philosopher, Enrique Dussel:

Interhuman difference is thus described as inexhaustible, rather than absolute, in a promising move that opens the possibility for conceiving relationship with the Other in ways that avoid the illusion that one can grasp the Other in univocal representations and the fatalism of denying the possibility of relating to the other.¹²

In recognizing Dussel's use of apophatic principals (analogical versus equivocal or univocal), Rivera can also apply this insight to the divine-human difference. Her "apophatic anthropology" necessarily reflects a respect for God's transcendence. This transcendence of God—whether as Levinas' infinity, Heidegger's divine trace, Weil's absent God, or Tillich's 'God Above God'—"is neither abstract nor otherworldly, but

¹¹ Granted, for the thinkers examined in what follows, both terms are used across disciplinary lines. Hence, this dissertation occupies the terrain of 'philosophy of religion,' rather than an attempt to oppose—in a binary unhelpful to this project—philosophy and religion.

¹² Mayra Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 73. I will confess that the debate about whether the term "irreducible" is more ethical or intellectually honest than "absolute" in terms of alterity is at work in this dissertation. In the case of Rivera and Dussel's reading of Levinas (which includes Irigaray's critique), there remains a concern that the "relation without relation" makes the other so exotic as to be misunderstood, or so Other as to be dismissed from the demands of relation. These concerns are for the most part based on abuses of Levinas' intention; though Irigaray's critique of Levinas' "femininity" and sexuality are well-placed. It is important to remember that the face is an "intermediary sphere" where access and transcendence remain intact without possibility of allergy. "My neighbour's face has an alterity which is not allergic, but opens up the beyond. The God of heaven is accessible, without losing any of His Transcendence but without denying freedom to the believer. This intermediary sphere exists." Emmanuel Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 18. Further work would need to be done, though it is intimated in what follows, regarding how this intermediary sphere is a point of contact that is neither participation in or assimilation of alterity.

openness at the heart of relation, infinity rather than exteriority, relation rather than separation.”¹³ As a result, neither the conception of alterity as univocally understood or equivocally dismissed suffices. Rivera, like Dussel, suggests an analogical ligament, whereby an “irreducibly different” reality nevertheless relates to our own, without difference dissolving into the relation.¹⁴ The absolute is insoluble to its relationships, not cut off from the possibility of relation.¹⁵ Therefore, my project entails an apophatic stress upon the *ab*-solute, as opposed to the forceful separation often implied by the Absolute.¹⁶

Under this revision of the absolute, to think the holy is to resist reduction. Holiness is not reducible to persons or their world; though it haunts both so intimately as to be confused, hidden.¹⁷ Holiness neither implies Gnosticism, pointing to another world, purely spiritual, ideally present. Holiness instead entails our exposure of every illusion that would crave truth as if it could only satisfy need.¹⁸ The ‘truth’ of holiness, as an opening to alterity, is the capacity to claim ‘not reducible to’; it is therefore always allusive in structure,¹⁹ and eluded in aim. Holiness, as an *ab*-solution, is the hunger that

¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵ “Every religion is the receptive answer to revelatory experiences. This is its greatness and its dignity; this makes religion and its expressions holy in *theoria* as well as in *praxis*.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 99. For the phenomenological variation on this theme, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Allusive thinking demands an understanding of how the kataphatic and the apophatic rely on one another. I stress the apophatic tone of the absolute, as *ab*-solute, in order to soften absolutized notions of the holy. When possible, I keep the “*ab*-solute” designation. I only break this when framing Lacoste’s work, since his notion of the *ab*-solute is spelled “Absolute,” but is no less apophatic.

¹⁷ I appreciate this insight from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951).

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Poverty,” *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking: Essays in Honor of Parvis Emad*, ed. Frank Schalow (New York: Springer, 2011).

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Catherine Porter and Heather MacLean (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Latour calls this allusive structure “referential chains,” (Ibid., 114) and contrasts them to the illusions of immediacy in scientific facts, or “double-click

nourishes us by God's absence. Thus, one aim of what follows is to articulate the illusions of a fundamentalist mode of thinking: the tendency to construe truth as absolutely univocal or immediately accessible.²⁰ When I say illusion of the 'fundamentalist mode,' I do not implicate religion alone.²¹ Every discipline is methodologically capable of over-valuing the distinctions it makes, and thereby diminishing the ability to perceive what resists these distinctions. The various symptoms of the illusory mode of thinking will be outlined in chapter one. These symptoms take several names, but each masquerades as 'thinking' an unthinking allegiance to security.²² The illusory mode of thinking is, in theological terms, idolatrous. In philosophical terms, it is an essentialization, a reification ever at risk of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, as Whitehead names it.²³ Thus, in dispelling the illusory modes across theological and philosophical terms, there will be some iconoclasm involved. But iconoclasm alone is insufficient. We cannot simply smash the idols of thought and occupy a wordless, imageless terrain. This, too, would be an illusion: if one values destruction and negation

communication" in the wider culture (Ibid., 106). For a description of Latour's understanding of reference, see Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 99-102.

²⁰ Caputo's poetic understanding, as compared to logical proofs, may be of interest on this point. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 102-124.

²¹ Though, one might argue with Paul Tillich that every fundamentalism, regardless of discipline, has "religious traits." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 103.

²² I am influenced by Edward Farley's subtle critique of idolatrous security (Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 65-72, 89-93).

²³ For the particular illusions of essentializing and anti-essentializing thought, see Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). Also, Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 51.

absolutely. Rivera helpfully identifies the consequence of such fatalistic negation: it is no better in opening “the possibility of relating to the other.”²⁴

Therefore, a second aim is to suggest how thought might better model the allusive mode through which it makes meaning. The choice of the word allusion, as compared to illusion, will be better explained in chapter two. As a preliminary explanation, allusion suggests the relation (playing toward, *alludere*) of every distinction and its other.²⁵ As in the literary term, allusion suggests that what is given nevertheless references, and is shaped by, what is partially withheld. Consequently, the allusive mode of thinking, when stretched to consider the absolute, is shaped both by observation of givens and attention to what is excluded. As such, it opens thought to the paradoxical relation of absence as it touches what we consider present. Theology might call this structure, at its furthest point,

²⁴ Ibid., 73.

²⁵ Though, for purposes of considering allusion in Levinas, I would wish to downplay this ludic connotation. I do not intend the play that Levinas critiques as “the playful order of the beautiful, of the play of concepts and of the *play of the world*”—if this play means an escape from the ethical (what Levinas attributes to the beautiful and the philosopher’s abstractions). Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 46. Nor do I summon the literary device of allusion if it entails “a return to a shared literary or textual tradition, heritage, horizon,” as is Jill Robbins’s concern. Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 86, 90, 145. Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 107-11. Robbins grants that there can be no text without the allusory structure; and I would add, no thinking of the ethical. (Ibid., 109). I find Robbins’ reading of Levinas’ “discrepancy between doing and saying that emerges with Levinas’ ‘use’ of allusion” very compelling. (Ibid., 109). To her insights, I would add the question: is an allusion, in its reference, necessarily a license for fusion, or a return to the same? Can allusion, like Levinas’ notion of “work,” rather suggest a movement “only in one direction” as Irwin suggests? William Irwin, “What is an Allusion?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59.3 (Summer, 2001), 289. It is possible, Irwin notes, to distinguish allusion from reference insofar as it “depends on something more than mere substitution of a referent.” (Ibid., 288). No doubt, an allusion’s complicity in and distinction from referential substitution, makes it simultaneously ethical and unethical to Levinas (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 84-85, 130-131). Furthermore, One could argue that an allusion’s indirection is unethical, in the Levinasian preference for *droiture*. But it is unclear whether the allusive mode of thinking, in the register of Levinas’ ethical relation, does not permit a certain indirection—as when he writes that “To go toward [God] is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.” Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 107.

the “wall of paradox,”²⁶ behind which is the incomprehensible “coincidence of opposites,” as Nicholas of Cusa writes.²⁷ It might even entail reopening the theological framework of analogy, in a modified *analogia entis* without a certain language of being.²⁸

Correspondingly, philosophy might turn to the tradition of deconstruction, in its dialectical, phenomenological, and post-structural trends.²⁹ In both apophatically applied analogies and in deconstructive subversions,³⁰ differences shape one another, and thus allude to what eludes such distinctions. The allusive mode of thinking will thus come to suggest the erotic nature of language.³¹

The thinkers gathered to support this notion of allusive thinking, as compared to illusory thinking, have uniquely complex relations to theology. Regardless of whether they call themselves theologians, they are deeply concerned with language, in many cases *especially* as it approaches the language we maintain with regard to God. Among them, I too am concerned with what happens to the name of God. What might it signify given God’s phenomenal absence? And how would this name of God affect the way we

²⁶ Nicholas of Cusa *The Vision of God*, trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), xvi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-53.

²⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, “Question 13: The Names of God,” *Summa Theologica, Volume 1, Part 1* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 59-72. David Bentley Hart has already taken up this task of renewing, through readings of Robert Scharlemann, Erich Przywara, Jean-Luc Marion, and Martin Heidegger, the discussions of *analogia entis* in contemporary theology. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 231-249.

²⁹ Mark C. Taylor, ed. *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

³⁰ This is not to suggest that Heidegger’s destruction, Derrida’s deconstruction, and Levinas’ logic of the trace are one and the same. As Robbins summarizes, Levinas’ trace is the “mark of the effacement of a mark...outside the presence/absence dyad.” Whereas Heidegger’s hints indicate, for the poet, the passing-by of the gods (who are neither strictly absent nor present), inscribing the possibility of their return. Derrida’s arche-trace seems a negotiation between Heidegger’s ontological difference (the covered over distinction between Being and being) and Levinas’ ethical trace insofar as *différance* suggests that what is ‘present’ is differentiated by, or marked by, what *is* not. (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 28-29.)

³¹ I recall specifically Anne Carson’s work of Plato’s analogies and the erotic nature of language in philosophy and poetry. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (London: Dalkery Archive, Press, 1998).

understand the holiness of others? Thus, the third aim is to suggest how God is the name for what *eludes* us, what is absolved from thinking even as its withdrawal gives itself to be thought. In this case, thinking is a holy exercise: a regard for the alterity that escapes us. It prevents the allusive structure of referentiality from collapsing again into another form of illusory thinking (say, a dogmatic adherence to the ‘mere play’ of signification). Perhaps neither a certain presence nor a certain absence is proper to God; and only an allusive structure values both the ways in which God is near and far. But without this possibility of elusion, alterity—be it the strangeness of God, our neighbor, or the puzzling edge of scientific mystery—is in danger of becoming a mere object to be grasped.

To think of God as a name for the elusion that challenges illusion, is to re-read any claims of ‘absolute truth.’ God will be explored as the invitation to think the absolute otherwise—that is, not as a truth protected by silencing difference. In attending God’s unique absence, there surfaces both a critique of anything too present to thought (fundamentalism) and anything too remote by way of indifference (nihilism). The truth of God, under this reading, is neither the definitive proof of God’s existence or inexistence; nor is it the adequation of thinking to its object. To speak of a truth suitable to God is rather to gesture toward what absolves itself from our theories, our thoughts, our words, even as it marks them. This ‘logic’ of a withdrawal that gives, or participates in *what it is not*, can be found in Plotinus’ concept of the “One” as it emanates through the many.³² But because oneness, too, is subject to illusory translations,³³ this study will privilege the logic of infinity.

³² Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

³³ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

In sum, then, illusory thinking claims that truth is radically *present* and makes it so by force. Its truths are necessarily *finite* so that they can be grasped. However, their finitude goes unacknowledged and is confused for the whole; thus anything not *in the finite view* goes unconsidered. Allusive thinking, in contrast, suggests a relation between what is traditionally conceived as present in its relation to absence. Its truths are provisional; their provisionality does not suggest relativism, but rather humility. The allusive structure of thinking takes into account that no object of thought or perception is fully present—or simply accessible as such. Every perception and thought is marked, implicitly, by personal and collective history, by observational comparison, by unfulfilled intentions, by prior understandings, and by future hopes. In short, thought thinks its objects as present, but thinking itself is a desire that is as much shaped by past resources as it is by the voids of the yet-to-be-known. Thinking must not ignore this structure; otherwise it loses the vital temporality of its object, the in-finity of its neighbor.

If illusion confuses the finite with the absolute, allusion reminds that the absolute absconds from what it touches. The allusive is *in-finite*: the desire to feed one's thought with hunger, not soluble solutions. The elusory is *infinite*; without the structure of allusion that hosts the infinite *in the finite*, it cannot touch the finite.³⁴ Thus, the allusive structure entertains, while avoiding, two silences: (1) the silence enforced by illusory thinking (be it the 'total presence' of truth in fundamentalism, or the complete absence of truth in nihilism); and (2) the silence induced by an encounter with elusion.

II. THE ABSOLUTE: OUR ABSTRACTIONS, GOD'S ABSENCE

³⁴ Levinas helpfully provides these distinctions (the "non" and the "within" implied in the *in-finite*) as they both contribute to thinking the infinite. Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 160.

*There are certain people in whose case everything that brings God nearer to them is beneficial. In my case it is everything that makes Him more remote. Between me and Him there lies the thickness of the universe...*³⁵

There's a certain distance that renders another person an abstraction. There's a certain nearness that renders another person an object. The reflex of a certain distance is to believe that one sees better from afar, that one understands better if purified of relation. One strives for the God's eye view in the detached view of the scientist, or in the speculative 'view from nowhere' of the philosopher. But how quickly this distance—which claims the privilege to see all sides—becomes the grip of the mind claiming to hold all edges! Hence distance, of a kind, can be too near for respectful relationship. How to be close enough to touch, but not too close to manipulate; how to be far enough to revere, but not too far to ignore? Could God's apparent absence inform our understanding of right relations, of proper distance?

While these questions suggest an ethics for human interactions (with one another, animals, and the earth's resources), I would argue that they cannot be considered without raising the name of God. After all, both being too far and too near share in the tendency to take for granted: to portray something too conveniently present for use, too measured by personal biases, and thereby absent from the possibilities of true respect. Neither the illusory forms of presence nor absence apply to God, because God is the mystery of a certain proximate distance. God is so interior to me as to seem irremediably far. And yet, one can write of this intimate distance, and relate to it as such.³⁶ Thinking God's absence as otherwise than nothing not only frees theology, philosophy, and science from the

³⁵ Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 311.

³⁶ Or so Augustine suggests when he addresses God as "more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me." *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

debates of God's *empirical* existence; it also allows theology and the various atheisms of 20th century philosophy to more fruitfully engage one another.

Whether one subscribes to God's death³⁷—be it God's undoing as a result of philosophy, God's absence in unspeakable tragedy, or God's transcendence of the categories of existence—we must become clear about how God's absence is *not* the opening of nihilistic relativism.³⁸ One cannot simply mention God's name to ward off the spirit of nihilism, or to nuance the claims of fundamentalism. God's name, the withdrawal that it gives, is not a noun of conjuring power, but a practice of thinking in the *apparent* absence of an ab-solute.³⁹

For several twentieth century thinkers, provoked by these various absences of God, God's withdrawal is not simply nothing.⁴⁰ The vacancy of God induces a vacating of idols and ideologies.⁴¹ In contrast, the God of Presence can be thought, calculated,

³⁷ See Marcel's critique of atheistic philosophy, which aims not at Heidegger's godless poet, but contemporary atheism in its misapplication of the 'death of God.' Gabriel Marcel, "Philosophical Atheism," *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 158-170.

³⁸ To this end, I am grateful for Hans Jonas' work, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for God After Auschwitz* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

³⁹ I hyphenate this term when I wish to emphasize the withdrawal (ab-) of the Absolute from solubility or solution.

⁴⁰ Heidegger writes in "The Thing": "The default of God and the divinities is absence. But absence is not nothing; rather it is precisely the presence, which must first be appropriated, of the hidden fullness and wealth of what has been and what, thus gathered, is presencing, of the divine in the world of the Greeks, in prophetic Judaism, in the preaching of Jesus. This no-longer is in itself a not-yet of the veiled arrival of its inexhaustible nature. Since Being is never the merely precisely actual, to guard Being can never be equated with the task of a guard who protects from burglars a treasure stored in a building. Guardianship of Being is not fixated upon something existent. The existing thing, taken for itself, never contains an appeal of Being. Guardianship is vigilance, watchfulness for the has-been and coming destiny of Being, a vigilance that issues from a long and ever-renewed thoughtful deliberateness, which heeds the directive that lies in the manner in which Being makes its appeal." Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), 182-183. Or, heeding Levinas, "The relationship with the Other is the absence of the other; not absence pure and simple, not the absence of pure nothingness, but absence in a horizon of the future, and absence that is time." Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other: And Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 90.

⁴¹ Obviously, Heidegger is not the first to critique the ontotheology of Christendom. Heidegger garners much of his critique from Martin Luther, and of course, Søren Kierkegaard. Benjamin D. Crowe,

possessed, dismissed, or even dressed in propaganda. The God of Presence is a territory to be protected by violence; it is no God, but a thing. This God calls for the false holiness of war.⁴² But if God's absence is God's absolution from such battles, it is necessarily a critique of possessive thinking. If God is not present, presence cannot 'be' God; put otherwise, we cannot grant ultimacy to the present moment, the object, or the individual only insofar as they are present to our thinking. Presence here is understood not in the complex way that twentieth century phenomenology comes to rethink it. Rather, I have in mind the illusory relation to presence that claims: only the empirical, the provable, the graspable, the present-at-hand, the adequate-to-thought, is real.

It is not as though theology has been unable to speak of God's absence. It has traditionally done so as God's transcendence from our discursive reasoning, our supposed 'virtues,' and even our ecclesial institutions⁴³—as in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and Marguerite Porete.⁴⁴ There are, no doubt, several good works bringing these contemplatives into conversation with postmodern theology. My task is

Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). Ben Vedder, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion: From Gods to the Gods*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 161-164. Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack on Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁴² Whether the physical violence of holy wars, or the subtle violence Levinas describes, "But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.

⁴³ Von Balthasar helpfully summarizes, and dispels, the cosmological and anthropological reductions of God. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979). It is significant that Emmanuel Levinas noticed the work of Von Balthasar in his lifetime. Emmanuel Levinas and Michaël de Saint Cheron, "Part I: Toward a Philosophy of Holiness," *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1983-1994*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 13.

⁴⁴ I think of these, and other, theologians who confessed this God of possibility who need not *be*, whose non-existence critiques *what is*. Though many persecuted by the church are not directly featured in my dissertation, they haunt through the philosophers of religion I have chosen. Their wounds are for theology like "lips [that] will never close, will never draw together." Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 153.

less an appeal to the thinkers of God's transcendence, and more an attention to thinkers of God's abyssal quality. Martin Heidegger⁴⁵ and his University of Marburg colleague, Paul Tillich, remain especially helpful on this point.⁴⁶ Given the atrocities of recent history, speaking of God's transcendence seems loftier than the tragedy of absence suggests. There is a tragic character to the loss of a God who does not seem to intervene in history, a loss to the God who no longer speaks the law, like thunder, from mountains.⁴⁷ Absence captures this loss in a way that comparatively makes transcendence seem like God's immunity, or alibi. And yet, it is not as though transcendence—its vertical inflection of absence—ought to be dismissed. It can be considered anew with the help of Emmanuel

⁴⁵ I have chosen not to excuse Heidegger's philosophy from my analysis based on his ethical failures, just as I cannot excuse theology based on its abuses. If one draws lessons from Heidegger's political life, they apply no less to the Christendom that he critiqued as a young theologian. Where necessary, I will read Heidegger's contributions counter Heidegger's gravest errors: to "enter into what is unthought in his thought," and the horror implied in its omission. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Perennial, 1968), 77. In this endeavor, Levinas' remarks are crucial. Emmanuel Levinas, "As if Consenting to Horror," trans. Paula Wissing, *Critical Inquiry* 15.2 (1989), 485-488. For example, Levinas' question, "But doesn't this silence, in time of peace, on the gas chambers and death camps lie beyond the realm of feeble excuses and reveal a soul completely cut off from any sensitivity, in which can be perceived a kind of consent to the horror?" (Ibid., 487.) I also acknowledge John Van Buren's position, in the close of his book, reminding that—insofar as Heidegger's philosophy is enmeshed with Nazism—it is not only a rejection of his earlier philosophical accomplishments, it is also a rejection of the critique he had developed in his early scholarship. It would seem that the very matters Heidegger criticized in his departure from the Catholic church (access to eternal or absolute truths about destiny or salvation; an inability to practice the authentic, Christian faith of waiting; prescribed programs of values; positions of political or religious authority assumed by philosophers) were forgotten in his ontotheological support of Hitler's agenda. John van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 362-397.

⁴⁶ Though, Tillich and Heidegger still use the language of transcendence, especially in 'self-transcendence,' with regard to God, they evade the language of immanence and transcendence through the language of abyss, or *abgrund*. Heidegger and Tillich, in this way, share in the inheritance of this term as Jacob Boehme develops it in *The Way to Christ* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007). Martin Heidegger, "Poverty," *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking*, 4-5.

⁴⁷ Perhaps this betrays my sensitivity to the God of the "gentle whisper," (NRSV, 1 Kings 19:11-13), as opposed to the God whose voice "thunder[s] from heaven" (NRSV 2 Samuel 22:14). A better exegesis of the Exodus 19 allusion, where God appears in the thunderstorm and in the cloud, would note the sense in which God's appearing is a non-appearing, and God's holiness is yet God's elusion of the people's need for immediate access. (NRSV, Exodus 19).

Levinas. Where Heidegger and Tillich helpfully articulate the ontological⁴⁸ implications of divine absence, Levinas more explicitly offers an ethics haunted by this ab-solution of God. To transition between these figures, I have summoned Simone Weil and Jean-Yves Lacoste, who are attentive to what thinking the ab-solute might suggest in the absence (or ‘non-presence’) of God. As theologians exercising phenomenological methods, they also serve as ligaments between Heideggerian considerations of the holy, Levinasian concerns about the unholy impulses of philosophy, and Tillichian critiques of the church.

Fittingly, each thinker can be located on the margins of their disciplines, in that exilic space of envisioning alternatives: an otherwise than theological appeals to presence, an otherwise than philosophical ‘proofs’ of absence, an otherwise thinking of God, another wisdom regarding the ab-solute. It is my hope that certain resonances will arise between them, and helpful distinctions made, that I might practice the sort of allusive thinking I attempt to articulate. This will require that I attend, as any reader must, to the ways they borrow and betray one another’s words. I will attempt to hear them in their own language, but also the ways in which they voice the absences in one another’s thinking. This practice of hearing what is excluded, even as it is alluded to in each thinker’s language, initiates the possibility of desiring the ab-solute.

⁴⁸ This word will become problematic for Heidegger and for Levinas. Thus, I prefer the connotation provided by Krzysztof Ziarek. He writes of ontologico-ethics, to show their shared root in language: “in its proximity to the phenomenal [ontological] and its exposition to the other [ethical].” Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language, Towards a Hermeneutic of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 13.

CHAPTER ONE

ILLUSION: LIMITATIONS OF THE ABSOLUTE

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, to divide, and measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture
 room,
 How soon unaccountable I became and tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.¹

Illusion is not necessarily in play when one prefers mathematics to the ‘mystical moist night-air.’ It is not simply that math is reductive, and the poet knows better; but that a totalizing advocacy for either disciplinary approach *can* be.² By reductive, I intend not the phenomenological reduction, which extracts a phenomenon by bracketing the biases of accepted premises. Both this disclaimer, and the poem that prompts it, harken to Edmund Husserl’s *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.³ Husserl wrote this prophetic work on the cusp of the wider crisis in

¹ Walt Whitman, “When I heard the learn’d astronomer,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Arthur Stedman (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1892), 31.

² See Kenneth Jason Wardley’s brief description of the way in which Lacoste and Merleau-Ponty, for example, critique Scientism. *Praying to a French God: The Theology of Jean-Yves Lacoste* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 6. Perhaps Lacoste summarizes it best when writing, “The other person, rather than appearing as someone I truly encounter, can be someone I am content to pass by and who will remain for me faceless. We may add an example. A scientific theory — mathematical, physical — can serve me as only an instrument of calculation or prediction. It is possible for it to appear to me only in the mode of utility. And if this is the case, I perceive neither the elegance nor the simplicity of the equations, nor the intelligence that has presided over the choice of axioms; in short, I certainly can acquire an understanding of the theory, but only superficially, and it is clear that the theory, reduced to its instrumentality, cannot move me as does a work of art, which it, in its own right, also is.” (Lacoste, “On Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 138-139.) See also Simone Weil’s aphorism, “Rationalism: if it means thinking that reason is the only instrument, that is true; if it means thinking that reason can be an all-sufficient instrument, that is ridiculous.” (Weil, *Notebooks*, 295.)

³ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

Germany, linking it to the very moves in science that he found culprit. Husserl identifies the methodology of abstraction as a means toward illumination of truths; and like the philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, he understands that this practice can be phenomenologically helpful.⁴ Husserl's *epoche*, for example, is a kind of abstraction insofar as it brackets out the 'natural attitude.'⁵ This bracketing is a methodological abstraction; *however*, it stands in direct contrast to abstracting methods. He critiques the inverse act of an *epoche*: the abstraction that brackets all particularity in order to reaffirm methodology.⁶ He observes that there is a fallacy in this adequation; if the reality correlates to the method, there is no longer any leverage by which truth can reveal itself otherwise. He condemns both objectivism and transcendentalism of this fallacy.⁷ In their methods lies an illusion: idealization of the world into mere objects of study is science as fantasy.⁸ If carried further, this fantasy of "one-sided rationality can certainly become an evil."⁹ A thinking that does not admit its own ambiguities and limitations is evil, for Husserl, insofar as it

⁴ Like Husserl, he acknowledges that abstraction is necessary for knowledge acquisition. Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2008), 115.

⁵ David Carr elucidates that this phrase, in the context of *The Crisis*, tends to mean the pre-theoretical attitude. However, in the *Ideen*, Volume I, the natural attitude is the theoretical attitude. (*The Crisis*, xxxix). When I evoke the term, I raise Husserl's critique of the naiveté implied in considering objects as *sui generis*. For Husserl, the *epoche* subverts any false opposition between self and world: by reflecting on the ways that consciousness structures the world in its interpretations, and in turn is structured by the world that is pre-given. The natural attitude is never entirely overcome, but is suspended in its own interrogation through the phenomenological attitude.

⁶ For the mutually informing methodologies of philosophy and science (and their strained relationship), see Martin Heidegger's comments in "Section 45b: The relation of our philosophical questioning to zoology and biology," *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 188-192.

⁷ For example, Husserl critiques the abstraction that mistakes "things as bodies" divorced from a spiritual, or even intersubjective relation (Ibid. 60, 80). He also critiques the psychological focus of inner experience that neglects the intentional structure of "real relations" (Ibid., 235-236).

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 291. Arendt sees this one-sidedness as a distinction of "the totalitarian leaders and dictators" in their "simple-minded, single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world." Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 362.

capitulates to “premature satisfaction.”¹⁰ Evil, as a mode of thinking, occurs when one absolutizes or isolates a “single line of knowledge” from its infinite horizons.¹¹

Illusory thinking is “one-sided” in ways that we readily associate with fundamentalism. It assumes that one approach perfectly captures the phenomenon, that the glory of a star could be comprehensively explained by measurements alone, that God could be adequate to our words about God.¹² Certainly there is a place in thought for calculation, and the abstractions it entails; but what happens when such formulas and formalizations construe their knowledge as final, or dismiss contrary experiences as unnecessary? Is thinking inherently doomed to illusion, since its abstractions—for purposes of reflection, communication, and even memory—can too quickly become divorced from the reality they describe?

Prior to Husserl’s published critique, another German scholar raised these questions. Just after World War I, the great Jewish thinker, Franz Rosenzweig, offered an assessment of ‘sick’ and ‘healthy’ thinking. Though he is known for his critique of Hegelian absolutes in *The Star of Redemption*, it is his brief text *Understanding the Sick and Healthy* that more accessibly diagnoses the dangers of abstracting life into philosophical ideals. Writing as a fictional doctor, he begins his letter to the reader by noticing how his patient, a philosopher, isolates “his experience of wonder from the

¹⁰ Husserl, *The Crisis*, 291.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹² Anthony Steinbock suggests that both the reductive tendencies of secularism and fundamentalism fall under this critique of idolatrous thinking. Anthony J. Steinbock, “Idolatry,” *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 211-241.

continuous stream of life.”¹³ This isolation may seem harmless; a thinker wishes to preserve the moment of wonder, to reflect upon it, to grasp it.¹⁴ But such a preservation requires extracting “thought’s ‘object’ and ‘subject’ from the flow of life” until both are essentialized. Rosenzweig describes this process as the removal of “singleness and particularity,” drawing the phenomena into the “pale region of the mere ‘thing.’”¹⁵ In short, to discover what something *is in its essence, its being*, one must deprive it of time, of life.¹⁶ Essentializing thought renders its object “submissive—statuesque, subjugated.”¹⁷ Attempting to preserve wonder in thought, one runs the risk of plastering over its porous relation to reality.

It is the very process that German idealists and romantic poets—Schelling, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Nietzsche—suspected was happening with regard to God.¹⁸ The death of God, at the chokehold of essentializing thought, began in many ways with the attempt to preserve God. But when preservation entails making God absolute via abstraction from beings, how can such a God be given the qualities of existence? Embalming assumes death. In the attempt to think God as eternal and unchanging, God resembles, as Novalis suggests, an “infinitely compact metal” that rusts in the breath of

¹³ Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*, trans. Nahum Glatzer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 40.

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl also reflects upon this thinking as the “‘theoretical’ attitude...that turns away from all practical interests and, within the closed sphere of its cognitive activity, in the times devoted to it, strives for and achieves nothing but pure *theoria*. In other words, man becomes a nonparticipating spectator...” (Husserl, *Crisis*, 285.)

¹⁵ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁸ David Farrell Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

life.¹⁹ God's absoluteness, God's purity, therefore implies "asphyxiation and death."²⁰ God can have no pores, no breath; God is beyond life because allergic to it. These claims arise out of an illusory mode of thinking, whereby God can only be absolute by being dead to existence. For these thinkers, David Farrell Krell observes, "the death of all absolutes [is preferred] to the absolute of death."²¹

According to Rosenzweig, one need not impose these alternatives. The absolute is not made so by death, or its removal from the contingencies of existence. Philosophy, Rosenzweig notes, is particularly subject to this illusion.²² He claims that, in attempting to understand the essential, philosophical thinking tries to remove everything (even the thinker himself!) from mortality. But to remove from mortality is also to detach from the complexities of life; to escape mortality is to render truth inanimate. In the attempt to think the simplicity of the absolute, illusory thinking confuses the absolute with a kind of death, an absence that confuses radical being with nothingness. Thus, the thinker's alibi (or disease)²³ of wonder is not simply his thoughtful exemption from relationality, but moreover a paralysis that prevents it. In wording that will later play in Heidegger's writings, Rosenzweig laments how the philosopher "is not interested in the actual event [*Ereignis*]."²⁴ He is too consumed with attempts to preserve its "particular essence

¹⁹ This breath is as much attributed to the "oxidation of the devil" as it is the living, though sick, breath of the spirit. (Ibid., 66.)

²⁰ Ibid., 69. Krell seems to suggest that Novalis has made God in the image of his own death by tuberculosis. Perhaps this is resonant with Hölderlin's suggestion that the god appears "*in der Gestalt des Todes*." (Ibid., 351).

²¹ Krell, 69.

²² Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 9.

²³ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 42.

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

[*Eigentlichkeit des Wesens*].”²⁵ The philosopher²⁶ attempts to think the ideal of a particular occurrence, therefore determining it as if it were always present. This ‘presence’ is actually inexistent.²⁷ In “seeking for the stability in things, he relegates them by his search to the dark realm of essence.”²⁸ To isolate an object in order to attain its most present, enduring quality, is to fail to see the object in its complex relationships, its flux.

This impulse can even enter into private life. A man might doubt the love of his beloved, and interrogate the essence of his beloved in order to secure himself against doubt. However:

The lover merely applied the question “What actually is it?” to a human being. The answer he received resulted in the immediate disappearance of two very concrete individuals—the questioner himself and his beloved. No matter whether the answer is “the peak of creation” or “an insect crawling in the dust,” the concrete individual is replaced by a ghost. The ghost may be of heaven or hell; it may be devil or angel—but man cannot live with these rarified essences...²⁹

Indeed, the opposition of heaven or hell, devil or angel, are categories that miss the complexity of the excluded middle. Illusory thinking gives way to the rarefied essences of binary logic, and exempts the thinker—and his ‘object’ of thought—from concreteness. In this way, the philosopher acts “as if” he is engaged in the particularities of life. Yet, he is meanwhile exempt from responsibility, and the everyday faith that stirs action.³⁰

Therefore, Illusory thinking is not simply a disease of thought; it is also a malignancy of

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Rosenzweig claims that the patient is a philosopher, but we needn’t think his assessment applies only to the philosophical discipline as we classify it today. It would include theologians, scientists, and mathematicians.

²⁷ Rosenzweig’s example of the slab of butter is comical and effective. (Ibid., 47-48).

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

²⁹ Ibid., 52. This example seems very similar to Gabriel Marcel’s point about one’s attempt to describe the essence of a friend, or of a beautiful landscape. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), 53.

³⁰ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 45.

ethics. Insofar as the thinker ignores not only the infinite horizons of an object's context, but also the infinite shifts of the other's life, her thinking shirks the demands of responsive relationship.

If illusory thinking results in the “immediate disappearance” of the thinker and her God, her lover, her world—it is no wonder that we have confused thought of the absolute with the encounter of nothingness. The relation between the death of God and the thinker's ability to abstract, or essentialize, are therefore related. Schelling, Novalis, Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Rosenzweig, Husserl—they interrogate thinking in order to expose its illusions, and the limitations it imposes. Their works ask us: is there not another way to think upon God, other people, our world, its stars, than to absolve them from the flux of time, from the richness of being, from our exposition to them? Must one suffocate alterity in order to ‘preserve’ it? To approach these questions in the following chapter, we must track this thread of illusion as it runs through, breaks, and knots in the 20th century.³¹

I. MARTIN HEIDEGGER: THE ILLUSION OF CALCULATIVE THINKING

The young Heidegger entered his famed, philosophical career by way of “Christian philosophy.”³² He began with the aim of undertaking research to affirm the

³¹ This image is a striking one, intended to enunciate the difficulty of traversing any critique of thought from within the language of thinking. Derrida offers the image in writing of Emmanuel Levinas' attempts to break from the totalizing impulses of western philosophy, while doing so in the language of western philosophy. Thus the image offers continuity and rupture. Jacques Derrida, “At this very moment in this work here I am,” *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 36-37. Or as Krzysztof Ziarek summarize Derrida's position: Levinas weaves interruptions. (Ziarek, *Inflected Language*, 95).

³² Heidegger calls “Christian Philosophy” a square circle, inherently contradictory, in 1927. Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53. However, Heidegger resists the principle of non-contradiction just a few years later, “Yet whatever is contradictory cannot be. It is—and this is an ancient proposition of traditional

“Catholic worldview.”³³ Only after his dismissal from the Jesuit novitiate,³⁴ and departure from the Catholic tradition in 1918, did Heidegger claim philosophy—*sans* theology—as his “eternal vocation.”³⁵ However, Heidegger’s sense of his eternal call did not come without an overhaul of eternity itself. The young, Catholic enthusiast aspired toward eternal truths.³⁶ But with time, he came to question whether the Church, as well as the academy, could access such absolutes.³⁷ What began as a Lutheran destruction of theology’s philosophical borrowing,³⁸ continued in a destruction of philosophy’s onto-theological tendencies.³⁹ Whether critiquing philosophical theology via Luther and Kierkegaard, or philosophy’s own aspirations toward the absolute spirit or ‘ideal forms,’ Heidegger calls for the practice of “factual ‘asceticism.’”⁴⁰ The theological language of

metaphysics—intrinsically impossible, just as a round square cannot be. We shall see that we must not only put in question this venerable principle of metaphysics, which is based on a quite specific conception of being, but also cause to shatter in its very foundations.” (Heidegger, *Fundamental*, 61.) See also Heidegger’s comments on contradiction via Hegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin: Martin Heidegger, “Principles of Thinking,” *Piety of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 51.

³³ Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 54.

³⁴ The dismissal was due to heart trouble. (Ibid., 52.)

³⁵ Ibid., 134. See “Letter to Father Engelbert Kraus,” *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John Van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 69-70.

³⁶ Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 124.

³⁷ Heidegger, in his critique of absolutes as the “agreement” of knowing and Being, or as the identity of God and logic, renders western philosophy as errant (with regard to its inception) insofar as it affirms the “empty eternity” in which oppositions are superseded. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 61.

³⁸ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 67.

³⁹ Indeed, the onto-theological critique cuts both ways—the ontologizing of God in theology and the deifying of a certain Being in philosophy.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 135. For the Christian, “worldly” facticity entails “peace and security,” and its correlative worrying about maintaining security (certainty about ‘how’ and ‘when’ Christ will return, for example). Christian facticity, in its renunciation of this worldly facticity, both turns toward God in concrete experience *and* questions the ultimacy of this experience. (Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 72-73.) The phenomenologist learning from Christian facticity thus cannot be a mere theoretician of religion who treats God as “an object of speculation” (Ibid., 67). Rather, the phenomenologist must attend the enactment (which cannot “itself be objectified”) of Christian life as its proclamations accompany the

“abdicat[ing]” or “renounc[ing]” philosophical pretensions may stem from Luther’s destruction of Aristotelian theology, equally Paul’s dismissal of the ‘wisdom of this world.’ However, it finds its methodological emphasis of facticity in the phenomenological tradition.

This is not to suggest that Heidegger leaves behind the problem of absolute knowledge, and essences, when he decides to no longer do “Christian Philosophy.” Theology and philosophy, and their overlapping concepts, offer both aim and ammunition for Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics.⁴¹ Therefore, I will emphasize Heidegger’s critique of “calculative thinking” as the impetus for thinking Being at the edge of traditional metaphysics, especially as this thinking might apply not only to the ontological but also the theological tradition.⁴² His critique clears thinking of its security,

doctrines (which cannot be indifferently abstracted from their situation, as in the “theoretical attitude”) (Ibid., 62-64, 77). Consequently, the young Heidegger argues that philosophical skepticism is ascetic insofar as it gives up any pretense to timeless truths (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 324).

⁴¹ For example, theologian Meister Eckhart in his concept of birthing, and Scotus in his understanding of analogy, aided Heidegger’s transition into Dasein as a being-in-the-world, exposed to history. Crowe, *Heidegger’s Religious Origins*. John MacQuarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994). Ben Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion: From God to the Gods* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007). Furthermore, the approaches afforded Heidegger by the hermeneutic (Dilthey, Schleiermacher) and transcendental, phenomenological tradition (Kant, Brentano, on the way to Husserl) prove significant. My primary concern, however, is the underlying problem that urged Heidegger away from conceptual generalizations (thought as representation, or objectification) even as it moved him through and beyond these thinkers. It is significant to note that destruction is not decimation of the tradition in favor of another, but a creative reappropriation of it. Thus Heidegger does not succumb to the illusion of ‘starting fresh,’ as if having the view from nowhere he repudiates. Indeed, he explains, “the illusion arises that through critique some content, corresponding to what has prevailed, is supposed to be put forth in opposition; and that my work is something for a school, a movement, continuation, completion...I do not want to introduce a new movement in the history of philosophy.” He sees in his ‘other beginning,’ “No fantastic representation of new categories that comfortably lead us into a new kingdom.” (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 238). See also Heidegger’s definition, “*Abbau*, this means here: regress to Greek philosophy, to Aristotle, in order to see how something original came into a falling away and covering over, and to see that we stand in this falling away.” (Qtd in Ibid, 143.)

⁴² Heidegger does not believe we simply ‘get outside’ or beyond metaphysics. Hölderlin’s *Hymn “The Ister,”* trans. Will McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 53.

and thus evades both the easy evacuation of God (as nihilism, subjectivism, or psychologism), and the substitute universals of scientism.

If for Rosenzweig the presence of life critiques the philosophical pretension to essence, we must become clear about how Heidegger might interpret this claim. If the “presence of life” requires a phenomenological return to the things themselves, Heidegger would not resist. However, Heidegger moves away from the rhetoric of presence, insofar as presence entails an objectifying mode that renders phenomena as present-at-hand—mere objects of ‘neutral’ calculation.⁴³ And yet, Heidegger’s critique of philosophical presence would perhaps not include Rosenzweig. Presence, for Rosenzweig, entails that the thinker remain open, like Dasein, to the phenomenal world, even to God, through naming. If Rosenzweig need not fall under Heidegger’s scrutiny of presence language,⁴⁴ does Heidegger come under Rosenzweig’s scrutiny with regard to essentializing?

Heidegger still writes of essences, but not without some escape from Rosenzweig’s critique. In his 1929 lecture on the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger still believes that philosophy “is knowledge of the essence.”⁴⁵ However, for Heidegger, the essence of philosophy seems to be its capacity to question.⁴⁶ The

⁴³ Though, in 1928, Heidegger does come to redefine neutrality away from the connotation it might receive in the sciences as “not the voidness of abstraction, but precisely the potency of the *primal source* that bears in itself the intrinsic possibility of every concrete factual humanity” (Qtd. in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 358.)

⁴⁴ If for no other reason than Rosenzweig has a rich, Heraclitean sense of time and presence—flow, flux, movement.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Fundamental*, 154.

⁴⁶ Heidegger’s understanding of universality or essentiality in philosophy, as the ‘infinite task’ of questioning, perhaps remains true to Husserl. In his “Vienna Lecture,” Husserl proclaims: “If inadequacy announces itself through obscurities and contradictions, this motives the beginning of a universal reflection. Thus the philosopher must always devote himself to mastering the truth and full sense of philosophy, the totality of its horizons of infinity. No line of knowledge, no single truth may be absolutized and isolated.” At

philosopher, through the practice of questioning, can arrive at essentiality—but never in the sense of “finding the most universal possible essence that fits all forms, i.e., the empties, as the sole and proper essence.”⁴⁷ Like Rosenzweig, Heidegger regards as illusory the mode of thought that strives for empty formalism. Indeed, he scathes this “pseudo-philosophy” and its claims of “superiority” over the sciences.⁴⁸ Philosophy must neither confuse essence with universality, nor with provability.⁴⁹ He challenges philosophy to return to its essence: *ambiguously* situated in the *questions* posed to and by the finite perspective of Dasein.⁵⁰ Insofar as philosophy rests in its appeals to “hyper-sophisticat[ed]” conceptual knowledge, universals “wrested from the matter itself,” it does not display a mature thinking.⁵¹ On the other hand, philosophy should not be natural science, concerned only with “stubborn appeal[s] to the so-called facts,” all the while ignoring “that every fact we can produce has already undergone a process of interpretation.”⁵² Neither the stubborn appeal to what *is*, nor to what *ought to be*, can

best, he affirms (in a way that informs Heidegger’s metaphor of thinking as walking a country path), philosophy can put humanity “on the road.” (Husserl, *Crisis*, 291.)

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 190. Nonetheless, Gosetti-Ferencei is right to question Heidegger’s “preference for the essential,” especially as it renders Hölderlin a figure for the essence of poetized violence or nationalistic politics. Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language: Toward a New Poetics of Dasein* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 11. I recommend her entire work, especially as it maintains the tension between a Heidegger’s being-in-the-world of facticity and his attempts to poetically disentangle from concrete realities. It is worth noting that Heidegger’s description of philosophy’s role changes over time, especially as he comes to distinguish phenomenology as a method of philosophy, or philosophy as superior to other sciences in “Phenomenology and Theology.”

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Fundamental*, 14-15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 191.

⁵¹ Ibid., 190. This critique of wresting can also be found in Heidegger’s explanation of the difference between reading religious life through abstraction versus explication (Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 59.)

⁵² Heidegger, *Fundamental*, 190.

open thought to its essential questioning: its never being-at-home despite its fundamental homesickness for an originary relation to the source of Being.⁵³

The desperate attempt to fortress one's thoughts—either in the utopian absolute or the supposed purity of 'bare facts'—marks an illusory mode for the thinker.⁵⁴ The thinker is to question and to create: a process marked as much by seeking the underlying structures of what *is* as it is waiting for these structures from within existence. Insofar as the thinker listens (*hören*) to what is, she not only belongs (*gehören*) to the world but also resists being too complacent within her thinking of the world.⁵⁵ Hearing is the possibility of disruption; belonging makes this disruption possible by keeping the thinker near in her distance. Not wholly unlike the liminal occupancy of an artist or religious devotee,⁵⁶ Heidegger claims, the thinker cannot be consumed with the "practical and technical serviceability" of her thoughts.⁵⁷ It is not that philosophy should remain disconnected from practice, but rather, it cannot help but remain deeply, fundamentally connected to its discipline of questioning and creating. For Heidegger, to halt at questions of use, production, and function is to remain somehow disconnected from the richness of

⁵³ Heidegger suggests that the fundamental attunement for philosophy is homesickness. (Ibid., 5-9.) This theme of the thinker never being at home (except, perhaps, in the unhomelike) arises additionally in Martin Heidegger, *The Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 283. See also Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* 49.

⁵⁴ This critique of thinking as fortressing or hardening arises in Heidegger's critique of self-certainty—a certainty which he thinks perpetuated in German Idealism's appropriation of the Christian's God absolute knowing. Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 158. This relation to knowledge of Being as adequation or certainty stands in contrast to the ability to be called by Being. "The self-certainty of no longer letting oneself be called; the obduracy against all intimations; the *inability to wait*; always only calculating." (Ibid., 94)

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 124-6.

⁵⁶ Heidegger hints that proper philosophy is more akin to art and religion than to science, though he does not care to describe their negative relation. (Heidegger, *Fundamental*, 2-3, 154, 182).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 191.

thinking. Creativity, as we will see for the poet and for the thinker, requires the revealing-concealing of *poiesis*, not the too-revealing demands of *tekne*.⁵⁸

In the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger at turns condemns the thinking that clings to vacuous formalism (the philosophical tradition) and the thinking that grips too tightly its object (the sciences). Both the open sieve of philosophical universalism and the strangle-hold of scientific evidences forget that Being must grip Dasein in its singularity. When we arrest the object of our thought from the stream of life (as Rosenzweig might say), we neglect the way in which the stream—time, attunements, phenomenal disclosure—is forming and gripping us. As Heidegger explains in thinking about boredom:

When we make it into an object in this way then we refuse it precisely the role it is supposed to have in keeping with the most proper intention of our questioning. We refuse it the possibility of unfolding its essence as such, as the boredom in which we are bored, so that we may thereby experience its essence.⁵⁹

Heidegger identifies an illusory thinking that forgets its immersion in the encounter. In thinking, in questioning, we must let the object of our thought *object to* our presuppositions. The essence of a phenomenon, or of the attuning “how” by which we relate to it, cannot be reached abstractly.⁶⁰ Illusory thinking, which prizes its theories and everyday biases, must be undone by an otherwise: a questioning that releases.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 14. Granted, Heidegger did not always associate *poiesis* with the proper thinking of Being; it was once considered a mode of production related to the presence of an *eidōs*, not a development like *physis*. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 106-107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶¹ Heidegger asserts that phenomenology best practices this releasement insofar as “it can understand the *incomprehensible*, precisely in that it radically *lets* the latter *be* in its incomprehensibility.

Before, however, we can explore more thoroughly this otherwise thinking as releasement (*Gelassenheit*),⁶² let us track further the illusory mode of thought that Heidegger condemns as “calculative.” It has already been suggested that both philosophy and the sciences are capable of illusory thinking. But how does this come to take on the vocabulary of calculation? We return to 1929-30 lecture of *Fundamental Concepts*, where the critique of calculation is briefly glimpsed. It is clear that Heidegger lambasts the calculation of history⁶³ and of time.⁶⁴ Heidegger expresses concern at our attempts to reduce history to chronology, or time to an objective measure of hours. He worries that whatever does not fit into calculation will “sink to the level of an illusion, [as] merely subjective.”⁶⁵ Is he worried about the loss of subjectivity? Hardly—if subjectivity is narrowly construed as psychology⁶⁶ or the humanist’s divinized subject.⁶⁷ Heidegger wishes to preserve what escapes calculation and our conceptual grips.⁶⁸ But why?

This is itself comprehensible only if one has understood that philosophy has nothing to do with the scientific object and subject.” This understanding as letting-be (*gelassenheit*) is neither the “rational-conceptual grasp” nor an “irrational letting-be of an indissoluble law”—especially insofar as the irrational is still measured by a particular rationality. (Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 92-93.)

⁶² Ibid., 91. The terminology of ‘releasement’ will become much more significant in the third chapter.

⁶³ Ibid., 182.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁶ Heidegger remains critical of the psychoanalyzed subject, though he gains some leverage in using the concept of the unconscious. (Ibid., 60-61, 166).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 211. Lacoste points out that phenomenology cannot simply do away with objectivity, but rather expose its insufficiency as the sole criterion of truth. “And when we want objectivity, control and prediction, it is not a chimera that we pursue: this must be said, if we wish to prevent the phenomenological quest for the primitive or the originary from seeming to entertain troubling collusion with irrationality. However, what is most important lies elsewhere, in the affirmation of a richness of appearing that overflows its reception in objective understanding, and in such a manner that objective understanding is truly intelligible only if we perceive that it rests in fact on a foundation that it does not recognize—that of affective understanding.” Jean-Yves Lacoste, “The Work and Complement of Appearing,” *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 73.

Illusory thinking *threatens* philosophy with its banality; it forgets that it is the thinker who must be gripped, not the thinker who must grip.⁶⁹ At issue, then, is the false correlation of the absolute with our abstractions of it, instead of its withdrawal from us, its insolubility. What is the structure of illusory thinking, which dismisses whatever it cannot calculate or comprehend?

In discussing Parmenides' assertion that "One should both say and think that Being is," Heidegger regards as an "illusion": (a) the dismissal of this phrase as weightlessly tautological,⁷⁰ or (b) the assumption that we can add this phrase to our knowledge, through the act of "cognizance-taking."⁷¹ It is illusory to dismiss, "Being is," say, in "the tree is," because it cannot tell us about botanical structures.⁷² It is equally illusory to take Parmenides' claim purely in the abstract. Is it not as if we could access its meaning "without intimations and questions, and seemingly not burdened with any prejudice,"⁷³ which accompany the act of interpretation. But this is not to say that thinking, especially in the phenomenological method, is doomed to its interpretive act as prejudice. Thinking can neither shirk the mysterious gift of Being simply because it cannot be calculated or grounded; nor can thinking dismiss the work of Dasein's translation in thinking the groundless. Heidegger advocates that thinking must "embrac[e] firmly and gently that which seeing brings into view."⁷⁴ Therefore, as John van Buren deftly summarizes:

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 57.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 174.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷⁴ Qtd. in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 10.

[Thinking] can have the character of Eckhartian letting-be (*Gelassenheit*) and openness toward the “mystery” of groundlessness....As metaphysics and modern technique, however, the intentional hand of thinking attempts to objectify, calculate, and master the *Sache* into the before-the-hand-ness (*Vorhandenheit*) of a present, universal, homogenous ground, around which it can close its conceptual fist....But all this is an illusion, since philosophy “cannot comfortably drop a knowable object into one’s hands.”⁷⁵

The word “comfortably” is telling. For Heidegger, philosophy—and theology—should be anything but comfortable. As early as 1919, Heidegger sought an end to the illusory thinking of philosophy in favor of a “new beginning” for theology and ontology.⁷⁶ His lecture notes for the winter semester of 1921-22 indicate that this new beginning offers no “saving coast,” no “comfortable...kingdom of the blessed and the absolute.”⁷⁷

Philosophy must resist the desire to systematize into ideology the complex realities with which it must continue to wrestle. This means that philosophy cannot define, calculate, and thereby “possess” God.⁷⁸ Theological thinking, too, must wrestle for the blessing of its names—a naming that is a process, an analysis of context, and not a projection of a pre-made title upon an object.

In his courses between 1919 and 1921 that Heidegger intends to restore an originary thinking, contra calculative thinking, in philosophy; and insofar as this requires a critique of ontotheology, it also has implications for theology. This originary thinking would have to avoid two dead-ends: philosophy’s attempt to make God a speculative

⁷⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 134-5.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 135.

object, and theology's attempt to describe God as the presence of a certain Being.⁷⁹ To avoid these outcomes, a reader of Heidegger does not need to deny theology's relation to philosophy. Rather, one can draw a connection between the inglorious patience of attending an absent God, and the sober attention to phenomena that withdrawal from our conceptual holds.⁸⁰ In both cases, Heidegger urges an awakening from the comfortable dream of "absolute knowledge" and "pure presen[ce]" to the "difficult" *kinesis* of life.⁸¹ Van Buren helpfully highlights this rhetoric of 'awakening from illusion' in Heidegger's discussion of the "They" prior to *Being and Time*.⁸² The "They" represents whatever masks the kinetic and personal aspects of existence. Under the sway of the "They," Dasein inclines toward what is average, attempting to measure through "rank, success, position in life."⁸³ In calculating, one seeks security and disposes the difficulties of ongoing decision. In short, through the influence of the "They," Dasein becomes an object present to itself, emphasizing the present moment as cut off from the potency of the past and the potentiality of the future. Heidegger contrasts kairological time to this calculable present and future fixity. Calculated time implies a temporality in which God "has to endure becoming a factor in human experiments. He has to respond to an inquisitive, pompous and pseudo-prophetic curiosity".⁸⁴ Kairological time reminds that

⁷⁹ Heidegger wishes to not only keep God from the language of Being, insofar as Being has been covered over by our distortions of it (i.e., the confusion of Being as a being), but also to think the question of Being in such a way that it is more preparative for a thinking of God, of the holy.

⁸⁰ Thus Van Buren claims an "intimate connection between his project of destruction and his plans for a phenomenology of religion." (Ibid., 137.)

⁸¹ Qtd. in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 138.

⁸² Ibid., 137-139.

⁸³ Ibid., 138. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc.), 149-168.

⁸⁴ Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 167.

the experience of God is not a secured fact, but a “How” of existing: waiting for the decisive to come.⁸⁵

The tendency of the “They” to totalize time and persons appears both in the philosophical tradition and in Christendom. Together, as ontotheology, both push, through a “Holy Ghost of Knowledge,” “the illusion of purely objective absolute philosophy.”⁸⁶ In valuing immutability, both have a tendency to arrange temporality by “fil[ing] it away into the eternal.”⁸⁷ As a result, Dasein is not considered in historical consciousness; it is calculated to emphasize its objectivity, its constant presence. Dasein comes to resemble some false god, who cannot be “disturbed on his walks through world, soul, and God.”⁸⁸ Heidegger resists this ease because of: the illusion it imposes upon humans, its neglect of historical complexity, and implicitly, its attempt to possess definitive knowledge about God. The calculation of temporality, and Being, is therefore not divorced from Heidegger’s concern about a calculated God. Concepts become totalizing, unless they admit the absence-permeated structures of time, of Being, of God.⁸⁹ For Heidegger, philosophy cannot be contemplation of an unchanging concept of Being, divorced from historical consciousness. Neither should theology be a discipline abstracted from the temporalized experiences of faith-content.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 104-107.

⁸⁶ Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 141.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 142.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 142. The language here resonates with Rosenzweig’s critique of the person who does not take in the variegated landscape of God, world, and self.

⁸⁹ To speak of them as absence-permeated structures: is to recognize that time is not adequate to our measurements that present it; is to remember that just as God is not a phenomenon, God cannot be said to be totally present to our thinking of God; is to suggest that no phenomenon is totally present, as if always fulfilling our intentionality. Absence both critiques and entices thinking; it acknowledges the ways that Being is irreducible to our thinking of it.

However, this needs some clarifying. Heidegger is not doing theology when he suggests the ways in which calculative thinking—whether he locates it in metaphysics, mathematics, logic, or technology—has made impossible a certain thinking of God. He highlights the errors of this thinking as a phenomenologist. Given his 1927 text “Phenomenology and Theology,”⁹⁰ Heidegger distinguishes theology as a positive science insofar as it not only studies the givens of Christianity, but also contributes to the particular existence of faithful Dasein. That is, Christian theology thematizes what is revealed to a participant in the life of faith. It is a kind of “historical science,” and an ontic science, insofar as its concepts attend the particular history disclosed in revelation.⁹¹ To avoid the goal of eternal concepts as insurance, he advises that theology must necessarily make the life of faith “more difficult.”⁹²

Phenomenology is also supposed to complicate one’s assumptions, and prevent the congealing of its object into an unchanging presence. Phenomenology’s object—hardly an object⁹³—is not the particular beings that participate in believing existence, but Being as disclosed to historical Dasein. Dasein, for phenomenology, is thus much more broad. The structures of Being that phenomenology interprets are thus considered more fundamental. Phenomenology is a procedure by which philosophical thinking can address the pre-Christian modes of existence. (Say, if theology writes of sin, phenomenology may

⁹⁰ Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” *Pathmarks*, 50-51.

⁹¹ Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” *Pathmarks*, 46.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹³ It depends on *whose* phenomenology. Husserl discussed not only the objects available to scientific observation, but also the ideal objects of numbers. Heidegger resists the notion of an object of thought in order to subvert the subject-object divide; he thereby opens phenomenality to moods and meaning. Marion and Levinas go even further—insofar as they question whether phenomenality is restricted to Being, or interrogate the suggestion that intentionality is toward Being and never reversed. See Kevin Hart, “Phenomenality and Christianity,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 153-185.

permit one to write of the structures of guilt, or understanding of conscience, apart from God.) Phenomenology attends the ontological structures that underlie existence, and can serve as a corrective to theological concepts insofar as theology is concerned not simply with the Dasein of the faithful.⁹⁴

Heidegger provided an example in his phenomenology of the “Characteristics of Early Christian life.”⁹⁵ The facticity of faith, according to Heidegger, entails perceiving that God is everywhere—in the experience and experiencer, but only as love directs this question of God’s presence toward a certain absence.⁹⁶ This love opens the experiencer to God, but is not the end of desire, nor the impossibility of retreat.⁹⁷ Every Dasein, regardless of faith, Heidegger claims, can experience “believing (grasping trustingly, somehow fixing an end), hoping (awaiting, keeping oneself open for), loving (loving devotion, appreciating).”⁹⁸ What makes these things unique in Christian facticity is the way that God thwarts the fixing of an end—demanding a love more like a desire, “burning” at the touch that never satisfies one’s need to capture significance.⁹⁹ Christian facticity, in its historical enactment, is precisely this waiting, enduring its trial. The trial is not without hope: it exposes that I do not have myself, just as I cannot secure God; and yet this insecurity is the possibility for a faith in which God secures me in mercy.¹⁰⁰ This language seems both theological insofar as it attends the existence of the faithful; but it is

⁹⁴ Ibid., 52-53. Fifty years later, Heidegger suggests that theologians should avoid using concepts provided by philosophy (Ibid., 55), and indeed that theology should not behave like a science (Ibid., 61.)

⁹⁵ Heidegger, “Chapter Five: Characteristics of Early Christian Life Experience,” *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 83-89.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 153

⁹⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 153-155.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 160-161.

also phenomenological insofar as Heidegger derives these insights from his already forming notions of ecstatic time.¹⁰¹ It is difficult to tease apart the extent to which Heidegger's readings of Paul and Augustine informed, or were informed by, his later phenomenological emphases on the thought that waits, and the hoped-for homecoming of the gods as it affects time. Nevertheless, because Heidegger's phenomenological work can be fruitfully applied (so Heidegger has shown) to religious experience, and indirectly assist theology, it is worth noting their common aims in resisting the calculative mode that Heidegger associates with ontotheological thinking.¹⁰²

It may be that phenomenology permitted Heidegger a means of resisting the metaphysical, "soporific opiate" of theological eternity;¹⁰³ but his understanding of an originary Christianity reflects, by contrast, a means of resisting metaphysical illusions.¹⁰⁴ In originary Christianity, the difficulties of vigilant waiting dispel calculative thinking, and the ease of absolute truth. In part, truth cannot be calculated or preserved as an illusory absolute, because truth—whether that experienced in faith or in philosophical questioning—cannot be abstracted from its context. To do so, Heidegger states, is to explicate by extracting the "What" from the "How" of enactment and attunement.¹⁰⁵ In

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰² Perhaps this is an attempt to follow Heidegger's suggestion of a "possibility of a community" between theology and philosophy. (Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," *Pathmarks*, 53.)

¹⁰³ See Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 214. All of chapter five is particularly helpful to this study.

¹⁰⁴ As Ben Vedder summarizes Heidegger's exploration of the Thessalonians, "[Heidegger] is involved first and foremost in the experience of historicity, which is implied in such faith, as well as in the ontology implied in this experience. However, it remains in question whether this experience of historicity is accessible at all if we consider it in isolation from its content: that is the unpredictability of history with respect to the Christians' hope for the coming of Christ. It recoils utterly from calculative manipulation." (Vedder, 59). *to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 59-60.

the illusory mode of thinking, “the abstracted is fixed in further progress without regard to that *from which* it is abstracted, so that the ‘from which’ remains a matter of indifference for the sense of the abstracted.”¹⁰⁶ This is a methodological error in metaphysics; and theology—if rightly proclaimed¹⁰⁷—serves to critique this shortcoming. To extract content from its situation, and our empathetic relation to it, is to perpetuate dogma.¹⁰⁸ Faith is necessarily historical: considering content, relationships, and one’s enactment within the situation of faith. Thus, when Christians hope for the *parousia* and its *kairological* intrusion into calculated time, they do so in “obstinate waiting”¹⁰⁹ from within their enactment.¹¹⁰ The *parousia* can only be related to in this waiting, with hope, and never in calculating “the consciousness of a future event.”¹¹¹ Therefore, the ‘truth content’ of such an event can never be solidified, in advance, as a dogma.

As a result, Christians can never “have God,”¹¹² nor entirely possess themselves. There is no absolute self, or absolute concept of God that can be held by the mind like an isolated object. This is idolatry, which tempts in its false security. Heidegger is adamant, “There is no security for Christian life; the constant insecurity is also characteristic for what is fundamentally significant in factual life. The uncertainty is not coincidental:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁷ For Heidegger, theology must be more concerned with practices of proclamation, and not simply a matter of articulating dogma in “the slickness and detachment of theory.” (Ibid., 103).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁰ “Earlier we formally characterized: ‘Christian religiosity lives temporality.’ It is a time without its own order and demarcations. One cannot encounter this temporality in some sort of objective concept of time.” (Ibid., 73.)

¹¹¹ Ibid., 71.

¹¹² Ibid., 70.

rather it is necessary.”¹¹³ An illusory relation to faith covers over this uncertainty, its “anguish.”¹¹⁴ Holiness is not the ease of secured isolation from the world. It is neither mere memorization of isolated, dogmatic content, nor the attempts to possess salvation, nor the calculation of Christ’s return. Rather, faith is holy in its enactment of obstinate waiting; it “does not wait for the significances of a future content, but for God.”¹¹⁵ To wait for and before God is to be without possessions: to have “in such a way, *that* [one does] not have...”¹¹⁶ This dispossession entails that God cannot be used as a “foothold” or mere “worldview.”¹¹⁷ One cannot attain to a God’s eye view through speculation. The Christian can only “be awake and sober.”¹¹⁸ Indeed, it is for this reason that “philosophical understanding arises out of a certain religiosity.”¹¹⁹ Both philosophy and theology must not eliminate God by establishing their abstractions as absolute. Rather, their shared task is to remain “radically open”¹²⁰ to what absolves from illusion’s grip: be it the self,¹²¹ God,¹²² or the very structures of time.¹²³

¹¹³ Ibid., 73. He suggests the contrast of an easy faith without questioning, a faith that decides its future by dogmatic adherence: “if such faith does not continually expose itself to the possibility of unfaith, it is not faith but a mere convenience. It becomes an agreement with oneself to adhere in the future to doctrine as something that has somehow been handed down. This is neither faith nor questioning but indifference—which can then, perhaps even with keen interest, busy itself with everything, with faith as well as with questioning.” Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 102.

¹²¹ Ibid., 161.

¹²² Ibid., 83.

¹²³ Ibid., 72-73. This theme of waiting in anguish, or “readied distress,” in order to authentically exist in time, surfaces throughout Heidegger’s works. In 1926, he describes the abyssal, destitute time of

In his successive lectures on Augustine (summer of 1921), Heidegger describes illusory thinking, its calculations, as the “miserable life.”¹²⁴ One is consumed with “axiologizing, transferring everything to one plane—objects of value. Precisely the decisive complexes of enactment are covered up, and especially the transitions.”¹²⁵ In this process of axiologization, “authentic concern is disfigured and viewed as concealed calculation.”¹²⁶ Responsibility is softened into secured unthinking. Everything is ordered so as to avoid meaning tied to historical enactment. Even in his lectures on Aristotle, a few months later (winter 1921-2), Heidegger bemoans this false approach to religion. He exposes the paradox of one who exercises a “premature, passionate position-taking, pro and con” and in so doing “merely betrays the lack of genuine passion pertaining to the resoluteness of the understanding” that in contrast “is silent and can wait.”¹²⁷ This inability to wait clings to “surrogates” of spirituality, foremost of which is the supposed “objectivity that actually dims our eyesight and is constantly fleeing from the issues.”¹²⁸

waiting in which poets abide: “What are Poets For?” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1971), 90-93. In 1933-4, he discusses calculated time in opposition to the poet’s waiting “in readied distress”: *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). In 1938-9, he again disparages the calculation of eternity: *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 8. In 1939, he refutes the historiographical attempts to calculate time: “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 97. In 1942, his elusive text, *The Event*, is riddled with oppositions to metaphysical and technological time. In 1943, he contrasts the “waiting time,” in which the holy comes, to that of calculated duration: “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 129. And his 1945 dialogues contrast this authentic waiting experience of time with awaiting: *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). This is by no means a comprehensive list, but is nevertheless indicative of how his early preoccupations with Christian temporality served his other philosophical texts.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 196-197.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 53.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 53.

Objectivity desires that “all things [be] brought into purity with uproarious haste,” and thereby levels any possibility for the multi-dimensional context of true decision to arise.

This language of leveling surfaces also in Heidegger’s readings of Hölderlin. In his 1926 essay, “What are Poets For?,” Heidegger associates technological leveling with self-assertion, and a willful ordering:

What threatens man in his very nature is the view that technological production puts the world in order, while in fact this ordering is precisely what levels every *ordo*, every rank, down to the uniformity of production, and thus from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise.¹²⁹

To collapse the multi-dimensional “realm” in a false ordering is to flatten distinctions, but also the foundational gradations of time-space. Heidegger’s concern about calculative time reappears in his 1933-34 lectures on Hölderlin’s poems, “Germania” and “The Rhine.”¹³⁰ It appears again in his 1942 lecture on Hölderlin’s, “The Ister.” Here, he critiques Kant’s time-space insofar as it is divorced from the enactment of journeying in locality.¹³¹ He dismisses the notion of absolute space, and the thinking that confuses geographic mapping with locality.¹³² Locality is not a point, but a relational understanding of time-space that takes its essence from the journeying of the river.¹³³

Under the strain of calculation, functionality, and questions of performance, experience of the spatio-temporal world become flattened into mere cause and effect. This is not simply a metaphysical diminishment; for Heidegger, it is the basis for

¹²⁹ Heidegger, “What are Poets for?,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 114.

¹³⁰ Heidegger, “Section 6: Determining the ‘We’ out of the Horizon of the Question of Time,” *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* 47-56.

¹³¹ Heidegger, *The Ister*, 45-47.

¹³² Edward Casey takes up this critique as well in *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹³³ Heidegger, *The Ister*, 20-44.

technology. Unique to technology is the way it manifests its metaphysical inheritance of calculation. The cause-effect understanding of symbol, for example, in metaphysical understandings of sacramentality, is transmuted into the modern concern of functionality or performance.¹³⁴ Heidegger notes this shift as the “transformation of the concept of substance into the concept of function.”¹³⁵ In functionality, Heidegger bemoans the leveled relation of terms, “[In the case of $a=(f)b$] ‘To be’ means nothing other than a function of b .”¹³⁶ Heidegger is not dismissing the significance of mathematical functions, but rather disparaging the maneuver of thought that labels: ‘nothing other than a function.’ This reducibility is precisely the mark of illusory thinking.

If Platonic metaphysics (and its reversal in Nietzsche) supposed a dangerous hierarchy, calculation, for Heidegger, enacts a dangerous leveling. This leveling makes every being present-at-hand, or evaluated in terms of its function. Heidegger thus attempts to situate thinking away from the realm of immutable forms (a difference disconnected from becoming) and the realm of managed variables (a relation that reduces difference). The critique of calculative thinking, and its leveling, continues into Heidegger’s writings of the next decade, perhaps most apparent in its contrast to poetic thought. In his lectures comprising *What is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger attributes calculative thinking to the sciences. Even though the sciences desire to see all sides of an object, they encourage “our minds [to] hold views on all and everything, and view all

¹³⁴ See Louis-Marie Chauvet on the reduction of the symbolic order into metaphysics of causality and production. He has a pertinent discussion of Heidegger’s qualms with ontotheology in the very same chapter. “Critique of the Onto-theological Presuppositions of Classical Sacramental Theology,” *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 7-45.

¹³⁵ Heidegger, *The Ister*, 41.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

things in the identical way.”¹³⁷ In short, the scientific mode in every discipline seeks “absolute univocity,” as if thinking is a matter of verified calculations, or “one-sidedly dogmatic statements”¹³⁸ It is not that Heidegger would wish to undo the particular rigors of consistency in the sciences; rather, he would remind that thinking must not only be concerned with empirical objects and calculable results. Thinking is not simply making knowledge available to proof.¹³⁹ It should, essentially, entail a listening relation to what is not entirely present: the future, coming toward humans in their relation to the gods who have passed.

Discussing Hölderlin’s “Earth and Heaven” a few years later, Heidegger suggests that calculation not only reduces our understanding of time and objects, it levels “the totality of the world as a uniform sameness.”¹⁴⁰ He attributes totalizing thought not only to the sciences, nor to the obvious terrors of political regimes, but to the domination of modern technology. Modern technology, he claims, displaces the “in-finite relation” of the fourfold;¹⁴¹ it eradicates the need for a relationship with alterity—be it the uncanniness of gods, other mortals, heaven or earth.¹⁴² Where technology reigns, beauty can no longer be the “joint,” the spacing, that allows these four voices to harmonize in their difference. When technology comes to replace this joint that lets beings be in their distinctness, appearance and consistency become the standard for what deserves our

¹³⁷ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 33.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁹ Heidegger uses the example of a cabinetry apprentice, whose thinking is not simply knowledge about the wood and manipulations of tools, but rather a relation to the “shapes slumbering within the wood.” (*Ibid.*, 23.)

¹⁴⁰ Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” 202.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

¹⁴² It thereby collapses the infinite relation opened by the fourfold (*Geviert*). Heidegger, “What are Poets For?,” *Elucidations*, 87-140. Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 143-159. Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 163-184.

attention. Heidegger, following Hölderlin, wishes for an otherwise approach to the real—one that founds community, beauty, humility, holiness.¹⁴³

Technology does not always value these foundations for reality, Heidegger asserts, if for no other reason than it cannot admit the ways in which a certain truth resists us, is unavailable to our formulas. As the outgrowth of the metaphysical impulse of calculation, technology strives to make the world “available to us as a calculable resource.”¹⁴⁴

Calculation, in its “making-available” displaces this possibility for the “in-finite relation.”¹⁴⁵ In the process, as we will come to see in the next chapter, it thwarts the possibility of a clearing in which the holy might arrive.¹⁴⁶ In contrast to the multi-dimensional play of what is concealed and unconcealed without measure,¹⁴⁷ “technology, industry, and economy [set] the standards for the work of the self-production of human beings, determin[ing] the reality of all that is real.”¹⁴⁸ As a result, language itself is “deformed into an instrument of reportage and calculable information.”¹⁴⁹ Reality becomes confused with the methods that calculate it; and in this adequation, language may forget its essence of intimation, its incompleteness that permits it to listen.¹⁵⁰ While

¹⁴³ Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” 204.

¹⁴⁴ Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” 202.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁴⁶ For the relation of technology and the holy, see “What are Poets For?” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 115. The following chapter will explore this relation more thoroughly through: Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Spirits,” *Elucidations*, 23-50. Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday...,” *Elucidations*, 67-100. Heidegger, “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 101-174.

¹⁴⁷ Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 212-227.

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, “Principles of Thinking,” *Piety*, 56.

¹⁴⁹ Heidegger, “A Non-Objectifying Thinking and Speaking,” *Piety*, 29.

¹⁵⁰ I would say that it forgets its symbolic or metaphoric quality, but Heidegger resists (in 1955-56) these terms insofar as they imply, for him, “the distinguishing, if not complete separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own...When one gains insight into the limitations of metaphysics, ‘metaphor’ as a normative conception also becomes untenable...The metaphorical exists only within metaphysics.” Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald

accuracy is necessary for technology, need calculation be the only means of assessing reality? Heidegger warns that the ‘necessity’ of calculative thinking is akin to idolatry: it feeds one’s need for security, and thereby *atrophies* one’s ability to remain *exposed* to the world, to be *held open* to mystery, and to *wait* on a god yet to come.

In a time when we welcome the accessibility and precision that technology grants, we might counter: what is so illusory about the thinking that tends toward this will to calculate? Heidegger is not naïve.¹⁵¹ He does not think we should give up technology, or stop teaching the calculative sciences.¹⁵² Again, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, illusory thinking occurs when a particular approach is construed as the *only or absolute* approach.¹⁵³ Technology is not something from which we must be saved. However, he remains concerned that the technological understanding of Being will dangerously substitute correctness for truth as revealing-concealing.¹⁵⁴ Correctness, in league with the metaphysics of presence, will privilege as ‘truth’ anything readily available to calculation. The tendency of technology to order (or ‘enframe’) through calculation and empirical

Lily (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 48. In the non-metaphysical conception of language, Heidegger prefers terms of intimation—such as gesture or hint. (Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 26.)

¹⁵¹ “What is dangerous is not technology. There is no demonry of technology, but rather there is the mystery of its essence. The essence of technology, as a destining of revealing, is essence.” (Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology, *The Question*, 28.) See also: Heidegger, ‘Memorial Address,’ *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 43-57. As Hubert Dreyfus suggests, Heidegger does not dismiss technology altogether, but rather wants to “prepare a free relation to it.” To talk about decline or destruction or loss is still calculative. Hubert Dreyfus, “Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relation to Technology,” *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2004), 53-62.

¹⁵² He pursued mathematics in his transition from theology into philosophy. (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 59.)

¹⁵³ The danger that Heidegger asserts, with regard to technology’s essence is that “the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking.” (Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 56.)

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question*, 26. See also Heidegger’s critique of correctness as the standard for being-true (Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 78.)

proof may endanger all that does not ‘unconceal’ itself. Calculation strives to enframe instead of poetically letting “what presences come forth into appearance.”¹⁵⁵ Calculation does not *let* but “thrusts man into a relation”¹⁵⁶ whereby appearance covers over its revealing-concealing origin. Heidegger describes the person who, caught up in the task of enframing, forgets precisely that he is employing a frame at all. He remains unable to qualify the ways in which his device is useful, and the domains in which it does not aid. Ironically, in claiming mastery of content through calculation, he forgets that he is, in a sense, being used by the frame he employs; under its mission, he cannot encounter the call implied in Being. In calculative thinking, what withdraws from thought is thereby erased with truth itself.¹⁵⁷ And the calculative method to capture truth, therefore, replaces the mystery of our being, even “the mysteriousness of [God’s] distance.”¹⁵⁸

Ultimately, Heidegger suggests that the truth of Being is in danger of becoming an “illusion,” indeed “one final delusion”: “everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct.”¹⁵⁹ I will only see the God I can construct. I will only acknowledge

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵⁷ That is, if truth is revealing-concealing of Being, and not simply what is available. (Ibid., 26).

¹⁵⁸ “Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God can, for representational thinking, lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance. In the light of causality, God can sink to the level of a cause, of *causa efficiens*. He then becomes, even in theology, the god of the philosophers, namely, of those who define the unconcealed and the concealed in terms of causality and making, without ever considering the essential origin of this causality.” (Ibid., 26.) Of course, one need not accept the alternative of a God commensurate with faith, or the God commensurate with ontology. There is a God, for Levinas, that can be “uttered in reasonable discourse” without this discourse being adequated to either the God of the philosophers, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 57. For similar reasons—avoiding the ontotheological god as well as nurturing the possibility of an encounter irreducible to concept—Lacoste writes: “An idol is thus in need of destroying, namely the Pascalian opposition of the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob” and the “God of the Philosophers and sages.” It is indeed an idol, for the opposition is not content to be a venerable relic but finds itself so well venerated that it is canonical. But the opposition is false, and its cult harmful.” (Lacoste, “On Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 140.)

¹⁵⁹ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 27.

another person insofar as I have prejudged them. I will only confirm the scientific results that fit my previous biases. I will sway statistical analysis in favor of my thesis. These reductive figurations not only threaten thinking, they threaten our capacity to remain open to an otherwise in our everyday engagements. Thus, for Heidegger, calculative thinking infects philosophy, the sciences, theology, and ethics.¹⁶⁰ It is not that Heidegger would wish, due to thinking's contaminating objectification, to undo Dasein's place as the thinker of Being, but rather to redefine a thinking befitting an otherwise conception of Being—that is, Being in its temporality, not its representation as an object of thought.

Dasein must yet assume responsibility in letting-speak phenomenal appearing without demanding a certain presence. Dasein is therefore engaged in “disessentializing” the suprasensorial in a Nietzschean attention to *what is becoming*.¹⁶¹ However, an emphasis upon thinking the sensorial can degenerate into a reversal of the Platonic hierarchy that Nietzsche (and modern science) seeks to avoid. Each discipline is caught in the desire to locate reality in the empirical; and yet there is no such thing as ‘brute fact.’ As Heidegger, with Nietzsche, reminds: everything is interpreted.¹⁶² But that does not mean that truth is left to socially constructed interpretation. Truth is neither adequate to our incomplete interpretations, nor our appeals to the completion of another world.

Insofar as theology strives inauthentically to be a science, it places God under the pressures of empiricism. According to Heidegger, the adequation of God with Christian

¹⁶⁰ I acknowledge that he classifies theology as a science in “Phenomenology and Theology,” but I name it separately from the sciences because of his concluding comment in “A Non-Objectifying Thinking and Speaking”: “This task also includes the question whether theology can still be a science—because presumably it should not be a science at all.” (*Piety*, 30.) Also, when I write ethics, I do so in Heidegger's development of *ethos* as a hospitable opening to the extraordinary in the ordinary, or being human “in the nearness of the god.” (Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” *Pathmarks*, 269.)

¹⁶¹ Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’” *The Question*, 53-112.

¹⁶² Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 178.

institutions of power, or scientific demands of proof, is precisely what kills God.¹⁶³ Insofar as theology sways toward sociology and becomes ‘only a heuristic device’ expressed variously across cultures, theology again kills God. Heidegger asserts: the death of God is not simply an atheistic remark we attribute to Nietzsche, but the eradication of all distance. It is not that truth should then be so distant as to become a “fixed constant”; for even this abstraction shifts into objectification.¹⁶⁴ Heidegger mentions that both the need to possess a secured truth and to debunk the secured truths of others falls into illusion.¹⁶⁵ When thought is emptied of its illusory values, and its will to power as valuation or re-evaluation, it can begin to think what is without value, without why, in a way that does not imply nothingness.¹⁶⁶

The stakes of thinking are how to construe truth as otherwise than a value willed, an object represented, or a calculation confirmed. How might thinking avoid clinging to either (a) the nihilistic will-to-value where its interpretations conceal (often by force!) their limitations, or (b) the concealment of all interpretation in a (supposedly immediate) knowledge of empirical proof? Heidegger recalls us to the people gathered in the marketplace, watching the madman, as he stumbles with his lamp in broad daylight,

¹⁶³ He remains clear that Christendom, and not Christianity itself, is under attack by Nietzsche. (Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’” *The Question*, 64.)

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81-82. Van Buren recalls Heidegger’s concerns I 1919 about theoretical objectification. “‘Object-being, standing-over-against-being as such does not concern *me*....The objective, the known [*Erkannte*] is as such dis-tanced, lifted out of genuine living experience.’... ‘Theoretical comportment places itself out of the experience of life in that it directs itself extensively into pure states of affairs in which all emotional relation is suppressed.’” (Qtd. in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 265-266.)

¹⁶⁵ Heidegger describes weak pessimism as a negation that is without patience, “see[ing] everywhere only gloom, find[ing] in everything a ground for failure, and claim[ing] to know how everything will turn out.” (Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche,” *The Question*, 68.) This fatalistic strand of nihilism, whether in the disenchanting believer or the “common” atheist (*Ibid.*, 63), has no room for the kind of sober, but hopeful, waiting Heidegger attributes to early Christian life.

¹⁶⁶ There is a difference between the without why that Nietzsche marks in a certain nihilism (*Ibid.*, 66), and the without why that Heidegger finds in poetic thinking.

seeking the unseen.¹⁶⁷ He warns that under a certain illusory thinking we, like the crowd, “can no longer seek because [we] can no longer think.”¹⁶⁸ It is precisely the eradication of the thinking’s distance—of the seeker’s path, and the waiting implied in his temporal existence—that Heidegger mourns in calculative thinking. Only if thinking resembles an ongoing search (and not mere curiosity)¹⁶⁹ can it hope to resist the illusory knowledge of definitively secured truths.

II. SIMONE WEIL: THE ILLUSION OF ATTACHMENT

When Heidegger lambasts theology and philosophy for seeking the security of absolute truths, he does so, in part, to stir them from complacency.¹⁷⁰ But security is not simply a matter of easy indifference; it also arises in strained attachments. In the illusory mode of thinking, the concept (*Begriff*) gives one a grip upon reality that is difficult to pry open.¹⁷¹ Thus, when Heidegger speaks of the “calculative intellect” in his lectures on Hölderlin’s “Germania,” he describes it as an inability to renounce:

For the calculative intellect, renunciation means a relinquishing and a loss. True renunciation—that is, a renouncing that is sustained and brought about by a genuinely expansive fundamental attunement—is creative and productive. In releasing what was previously possessed, it receives, and

¹⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Madman,” *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), 181-182.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 165-169.

¹⁷⁰ Simone Weil also critiques security as “consolation.” (Weil, *Notebooks*, 277.)

¹⁷¹ See for example, Weil’s remark that “All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all faulty connections of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search.... We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.” Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 62.

not as some kind of subsequent reward; rather, a mournful enduring of the necessity of renunciation and letting go is in itself a receiving.¹⁷²

In this context, the expansive fundamental attunement is “holy mourning, steadfast within itself and rejecting everything contrived.”¹⁷³ Mourning is not simply an emptiness that “float[s] off into a vacuum,” but rather creatively reconstitutes a “new relationship to the divine” as receptivity.¹⁷⁴ Mourning is not simply the calculation of loss, but the holy discipline of refraining from forcing the divine into predetermined concepts. In short, the thinker’s relation to the holy is not that of absolute concepts, but the absolution of God from calculative attachment.

To nuance Heidegger’s reading of calculative attachment, one can turn to Simone Weil. Few thinkers have accomplished a more robust phenomenology of ideological attachment than Weil. And unlike Heidegger, she does not believe that calculation alone threatens renunciation. Indeed, Weil respected her brother’s mathematical genius; and her own quasi-mystical, mathematical explanations surface throughout her notebooks.¹⁷⁵ It is true that Heidegger is less concerned with attacking the mathematical discipline, than he is exploring the confusion of calculation with thought.¹⁷⁶ According to Heidegger, calculation thwarts both authentic existence in the originary time of waiting, and

¹⁷² Heidegger, *"Germania" and "The Rhine,"* 85.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷⁵ Further, she does not necessarily associate the principle of non-contradiction with calculative reasoning, as Heidegger does. For example, there is a way of engaging math and the sciences in their ambiguity: “If contradiction is what pulls, draws the soul towards the light, contemplation of the first principles (hypotheses) of geometry and kindred sciences should be contemplation of their contradictions. Why do we suppose pure straight lines, pure motives?” (*Ibid.*, 34.)

¹⁷⁶ Insofar as he distinguishes philosophical thinking from mathematics, he is not entirely generous to mathematics as having an approach apart from calculative thought. He distinguishes philosophy’s method of questioning from that of mathematical proof. (Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 23-54.)

exposure to the abyssal origin that confounds causality.¹⁷⁷ Weil resonates with these emphases of in-finitude and exposure.¹⁷⁸ However, Weil does not only think exposure, thereby offering a phenomenology of attachment and detachment; she also places her own thinking, her own life, under its scrutiny.¹⁷⁹ She models detachment in her renunciation of home, religious affiliation, middle class status, and even health.¹⁸⁰ Unlike Heidegger, she is far from reticent on the ethical implications of our illusions.¹⁸¹

Like Heidegger, Weil inquires into our capacity to hold reality both firmly and gently in our thinking: firmly, to avoid the easy indifference of an illusory detachment; and gently, so as to avoid the ideological objectification of attachment. The illusory form of detachment is only an abstraction—one's absolution from the concrete demands of life. This is not to suggest that thinking is wrong only insofar as it is abstract. Over-attachment to one's perception of the concrete, as if an idol, comes to resemble one's detachment through ideas, whereby the self becomes a god who cannot be disturbed. In both cases, an insidious attachment to the ego is in play. My rigidly held idea of the other person replaces a genuine relation to her; but likewise, a convenient indifference prevents

¹⁷⁷ Weil would agree with this resistance to causality. It is plausible that Weil, and perhaps even Heidegger, reached this critique through their engagements of Buddhism. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 399.)

¹⁷⁸ In a question Heidegger might entertain, Weil asks, "Why, in science, does the concept of cause occupy such a prominent place? (Why, if it is not because of the technical aspect!) Why not *conditions of existence*?" (Ibid., 43.)

¹⁷⁹ She refuses to separate herself from her thinking and her acts. Calling it "the ring of Gyges, making oneself invisible," she critiques the 'setting apart' maneuver by which one fails to see the "connexion" of responsibility. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 348-349.)

¹⁸⁰ Weil died of tuberculosis exacerbated by malnutrition. This diagnosis is supported by a life of sacrificing her health: either in solidarity with the troops' rations, or fighting in the Spanish Civil War, or electing to work in factories to support the laboring class.

¹⁸¹ Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Alan Blunden (New York: Basic Books, 1993). John van Buren has made a good case for Heidegger's early works having ethical implications (Van Buren, "Indications of Ethics," *The Young Heidegger*, 319-361.) Krzysztof Ziarek has also argued for a certain Heideggerian ethics, in full recognition of Levinas' challenge to such a reading. (Ziarek, "Refiguring Otherness: A Heideggerian Bypass of Ethics?," *Inflected Language*, 43-64.)

relation. Illusory thinking takes hold when the proper distance—far enough to respect, but not so far too ignore—disappears. In contrast, the illusory distance thought takes (in conceptual attachment or detached abstractions) is a distortion of holiness. It is not the ‘setting apart’ of reverential attention, but of careless bias.¹⁸²

How does this reverential distance disappear in thinking? For Weil it begins in attachment. Our initial attraction to an idea, or to an action, unfolds with the belief that “it is good”; but as an illusion, “We end by being chained to it because it has become necessity.”¹⁸³ In speaking of this chaining as “attachment” to values, Weil re-reads Plato’s allegory of the cave in a Nietzschean register: “Illusions about the things of this world do not concern their existence but their value.... We only possess shadowy imitations of the good.”¹⁸⁴ It is not that what exists is necessarily illusory, but that our value-laden interpretations can be. Thus, an illusion is more our relationship to evaluation than the values themselves. Illusion is not a noun, but an adverb, a manner of engaging one’s interpretations. The illusory *how* manifests as distorting attachment: we confuse the shadows of our own values for the good in itself; we remain chained to these values without humbly acknowledging their limitations.

When an evaluation becomes absolute, or when a limited idea pretends to the “completeness of reality,” illusory thinking takes hold.¹⁸⁵ According to Weil, it is precisely the inability to acknowledge the provisional nature of our values that prevents

¹⁸² “We set apart without knowing it—there lies precisely the danger. Or else what is still worse, we set apart through an act of will, but an act of will that is furtive in regard to oneself. And afterwards we no longer know that we have set apart. We don’t want to know it, and by dint of not wanting to know it we end up by not being able to know it.” (Weil, *Notebooks*, 346.)

¹⁸³ Simone Weil, “Illusions,” *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2004), 52.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

us from truth.¹⁸⁶ Because we cannot sense, in attachment, the ways in which truth absolves itself from even our best ideas, we are unable to grow toward truth. It is for this reason that Weil links the illusory mode with a lack of growth: resistance to embodiment in time,¹⁸⁷ and denial of mortality.¹⁸⁸ The illusory mode operates on a false form of holiness—abstraction from the concrete, or ascriptions of purity to the finite. Yes, abstractions are the maneuvers of thought that withdraw or remove; they are required for grasping the edges of concepts, for purposes of memory, understanding, and communication. But when an abstraction thoroughly disengages from the references that shape it, it is in danger of forging an illusory attachment. The detachment required to abstract from experience in order to think about it, then pretends to the privilege of standing outside, of holding in view, and thereby isolating in order to make a phenomenon more manageable.

Governed by attachment, we regard truth as an object to hold or digest. This can be especially the case for the soul seeking a certain God as truth. In describing one who loves God like a “gambler loves his game,” she interjects an observation and a prayer: “The lower parts of my nature should love God, but not too much, for then it would not be God. May their love be like hunger and thirst. Only the highest has the right to be satisfied.”¹⁸⁹ When she mentions the lower, appetitive parts of the soul, she does so without rejecting their capacity for truth. Indeed, thinking should be like these desires *except* that, when aimed at truth, the soul’s stomach must seek never to be satisfied. The

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.

soul must be *pure thirst, pure hunger* in order to love God as true. This does not mean that the soul's stretch must retract itself, solidify its thinking in order to be more like the absolute toward which it strives; quite the opposite. The soul is nothing but thirst, never quenched because humbled by its finitude in relation to truth. She continues: the soul's desire must love God, but not too forcibly, for this is as dangerous as "refusing to love God."¹⁹⁰ Both the immodest love of God and the refusal of God distort how one must relate to alterity. The former smothers God, remaining dangerously attached to an idea or emotion related to God; the latter preempts the possibility of God. Both are guilty of erasing distinctions.

It may be difficult to concord with this interchangeability of God and truth. For Weil, they are synonymous insofar as they are names for the absolute Good beyond our every evaluation, our every thought's attempt. Weil's God is less a matter for doctrinal adherence and more the possibility for humility, detachment from idols, and respect of difference.¹⁹¹ (This will become more evident in the subsequent chapters.) It remains Weil's assertion, however, that we can only glimpse truth by considering illusions that have been abandoned.¹⁹² The ability to let-be what is, to read it in its appearance without projection, and to wait for possibilities, requires a certain detachment. Detachment has its place both in preserving mystery and in disrupting the idols of ideology. Or so Simone Weil suggests in her explication of detachment and decreation.¹⁹³ But what form of detachment is illusory? Weil answers: any detachment that perpetuates the objectification

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹⁹¹ See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Being, Subjectivity, Otherness: The Idols of God," *Questioning God*, eds. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 341-369.

¹⁹² Weil, *Notebooks*, 108.

¹⁹³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 12-15, 32-39.

of the other. Weil opposes the methods of ideological abstraction that violate the alterity of concreteness, and of divine transcendence. We must track these illusory attachments—masquerading as ‘objective,’ impervious detachment—in her descriptions of: abstract ideology, objectifying mis-readings, and ultimately in brute force.

Not unlike Heidegger’s task for the poetizing thinker, she begins on the level of language. In a sense, Weil contrasts the nuanced making (*poiesis*) of language with the language that has become mere tool (*tekne*). She opens her essay, “The Power of Words,” with the dangers of technology, namely how its gift (“a measure of control over nature”) transforms into a weapon of destruction.¹⁹⁴ She uses technology as a metaphor for our responsibility regarding words. It is not that technology, or words, are to blame, but rather our misuse of them. We have the scientific resources, and the most complex linguistic resources, to “sav[e] human lives.”¹⁹⁵ But in both cases, this salvation depends upon precision, and understanding of desired ends.

Despite our capacity for precision and thoughtful execution, Weil senses that, as a result of illusory thinking, words have undergone inflation. Words are either overused in vast generalizations or overblown in diminishing absolutisms. Inflated words render the truth as an object—a mere rhetorical tool, an ideological weapon. Against their totalizing and propagandistic uses, she calls for qualifiers of degree and recognition of shifting contexts.¹⁹⁶ We must become more precise in our words because such precision will affect the concepts that may “sav[e] human lives.”¹⁹⁷ She asks that we avoid giving

¹⁹⁴ Simone Weil, “The Power of Words,” *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), 269.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

words meaning with blood and tears; our capital-letter-concepts are made emptier as they pile the casualties of war.¹⁹⁸ Even the words we take to be warring oppositions—such as ‘dictatorship’ and ‘democracy,’ ‘right’ and ‘left,’ ‘capitalism’ and ‘communism,’—are not ‘things in themselves’ that bear no relation to one another.¹⁹⁹ Absolute distinctions, inflated words, and the ideologies that support them: these are methods to hide power’s illusions from itself.²⁰⁰ As she incisively summarizes:

All power is based, in fact, upon the interrelation of human activities; but in order to be stable it must appear as something absolute and sacrosanct, both to those who wield and those who submit to it and also to other external powers. The conditions which ensure order are essentially contradictory, and men seem to be compelled to choose between the anarchy which goes with inadequate power and the wars of every kind which go with the preoccupation of prestige.²⁰¹

The contradiction she identifies is key: order requires relationship and the absolving of relationship. It requires sacrosanct separations and yet hierarchical interactions. The distance power takes to enforce its stability becomes invasive: the violence is its distance and its powerful need for adherents. And yet, because only abstract words can rally with such vastness while ignoring such complexity, illusory truth begs polemics. The abstract appeals to a regime (or any *ism*) both distance enemies and gather supporters, compelling a polarizing decision. Anyone who maintains power through imprecise language remains blind to the possibilities of peace, securing instead the artificial stability of subtle violence. This illusory peace requires that “men [are] objects, and unresisting ones at that.”²⁰² In the strangling hands of “bloodthirsty abstractions,” humans are both forgotten

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 271.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 274-76.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 283.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 282.

²⁰² Ibid., 277.

and scathed. Like the ideologies that harm them, they become empty, caught between the too-loose tendency of anarchy and the too-tight grip of war.

Weil does not make these observations from her ivory tower, wherein she looks upon humans as thought objects in her argument. She saw firsthand the implications of artificial stability in the factory ethos.²⁰³ In this context (namely, the Renault factory where she elected employment), the imprecision of words are not so obvious; but heedless attachments to ideals are still at work. Atrophied conceptions of human dignity, in particular, re-inscribe the factory's quiet oppression. The factory offers an ideology of collective life; but in actuality, it interjects people into a setting in which they are appendages of a machine.²⁰⁴ People become "interchangeable parts."²⁰⁵ They are walking abstractions, so removed from nature and from sociality that their long workdays become an ongoing exile.²⁰⁶ She characterizes factory workers as without home, and nearly without being.²⁰⁷ Her solution is concrete: she advocates for incentives that would better relate the worker to her product.²⁰⁸ More significantly, she reminds that humans are flesh and blood beings traveling through time; we require variety and coherence.²⁰⁹ Factory work has distorted this beauty of concreteness by tying employees to uniform production, and keeping them without means of foresight. In attaching desire to production, factory managers avert desire from its purpose (which is to be without object, though not without direction). Factory work distorts detachment into its evil illusion: disruption,

²⁰³ Weil, "Factory Work," *Simone Weil Reader*, 53-72.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

disembodiment, and objectification. In the fierce attachment to profit, workers are dispossessed.

It is not that she blames the ideology of capitalism alone.²¹⁰ Weil identifies idolatry in every ideology. As she writes, “Idolatry comes from the fact that, while thirsting for absolute good, we do not possess the power of supernatural attention and we have not the patience to allow it to develop.”²¹¹ We grab at the world, at others, at God, like objects, attaching our mind to the stakes of their stasis. In reality, Weil reminds, the desire for stasis is an illusion imposed upon the entire universe: we see rest where there is “perpetual movement.”²¹² Yes, this illusion is “a condition of existence,”²¹³ whereby we function in not perceiving the earth’s rotation or the quantum dance. However, it need not be a condition for thought. Thinking must strive toward reality especially as it resists our halting holds. The illusion of rest, when no longer passively expected but forcibly imposed upon dynamic persons and concepts, becomes a matter of power.

In her analysis of Homer’s *Iliad* as a “Poem of Might,” Weil carries to its bloodied end her analysis of false detachment (as “superb indifference”), and ideological attachment (which objectifies one’s enemy).²¹⁴ Might dehumanizes both the victim and the victor.²¹⁵ The victim is made into an object of might’s aim; the victor a tool for might’s hand. Because might renders the victim a thing to be destroyed, the victim’s soul

²¹⁰ Weil, “The Power of Words,” *Reader*, 278-9.

²¹¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 60.

²¹² Weil, *Notebooks*, 479.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 479.

²¹⁴ Weil, “The *Iliad*, Poem of Might,” *Reader*, 168-9.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 160, 163, 167.

must endure the violence of dwelling as a thing.²¹⁶ Ideally, the victim's presence should be sufficient to put in question the victor's every design.²¹⁷ But the victor's impatience renders impossible a genuine interaction. The victor ignores his victim's presence, changing him into a living corpse, a soulless shell.²¹⁸ But such an act of violence will necessarily turn from the tip of the sword to its hilt; the victor will go mad as might makes him, too, a thing. The powerful become indifferent to the weak they crush; but the powerful also become blind to the madness of might which will, in another battle, crush them. No one wins. Under its illusory sway, might proves itself the "true hero, the real subject"—all others are its defeated objects, shells of human beings, phantoms.²¹⁹ According to Weil, this is a process of dangerous abstraction.²²⁰ War imposes distances while also eliminating the possibility of contemplation, the pause necessary for thoughtful reflection. It may offer certain friendships through alliances, but always ever built on objectified 'others' who do not deserve communication. Weil attributes this illusory belief to a misapplied observation about the diversity of humankind.²²¹ Difference need not foreclose conversation, but be its basis. Only if difference is the basis of humility, and not the reinforcement of power, can concepts be porous conversations and not ideological objects.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 155.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 157.

²¹⁸ See also her comments on cruelty in *The Notebooks*; for example, "Some acts make us conscious of the existence of other people' others annul this consciousness in us. Not only does cruelty have this latter effect; shameful things do also." (Weil, *Notebooks*, 357.)

²¹⁹ Ibid., 153.

²²⁰ Ibid., 169.

²²¹ Ibid., 181.

Unfortunately, “Force imitates thought very well.”²²² It is not entirely “a question of calculation,” whereby one’s thoughts strive to overtake in measured anticipation.²²³ Weil attributes the violence of thought to the inability to retract oneself when coming upon a limit. Thought ought to have the mechanisms to check itself, “To suspend one’s judgment: not to read.”²²⁴ But instead, thought often resembles force in its attachment to preservation. Maintaining porous concepts remains difficult insofar as we become attached to our misreadings of reality. Weil claims that it is “always a question of reading” when we “give real thoughts a real existence, and keep imaginary thoughts within the bounds of empty imagination.”²²⁵ Illusions, then, are a function of the imagination in service of a certain “faulty reading.”²²⁶ This reading fails to discern reality because it holds “a *vital* necessity for lying to oneself.”²²⁷ Weil claims that the necessity is vital because lying occurs “when one has not made up one’s mind to die.”²²⁸ One has not accepted the finitude of one’s life, and correlatively one’s thoughts. To the contrary, in order to perpetuate illusions, one must “expand,”²²⁹ and “read in outside things what we carry within ourselves.”²³⁰ In this scenario of projection, or totalizing assimilation, one reads without “at the same time [reading] one’s own reading.”²³¹ There is no deconstruction, or recognition of hermeneutical situation. In misreading, one reads others

²²² Weil, *Notebooks*, 84.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 84.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

as if from a timeless, disembodied position.²³² Illusion is born of a thinking that forgets its subjection to “necessity, to space and to time.”²³³ If for Weil, to think is to be a finite being, it entails being “like God, but God crucified.”²³⁴ Thinking must not be attached to thoughts as if they were sacrosanct.

Unfortunately, illusory thinking cannot dispossess the sovereign ego.²³⁵ In illusory thinking, one “build[s] in accordance with what [one] wish[es] to be read.”²³⁶ Thus *justice*—the ability to “be continually ready to admit that another person is something other than what we read”—devolves into injustice. In allegiance to an inflexible reading, one is not capable of reading in another person “also (and continually) that he is certainly something other than what we read—perhaps something altogether different.”²³⁷ Fidelity to one’s reading is not fidelity to truth; it is the inability to hear the “silen[t] clamours” of “every being...to be read otherwise.”²³⁸ In attempting to circumscribe the world, God, and others, with my reading, I in fact eliminate dimensionality. Injustice, as just one sign of this “do[ing] away with the third dimension,” objectifies and forgoes “multiple relationships.”²³⁹ Reading becomes a way to distance myself from being implicated in the relation to whomever I read, while also terribly overwriting the other with myself. It is a false distance from the other—in truth, a

²³² Ibid., 23.

²³³ Ibid., 213.

²³⁴ Ibid., 213.

²³⁵ Ibid., 212-213.

²³⁶ Ibid., 42.

²³⁷ Ibid., 43.

²³⁸ Ibid., 43.

²³⁹ Weil, “Imagination which fills the void,” *Gravity and Grace*, 17.

decimation of alterity.²⁴⁰ What begins as a reading becomes a monologue, wherein force remains heedless to the dialogue required by distinctions and relationships.

Weil continues to link illusory thinking with forceful misreading: “To force somebody to read himself as you read him [is] slavery. To force others to read you as you read yourself is [conquest].”²⁴¹ How to avoid such violent misreadings? Or as Weil asks, “How manage to escape it? Or even turn it into a means of reading truly?”²⁴² She suggests several ways of suspending one’s judgment, of escaping the illusory attachment to one’s misreading. But before exploring her undoing of idolatrous reductions, we will follow her intuition that illusory thinking occurs on the level of false desire.²⁴³ The violence of a false, religious desire is idolatrous attachment to God’s nearness in objects. Though she has a sacramental view of beauty (to be explored in the next chapter), it is not that the beautiful object *is* God’s total presence to us, ready for consumption. If an object is sacred, or imparts God’s presence in God’s absence, it entails that we maintain distance from it. The object must not become an object of desire, but train our attention that we might desire what cannot rightly be possessed. Without this distance taken with regard to beings (implied, for Weil, in God’s absence), thinking quickly becomes the desire to possess, to totalize, to conquer. Weil remarks that Christendom is perhaps most guilty of this inability to admit God’s absence: “Christendom has become totalitarian, conquering, and exterminating, because it has not developed the idea of God’s absence and non-

²⁴⁰ Though Heidegger is not as explicit in appealing to justice, he too remains concerned about what happens when, in trying to measure alterity (the strangeness of being, or of God) with our thoughts, we covers its distinctions.

²⁴¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 43.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁴³ For her readings of Weil and Levinas, and her own contributions in articulating these concerns, I recommend, again, Wendy Farley’s *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World*.

activity here below.”²⁴⁴ According to Weil, Judaism, too, has its totalitarian strand.²⁴⁵ She has in mind the violent acquisition of the Promised Land, whereby God orders injustice that holiness might entail a possessed territory. When Weil speaks of idolatrous attachment, she condemns this conception of the holy as demanding violent separation, as securing definite possession.²⁴⁶ We heed her words, prying open possessive thinking, as they startle us into Levinas:

We have to go down to the root of our desires in order to tear the energy from its object. That is where the desires are true in so far as they are energy. It is the object [that] is unreal [illusory]. But there is an unspeakable wrench in the soul at the separation of a desire from its object.²⁴⁷

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS: THE ILLUSION OF TOTALITY

²⁴⁴ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 159. Also, as she summarizes, “The Great Beast hides His [God’s] absence from us.” (Weil, *Notebooks*, 379.)

²⁴⁵ There is a significant debate regarding Simone Weil’s relationship to her own Jewish heritage, especially given her comments on the Jews as “that handful of uprooted individuals...[who are] the poison of uprooting personified.” (Ibid., 575-576.) In these very comments she links Judaism’s uprooting to the Enlightenment’s “lie[s] about progress,” “colonial conquest,” “capitalism and totalitarianism.” (Ibid., 575.) As with Heidegger’s comments on the homelessness, in distinction to the worldlessness of the Jews, these comments perpetuate anti-Semitic tropes, while also complicating the philosophical role of “unheimlichkeit” (in Heidegger) and “uprooting” (in Weil). Uprooting—as exile, as resistance to territorial lines, or as not “being at home”—has a positive connotation elsewhere in her notebooks (Ibid., 298). However, as with Heidegger, she seems unable to associate the Jews with this positive connotation. . Simone Weil “Uprootedness,” *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Willis (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 41-182. Granted, she associates uprooting less with denial and more with destruction—with conquest and violent disruption—as well as idols born in the attempt to cut mediation (Ibid., 68). Thus she writes of Hitler as an uprooted person (because of his early poverty and homelessness) who then idolized greatness and history (Ibid., 217, 224, 238). For example, uprootedness has more to do with how the Romans violated the Jews than it does the Jewish lack of allegiance to land or national leader, which she commends in their resistance to Rome (Ibid., 272-273). When she speaks of rootedness, it is not entirely as Levinas condemns it. When Levinas uses the term uprootedness, particularly as it applies to Judaism, he intends it as the means to thwart idolatry and violence. Emmanuel Levinas, “Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us,” *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 231-244. See also Richard H. Bell, “Simone Weil, Post-Holocaust Judaism, and the Way of Compassion,” *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 165-190.

²⁴⁶ This characterization of Judaism is, of course, very narrow, owing to the fact that Weil does not read it as generously as she does texts from “the Christian, French, and Greek tradition.” (Weil, “What is a Jew? A Letter to a Minister of Education,” *Simone Weil Reader*, 80.)

²⁴⁷ Weil, “To desire without object,” *Gravity and Grace*, 22.

Though Emmanuel Levinas could have easily written the above words about separation in the work of desire, he adamantly resists Simone Weil's criticism of Judaism. He accuses her of the very misreading she urges us to avoid²⁴⁸—specifically her “not having suspected [the] dimensions” of Talmudic texts.²⁴⁹ Yes, Levinas agrees that Weil should be “revolted by such cruelty” as the “evil committed by the Canaanites.”²⁵⁰ However, he interrogates her description of the “harsh law of the Old Testament”: “[It is] perhaps not a doctrine based on kindness, but what does this matter, if it is a school of kindness?”²⁵¹ Can separation be the school of reverential relations? Can the holiness of being ‘set apart’ make possible a respect of those excluded? To respond to these questions, we must distinguish between the separation that founds our relation to the other, and the violent separation that Weil attributes to Judaism. The former separation is that of the ego. Though “atheist”²⁵² insofar as it does not depend on the being from which it is separated, the independent self provides the basis for an ethical relation to the other, and in turn a relation with God.²⁵³ The latter separation, what Weil suspects as the

²⁴⁸ Weil and Levinas are actually joined in their desire for a hermeneutics of multiplicity, even as Levinas argues that Weil seeks an absolute reading purified of plurality. For examples of Levinas' hermeneutics of multiplicity, see “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” *Beyond the Verse*, Gary D. Mole (New York: Continuum, 2007), 127-147.

²⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Simone Weil Against the Bible,” *Difficult Freedom*, 139.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138. Though, he sounds remarkably akin to Weil's probing of the Jewish God when he writes of the Greek, pagan God, “Is it not folly to ascribe plenitude of being to God who is always absent from perception, and is not any more manifest in the moral conduct of the world, subject to violence, where peace is established only provisionally at the price of blood tribute paid to some Minotaur, the price of compromises and politics—where, consequently, the divine “presence” remains an uncertain memory or an indeterminate expectation?” Both Levinas and Weil seem to suggest that our violent understandings of justice are due to a false relation (or denial of) “the scandalous absence of this God.” (Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 62.

²⁵¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 138.

²⁵² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

²⁵³ Adrian Peperzack, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 144-146.

violently protected identity of a people, is not what Levinas has in mind when he writes of the ethical relation or theological holiness.²⁵⁴

It is Levinas' contention that precisely because of "contact with this harsh morality, with its obligations and sanctions," the Jewish consciousness learned the "absolute horror of blood," and in turn developed a robust doctrine of non-violence.²⁵⁵ It is not, then, that Weil should make digestible the "indigestible passages" of the Bible, but that she should consider their interpretation and influence throughout time via the oral tradition and its suggested practices.²⁵⁶ In short, he believes she has overlooked the "faces" of the texts by rendering them as figures for "the interiorization of religious truth" in contemplative union.²⁵⁷ As will be discussed in the next chapter, one need not read Simone Weil as Levinas does: as a Neoplatonic 'mystic' who misunderstands suffering, and through love's charity overlooks the real activity of social justice.²⁵⁸ In the meantime, however, we must consider the question addressing us in Levinas' revision of holiness: which sort of separation leads to a holy relation with the Other, and which separation is

²⁵⁴ To be clear, Levinas attributes to "identity" a certain violence, insofar as it seeks to establish sameness, or violently foreclose the possibility of exposure. He rather poses the subject, not as an identity of essence, but as the possibility of being subjected to the other: "Does not subjectivity signify precisely by its incapacity to shut itself up from the outside?... This openness is the vulnerability of a skin exposed, in wounds and outrage, beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that which in being's essence can be exposed to comprehension and celebration." (Levinas, "No Identity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 145-146.) For Levinas, humans are "without identity"—"a uniqueness without inwardness, an ego without rest in itself." (Ibid., 148.) He would not comply with Weil's belief that Judaism maintains itself in violent separation, in conquest of identity. With regard to the violence of religion, he is more concerned about the violent separation of the numinous: "The entire effort of Judaism consists in understanding the holiness [*sainteté*] of God in a sense that stands in sharp contrast with the numinous meaning of the term... The sacred [*le sacré*] that envelops and transports me is a form of violence." (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 14.)

²⁵⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 138.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 138.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 140.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 139-141.

ultimately violent, possessive, totalizing?²⁵⁹ Can there truly be a way “to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred?”²⁶⁰

Separation, as a *concept* or as *exclusion* (either in enthusiastic ecstasy, or in indifference), is not holy.²⁶¹ And yet, the mind requires distinctions; language structures itself upon differentiation; and even an individual’s singularity remains absolutely distinguished in its place and time. However, it is important for Levinas that we do not falsely re-inscribe this necessity of distinction, by simply *conceiving* of our relation to thinking, to language, to others, by separating ourselves from them in an illusory distance. This attempt to conceive, as if above the relation, is a false absolution.²⁶² The face of the Other, as the “medium through which the invisible...becomes visible and enters into commerce with us,” reminds us that our self-preserving ego and its conceptual distinctions are not absolute.²⁶³ We cannot conceive of this relation via knowledge’s transcendence, because “we are in relation” to the transcendent.²⁶⁴ Transcendence does not require an abstraction from relationality, but staying put, being summoned on the

²⁵⁹ I am focusing on ‘separation,’ in Levinas, because it is for him the question of holiness, “In Rabbinical thought holiness evokes above all separation (like our word ‘absolute’). The term names—and this is quite remarkable—a mode of being or a beyond of being rather than a quiddity.” Emmanuel Levinas, “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts,” *Beyond the Verse*, 118.

²⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

²⁶¹ The separation of the sacred is not the separation of the holy. See Jill Robbins helpful summary of this distinction in Levinas. Jill Robbins, “Who Prays?: Levinas on Irremissible Responsibility,” *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 38-40. Emmanuel Levinas, “From the Sacred to the Holy: Five New Talmudic Readings,” *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 91-197.

²⁶² Indeed, Levinas links the “totality” with the “absolute” in their attempts to resolve all disruption into the “impassive order.” The connotation of the totality’s impassivity is precisely what Levinas wishes to undo with a different kind of separation, a different ab-solution. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-Of-The-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 54.

²⁶³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 140.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

ground, so to speak, before the height of the Other.²⁶⁵ One cannot go higher than the Other's height. Alterity is radically before me, and cannot be transcended.²⁶⁶ Alterity is a "beyond within"²⁶⁷—not another world, but an otherwise world of ethical relations.

Whether or not we are convinced of Levinas' critique of Weil's misreading, we follow his hope that separation can be ethically inflected as a relation to transcendence, and not simply an imposition of violence. The God who asked for genocide, or for Isaac's slaughter, must be read beside the God who taught the holiness of life-blood, hospitality to the stranger, and even negotiations on behalf of human survival.²⁶⁸ Levinas wagers this reading: separation can be the basis for reverential relation; it is an incision that resists enclosure.²⁶⁹ There are separations of invulnerability that assimilate through power,²⁷⁰ and separations that, in contrast, seek to preserve the Other through passivity.²⁷¹ There are separations that neuter Being and abstract beings,²⁷² and there are separations that

²⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 34-35.

²⁶⁶ "...the radical separation between the same and the other means precisely that it is impossible to place oneself outside of the correlation between the same and the other so as to record the correspondence or the non-correspondence of this going with this return. Otherwise the same and the other would be reunited under one gaze, and the absolute distance that separates them filled in." (Ibid., 36.)

²⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida as quoted in Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading*, xix.

²⁶⁸ See Levinas' critique of Kierkegaard in its similar resistance to a God whose holiness entails the possibility of murder. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 66-79.

²⁶⁹ "When this relation is really thought through, it signifies the wound that cannot heal over of the self in the ego accused by the other to the point of persecution, and responsible for the persecutor. Subjection and elevation arise in patience above non-freedom. It is the subjection of the allegiance to the Good." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 126.

²⁷⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 274-277.

²⁷¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 54-55.

²⁷² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 299.

expose the sub-ject, and the Other, in their concreteness.²⁷³ It is the former that we must first address, as it perpetuates the illusion of totality for the ‘thinking’ subject.²⁷⁴

Levinas charges Western Philosophy (as ontology),²⁷⁵ and the knowing subject it creates, with the totalizing impulse. He does so—not unlike Simone Weil—by critiquing them on the level of desire. Their desires are not for alterity (which, by definition can never be consumed, appropriated, assimilated), but rather solidification of the same in satisfaction of need. In contrast to need (whether the need for rationality, for order, for enjoyment), Levinas suggests a metaphysical desire.²⁷⁶ Metaphysics, under Levinas’ definition, is the testimony of the “otherwise” toward which we are turned while in the world.²⁷⁷ Unlike the needs (eating, contemplating, dwelling) we confuse with desires, metaphysical desire “tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolute other.”²⁷⁸ This desire is neither need, nor nutrition, nor nostalgia—which all function to return us from the Other to something familiar. The metaphysical desire is unlike the assimilating

²⁷³ The subject is its subjection to the other; it is separated only in its singular, unsubstituable, responsibility for the Other. (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126-127.)

²⁷⁴ In his introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, John Wild helpfully summarizes Levinas’ text as the “working out of a third way between the horns of [anarchy and tyranny]. Totalitarian thinking...aims to gain an all-inclusive, panoramic view of all things, including the other, in a neutral, impersonal light like the Hegelian *Geist* (spirit), or the Heideggerian Being. It sees the danger of an uncontrolled, individual freedom, and puts itself forth as the only rational answer to anarchy. To be free is the same as to be rational, and to be rational is to give oneself over to the total system that is developing in world history. Since the essential self is also rational, the development of this system will coincide with the interests of the self.” (*Totality and Infinity*, 15).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷⁶ See also his description in “Meaning and Sense”—“This is what desire is: to burn with another fire than need, which saturation extinguishes, to think beyond what one thinks. Because of this unassimilable surplus, because of this *beyond*, we have called the relationship which links the I with the other the idea of infinity.” (Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 97-98.)

²⁷⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

structures of digestion, the correspondence between thinking and being,²⁷⁹ and the fulfillment of Husserlian intentionality. Simply put, “it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.”²⁸⁰ In this sense, Levinas finds more philosophical companionship in Descartes’ “Idea of Infinity” and in Plato’s “Good Beyond Being.”²⁸¹ Levinas describes this desire as absolute insofar as “the desiring being is mortal and the Desired is invisible.”²⁸² But the invisibility of the absolute is not an “absence of relation.”²⁸³ The thinker cannot assume an artificial detachment from the object of thought, or the aim of vision. Rather, it is, as will be explored in the next chapter, a “relation with what is not given, of which there is no idea.”²⁸⁴ Thus, contrary to Heidegger’s thinking as a poetic tracking of the measureless, Levinas protests: “The infinite cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter. The trace left by the infinite is not the residue of presence; its very glow is ambiguous.”²⁸⁵

²⁷⁹ This is how Levinas reads Heidegger—as one who marks thought’s adequacy to the call of Being. Though Heidegger moves away from this correlation, and its implications of thought bringing Being into the light, Levinas no doubt recalls the passage in Heidegger’s 1935 lecture, *Introduction to Metaphysics*. At this time Heidegger speaks of Being and thinking as “belonging-together” even in their “contending against each other.” Here, Being is still tied to *physis* as “standing in the light, appearing, stepping into unconcealment,” and thus thinking being is reception to this showing. Our ability to think being is not a manipulation of mind on appearance, but a belonging of the thinker to Being, who is then visited with the “happening of apprehension.” Even should we read this generously, we hear Levinas’ concern that Being—and thought—are, at least in this moment for Heidegger, concerned with presencing. (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 147, 150.)

²⁸⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

²⁸¹ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 153-174.

²⁸² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12.

In avoiding the mediation of ideas and of presence, it is not as though Levinas pretends that the subject is without mediation of any kind.²⁸⁶ The subject is still corporeal, indeed, affectively engaged. The subject is not some essence, removed from the mediations of temporal embodiment.²⁸⁷ Levinas would simply affirm that thinking often reduces alterity to the thinking subject's correlations. Granted, the self-identification of the ego is inevitable in this relation to the invisibility—the unthinkability—of the Other.²⁸⁸ One cannot survive to encounter the Other if one escapes the world, burns down his dwelling, and refuses food. Separation of the self is implied in one's relation to the absolute separation of the Other. The identification of the ego with itself, while being a return to sameness, has the “merit of protesting against participation.”²⁸⁹ The illusory mode enters when the ego asserts its “I can,” and the security of its dwelling to the neglect of the Other. The separation of the ego, while a condition of the ethical relation, requires that the ethical relation found an even greater separation.²⁹⁰ Levinas calls this privileging of a non-ethical separation—indeed, a byproduct of reasoning itself—

²⁸⁶ The other is still mediated through a certain vision, but it is an optics transformed by ethics. Robbins calls this the “transformation of the gaze” (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 6). Levinas evidences this transformation of philosophical vision (which brings to light) into ethical sight (which has no mediating idea to illuminate). Ethical optics marks the intrusion upon the ego by the epiphany of the other. (Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 47.)

²⁸⁷ Subjectivity is not Dasein “being here,” but the “breaking point where essence is exceeded by the infinite.” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12). This is not to say that the subject never engages the world, or Being, but rather is radically uprooted by the corporeality, the Infinity in the face, of the Other. The relation to an impersonal Being, is called into question by the Other. Embodiment is the contraction of the self in a too-tight skin, as well as the pain-point through which I become exposed to the other. My incarnation as an ego is a materiality “more material than all matter.” The body is not a figure or metaphor for Levinas, it is the biology submitted to dispossession—responsibility. (Ibid., 108-109).

²⁸⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36-37. “Separation, effected in the concrete as habitation and economy, makes possible the relation with the detached, absolute exteriority. This relationship, metaphysics, is brought about primordially by the epiphany of the Other in the face. Separation opens up between terms that are absolute and yet in relation, that absolves themselves from the relation they maintain, that do not abdicate in it in favor of a totality this relation would sketch out” (Ibid., 220).

²⁸⁹ Adrian Peperzak, *To the Other* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 49.

²⁹⁰ As Jill Robbins summarizes, “In other words, there is a sense in which ethics can be thought as a break *from* the break from participation.” (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 88.)

freedom.²⁹¹ Reason, so often linked with autonomy, and the ‘objective’ view from outside, has removed itself from the possibility of relating ethically to what it circumscribes. Freedom is a false absolution of the subject, defined by the ability “to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autharchy of an I.”²⁹² If I am to avoid the egonomic tendency, the intrusion of a more radical separation must breach my egoism.²⁹³ My autonomy cannot be called into question by another concept of alterity, because concepts alone are too often governed by “the logos of being.”²⁹⁴ The logos attempts to gather, to comprehend, to place a being in Being’s appropriating event. It may be that Heidegger’s phenomenology attempts to avoid this by “let[ting] the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation.”²⁹⁵ Heidegger’s emphasis on gathering-together (logos) remains in tension with his advocacy for letting-be (gelassenheit).²⁹⁶ But does this letting-be conceal the grip of concept implied by gathering? Levinas remarks how Heidegger’s thinker of Being forgets that the “process of cognition is at this stage identified with the freedom of the knowing being

²⁹¹ “Freedom does not resemble the capricious spontaneity of free will; its ultimate meaning lies in this permanence in the same, which is reason. Cognition is the deployment of this identity; it is freedom. That reason in the last analysis would be the manifestation of a freedom, neutralizing the other and encompassing him, can come as no surprise once it was laid down that sovereign reason knows only itself, that nothing other limits it.” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.)

²⁹² Ibid., 46.

²⁹³ Levinas describes this as an economy of hedonistic autonomy, whereby I enjoy, rule, and engage the world according to personal need, in “Section II: Interiority and Economy,” (Ibid., 109-183). Elsewhere he describes egoism as, “the *outside of me* is for me. The tautology of ipseity is an egoism.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 345.

²⁹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁹⁶ Though, Heidegger manages to connect *legein* and *logos* with thought as: letting-lie-before-us as well as a making-to-appear. (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 202.)

encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it.”²⁹⁷ In order not to mark the other, or diminish her alterity, the thinker interposes a supposedly neutral concept. But this concept tends to protect the thinker from its object, rather than the reverse. What might the difference be between the thinker who respectfully touches alterity with her thoughts, and the thinker who—in attempting not to mark the other—remains too ‘out of touch’?

Levinas would suggest that, in attempting to “let be” the relation to the Other, Heidegger actually absolves himself from the ethical relation. Heidegger risks reducing the Other to the correlation of thinking that meditation seeks to avoid. Thus Levinas asks for the radicalization of relationship as “a relation without relation”—“a relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community or concept of totality.”²⁹⁸ The danger of assuming that one can ‘let be’ the object of knowledge or perception is that the untouchability may rebound. The thinker, in his freedom, believes that he can know without being affected or disrupted in his conceiving.²⁹⁹ In a sense, the freedom of the thinker prevents his realization that, above all, his responsibility precedes his freedom.³⁰⁰ In the distance forged for comprehension, he neglects to preserve the

²⁹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹⁹ This critique also applies to the irresponsibility of the artist (Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 12). Levinas suggests that art, insofar as it creates mouths that do not speak, is an idolatry—a term he also uses with regard to the knowledge of facts (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65).

³⁰⁰ As Jeffrey Bloechl has remarked, Levinasian responsibility is not only a being-for-the-other, but also being responsive. See his comments on the appealability of the subject. Jeffrey Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 276-282.

infinite interval opened for conversation.³⁰¹ According to Levinas, philosophy as ontology is incapable of responding to, or being questioned by, the Other. Instead, ontology neutralizes the Other “who becomes a theme or an object—appearing, that is, taking its place in the light.”³⁰² In urging the priority of appearance, the thinker places the Other in a horizon of grasping.³⁰³ Often this horizon is that of the concept (Hegel), or of history—both of which reduce what they exclude (transcendence) to a “philosophy of immanence.”³⁰⁴ But Levinas does not place the verdict on modern philosophy alone. The philosophy of immanence can be found even in Socrates, wherein the thinker seeks the truth of the Other through illumination of what is already “in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside.”³⁰⁵ One strives, in reason, to return to the “homeland” of the Platonic “Ideas”—their immutability, their identity. Insofar as this desire for security, for recollection, and self-sameness reflects the ego, Levinas remarks, “Philosophy is an egology.”³⁰⁶

At root in Levinas’ accusations is the disdain for certain mediations, namely those that espouse the beings as interiority,³⁰⁷ or Being as neutrality.³⁰⁸ According to Levinas,

³⁰¹ (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.) Levinas claims that the only discourse permitted by this impersonal relation to Being is a “necrological discourse.” (Levinas, “The Ego and Totality,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 35.)

³⁰² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰⁷ See Lyotard’s reflection on Levinas’ suggestion—that an ego must be separated (so as not to suggest a dialectical relation of the self with the Other), without this separation forbidding an “exit out of interiority.” (Lyotard, “Levinas’ Logic,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 120.)

³⁰⁸ “The hatred of the *neutral* constantly evinced by Levinas is not directed at the unnameable in general, nor even at an unnameable that is presumed to speak, but at an unnameable that is assumed to be both speaking and spoken: the unnameable *of which* I speak or, to use the autonym familiar to philosophers, *of which* the *I* speaks and of which it (or I) speak(s) in order to say that it (this unnameable) speaks in its (or

even the most iconoclastic of philosophy—say, Heidegger’s writings against misconstruing Being as a being, or his dismissal of calculating representations—attempts to mediate beings through Being. This leaves the thinker undisturbed by what (or whom) he encounters. The thinker is but the force of light into which phenomena must enter, and submit themselves, in their testament to Being. Levinas’ indictment of Heidegger is clear:

[Heidegger’s decision about the essence of philosophy] subordinate[s] the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom. It would be opposed to justice, which involves obligations with regard to an existent who refuses to give itself, the Other, who in this sense would be an existent par excellence.³⁰⁹

Levinas will elsewhere call Being the “neuter which illuminates and commands thought, and renders intelligible.”³¹⁰ It is precisely this medium of Being that Levinas finds an insufficient intermediary for alterity. Levinas seeks a medium that preserves the distance of alterity,³¹¹ not as the sacred light that enchants or elucidates, but as the holy height that commands.³¹² He cannot find this holy separation in the concepts of classical idealism, nor in the neutrality of Being, nor in the thought of an intact, self-affirming ego.³¹³ In each of these concepts of ‘thinking,’ Levinas recognizes what he calls the “temptation of temptation”—philosophy as the temptation “to be simultaneously outside everything and

my) place, that is, in the place of the *I*, or of me.” (Lyotard, “Levinas’ Logic,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 129.)

³⁰⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

³¹⁰ Levinas, “The Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 51.

³¹¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

³¹² Levinas, “Desacrilization and Disenchantment,” *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 140-141.

³¹³ It is not that thinking, and its mediations, are utterly to blame. Try as Levinas might to self-destruct phenomenological intentionality (Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 61-74), and out the congealed “said” in his every “Saying” of alterity, Levinas still uses the language of philosophical traditions. (Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 97-192.)

participating in everything.”³¹⁴ The thinking ego wants desperately to know, to engage, while “assur[ing] itself a continual disengagement.”³¹⁵ Levinas seeks whatever precedes these oppositions of engagement and disengagement, contemplation of truth and praxis, naivete with regard to alterity and violent restraint of alterity.³¹⁶ He seeks an ego prior to questions of volition, of freedom, and even prior to the options of liberty and coercion.³¹⁷

Granted, even (perhaps especially) the ego unschooled in philosophical language, unaware of categories like Husserlian intentionality, or Heideggerian Being, is capable of reducing the Other to the Same. While Levinas largely critiques philosophy, he also identifies totalizing thought in the mind’s struggle for narrative unities.³¹⁸ It is not that the content of narratives cannot be ethical in the Levinasian sense. After all, he cites Dostoyevsky’s works as preparation for his philosophy;³¹⁹ and he upholds the story of Abraham’s journey from home as a “movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.”³²⁰ But structurally, narratives often attempt to organize alterity into coherent moments.³²¹ The language that makes up this “unity of meaning in narration” consists of a system of signs that “confer an identity of meaning to the temporal

³¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” 34.

³¹⁵ Thus Levinas will critique Heidegger’s ‘risk’ of thinking and living authentically as the desire to “live dangerously, but in security, in the world of truths.” (Ibid., 34.)

³¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

³¹⁸ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 109.

³¹⁹ Robbins, *Altered Reading*, xix.

³²⁰ Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” 348.

³²¹ For an example of Levinas’ critique of narrative as it pertains to the Holocaust, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘the jews,’* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Lyotard addresses not only the “representational econom[ies]” of religion (ibid., 21), but also the role of narrative in Freudian trauma (ibid., 8-23), representation in light of Kant’s aesthetics of sublimity (31-48), and the forgetting implied in Heidegger’s *Volk* myth (51-94).

dispersion of events and thoughts.”³²² Thus narrative enacts both a synopsis and a synchronicity³²³ that reduces “every non-thematized, non-theoretical and even ‘still ineffable’ manifestation” to a theme.³²⁴ Even in the storyteller’s tight weaving of events, Levinas suspects the philosopher’s “pretension to absoluteness of speech, which is capable of embracing everything, relating everything, thematizing everything, even its own failures, even its own relativity.”³²⁵ We could protest that rich fictions precisely resist this absoluteness of truth.³²⁶ No novel pretends to the absoluteness of mathematical certainty. But Levinas remains correct insofar as totalizing thought implies accounts that erase the unaccountable aspects of alterity.³²⁷ Narratives often further reductive interpretations, say, in the narrative structure we apply to others’ suffering. ‘You may not see it now, but all this atrocity is part of God’s will,’ is a narrative as totalizing as Hegel’s, whereby antagonisms are sublated in progressive unfolding of the Absolute Spirit.³²⁸

The appeal to theodicy can be as violating as the appeal to history. History, according to Levinas, perpetuates the narratives of “necrological discourse,” whereby:

A man is reduced to his legacy and absorbed into the totality of the common patrimony. The power which when alive he exercised over his work (and not only through this work)—a man in his essential cynicism—

³²² Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” 109.

³²³ For a richer description of synchrony compared to diachrony, see Emmanuel Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 76-88.

³²⁴ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” 109.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

³²⁶ For example, Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³²⁷ By way of theological example: Stephen G. Ray, Jr., “The Sins of Sin Talk,” *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1-35.

³²⁸ Contemporary thinkers have helpfully resisted this narrative, showing—as Levinas might appreciate—that interpretation of a text can unfold an otherwise. See Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

is wiped out. A man becomes, not, to be sure, a thing, but a dead soul. This is not reification; it is history. History judges posterity, those who are absent, with a judgment that can no longer change anything, the judgment of those who are not yet born on those who are dead.³²⁹

Just as in theodicy, one passes judgment on the absent God, through history, one passes judgment on absent persons. The effect is similar: the irreducible is imprisoned by a story that renders absent humans, and an absent God, reducible to their works and interventions (or lack thereof). It is no wonder that theodicies with regard to the Holocaust contributed to statements about the death of God. If God's will included the death camps (so the story goes among some), who could worship this God?³³⁰ Thinking God, and humans, through their use is as dangerous as contriving a story about the usefulness of suffering.³³¹ In different ways, suffering, humans, and God resist the coherent themes we impose.³³² Certain stories try to make radically present their figures; and they seal the disruptions of the Infinite within a synchronized temporality.³³³ In so doing, they ignore what absolves itself from every account—the face of the Other, the enigmatic trace of God.³³⁴

³²⁹ Levinas, "The Ego and the Totality," 35. See Alphonso Lingis' helpful footnote about what Levinas means by 'cynicism' as it inflects the entire passage.

³³⁰ Compare the stories of theodicy with Levinas' accounting of Arnold Mandel's "Yossel, son of Yossel," in Emmanuel Levinas, "Loving the Torah More than God," *Difficult Freedom*, 142-145.

³³¹ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," *Entre Nous*, 91-102.

³³² However, one might understand, as Paul Ricoeur does, that while the evils of suffering cannot be thematized, sometimes mourning requires storytelling as lament. Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53.4 (1985): 635-648.

³³³ David Carroll opens Lyotard's book, *Heidegger and 'the jews,'* with the acknowledgment that narrative impossibility necessarily invites both silence and constant retelling. (*Heidegger and 'the jews,'* vii-ix). Carroll depicts Lyotard's work as a means of talking about an irreducible event in a way that is not simply representational. Such language is possible, indeed, for Lyotard, imperative since "the impossible of talking about 'that' [the Shoah] is itself the sign that critical thought is obliged to talk about it, writing obliged to write about it..." (Ibid., xi.)

³³⁴ Thus Regina Mara Schwartz can write convincingly of "narrative idolatry" as opposed to the sort of disruption that occurs in conversation. Though she cites Marion and Derrida as her conversation partners, she closely resembles Levinas' distinction between narrative and the 'work' that does not simply speak *about* the other, but rather speaks *to* the other. Regina Mara Schwartz, "Questioning Narratives: The Immeasurable in Measures," *Questioning God*, 209-234. Levinas also calls the work, insofar as it goes out

IV. JEAN-YVES LACOSTE: THE ILLUSION OF PURITY

In protesting the definitive hold of history, narrative, thematization, and their worst application in theodicy, Levinas often emphasizes the “purity” of the other.³³⁵ This is not the purificatory abstraction found in appeals to essence; the face’s purity is its disruption of such appeals, and its ab-solution with regard to context. On the one hand, the language of purity, ab-solution, nakedness, honor the face’s irreducibility to context. On the other hand, must one—in respecting alterity—purify the other of her roots? Is there not a way to resist the opposition of ontology and ethics, of irreducibility and narration, of a “utopia of conscience” and history?³³⁶

Jean-Yves Lacoste does not directly criticize purity.³³⁷ Nevertheless, it is my contention that his works dispel the illusory tendency to think Being as purified of the possibility of God, or consciousness as unattended by soul, or presence as unadulterated by absence, or finally history as separated from eschatology.³³⁸ Until now, there have been only hints about how the absence of God might expose the inadequacies of illusory

to the other, speaks to the other “religion” (Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 23.)

³³⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 148.

³³⁶ Levinas affirms that these are not orthogonal (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 81). Though, his more austere opposition to ontology, poetry, and narrative tempt readers to pose the opposition. He does however, continue to speak of a “prior rupture with the illusions and the ruses that filled [the hollow of ideology]...and interruption of essence, from a non-place, from a ‘utopia,’ from a pure interval of the *epoche* opened by disinterestedness” (Ibid., 5.)

³³⁷ Or when he does, it is often followed by qualifications about the world’s “inchoation” and “interposition” that diffuses this purity. He also dispels the purity of total presence/present in the awaiting of “eschatological verification...yet to come.” Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 43, 146.

³³⁸ As a result of these commitments, Lacoste writes, “all my work was designed to explore the border area that divides—yet doesn’t actually separate—philosophy and theology.” (Qtd in. Wardley, *Praying to a French God*, 4.)

thinking. In the work of Lacoste, this is more evident. The God who somehow touches³³⁹ our experience while eluding it as non-experience is our relation to the ab-solute.³⁴⁰ The ab-solute exposes the being-before-God, opening her thought to the ambiguities of affectivity, and more significantly, the gifts of (in)experiencing God. Descriptions of this ‘liturgical relation’ will arise in the next chapter. We must first engage Lacoste’s resistance to thinking the absolute as pure presence, or touchless transcendence.

Not unlike Levinas, Lacoste suggests that thinking itself proves insufficient for encountering the alterity of the ab-solute.³⁴¹ But this does not mean that Lacoste flees the methodology of the phenomenological project; rather, he qualifies Heidegger’s presumptions about phenomenology’s necessary atheism. This is not simply a disciplinary debate, but a revision of ontology. Again not unlike Levinas, Lacoste disrupts the Heideggerian priority of Being, without *completely* negating the conditions of our existence (being-in-the-world, temporality that resists calculation, atheism).³⁴² Lacoste seeks the possibilities for experience that are otherwise than the topoi of the “atheistic ‘world’ or the pagan ‘earth.’”³⁴³ Neither the sacred too far (a matter of

³³⁹ Ibid., 146.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 40-54.

³⁴¹ This arises in his description of the fool (Ibid., 177-185), but also in his assertion that the “carnal dimension of experience may provide a better paradigm for understanding the relation between man and God” (Ibid., 156).

³⁴² “We can always be seduced by immediacy and our facticity. We can live only according to the conditions that world and earth bestow upon us, and we find in these conditions the limits of the thinkable.” It would seem that the Absolute disentangles itself from these conditions, perhaps pushes “beyond these limits”; but we are not, in the meantime, this absolution from existence. (Ibid., 109.)

³⁴³ Ibid., 180.

indifference), nor the sacred too near (an adequation with consciousness and its experiences) can approach the insolubility of the Absolute.³⁴⁴

Therefore, Lacoste cannot simply carve a “pure space”³⁴⁵ out of the Heideggerian world, that thinking might reach something more originary than the “pure phenomenon.”³⁴⁶ Lacoste elucidates a “marginal or parenthetical experience[s]” that can only occur when the being-before-God “from within the world...takes its distance from the play of the world.”³⁴⁷ Levinas locates this leverage in the ethical relation. Heidegger might name this the “infinite relation” between mortals and gods, enunciated in his works on Hölderlin.³⁴⁸ There remains some debate as to whether these experiences are founded in, or excluded from, the liturgical relation.³⁴⁹ Lacoste seems to suggest that in order for Levinasian ethics to take place, or for Heideggerian *unheimlichkeit* (the uncanniness experienced by the thinker, poetized by the poet, or discovered in the artwork) to have its gravity, we must first understand how thinking is entangled with the ambiguities of affectivity.³⁵⁰ Unlike conceptual knowledge—which verifies or falsifies the adequation of

³⁴⁴ In the case of Lacoste, the “Absolute” is not far from the apophatic connotation I give it. So instead of changing every designation with “ab-solute,” I will follow his choice.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 95.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

³⁴⁸ Lacoste accounts for this as an experience that disrupts the world of *Being and Time*; but compared to liturgy, it does not go so far in transgressing the structures of worldly existence. (Ibid., 15-16, 21.)

³⁴⁹ Joeri Schrijvers suggests that the ethical relation can be a critique of the liturgical relation, even if Lacoste makes ethics, in some sense, secondary to (or an outcome of) liturgy. Joeri Schrijvers, “Jean Yves Lacoste: A Phenomenology of Liturgy,” *Heythrop Journal* 46, no. 3 (July 2005): 314-333. Indeed, Lacoste calls ethics “another type of liturgy” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 74). However, contrary to Schrijver’s depiction of *Experience and the Absolute*, Lacoste describes liturgy much more broadly than being-in-Church, if one acknowledges his description of vigil—“(which we can spend doing philosophy, writing poetry, or praying—and many other things besides)” (Ibid., 79).

³⁵⁰ Joeri Schrijvers thus calls Lacoste’s critique of Heidegger an “ontology of affectivity.” Joeri Schrijvers, “Phenomenology, Liturgy, and Metaphysics: The Thought of Jean-Yves Lacoste,” *God in*

a present phenomenon to our thinking—affective knowledge of the Absolute speaks of God as “sensible to the heart” precisely in God’s withdrawal from experience.³⁵¹ For Lacoste, then, illusory thinking emerges in at least two ways: (1) philosophical assertions divorced from affective ambiguity, and (2) spiritual life as necessarily divorced from ‘secular’ embodiment. The questions, then, about distinctions between the being-before-God and the being-toward-death, surface in their subversive relationship, not in their mutual exclusion.³⁵²

This point is not argued by Lacoste’s principle reader, Joeri Schrijvers.³⁵³ It is the case, as Schrijvers argues, that one can read the liturgical relation as a violent transgression of being-in-the-world, and a mere ‘metaphysical reversal’ of the metaphysics of presence.³⁵⁴ With regard to the latter critique, Schrijvers has in mind a particularly problematic passage in which Lacoste describes the liturgical relation as God relating to us like objects “in God’s hands as clay . . . in the hands of the potter.”³⁵⁵ Schrijvers argues that God becomes the only Subject among a world of objects present-to-God, ready-to-God’s-hand. According to Schrijvers, this does not simply decenter the subject, as Levinas does, but disrespects singularity. Certainly this rhetoric of human qua

France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God, ed. Peter Jonkers and Ruud Welten (Dudley, MA: Peeters Press, 2005), 216.

³⁵¹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 142.

³⁵² Lacoste often offers ways of “mediat[ing] the opposition between the provisional and the definitive,” of thinking them together in order to “think their distinction and conciliation at once.” (Ibid., 140.)

³⁵³ Despite my minor pushback here, Schrijvers has gifted very helpful readings of Lacoste to scholarship. See, for example, the outgrowth of his work in Kenneth Jason Wardley, *Praying to a French God*.

³⁵⁴ Schrijvers, “Phenomenology of Liturgy,” 331.

³⁵⁵ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 156.

thing seems to undo the paradigm of embodied spirit³⁵⁶ that Lacoste assumes when he writes of liturgy at the “crossroads of the historical and the eschatological.”³⁵⁷ Lacoste is adamant: liturgy does not “abolish[h] the facticity of the world...by delivering us to the hold definitive realities have over us, liturgy does not remove the hold world and history have over us.”³⁵⁸ Lacoste has in mind the Heideggerian world and Hegelian history. Liturgy challenges these concepts as limited without utterly discarding them. I would insist, with Lacoste, that the liturgical relation is not a violent isolation from world; this is precisely the illusion he critiques.

The eschatological reality one seeks in liturgy is not absolutely separated from history; it is the partial presence of the Absolute in history that draws history beyond its necessities. Thus he writes of a restrained beyond, an inhabitation at the mingling, mangled limit of the world:

Liturgy strives for more than history and the veiled presence [*inévidence*] in which history maintains God. But the desire for the *eschaton* obviously does not bring about the Parousia (even though, as we will see...a moment in the liturgical logic compels whoever prays to imagine that the Absolute is present to him in the mode of Parousia). To pray in that way, even though it breaks through the closure of the world, is to dwell at the limit and not in the beyond.³⁵⁹

When Lacoste speaks of liturgy, it is less a violent purification of Being and more a subversive space of marginality while being-in-the-world. The contrary assumption, that being-in-the-world forbids the possibilities of being-before-God, is precisely what Lacoste resists. God, as ab-solute, eludes experience to the extent of absence, and

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 8.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 61.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 61.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 46.

therefore ‘manifests’ as non-experience and non-event. The non- is not a cancellation of experience and event, but a subversion from within the structures of appearance, of affective logic, of time. We live “the tension between the provisional and the definitive in [our] worldly encounter[s] with the Absolute.”³⁶⁰ The Absolute, in Lacoste’s terminology, is not the trump card of verification or violation, but the “inaccessible and unverifiable” that “determines our identity from afar.”³⁶¹

One could assume that Lacoste departs from the irreducible ambiguities of liturgy when he renders the human as a passive object. As a corrective to Lacoste’s statement, Schrijvers suggests that we return to Levinas, who “attempt[s] to think the other as other by means of a ‘defense of subjectivity’.”³⁶² Schrijvers’ suggestion quotes *Totality and Infinity*, perhaps without thinking of passages in *Otherwise than Being*, where Levinas regards subjectivity, not unlike an object, as a hostage to be persecuted by the other.³⁶³ This would require a careful unpacking of the differences between the potter-clay language of Isaiah 64:8, and the Jonah example Levinas cites in claiming our “absolute passivity” in the “impossibility of escaping God.”³⁶⁴ But this critique aside, we return to the example Schrijvers opposes: the clay, found in the parenthetical statement Lacoste (so

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 54.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 54.

³⁶² Schrijvers, “Phenomenology of Liturgy,” 331.

³⁶³ Yes, Levinas does de-substantialize subjectivity, and therefore resists the vocabulary of “thing”—but the potter and clay example is perhaps less severe than the implications of ‘hostage’ and persecution language. (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127). A hermeneutic comparison of “radical passivity” in Levinas and Lacoste must be done with regard to how passivity and exposure before God alters common notions of subjectivity. Both Levinas and Lacoste, for example, use passivity to suggest a pre-conscious exposure, or a kenosis that conditions ethics. I am also reminded of Levinas succinct expression of ethics: “Ethics is when I not only do not thematize another; it is when another *obsesses* me or puts me in question. I am the object of an intentionality and not its subject...” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 99.)

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 128.

fittingly to his phenomenology) interjects as his example. Why does Lacoste, after suggesting the carnal dimension as a paradigm, speak of humans as objects—as passivity more passive than flesh? Surely he doesn't mean to render humans as things; the opening of his *Experience and the Absolute*, indeed, suggests the contrary.³⁶⁵

I would argue that his modifier of the clay “(which is *not conscious* of [being in God's hands])” is telling.³⁶⁶ Not unlike Levinas, Lacoste wishes to undo the hold that the structures of consciousness have with regard to the absolute. If Lacoste speaks of the clay as being without consciousness, it is not to render humans as more thing-like, but to acknowledge the pliability of the human soul in its non-knowledge, its non-experience, of God. If consciousness claims to access an objective knowledge of the absolute, diminishing this consciousness (in the example of the clay), is not to render humans more objectified, as Schrijvers suspects.³⁶⁷ Rather, like Levinas' reversal of intentionality,³⁶⁸ Lacoste wishes to reverse the “tak[ing] as”³⁶⁹ feature of consciousness: we are instead taken by the absolute, gripped by God, rather than claiming any comprehensive experience of this relation. It is not that consciousness, and the body, do not bear—in some way—“the claim the Absolute makes over man.”³⁷⁰ Lacoste insists that the soul is

³⁶⁵ “The problem of the body is that it is an I: not some ‘thing’ that we may or may not possess, but something we are: and, more rigorously, something that defines us as man: as someone.” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 7).

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 156. (Emphasis mine.)

³⁶⁷ Schrijvers may read too far into Lacoste's example of reversed “objectivity” a reinforcement of the binary between subject-object. Lacoste attempts a subversion of the subject precisely with an example that challenges its pretensions to objectivity. Lacoste's language is no doubt misleading in this moment. Lacoste may be perhaps an example—not of the ‘reversal of metaphysics’ (a critique Heidegger launches against Nietzsche), but the impossibility of getting beyond metaphysical language. Heidegger himself never wished to get beyond metaphysics entirely as this is “childish,” and much easier than the difficult work of destruction. (Heidegger, *The Ister*, 53).

³⁶⁸ For example, Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 110-113.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁷⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 63.

“not alone in bearing the claim;” and yet, “the soul alone tells us that this claim exceeds all that experience can comprehend of it.”³⁷¹ It would be illusory to suggest that the soul, body, and consciousness are isolated from one another, operating *purely* in their segregated functions. Lacoste describes, at length, how flesh is the basis of vulnerability—the vulnerability of being *impure*: “No body is pure action and pure initiative. Because I am a carnal being, passivity determines me just as fundamentally as does activity.”³⁷² Combining the Husserlian ‘act’ of consciousness and the Heideggerian ‘opening’ of Dasein, Lacoste insists that the enfleshed ego is never the complete passivity of a thing, nor the supposed activity of consciousness. Indeed, consciousness, in Lacoste’s careful reading of phenomenology, is not simply intentional comportment; it requires a primary “self-giving”³⁷³ and is thus an “an action that corresponds to a passivity.”³⁷⁴ It would seem that phenomenology, not unlike liturgy, “dismantl[es]” subjectivity. Though he remarks that phenomenology and liturgy have a shared paradigm,³⁷⁵ he will have to show how the vulnerability in God’s hand is otherwise than the exposure of Dasein before the world.

Lacoste explains that the “marginalizing” of consciousness—the acknowledgment of its limitation (not its negation) before the Absolute—occurs uniquely in the liturgical experience.³⁷⁶ Lacoste gives the example of prayer, where consciousness is still operative

³⁷¹ Ibid., 63.

³⁷² Ibid., 154.

³⁷³ Ibid., 154.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 155.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 156.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 47.

in “directing one’s attention.”³⁷⁷ However, the “opening” of consciousness is not the same as the “exposition” of our being in the prayer event.³⁷⁸ Consciousness may be disappointed, in the act of prayer, when it cannot perceive God’s presence. Indeed, the experience of prayer, for Lacoste, is a “nonevent” wherein one acknowledges “that God is absent from his experience, or that experience cannot ground itself in any content of consciousness to which the God’s condescension would be unequivocally linked.”³⁷⁹ This is not only phenomenologically honest,³⁸⁰ but also theologically sound.³⁸¹ The structure of this disruptive relation, which prevents any ‘unequivocal’ correlation, requires soul, body, and consciousness. In the liturgical event, the soul “puts consciousness in question,” but does not silence it altogether.³⁸² Their inability to be separated from one another, even as they subvert or question one another, prevents God from being reducible to mere psychologism or a pure mystical departure.

There may be the mystical “night” of St. John of the Cross, where senses do not serve; but it is not because sensation inherently contaminates divine experience. Rather, the night of the senses occurs because God refuses to appear fully to the senses. The night is not simply God’s absence, or a supra-sensorial faith in God’s presence. “The liturgical night neither proves the absence of God nor denies his proximity: on the contrary, it

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 62.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 62.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁸⁰ Insofar as it maintains what Heidegger describes as the “concealed in unconcealedness” of Being (Martin Heidegger, trans. Joan Stambaugh, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper Collins, 1969), 68) and the “presence of the absence” of the gods (Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 46).

³⁸¹ Insofar as it respects that God is both revealed and concealed in our names for God, or never ‘unequivocally’ known. There is, of course, some mention of the beatitude possibility; but even this is given in a worldly ‘inchoation.’ (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 146).

³⁸² Ibid., 152.

teaches how to think them better.”³⁸³ If this would seem to promise some production of thought; it is not so simple. The liturgical night produces by denial, gives by withdrawal. It is an “asceticism” whereby one “makes oneself present,” waiting without guarantee of affective compensation.³⁸⁴ It is not that I will this kenosis, or can thematize its strange non-knowledge. Lacoste goes so far as to say that the liturgical night bores us, exhausts us in our impatience. While in the night, we inhabit the aridity of this nonevent. But this is not to say that the night is pure negation; it can be described.³⁸⁵ Our consciousness is “disoriented,” not decimated or delivered.³⁸⁶

In his revision of St. John of the Cross’ night, Lacoste dispels the illusory ecstasy wherein a soul is purified of its worldly ‘contamination.’³⁸⁷ The world is both what we inhabit and the veil that preserves God; the world is assumed in the structure of the night’s inexperience. However, Lacoste helpfully distinguishes that the frustration of consciousness is not the defeat of the soul. The soul and consciousness “are not two beings” that could war with one another; but rather “two modes of the same being—man.”³⁸⁸ In his reading of Heidegger’s “Fourfold,”³⁸⁹ Lacoste distinguishes between consciousness and soul by interposing the veil of the world—a veil that is never

³⁸³ Ibid., 148.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 148.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 149.

³⁸⁶ There are other ways to critique consciousness, say in the ethical relation as Levinas describes it. But Lacoste suggests that liturgy significantly “contradicts the worldly reasons that govern what we are,” and thereby enacts a subversion of consciousness through conversion. (Ibid., 153.)

³⁸⁷ “Critique and subversion cannot cause us, in the nonplace of liturgy, to cease to exist in the mode of consciousness.” (Ibid., 153.)

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 152.

³⁸⁹ In his reading, “Dasein exists in the world without God—this does not presume the nonexistence of God but teaches only that the world, as world, draws a veil between Dasein and God” (Ibid., 41).

completely lifted while in the world. The world is the veil of God's Parousia presence; and thus claims about God's total presence is a diminishment of God *and* the world. Under this diminishment, thought covers over the "chiaroscuro order of the world" in the pretension of illumination.³⁹⁰ To the contrary, respecting the chiaroscuro nature of the world, we resist two fallacies: (1) the total darkness of a Godless night, which trades its 'nonexperience' of God for an assumption of God's inexistence; (2) the totalizing light of consciousness, which fails to acknowledge what does not enter into its experience.³⁹¹

Not unlike Levinas, Lacoste remains suspicious of any philosophical attempt to "convert into intelligibility" through the "phosphorescence" of Being.³⁹² Though Levinas has in mind Heidegger's Being as "this brightening [that] makes everything clear," it could be argued that even for Heidegger, a phenomenology of appearing must be tempered by what remains necessarily concealed.³⁹³ Lacoste is a little less critical of Heidegger, insofar as he reads in Heidegger a resistance to phenomenological objectification. Schrijvers notes this in Lacoste's differentiation between Heidegger and Husserl: "There is between the Husserlian and the Heideggerian descriptions a distance which distinguishes the 'seeing' (the 'appearing') from the 'letting see' (the 'making appear,' 'the bringing to light'.)"³⁹⁴ In short, the correlation of sight with its appearing object (Husserl) is softened by Heidegger's emphasis on horizons of affectivity. It is

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 46.

³⁹¹ The former can be found in Lacoste's understanding of the Heideggerian world; the latter is Levinas' accusation of Heideggerian Being. More significantly, these fallacies haunt the wider illusion we are working to resist: that if one cannot reason God fully, or perceive God directly, then God's absence in Being necessarily implies God's death.

³⁹² Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 52.

³⁹³ Martin Heidegger, "Homecoming/To Kindred Ones," *Elucidations*, 35.

³⁹⁴ Lacoste qtd. in Schrijvers, "Phenomenology of Liturgy," 325.

precisely this affective strand that Lacoste finds helpful in Heidegger.³⁹⁵ For Lacoste, as for Levinas, the stakes involve a respect for what cannot fully present itself in the present³⁹⁶—the “to come” and its diffuse ambiguity, its plurality.³⁹⁷ Affectivity affords this plurality as it shades our capacity to think or perceive otherwise.

This is not to suggest that reason (and its demand for unity and intelligibility) is the only suspect in an illusory thinking of the absolute. Lacoste also resists the abuse of affectivity whereby God is reducible to an object of feeling. Religious experience cannot be the only testament of the Absolute; we can neither require that God appear in God’s Parousia presence to religious feeling nor to thought. Any theology of religious experience that enforces a logic of immediate access commits the same fault as a philosophy of correlation (thinking adequate to Being). So while Lacoste may speak of a “meantime that is removed from the time of the world,” it is not a removal that grants immediate access—through feeling or thought—to a timeless truth. Any depiction of the divine-human relation as the cancelation of or extrication from “the temporal play of consciousness,” and other conditions of existence, is “illusory.”³⁹⁸ Our existence is mediated; as a result, any experience of the sacred “at once veils and unveils.”³⁹⁹ We cannot tear the veil of the world in order to experience, immediately, the Absolute.

³⁹⁵ He reads Heidegger’s moods as an example of proliferating affective horizons, even as this reading is against the grain of Heidegger’s hermeneutic of the work of art. Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh may present a unity of meaning that forgets the sway of affective ambiguity (indeed, the many hermeneutic possibilities opened by the varying affects of viewers). Jean-Yves Lacoste, “The Work and Complement of Appearing,” *Religious Experience*, 68-93.

³⁹⁶ To think that “our being has the present as its measure, and that we are cannot now be determined by what we have not yet become, by the hold our future has...over our present” is to maintain “a blind spot.” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 57.)

³⁹⁷ Lacoste acknowledges that this messianic quality it not unique to Levinas and Derrida by exploring the possibility in Heidegger. (Ibid., 16.)

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 57.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 144.

Lacoste advises against such illusions, “Liturgical inexperience must teach us to demystify our capacity for ‘religious’ experience: to completely rule out the immediacy that precedes knowledge, and not to require too much of the immediacy that succeeds it.”⁴⁰⁰ An illusory relation to the Absolute privileges either the purity of knowledge or the immediacy of feeling. The contented, “pure I”⁴⁰¹ cannot admit that the Absolute gives “impoverished kinds of knowledge,” caught between knowledge and inexperience.⁴⁰²

Exposed before God, “we face the Absolute within the element of the provisional.”⁴⁰³ To think that God’s *donation to* and *absolution from* our experience entails our violent removal from experience is to miss Lacoste’s subtlety. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is also to miss the ways in which the Absolute can disrupt Being from within—without becoming an ontotheological diminishment.⁴⁰⁴ When the Absolute touches us, it will not submit to the glory of knowns, or the experience of pure presence; it will be through poverty, foolishness, humor, flesh. Anyone who “‘enjoys possession of’ his knowledge” of God—as possession of a thought object, or as an evacuation from being-in-the-world—has covered over the “pain of inexperience.”⁴⁰⁵ It is

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 145. Lacoste reminds that the “conjunction of knowledge and inexperience (our incapacity to introduce into liturgy experiential verification as a constitutive moment) cannot be torn asunder. Man wishes ‘to see’ God, but everything he sees disappoints him...” (Ibid., 143.)

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁰⁴ “The theological deployment of phenomenology attempts to respect the phenomenality of God and resists the objectification or reduction of the Divine to the ‘supreme Being’ of ontotheology, to an object of philosophical preconception.” (Wardley, *Praying to a French God*, 6.)

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 145.

this humiliating pain that refuses the illusion of our absolute knowledge.⁴⁰⁶ It frustrates our attempts of assumed purity, asking instead a fool's relation to the Absolute.

V. PAUL TILLICH: THE ILLUSION OF THE DEMONIC

Not unlike Lacoste, Paul Tillich's understanding of being-in-the-world is riddled with ambiguity.⁴⁰⁷ And just as Lacoste leaves room for the "transcendental possibility" of "disentangl[ing] from its ambiguity,"⁴⁰⁸ Tillich describes religion as a historically rooted, self-transcendence toward the unambiguous.⁴⁰⁹ The possibility of the unambiguous, for Lacoste, is the opening of the liturgical exposure, which is neither determined by "religious experience in all its ambivalences" nor the disappointments of God's presence.⁴¹⁰ Indeed, if it is defined by either 'feeling' or 'presence,' then liturgy will always be bound to the ambiguities of consciousness.⁴¹¹ To place Lacoste in Tillichian terms, the "quest for the unambiguous" in liturgy is "latent" in the ambiguities of life.⁴¹² For both thinkers, these ambiguities cannot be utterly negated in order to access the unambiguous. The unambiguous, the absolute, is revealed and concealed through the

⁴⁰⁶ This is not simply the pain that Tillich names as "the awareness of one's self made into an object deprived of self-determination." Though, Shrijvers' reading of Lacoste would have us read it this way. I would argue that Lacoste's 'pain' is deprivation, and a lack of self-determination, but is it not because the subject has been made an object; it because the subject has been exposed as soul. (Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 92.)

⁴⁰⁷ Wardley, "Chapter 3: Ambiguity," *Praying to a French God*, 45-73. Tillich, "Life and its Ambiguities, and the Quest for Unambiguous Life," *Systematic Theology III*, 11-110.

⁴⁰⁸ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 64.

⁴⁰⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 104-107

⁴¹⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 64.

⁴¹¹ "In the chiaroscuro of the world and of history, liturgy, if we must speak of it in terms of consciousness, is that experience in which consciousness encounters a veiled Absolute and cannot take leave, if not from perpetual ambiguity, then at least from the necessity of a perpetual interpretation that is by no means infallible." (Ibid., 63.)

⁴¹² Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 107.

ambiguous; it partially resists and partially resides in the structures of Being. This is no more obvious,⁴¹³ for Tillich, than in religion's "creation and distortion of revelation."⁴¹⁴ If we quest toward the unambiguous, we must thoughtfully distinguish between the holiness of the absolute and its illusory form in the demonic.⁴¹⁵

Tillich defines the demonic as the distortion of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is the possibility of resisting "total bondage to [one's] own finitude."⁴¹⁶ It goes beyond the centering feature of self-integration, and the horizontal growth of self-creation. The verticality of self-transcendence is not, however, the freedom to be exempt from all relation. Self-transcendence is still subject to the ambiguities that emerge from the relationship of essence and existence.⁴¹⁷ Self-transcendence is verticality without ultimate departure; it thereby resists the totalizing tendency of self-integration by opening toward the other.⁴¹⁸ Self-transcendence is also not content with the empire-building of unencumbered self-creation.⁴¹⁹ Rather, self-transcendence is the capacity of life to be in

⁴¹³ "The general assertion may be made that in every act of the self-transcendence of life profanization is present or, in other words, that life transcends itself ambiguously. Although this ambiguity is most conspicuous in the religious realm, it is manifest under all dimensions." (Ibid., 87.)

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁴¹⁵ "Demonization of the holy occurs in all religions day by day, even in the religion which is based on the self-negation of the finite in the Cross of the Christ. The quest for the unambiguous life is, therefore, most radically directed against the ambiguity of the holy and the demonic in the religious realm." (Ibid., 102.)

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹⁸ Resonating with Levinas, Tillich writes, "But there is one limit to man's attempt to draw all content into himself—the other self.... One can destroy it as a self, but one cannot assimilate it as a content of one's own centeredness.... Therefore the other self is the unconditional limit to the desire to assimilate one's whole world, and the experience of this limit is the experience of the ought-to-be, the moral imperative." (Ibid., 40).

⁴¹⁹ Tillich places self-transcendence in the ambiguity of freedom and destiny. Though he emphasizes self-transcendence as the self's liberation, he need not be entirely suspect to readers of Levinas. Tillich's understanding of freedom is 'finite freedom,' where its dynamism is always in relation to restriction. Thus he writes that "Freedom and subjection to valid norms are one and the same thing." One could read this under Levinas understanding of freedom as responsibility. For example, in Tillich's

and above itself,⁴²⁰ erotically moving toward what both gives itself and withdraws from it.⁴²¹ It is this ambiguity that nestles self-transcendence between the holy and the profane.

To be clear, when Tillich writes of the distortion of self-transcendence, he does not call it profanization. Profanization *does resist* transcendence, but in a more neutral way than the demonic.⁴²² Though the profane stops short of the doors of the temple, it is also irrevocably connected to the holy.⁴²³ If profanity connotes impurity and mediation, it is all the more required for Tillich's definition of the holy.⁴²⁴ Recall that we only know the unambiguous through the "ambiguous manifestations in the mixture which is life."⁴²⁵ Yes, the profane resists the holy, but also is the possibility of its incomplete expression.⁴²⁶ Bread and wine are profane objects, but they are also sacramental. To over-emphasize the sacramental presence, however, is a demonic distortion that Tillich attributes to ritualization.⁴²⁷ Thus Tillich defines demonization as "identifying a particular bearer of holiness with the holy itself."⁴²⁸ Such false identification occurs in

description of the encounter the self has with another self, a disruption occurs due to the temporality the other brings. (Ibid., 58.)

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁴²¹ Thus Tillich connects it with Aristotelian eros. (Ibid., 87.)

⁴²² Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 218.

⁴²³ "But where the holy is, there is also the profane." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 88).

⁴²⁴ The holy is the "sphere of the gods"—as a sphere, it resembles a medium or a mediating quality. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 215-217. In this sense, it is akin to Heidegger's understanding of the holy as an immediate medium. Martin Heidegger, "As When on a Holiday," *Elucidations*, 84-85

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴²⁶ "Everything secular is implicitly related to the holy. It can become the bearer of the holy. The divine can become manifest in it. Nothing is essentially and inescapably secular...Furthermore, the holy needs to be expressed and can be expressed only through the secular, for it is through the finite alone that the infinite can express itself." Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 218.

⁴²⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 379-380.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 102.

confusing the finite being with the infinity it bears.⁴²⁹ The demonic can manifest as ritualization; but it can also occur in the secularization of the church.⁴³⁰ When the church too closely aligns with its culture's "moralism, intellectualism, or nationalism," this too tends toward the demonic.⁴³¹ Attempting to be more open to the world, secularized religion "has the character of transforming [itself] into a finite object among finite objects."⁴³² In both cases, something finite, or finitude itself, has become definitively authoritative; it has lost its ambiguity.⁴³³ To avoid this false holiness, self-transcendence must resist emphasizing either the "Protestantism" of secularizing the holy, or the ritualism that makes profane objects unambiguously adequate to the holy.⁴³⁴

It is important to note that religion falls under Tillich's explanation of the ambiguities of life. Its ambiguities are not its demonization; but if unbalanced, these ambiguities lead to demonization. Given Tillich's understanding of life—as the essential ambiguously mingling with the existential—one cannot simply negate ambiguity by dropping one polarity of its tensions.⁴³⁵ The opposite of demonization is not the holiness

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 105.

⁴³⁰ And as Simone Weil notes, "I am well aware that the Church must inevitably be a social structure; otherwise it would not exist. But in so far as it is a social structure, it belongs to the Prince of this World. It is because it is an organ for the preservation and transmission of truth that there is an extreme danger for those who, like me, are excessively open to social influences. For in this way what is purest and what is most defiling look very much the same, and confused under the same words, make an almost undecomposable mixture." (Weil, "Letter II," *Waiting for God*, 13.)

⁴³¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 380.

⁴³² Ibid., 98.

⁴³³ Secularity—if caricatured as the pursuit of 'reason' apart from religious sway—has its own idolatrous trends. (For example, Husserl, *Crisis*, 291.)

⁴³⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 380.

⁴³⁵ "The ambiguities of life cannot be conquered by producing a vacuum." (Ibid., 82.) And I would argue that this is the same for Lacoste. If Lacoste's eschatology utterly obliterates history, it is no longer a robust eschatology. The same holds for his oppositions between soul and consciousness, the 'eschatological I' and the 'empirical I.' The only way to the unambiguous, for Tillich, is in the perfect balance, or exacting tension, of polar elements (Ibid., 402.)

of reification, or purification; rather, these are the distorted outgrowths of demonic divinity. Indeed, the fallacy of an existence purified of its concreteness, its ambiguity, is the beginning of an illusory thinking of the holy.⁴³⁶ The attempt at forging a false absolute (a rigid separation) breaks the dialectical tension of self-transcendence: “It must have concrete existence, otherwise nothing would be there to be transcended....Religion as the self-transcendence of life needs the religions and needs to deny them.”⁴³⁷ The secular (as the realm of “preliminary concerns”)⁴³⁸ must be distinguished, but always in its relation to the holy (as the realm of “ultimate concern”). It is distinguished because religion has to open a specific realm of reception to the unambiguous within the ambiguous. For Tillich, the pursuit of the unambiguous is deeply religious. However, religion often forgets, in its desire for the unambiguous, that it is no less subject to the ambiguities of life.

The demonic strand of religion repudiates ambiguity; but in trying to attain the unambiguous, it prevents the possibility of its reception. The process of demonization occurs “when religion as a social and personal reality makes this claim [of superiority] for itself and the finite forms by which it points to the infinite.”⁴³⁹ When religion confuses its finite, profane forms with the infinite, its capacity to bear the holy is broken. Holy forms “become demonic at the moment in which they become elevated to the unconditional and ultimate character of the Holy itself.”⁴⁴⁰ Demonization not only

⁴³⁶ He radically states that to separate the holy and the secular is to invite sin. (Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 218.)

⁴³⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 98.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁴⁰ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 60. Religion, as a resource for these symbols of the absolute, “gives us the experience of the Holy, of something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate

inflates the finite into a false infinite; it short circuits desire. The demonic closes the perpetual, erotic striving of the finite being toward the infinite. In the demonic distortion of religion, God is no longer what “ultimately concerns” us, but what we dictate to others as ultimate. Under the illusory thinking of the demonic, the receding horizon of eschatological preparation is circumscribed; the church’s expectation collapses into world history’s cynicisms and utopias.⁴⁴¹

Though every religion is capable of demonic tendencies, Tillich is most exacting in his analysis of Christianity and its churches. Like Lacoste, Tillich suggests that the “latent Church” (the kingdom-not-yet-here) cannot be identified with history.⁴⁴² This identification would falsely equate the potential of the Church with its actual forms; it would over-emphasize God’s presence to the neglect of God’s absence, God’s coming.⁴⁴³ If such demonic thinking seizes theology, it would obliterate the leverage for critique—both the Church’s judgment upon history, and its judgment upon itself as part of history.⁴⁴⁴ Indeed, if the Church were judged as history, or by its actuality, “one [could not] call Church history ‘sacred history’ or ‘a history of salvation.’”⁴⁴⁵ Tillich is explicit:

meaning, the source of ultimate courage. This is the glory of what we call religion. But beside its glory is its shame. It makes itself the ultimate and despises the secular realm. It makes its myths and doctrines, its rites and laws into ultimates and persecutes those who do not subject themselves to it. It forgets that its own existence is a result of man’s tragic estrangement from his true being. It forgets its own emergency character.” (Ibid., 9.)

⁴⁴¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 390-1.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 376. Tillich’s understanding of the kingdom also shapes his depiction of God as “present, although hidden, in every divine-human encounter.” Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1952), 180.

⁴⁴³ On this point, Lacoste and Tillich resonate, particularly as Merold Westphal summarizes Lacoste’s absolute: “the Transcendent and Absolute is not a rival of the immanent/relative but their ground and telos. But the Transcendent/Absolute and the immanent/relative become rival to each other when the latter takes itself to be absolute.” Merold Westphal, “Phenomenology of Religion,” *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister (London: Routledge, 2010), 668.

⁴⁴⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 383.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 381.

There is one line of demonization in Christianity, from the first persecution of heretics immediately after the elevation of Christianity to the position of state religion of the Roman empire, through formulas of condemnation in the declarations of the great councils, through wars of extirpation against medieval sects and the principles of the inquisition, through the tyranny of Protestant orthodoxy, the fanaticism of its sects, and the stubbornness of fundamentalism, to the declaration of the infallibility of the pope. The event in which the Christ sacrificed all claims to a particular absoluteness into which the disciples wanted to force him occurred in vain for all these examples of demonization of the Christian message.⁴⁴⁶

Tillich lambasts churches that claim to be *the* definitive church for similar reasons.⁴⁴⁷ In making the empirical more ultimate than the eschatological, they betray Christ's example. Demonically oriented churches seek the power and security of being absolute in their particularity. In refusing the paradigm of Christ, these churches not only reinforce demonic theology, they blaspheme the only criterion they have to judge themselves. No church is immune from Tillich's critique; but because of the ambiguities of existence, no church can be reduced to its demonic tendencies. As Tillich affirms, "distorted holiness is still holiness."⁴⁴⁸ If in attempting to correct the demonic distortion, one sought a holiness purified of the dynamics of power, history, form—this would inevitably lead to the demonic.⁴⁴⁹ The church riddled with demonic tendencies cannot simply "forfeit [its] function" of representing God.⁴⁵⁰ Demonization occurs when representations, and the

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 381.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 378.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 375.

⁴⁴⁹ "The critics of such profanized religion are justified in their criticism and often serve religion better than those whom they attack. It would, however, be a utopian fallacy to attempt to use these criticisms to remove the profanizing tendencies in the religious life and to retain pure self-transcendence of holiness. Insight into the inescapable ambiguity of life prevents such a fallacy." (Ibid., 100.)

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 375.

structures of mediation, are obliterated either by: (1) sublating their conditionality into the unconditional,⁴⁵¹ or (2) abandoning them in the name of iconoclastic cynicism.⁴⁵²

Given Tillich's system of ambiguous relations, it is not as if abandoning religion and its institutions is entirely possible. As the prime instantiation of self-transcendence, religion remains in its "essential unity" with "morality and culture."⁴⁵³ Religion gives the ethical encounter its "unconditional character" in the moral imperative.⁴⁵⁴ Religion also grants culture "the element of ultimacy which culture lacks in itself but to which it points."⁴⁵⁵ Religion, in this broad construal, provides the "inexhaustible depth" of creativity, and the ethical demand for reconciliation.⁴⁵⁶ This is not to say that religion ought to be adequate to the culture, or that religion is inherently moral. Ambiguities remain as the price for existence. And given the "mutual immanence" of religion and culture, ambiguities—and their attempted eradication—will exist for both.⁴⁵⁷ Thus, the pervasiveness of religion is not simply its essential influence, but also its responsibility for the structures of demonization in morality and culture. "Wherever the demonic appears"—whether in "scientific absolutism," "idolization" of persons, the abuses of totalitarian regimes—"it shows religious traits."⁴⁵⁸ Demonic thinking is the "self-

⁴⁵¹ In this sense, Tillich remains closer to Heidegger's description of Christian facticity by resisting Hegel, "The demonic forces are not destroyed, but they cannot prevent the aim of history, which is reunion with the divine ground of being and meaning. The way in which this happens is identical with the divine mystery and beyond calculation and description. Hegel made the mistake of claiming that he knew this way..." (Ibid., 373.)

⁴⁵² Tillich argues elsewhere that theologians must necessarily pursue the task of mediation. Paul Tillich, "The Protestant Principle," *The Essential Tillich*, 70-71.

⁴⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 95-6.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 103.

elevation of one nation over against all others in the name of her God,” or the self-elevation of a “system of values” in the name of another God. That God need not be the God of monotheistic religions; it can also be the god of political ideology, or ‘reason.’

Demonization occurs wherever someone, threatened by the non-being inherent to finitude, builds a fortress of false absolutes. It would seem that, for Tillich, demonic habits of thought not only threaten theologians; in point of fact, they are endemic to the human mind. Tillich’s description of the human person is decidedly Heideggerian (or Kierkegaardian and Lutheran, if we admit Heidegger’s influences). According to Tillich, the human exists estranged from his essential being. He is a living being that is necessarily a dying being.⁴⁵⁹ But because essence still touches existence, and because this essential being itself maintains relation to non-being,⁴⁶⁰ humans anxiously seek security.⁴⁶¹ Tillich, like Heidegger, is not speaking of psychotic anxiety, but of the dread without object that arises in a finite being’s encounter with non-being. Non-being, in Tillich’s definition, is the negation of man’s self-affirmation. Ontically, non-being surfaces in the pressures of contingency, fate, and death. Spiritually, non-being manifests in the experiences of emptiness and meaninglessness. Morally, non-being expresses itself in guilt and condemnation.⁴⁶² The demonic impulse tries to ignore non-being, or to conquer it inauthentically. However, it cannot suppress by self-elevation the threats that anxiety drives it to eliminate.

⁴⁵⁹ This depiction of living beings is at work in Tillich’s opening of *Systematic Theology III* (Ibid., 11), and receives more explanation in *The Courage to Be*.

⁴⁶⁰ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 48.

⁴⁶¹ “The human mind is not only, as Calvin has said, a permanent factory of idols, it is also a permanent factory of fear—the first in order to escape God, the second in order to escape anxiety; and there is a relation between the two.” (Ibid., 47-8.)

⁴⁶² Ibid., 49.

In rendering the finite absolute, “one is driven from devotion to one object to devotion to another and again on to another, because the meaning of each of them vanishes and the creative eros is transformed into indifference or aversion.”⁴⁶³ The finite cannot satisfy; but under the process of demonic thinking, it does dangerously ossify our indifference to finitude or our aversion of it. Devotion, in the demonic register, becomes the surrender of freedom (and therefore the surrender of responsibility and risk). To break from the anxiety of doubt, stirred by non-being, an individual surrenders his separation to the totality of a collective. The collective provides meaning; but because it cannot authentically address doubt and meaninglessness, its power derives from a “fanatical self-assertiveness.”⁴⁶⁴ The fanatical element of the demonic resembles anxiety more than it refutes it, “attacking with disproportionate violence those who disagree and who demonstrate by their disagreement elements in the spiritual life of the fanatic which he must suppress in himself.”⁴⁶⁵ The fanaticism of religious cults, and of political parties (whether Communist “neo-collectivism” or “democratic conformism”),⁴⁶⁶ thrives by replacing the task of self-affirmation with preservation of the group. The group comes to replace God;⁴⁶⁷ and its symbols are conveyed as absolutes.⁴⁶⁸ It is not that Tillich frames the solution in a Kierkegaardian resistance of subjectivity to totality.⁴⁶⁹ It is just as easy for an individual, wishing to avoid the anxiety of non-being, to “sit on the throne of

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 99-113.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 104, 110.

⁴⁶⁸ “All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 60.)

⁴⁶⁹ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 125.

God.”⁴⁷⁰ An individual, just as a collective, can experience the lure of “pure objectivity above finitude and estrangement.”⁴⁷¹

Like Rosenzweig, Tillich traces this temptation back to the thinking that abstracts from existence. In the theoretical attitude, the “cognitive act...demand[s] detachment.”⁴⁷² No doubt, “there are realms of reality...in which the most complete detachment is the adequate cognitive approach.”⁴⁷³ However, Tillich maintains that:

...it is most inadequate to apply the same approach to reality in its infinite concreteness. A self which has become a matter of calculation and management has ceased to be a self. It has become a thing. You must participate in a self in order to know what it is. But by participating you change it. In all existential knowledge, both subject and object are transformed by the very act of knowing. Existential knowledge is based on an encounter in which a new meaning is created and recognized.⁴⁷⁴

Knowledge, and its acts of meaning-making, are events based on encounter, participation. Before Levinas protests, I must emphasize that Tillich does not intend mystical absorption when he speaks of participation.⁴⁷⁵ Participation suggests that the knower is implicated, responsive in and responsible for, what he encounters in the attempt to know. Thinking—in approaching the holiness of other subjects, and ultimately the absolution of God—must be transformed away from both demonic self-elevation, and illusions of calculative control.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 124.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁷⁵ In his assessment, “Mysticism does not take seriously the concrete and the doubt concerning the concrete. It plunges directly into the ground of being and meaning and leaves the concrete...behind.” (Ibid., 180.)

Reminiscent of Weil, Tillich acknowledges that thinking necessarily oscillates between detachment and attachment. Thinking must detach in order to prevent ideological idolatry; but it also must be engaged, “restrict[ing] detachment to one element within the embracing act of cognitive participation.”⁴⁷⁶ To write of the abuses of factory work, one must work in the factory. But as Weil knew, factory life—offering its false community and idol of progress—cannot become a matter of devotion, preventing the work of critique.⁴⁷⁷ As Lacoste might add, the existential component of knowledge must not occlude the eschatological potential. One must remain attuned, in thinking, to what is present, and the otherwise toward which actualities allude.

Tillich, like Weil and Levinas, claims that the idols of thought break upon one’s encounter with the incalculable subjectivity of another. But this assertion is deeply connected to Tillich’s understanding of knowledge with regard to God. When thinking treats God as an object to be argued, it devolves into the “bad theology” whereby God “is a being besides others,” a part of reality “subjected to the structure of the whole.”⁴⁷⁸ This is, no doubt, Heidegger’s concern when he speaks of the ontotheological God before whom one can neither worship nor dance.⁴⁷⁹ Like Lacoste, Tillich reminds that the paradoxical encounter of God must inform our thinking. If in prayer one “speak[s] to somebody to whom [one] cannot speak because he is not ‘somebody’” present to experience and knowledge, thinking God, too, must permit the porosity of absence.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁷⁷ For further resonance with Weil, see Tillich’s critique of the demonic as means confused with ends. (Ibid., 137.)

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁷⁹ Heidegger’s solution is not Tillich’s. The latter claims that the way to avoid making God a being is to understand God as “being-itself.” This makes God intimately active in our resistance to non-being—not as an assuring subject or cause of security, but the power to resist in the “absolute faith” of the courage to be. (Ibid., 178-9.)

Thinking must avoid playing the game that claims an absent God is a dead one. Otherwise, the subject-object structure of discursive thought forces God into the role of ultimate subject whereby I am “nothing more than an object.”⁴⁸⁰ I might resist this symbol of God as tyrannical subject by subjugating God to my conceptual grip—which is not far from condemning God to death. For the God that can be thought as “absolute knowledge and absolute control,” is the God that “Nietzsche said had to be killed.”⁴⁸¹ The false god of absolute control cannot inform our ethical responsibility to the incalculable. And, the false god of absolute knowledge annuls the possibility of humbled thinking. Tillich affirms, these gods are not holy, and must die.

How might thinking, and the language it grants us, resemble the letting-in and letting-go of breath? How might we engage alterity that thought might not only respond to existence, but also remain ethically responsible?

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 179. (This was Schrijvers concern in his reading of Lacoste.)

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 179.

CHAPTER TWO

ALLUSION: THRESHOLDS OF THE INSOLUBLE

Night with No Moon

Now you are darker than I can believe
it is not wisdom that I have come to

with its denials and pure promises
but this absence that I cannot set down

still hearing when there is nothing to hear
reaching into the blindness that was there

thinking to walk in the dark together¹

It would be easy to halt at the wise “denials” of illusion. We could dismiss the church because of its demonic practices. We could abandon philosophy because of its calculating, totalizing tendencies. We could refuse the language of purity given its abuses of embodiment. We could even remain skeptical of language altogether, since rhetoric secures our attachment to abstractions. But this iconoclasm only surfaces “this absence that I cannot set down.” It is as if, in noting the all-too-present illusory gods, and our misrepresentations of others, we have become more attentive to alterity’s absence: “still hearing where there is nothing to hear.” And it is this quiet call to an otherwise that draws

¹ W.S. Merwin “Night with No Moon,” *The Shadow of Sirius* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009), 45. This poem recalls Ricoeur’s alternative faith, which is neither atheism nor religion: “It would be a faith that moves forward through the shadows, in a new ‘night of the soul’—to adopt the language of the mystics—before a God who would not have the attributes of ‘Providence,’ a God who would not protect me but would surrender me to the dangers of a life worthy of being called human. Is not this God the Crucified One, the God who, as Bonhoeffer says, only through his weakness is capable of helping me?” Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 460.

us to the threshold opened by our clearing.² After iconoclasm, we must still wrestle with incarnation; after ideological destruction, we yet inhabit a world that shows itself, and places its demands for response.³ There is in the wisdom of negation no promise of purity, for this, too, is an illusion.⁴ We must walk further in the dark together; for what withdraws from illusion's eyes does not abstain from touch.⁵ As Simone Weil observes, "Experience of the transcendent: this seems a contradiction in terms, and yet the transcendent can only be known through contact, since our faculties are unable to construct it."⁶ It is the allusive structure of apophatic sacramentality—this strange contact with an abnegating presence—that I will attempt to illustrate. How does each thinker describe the contact with transcendence as otherwise than a denial of mediation (iconoclasm), and otherwise than an allegiance to comprehension (idolatry)? To respond, I will describe each thinker's approach to mediation with regard to the absolute—what can never be soluble to its medium.

² Thus God is not 'wholly other' with regard to our illusions (to reinforce a dualism), but engages us in a process of 'wholly otherwise' (*totaliter aliter*), as is the parlance of Levinas and Derrida (Levinas, *Proper Names*, 55-62.)

³ As Lyotard acknowledges, "One *must*, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It would be sin itself to believe oneself safe and sound. But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten, in writing" (Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews,'* 26).

⁴ Bruno Latour comes to mind, as he applies the *acheiropoieta* of icons not only to theological attempts to purify speech, but also scientific attempts to claim objectivity. Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: On the Torment of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵ As Edward Farley writes of the "poetic" worldview, "Things keep their secrets even from the poets. But poets see this failure as itself something to be incorporated into language as they try to voice the emotional intensity of their experiences of things, the world, and other human beings. Poetic language cannot replicate the concrete, but it can so clothe itself in metaphor, that the hearer (or reader) might re-experience things in their concreteness.... Looked at in this way, poetry's very meaning is a *therapeia* for the overconfident abstractions of knowing." Edward Farley, *Thinking About Things: And Other Frivolities* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 84.

⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 242.

Let us return to the sanatorium of Rosenzweig, as he looks on his patient, the thinker. We remember his first letter to us, how he signed: “Remaining *a limine* in everything, Respectfully, *Your Author*.”⁷ How strange: to be ever on the threshold, to remain in the excluded middle, between the appeals to essential presence and the sense of real nothingness. The doctor suggests that this threshold is precisely one’s occupation of life in the world. “One cannot exist entirely in the realm of theory, no matter how ‘essential’ it may seem when compared to dull, tedious reality. The concerns of the world intrude.”⁸ The thinker, exposed to the world’s intrusions, must neither paralyze himself in preserving wonder, nor deny the wondrous in destroying signification. Rosenzweig suggests that the thinker, when confronted with life, will cease to “quest for a meaning, hidden behind events...events come and go and no attempt is made to discover a meaning in them...”⁹ After the critique of essentializing thought, the thinker can no longer seek some absolute significance of world history, nor assert a glorified theodicy to justify all suffering. But this does not mean that all is resigned to insignificance. There must be a mode for thought, in which illusory thinking can be critiqued by what eludes it. But this cannot be merely the meeting of two nothings—the illusory retreat from existence and the beyond-existence of elusion. As Rosenzweig incisively observes, in this “there is an attempt to mend one mistake by making another. It seems reasonable that we will presently witness a craze for Mystical injections of as universal a scope as the previous fad.”¹⁰ A mystical appeal to the beyond can closely resemble the illness of thinking that

⁷ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

seeks only essences.¹¹ Thinking must resist anything that “claim[s] to ‘be’ either reality itself or the essence of reality. All abstract from life.”¹²

So what does Rosenzweig suggest as therapy for thinking? Though he declares that events must transpire without the attempt to discover their essence, he concludes, that there should be “no attempt to discover a meaning in them *other than* that revealed by the *names* by which they are called.”¹³ What is unique to naming that it avoids both essentializing thought, and the emptying of signification?¹⁴ How does naming, as the language of an otherwise thinking, avoid the flight from life? Naming must entail a different relation to the language of thought. A name cannot be like the thinker’s bowl used to catch a flowing river, as in Rosenzweig’s critique of worldview philosophy:

Nowadays a *Weltanschauung* is a valuable asset, and it would appear quite natural and obvious that the world should be “viewed.” However, the truth of the matter is that man becomes acquainted merely with certain fragments of the world at best coming in contact with only a limited number of things and people and events. If such a loose agglomeration of accidentally encountered fragments is considered the world, no harm need result from having a *Weltanschauung*. The word *Weltanschauung* is, however, sometimes associated with a much less modest claim. Here the word signifies more than a mere river bed passively permitting the stream of things and people and events to flow by; it is understood as a bowl which the observer dips into the stream and fills—not always to the brim—and which he then gazes at in undisturbed wonder. He gazes at the bowl and not at the river. The river cannot be dammed. It pays no heed to the attempts to dam it; the bowl, however, can be dipped into the stream and brought up at will. It can be brought up and considered by itself. Once

¹¹ As Derrida explains in his reading of Levinas, “The complicity of theoretical objectivity and mystical communion will be Levinas’ true target. The premetaphysical unity of one and the same violence. An alternation which always modifies the same confinement of the other.” (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 87.)

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 56. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ For a theological response to this question, see Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 63-88. See also, Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and the Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 139-195.

something is isolated from the flow of real objects—in our case the world—the question “What is it? What is it in essence?” is inevitably raised.¹⁵

I quote this passage at length because it suggests two modes of capturing reality, both of which appear in the etymology of abstraction. To abstract, from the Latin *abstrahere*, is to draw away via detachment or diversion. Since at least the 16th century, “abstraction” names what is removed from practical matters or withdrawn from the concrete. It could be linked with Rosenzweig’s critique of worldview philosophy, which removes a piece of life and confuses its abstraction for the whole (the essential, the total). However, there is yet another definition of abstraction, naming the possible reality of “a smaller quantity contain[ing] the virtue or power of a greater.”¹⁶ Here, abstraction serves not as a reduction harmfully ‘out of touch,’ *but rather as an allusion: a reduction that plays toward (allusio) what it contains and what it omits*. Under the first definition, the illusory tendency of thinking, abstraction functions like the bowl that isolates from the flow of life. Under the second definition, *the allusive structure of thinking*, abstraction functions like the river bed.¹⁷ An allusion permits relation between finitude and infinity; it passively holds the portion of flow it engages. An allusive structure is not simply the

¹⁵ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 65-66. Heidegger also uses this language of the “streaming experience of life” in his conception of *Ereignis*. (Qtd. in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 274-275.) And Heidegger, too, remains critical of the worldview as an “objectifying and stilling of life at a certain point in the life of culture. In contrast, phenomenology is never closed off [*abgeschlossen*], it is always provision in the absolute immersion [*Versenkung*] of life as such.” (Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 345.)

¹⁶ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. I* (London: J.F. and C. Rivington, 1785), 85. This usage survives today in the ‘call for abstracts’ in academic conferences.

¹⁷ Tillich notices the “ambiguity of abstraction.” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 70-1.)

mediation between two isms—idealism and realism.¹⁸ Rather, like a name, it respects the infinite course of meaning, while also attending the uniqueness of its location.¹⁹

But how does one arrive at this understanding of language, and its parallels with the “soundless Saying” of phenomena?²⁰ One cannot simply assume that the world is illusory because his thinking tends to objectify or essentialize it. True, once one has made the world mere appearance for speculation, he risks connecting God with this mere appearance, as well as the self.²¹ Thus, to approach the allusive mode of thinking, one must begin simply, by saying that the world *is* something, that consciousness *is something*, that God’s noticeable absence *is not nothing*. Rosenzweig suggests this modest beginning so that we are tempted neither by the “ultimate profundity” of demonstrating essences, nor the nihilistic profundity of reducing everything to illusory appearance. Thus, when Rosenzweig utters the names of “man,” “world,” and “God,” he does so acknowledging their distinctness as much as their relation. Each is “truly external” to the other. But where lies the possibility for their interaction?

Rosenzweig puzzles then announces, “. . .we discover something which is the companion of everything, including every event which takes place in the world, and yet is external to them all: the Word.”²² Words are allusive in structure; and they demand that thinking imitate this structure of referentiality. Acknowledging its roots in language, thought cannot simply sever itself from the realities it describes. Language does not

¹⁸ Insofar as they are isms they “fail to conciliate thought and action, which is, after all, the one thing desired. They fail precisely because they are *isms* . . .” (Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 57).

¹⁹ This rhetoric of journeying in location, or of respecting the flow of the river as a pattern for thinking, also arises in Heidegger’s, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister.”*

²⁰ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 129.

²¹ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 67-69.

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

aspire to being the world's essence. "It only names the things of the world... To utter a word is to affix a seal as a witness of man's presence. The word is not part of the world; it is the seal of man."²³ Or rather, the word is a seal witnessing to the engagement of humans with the world. This stands in contrast to illusory thinking, which disengages from the world's complexity. The word signifies the possibility of *in but not of*—an engagement that does not erase difference.

Even accepting Rosenzweig's distinction between word and thought, between 'speech-thinking' and abstraction, how might one translate this into the distinction between allusion and illusion? Like Rosenzweig's understanding of the word, allusive thinking maintains the referentiality and externality of phenomena. Allusive thinking wishes to name: to respect particularity without reducing it to essence or the chaotic flurry of pure differentiation. Naming is not totalizing, or essentializing, even though it gathers particularity around a unifying image or word. Rather, naming is the letting-be, or letting-appear, of difference as such. The name does not aim to definitively illuminate. It lets the phenomena of world, and the intrusion of the other person, occur even in their concealment. It lets their concealment, their exteriority, be seen as such. The name is a stamp, not simply of human engagement, but also "the sign of God... upon all things of this world."²⁴ The world and its inhabitants have the potential for change and growth as wide as the space opened by God's absence. They are marked by traces of God, not simply as objects of human thought. Therefore, "the thing does not gain in definition by being isolated and made stagnant; certainty of being 'something' is not achieved by

²³ Ibid., 71.

²⁴ Ibid., 73.

plumbing the depths of such an entity, but of opening the floodgates and permitting the stream of which it is part to inundate it.”²⁵

Before addressing the ways in which allusive thinking is in-formed by the elusive “sign of God,” we must begin by moving thought toward the allusive structure of naming. Again, unlike the abstracting, “isolat[ing]” quality of illusory thinking, allusion expands the network of meanings to the entire “stream of which [the phenomena] is part.” Allusive thinking is akin to naming with the seal of a word: perceiving concreteness without objectifying it, identifying difference without abstracting from its particular relations. We return to our ‘thinkers,’ for suggestions as to how thought can remain on this threshold of allusive signification.

I. MARTIN HEIDEGGER: THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF POETICS

In reading the corpus of Martin Heidegger, it is no doubt difficult to square his ontological appeals to the essence of Being with his phenomenological demands of being-in-the-world. Phenomenology, in Heidegger’s reading, assists in Dasein’s inquiry about the structure of Being in its temporality. Being is therefore not a rarified essence or eternal actuality. Rather, Being is marked by temporality, affording the structures of sending, incomplete presencing, and historicity. Being, however, becomes for a time implicated in Heidegger’s nationalistic agenda—say in the German nation’s ability to fight for its “essence,”²⁶ or in the German thinker’s ability to receive the violent stamp of

²⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁶ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 263-267.

destiny (*Schicksal*) sent (*schicken*) by Being.²⁷ I suggested in the last chapter that one could read Heidegger's appeals to essence as the infinite task of questioning our assumptions.²⁸ This is a generous reading of 'essential' truth, supported by Heidegger's repudiation of eternal absolutes, and his appeals to "the 'quiet power' ...of the possible."²⁹ Nevertheless, it is also the case, for Heidegger, that essence entails appeals to national destiny, and to the strife implied by polemical decision.³⁰

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei has argued that this onto-historical dimension of Heidegger is "belligerent" and "totalizing."³¹ And yet, as she brilliantly contests:

Poetic language indeed requires a special relation to truth as withdrawing disclosure; but errancy need not be inevitable and disclosure need not be confounded with fate. Phenomenological insight into the nature of poetic language as disclosure discords significantly with the notions of decision and *Schicksal*, both of which instigate a 'gathering' of what is disclosed in fact more characteristic of the totalization of technological revealing. If [technology] demands a revealing that is total and exhaustive, poetic language grants that things are brought into presence without demanding that they be fully present.³²

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1990), 5-13. Though, the language of being struck by a revelation and existing in the historical unveiling of a destiny is evidenced previously in Heidegger's description of faith. (Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," *Pathmarks*, 44-45.)

²⁸ As Ziarek notes, "It is perhaps high time to recognize that Heidegger's use of *Wesen* places at least as much emphasis on coming into one's own as on its character of an event, an occurrence, never finalized or complete. As such, it not only does not smack of 'essentialism,' but, conversely, exposes the ungrounding (*Abgrund*) of any essentiality. What matters for our discussion here is that the comportment toward the other Heidegger outlines never coalesces into an essence but in fact puts in question any desire or illusion of it." (Ziarek, *Inflected Language*, 57.) One could read Tillich's language of essence similarly. The essential, the unambiguous, is only intimated when exposing the demonic eradication of ambiguity.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" *Pathmarks*, trans. Frank A Capuzzi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 242.

³⁰ During his lectures as Rectorate (secured by his affiliation with the Nazi Party), Heidegger discusses essence in more polemical language—as a struggle against the Apollonian or Dionysian powers, or as the struggle of a being as it comes to be, against an enemy of Dasein. (Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 72-75).

³¹ Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger*, 50-51.

³² *Ibid.*, 58.

One could argue that Heidegger's views of destiny (*Schicksal*) and decision are merely preparative and provisional, as much entangled with absence (what has been and is coming toward us) as any demand of presence.³³ Gosetti-Ferencei acknowledges this insofar as destiny founds the truth of Being—a truth that is as much sent through history as it is discovered in erring.³⁴

In speaking of founding an essential origin, then, Heidegger urges thinkers to attend the other beginning, the otherwise than metaphysics. In doing so, he grants an intimacy between history and Being as appropriative event (*Ereignis*)—rather than a leveling of all objects into fodder for a historical subject.³⁵ The destiny of a thinker, in this sense, would be less tied to politicized concepts of historical essence³⁶ and more the unfolding relation to Being as *Gelassenheit*. Indeed, in his “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” Heidegger associates thinking with an embrace of “essence in a destinal manner in each case. To embrace a ‘thing’ or a ‘person’ in their essence means to love them, to favor them....[to] let it be.”³⁷ But it is precisely this letting-be (*Gelassenheit*) that Gosetti-Ferencei ties with Heidegger's poetic-phenomenological strand, and adamantly not his onto-historical one.

³³ One could also note how the young Heidegger critiqued the “modern ‘ego-metaphysics’ and ‘technology,’ for which, as for eschatological religious speculation, being stands over against an autonomous ego as the *Reich* of a homogenous presence-before-the-hand that is constantly available, calculable, and controllable.” (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 240-241.)

³⁴ Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger*, 52-60.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Event*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³⁶ Though one can easily find moments when Heidegger's ‘poetized thinking’ is riddled with an ontology of the German essence. James Phillips, *Heidegger's Volk: Between National Socialism and Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” *Pathmarks*, 241.

The tension remains between the thinker's destiny as gathering (*logos*)³⁸ and letting-lie (*legein*).³⁹ Heidegger later advocates the destinal *logos* as a way of 'letting' that avoids history as causality.⁴⁰ Yet, Gosetti-Ferencei argues that his earliest depictions of destiny evoke violence and suffering.⁴¹ The occasional fusion of the onto-historical and the poetico-phenomenological may prove particularly problematic for theologians reading Heidegger. Decision, fate, and waiting in readied distress appear not only in Heidegger's onto-poetics of the 1930s with regard to the destiny of the German people, but also in his compelling depictions of Christian eschatology.⁴² As discussed in the previous chapter, notions of originary time, resolute openness, and uncertainty appear in his readings of *Thessalonians*, before surfacing in his readings of Hölderlin.⁴³ This is not to say that Heidegger imported Christian facticity directly into his philosophical works—as if he were covertly occupied with theology.⁴⁴ However, to hear resonances between his phenomenology of early Christian life and the poet's waiting upon the holy, is to suggest poetic thinking as a cautiously cultivated resource for religious life.

³⁸ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 165-168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁰ "But the fateful character of being destined to such thinking, and thus that destiny itself, will never enter our horizon so long as we conceive the historic from the start only as an occurrence, and occurrence as a causal chain of events. Nor will it do to divide the occurrences so conceived into those whose causal chain is transparent and comprehensible, and others that remain incomprehensible and opaque, what we normally call 'fate.'" (*Ibid.*, 165.) It is as if thinking must function between what is too present and what is considered too absent—in this allusive mode. Allusive thinking is most capable of remaining open to the claims of the world, and its history, without making claims about world history in "quick and easy" appeals to universality. (*Ibid.*, 166.)

⁴¹ Heidegger, "Germania" and "The Rhine," 60-61.

⁴² This point is not lost on Gosetti-Ferencei as she helped to translate Heidegger's *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 109-111.

⁴⁴ Though, given Heidegger's theological training, I assume that poetized thinking is as much a possibility for theology as it is for philosophy. (Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language: Between a Japanese and an Inquirer," *On the Way to Language*, 9-10.)

No doubt Heidegger personally failed the phenomenological project of upending popular opinion, exposing the prejudices of theory, or practicing the *gelassenheit* of thought. One may decide, with Levinas, that Heideggerian phenomenology as a fundamental ontology cannot help but foreclose a certain ethical relation. In avoiding an ad hominem path—necessary as it is in judging the case of Heidegger’s philosophy—I want to consider the possibility of a Heideggerian poetics that provides resources against both ontotheology and ontohistorical politics, even if Heidegger failed in the latter.

The *allusio* of Heidegger’s poet, as I employ it (a playing-towards-alterity), is less about the historical struggle of a people as they welcome the uncanny destiny of their Being. It rather concerns—and this, too, is found in Heidegger—the possibility of remaining in the between, in the clearing opened by Being as unconcealment and concealment, presence and withdrawal. This strain of Heidegger’s thinking emphasizes the capacity to let beings appear, while respecting their elusive quality from within the constraints of existence. Insofar as Heidegger’s ‘soundings’ of the poet’s holy reflect a thinking that neither theorizes about God nor Being, he affords a means for resisting thought’s tendency toward calculation or its quest for satisfaction. The poet’s uncanny place, between the thinkers and the gods, allows his naming of the holy to be significant to the thinking of Being, but also to the language of God.⁴⁵

Because the poet remains in this threshold, not unlike the Christian caught in eschatological waiting, poetized thinking is less susceptible to a totalized gathering of concepts. It is rather a negotiation of hints: a relation to Being that admits its own inadequacies through the prophetic attempts it suffers to speak. In a sense, the poet

⁴⁵ “The thinker says Being. The poet names the holy.” (Heidegger, “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” *Pathmarks*, 237).

experiences what Kierkegaard calls the ‘persecuted truth’⁴⁶—a truth that cannot be absolute because it arrives in limitation, ambiguity, humility.⁴⁷ Such an understanding of truth leaves to thought, and language, the task of the poet: to “point to”⁴⁸ the trace of what withdraws in appearing, to open the space of allusion that elusion might be preserved in its ab-solution. In order to explore the allusive structure in Heidegger’s poetics,⁴⁹ we must examine the poet’s vocation as intermediary, and the holy as a spacing-placing medium. This will prepare us not only to think the possibilities for language opened by this notion of the holy, but also to examine, in the next chapter, the implications of the poet’s gods for the thinker’s godlessness.⁵⁰

In his readings of Hölderlin, Heidegger describes an alternative to calculating the truth of Being. He does so by taking hints from the poet’s relation to language, as it

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Proper Names*, 77. See also, Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 67.

⁴⁷ “Plato, however, in that famous passage [in *The Republic* where he describes the *hypothesis*, the underlying foundation], sees something which every thinker has to see afresh each time, else he is not a thinker: that everything that lies before us is ambiguous.” (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 201.) This is not only because phenomena can be variously interpreted, and those interpretations deconstructed, but also because even propositional language cannot be unequivocal. Heidegger displays this in the proposition “God is the Absolute” (Ibid., 156). Though this proposition can be taken as absolute, if accepted by an unconditional thinking of faith, it is nevertheless not absolute insofar as it is in language. (Ibid., 165.)

⁴⁸ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 28-29.

⁴⁹ Heidegger’s understanding of signification supports his reading of the poet’s task as allusive. As Van Buren reminds, for Heidegger signification “ap-points, as-signs, de-signates, that is, refers a to-hand thing to that with which it is contextually involved.... There are no nonrelational substances in the world—only insubstantial contextualized sites of an ecstatic worlding, signifying, and referral that is simultaneously deferral into a futural for-which that never gets completely fulfilled.” (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 259-260.) See also Van Buren’s mention of Heidegger’s view that things “poin[t] into the absence of the horizontal contexts of other things and persons.... Given the inexhaustible futurity of things their referral is a constant deferral” (Ibid., 300).

⁵⁰ I will address these elements, less in a linear, cause-effect outline, more as they overlap and encircle one another. It is difficult to ignore the implications for the holy as medium, in the mediating images of the poet; and necessarily more difficult to ignore the ways in which mediation conveys provisionality, relationship, and experiential knowledge for the thinker.

struggles to say “the holy.”⁵¹ The truth of Being, written in the poetic domain of the holy, demands neither the capacity to impose a universal frame of essence,⁵² nor the desire to set things apart in a differentiation without relation.⁵³ Thus the poet, unlike certain calculative thinkers, accepts (in joyful mourning)⁵⁴ the mediation of the concrete, and the absence that such manifestation entails.⁵⁵ Because the poet occupies a language that ascribes to neither univocal nor equivocal notions of truth, he understands Being in relation to both what it *is not at present* (temporal absence), and what it *is not in its singular presence* (its difference). In short, the poet has an allusive understanding of language, and an impoverished notion of truth.⁵⁶ The poet, like Diotima’s erotic spirit, senses both the excess and withholding⁵⁷ of reality as it resists conceptual calculation. This understanding of reality—as both an infinite greeting and perpetual reserve⁵⁸—applies not only to the poet’s characterization of nature (*physis*),⁵⁹ but also the appearing of truth as beauty.⁶⁰

⁵¹ “But now day breaks! I awaited and saw it come,/ And what I saw, may the holy be my word.” (Hölderlin, quoted in Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday...,” *Elucidations*, 80.)

⁵² Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” *Elucidations*, 53.

⁵³ The Spirit of holiness, like essential thinking, sets apart everything while letting them belong together. (Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 82.)

⁵⁴ Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 44.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 83-84.

⁵⁶ This is to say that, for the poet, truth cannot be compulsory, but must emerge as what secures openings to what is not restricted to need (i.e.: what cannot be judged in terms of use). (Heidegger, “Poverty,” *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking*, 6-7.)

⁵⁷ That is, the erotic spirit, as born from resource and deprivation, suggests an understanding of reality that would lean too heavily on adequation. Plato, *The Symposium*, tr. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1989), 203B-204B.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 44-45.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 74-79.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 79.

The poet, as signified by Hölderlin, reminds that we are a conversation: poised, like language itself, between an intimation of oneness and variability.⁶¹ The poet is thus suspended—like an incomplete translation of the most high god into ordinary words. In this suspension, he enacts the “primal event” of language: open to the world, responsibility, confusion, decay, and even divinity.⁶² In his efforts to translate reality, the poet not only reminds us of the joy of the world’s mediation (—what wonder, that things are!); he also recognizes that words qua mediations can only touch, not possess definitively, their object. For the poet, the notion of ‘object’ is even subverted: “It is not we who have language; rather language has us, in a certain way.”⁶³ Poetry, therefore, is neither self-expression nor possession of the other, but the encounter with something that wishes to express itself through us. Poetry recalls us to what resists language, and yet demands a shelter therein.

Fittingly, Heidegger writes of the poem, and the poet, as openings, as incisions that prepare the possibility of deciding (distinguishing, thinking difference). This depiction privileges the opening function of thought, rather than the grasping of objectification. Poetry creates an opening wholly unlike the empty formalism of concepts. Neither does its opening simply hollow out hearers like a “moral rebuke,” or an episode of iconoclastic self-reflection.⁶⁴ So how exactly does the poet exemplify this quality of poetry—its acceptance of the task of mediation, its reception of the concrete as present-

⁶¹ Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” *Elucidations*, 57.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶³ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

absent, its calling us and resisting our grip? And how does the poet, in turn, reflect the holy as open medium?

Heidegger offers three profound images of the poet as mediator: (1) a demigod caught between the homeland of the historical people, and the homecoming of the absent gods, (2) a river navigating its journey of departure from the source in ongoing relation to the origin, and (3) a cloud that translucently relays and delays illumination.⁶⁵ The poet *is* these tensions of “becoming homely in being unhomely.”⁶⁶ He is not merely a symbol of this difficult journey—that is, if ‘symbol’ is a means for dismissing the sensuous by a nebulous appeal to the super-sensuous.⁶⁷ The poet is a mediating sign in his ability to inhabit one dimension while hailing multiple others.⁶⁸ If the calculative thinker levels, the poetizing thinker accentuates dimensionality.⁶⁹ Unlike the “thinking that merely represents—that is, explains,” poetized thought attends what it cannot produce. The poet marvels in the fact that things appear, while warning that their appearance demands human vigilance.

⁶⁵ I trust this latter image—of the cloud—to the, no doubt, more refined readings of Andrew Mitchell. Andrew Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁶⁶ “Had we not ventured, in our preceding remarks, to attempt to clarify in general that realm to which the essence of the river belongs; and were it not for our now keeping strictly in view the fact the rivers in their journeying bring about a becoming homely in being unhomely; were it not for our giving thought to the fact that this journey’s attainment of the homely locality and its hearth is the poetizing of that which is properly to be poetized; were it not for our knowing that the poets, as the demigods who are above human beings and beneath the gods, between the two, must name the holy for both—were it not for all this, then we would now stand at a loss without any clue when faced with these ‘lines.’” (Heidegger, *The Ister*, 148.)

⁶⁷ See his diatribe against symbolism as the precarious link between sensation and the suprasensible. He thinks the symbol should not be the sole mediator between two disparate realms. Heidegger would rather think the poet, from within the mediation of nature, as the sign pointing toward a mediating (impure presencing) of holiness. (Ibid., 16.)

⁶⁸ In this way, he is more akin to Tillich’s understanding of symbol, to be discussed below.

⁶⁹ This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Heidegger’s concept of the fourfold as it informs what others would regard as a mere jug. Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 163-180.

The poet's thinking is response to and recollection of a call not its own, suspended between the nearness and remoteness of whatever presences itself.⁷⁰ The depiction of the poet as the "between,"⁷¹ arrives in Heidegger's 1934-35 lecture, *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine."* Here, the poet is not unlike the demigod, caught between humanity and the gods who have passed. Like the demigod, the poet "point[s] in the direction of the gods."⁷² But by pointing, the poet's words are not quite adequate to the mystery of the "over beyond" of the gods; they hit just under, resonating somewhere over humans.⁷³ The poet tries to think the essence of the demigod, this between; but he can only think the essence in denying it as a thought object. The poet comes to know the essence of the demigod by taking on, in a sense, its mode of existence. By assuming the position of the demi-god, the poet reverses the traditional question of essence: he becomes the object of the gods' questioning in his orientation toward them. Because the poet is in the grip of the gods, he never "attain[s] the gods themselves."⁷⁴ The poet merely creates an opening that makes possible the distinction between humans and gods. Heidegger claims that this thinking "founds and breaks open the realm of beyng in general."⁷⁵ Since beyng and the holy are variously construed as the beginning of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 179.

⁷¹ Though Heidegger had previously characterized Dasein, as care, as this "between" in *Being and Time*, significantly the Dasein of the poet is between humanity and divinity, not birth and death. (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 426-427.)

⁷² Ibid., 150.

⁷³ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 151.

non-metaphysical thinking, when the poet founds beyng, he is also breaking open the medium of the holy.⁷⁶

To confirm this construal, one need only look to Heidegger's 1949 "Letter on 'Humanism.'" Heidegger claims that the letter carries out a direction taken in 1936, one year after his "*Germania*" and "*The Rhine*" lectures.⁷⁷ Though this letter privileges the foundational thinking of the truth of Being so that the "essence of the holy can be thought," it does not mandate that one realm must be founded before the other.⁷⁸ Rather, if one wants to be able to think the nearness or withdrawal of the god, one must be able to think of the holy as, not unlike Being, a clearing that permits concealment and sheltering.⁷⁹ To think the holy, is to dwell in Being's terms: (1) its "strict mediatedness,"⁸⁰ which prevents any pretension to immediate access to the gods, and (2) its ethos of hospitality. Regarding the former, holiness comes to mean not simply 'setting things apart' but rather letting them appear in their distinction, and preserving their alterity. The latter point—this 'ethos' of hospitality—appears in Heidegger's reading of Heraclitus in "The Letter on 'Humanism.'" Far from a traditional basis for ethics,⁸¹ holiness entails inviting god into the ordinary, into the center of one's livelihood, by

⁷⁶ In *The Event*, Heidegger refutes the primordiality of the holy as the "inceptual beginning." (Heidegger, *The Event*, 255-256). Thus he even claims that the thinking of the history of beyng is prior to poetizing (Ibid., 261).

⁷⁷ Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism.'" *Pathmarks*, 239.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 267. Indeed, elsewhere the holy is most original, "always former." (Heidegger, "As When on a Holiday," *Elucidations*, 85.)

⁷⁹ Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism.'" *Pathmarks*, 267.

⁸⁰ Heidegger, "As When on a Holiday," *Elucidations*, 84.

⁸¹ For example, he asserts that the "tragedies of Sophocles...preserve the *ethos* in their sayings more primordially than Aristotle's lectures on 'ethics.'" (Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" *Pathmarks*, 269.)

welcoming “foreign visitors.”⁸² Heidegger claims that one must return to a story about Heraclitus in order to understand ethics as being human “in the nearness of god.”⁸³ The poetic account of the philosopher welcoming “foreign visitors” to come sit at his hearth is authoritative in its conclusion: “here too the gods are present.”⁸⁴ Heidegger suggests that the abode (*ethos*) of the poetizing thinker is not a totalizing space, but a home within which the gods and the stranger may be welcomed. Thus not even the home is homelike. It opens to receive the foreign, not to trap, but to warm and welcome the visitor.

To return then, from this later commentary, to the traveller in Hölderlin’s poem, “The Rhine,” we see how Heidegger already reads the poet as torn between the desire for what remains foreign, and the pull toward home.⁸⁵ A parallel runs here between the foreign land and the alterity of the gods, between the homeland and the historical people, not quite capable of being ‘overhumans.’ As the intersection of these parallels, the poet “occupies the threshold of the Earth as homeland.”⁸⁶ Only from this threshold can the poet think, and assume proximity, to the threshold beings—the demigods. It is essential that the poet remain here, not only to welcome the gods in their return, but also to remain exposed to their calling. From within this threshold, the poet becomes attuned to the

⁸² Ibid., 270.

⁸³ Ibid., 269.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁸⁵ Richard Kearney thus summarizes Heidegger’s poetics as “mak[ing] us strangers to the earth so that we may dwell more sacramentally upon it. For, as Hölderlin shows, unless we first experience the uncanny sense of homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*), we cannot begin the journey of homecoming (*Heimkommen*); a journey that is never a return to a fixed origin (*Heimat*) but a turn toward a home always to come (*Heimkunft* as *Ankunft*). Without sundering, no arrival. Without dispossession no return. In this sense, the *ana* of anatheism may be read as a departure as much as a repetition, an odyssey that takes us away from home and back again. The shortest route from wonder to wonder is loss.” Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 13.

⁸⁶ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 155.

“shadows of those who have once been.”⁸⁷ It is as if he must partially relinquish being-at-home in order to think in a way less concerned with fully present objects; he must “thin[k] out beyond” what is familiar and secure in order to intimate the gods.⁸⁸ Indeed, the gods of the poet are fled gods—weak as “wisps,” and veiled.⁸⁹ And yet the gods’ weakness is not their impotency; for this would provide the security of atheism. The gods’ absence is palpable; their distance is too near, like a violent thunderstorm.⁹⁰ The poet’s task is to remain exposed, “with bared head,”⁹¹ to the “beckonings”⁹² of the gods, and to translate these beckonings—“making manifest the distance that still prevails in this felicitous proximity”—into words for the people. The poet’s demigod status is not glorious; it is painful endurance. In his struggling receptivity of the gods, the threshold prevents him from rendering holiness as too present, or totally absent. This is not only the ambiguous presence-absence that Heidegger grants temporal Dasein;⁹³ for the poet, the gods’ presence-absence intensifies the ambiguity of existence. This intensification overwhelms language. And yet, the poet wrestles the unsayable into the poetized saying-showing.⁹⁴ In short, the poet names, and in so doing opens the possibility of calling: of reaching toward, of welcoming, the gods.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁹¹ Ibid., 30. One thinks of Martin Luther’s decision to become a monk in the lightning storm.

⁹² Ibid., 31.

⁹³ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁴ “This [dwelling near to the origin] neither makes the origin nor does it merely discover it like something present-at-hand, and so it must hold onto this firmness in such a way that it shows the origin in its self-securing, and in its letting-flow-forth. The showing brings what is shown near, and yet keeps it distant. The showing only draws near to what is shown. The more essential the distance which is maintained in this drawing near, all the nearer is the showing to what is shown....Accordingly, founding is what remains, which approaches the origin and it endures because, as the shy approach to the source, it

But the poet names (calls) only insofar as he is a “sign.” He is an allusion, pointing to what is not yet. And in so pointing, he provides not only an orientation, but also an abode for reception. The poet can only allude to the god’s traces; and in turn the gods’ beckonings mark the poet’s language as allusive. His words are not the total presence, or representation, of the gods, but an appeal to the “withdrawing [that] is not nothing.”⁹⁶ Thus, Heidegger defines poetizing as “a telling in the manner of a making manifest that points”⁹⁷ to what *is not* but *may have been*, what must be remembered, and *what may be coming*.⁹⁸ Because “being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present at hand, they must be freely created, posited, and bestowed,” in the poet’s founding names.⁹⁹ In its founding, poetizing language is as renunciative as it receptive. In this sense, poetry reminds humans that they “are [to be] a conversation,” which, for Heidegger, is language’s essence.¹⁰⁰

Even if language would seem a blasphemy—to place the holy in words—Heidegger calls it a necessary protection.¹⁰¹ Language’s protection not only preserves the poet against the gods’ “lightning flash” language, it holds open the channel by which the

finds it difficult to leave this place of nearness. What this founding, as a remaining which shows, finds is itself. What remains here is the remaining. What is thus founded the poet can call *something remaining*.” (Martin Heidegger, “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 168.)

⁹⁵ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 122-124.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁷ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 30.

⁹⁸ Heidegger observes a quasi presence of the gods marked by absence, “In being absent, they come to presence precisely in the absence of that which has been. That which has been and its having-been is something fundamentally different in principle from that which is past and its being past.” (*Ibid.*, 98.)

⁹⁹ Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” *Elucidations*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

gods can communicate with beings. The poet, who suffers with the demigod,¹⁰² can neither shirk beings nor shirk the gods in his exposure to Beyng; the gods need his words. In his lecture on “Germania” and “The Rhine,” Heidegger quotes another Hölderlin “river poem,” “The Ister,” wherein the poet’s words are needed that the gods might “feel themselves warm by one another.”¹⁰³ Like a river that passively receives and reflects, the poet must be a “sign...plain and simple”:

...so that sun
 And moon may be borne in the mind, inseparable,
 And pass on, day and night too, and
 The heavenly feel themselves warm by one another.
 Whence those ones too
 Are the joy of the Highest. For how else would he
 Descend?

The poet, like the river, must be the signifying medium of paradoxical belonging¹⁰⁴—the gathering of oppositions, that he might reflect the paradox of the Highest’s descent.¹⁰⁵ Just as the water reflects the light of the sun and moon, receiving the impressions of day and night,¹⁰⁶ the poet must say-show the strange touch intensified by distance, as it reflects the belonging together of difference. In this way, the poet-river-demigod is not unlike the ‘holy’ he strives to enunciate. In Heidegger’s readings of Hölderlin, the holy is often characterized as the possibility of mediation: the “immediate”

¹⁰² Ibid, 165.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 132.

¹⁰⁴ The poet is to initiate the “wedding day” that he sees coming; for this “encounter of those men and gods,” is the very opening of the holy in that they birth rivers, demigods, and the pointing poets. (Heidegger, “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 127.)

¹⁰⁵ See also Heidegger’s explication of the interdependency of the crude and the pure, in his reading of Hölderlin’s “The Titans.” (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 194-195.)

¹⁰⁶ Heidegger elsewhere describes day and night in terms of the presence and absence of the gods. For example, the “world’s night,” in which the gods are felt in their absence, demands the poet. (Heidegger, “What are Poets For?” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 87-139.)

as the “mediatedness of the mediated”;¹⁰⁷ the correction to any supposed “immediate intrusion of the mediated”;¹⁰⁸ the very opening that receives, in thinking, the possibility of “separating” and “uniting” everything;¹⁰⁹ even the “the abiding that bestows an abode as the temporal-spatial playing field of Dasein.”¹¹⁰ It is as if the poet’s renunciation, his opening as he travels toward the uncanny, founds the opening in which the holy might be received by historical Dasein.¹¹¹ The holy is less a beyond-to-existence, but the beyond of a medium within existence.

In his 1942 lecture on “The Ister,” Heidegger further develops the poet as a demigod, as a medium of holiness, as a river, in the language of hospitality to the foreign. Like the Ister river, the poet should “acknowledge the foreigner in his foreignness...to let the foreigner be the one he is.”¹¹² Like the river that travels from the origin, while remaining mingled with its source, the poet welcomes the uncanny in “a relation to the foreign [that] is never a mere taking over of the Other.”¹¹³ The poet’s vocation is to express the relation of “becoming homely in terms of being unhomely.”¹¹⁴ As Heidegger suggests in his reading of Heraclitus’ hearth, the poet qua river welcomes the “foreign

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 84.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Heidegger, *The Event*, 261.

¹¹¹ The poet is also the river in that “both belong in their essence to the founding of dwelling”: “Their essence is to inhabit and sustain the middle of beyng between gods and humans, that middle in which and for which the whole of beings opens itself up.” (Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 234.)

¹¹² Heidegger, *The Ister*, 141.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

[that] is already present as a guest at its source.”¹¹⁵ Thus holiness—the uncanny at the ordinary hearth¹¹⁶—must become an opening that is impure, ready to receive alterity without consuming it.

The hint structure that Heidegger elucidates, with regard to Hölderlin’s conception of the holy, prevents a simple intermediary. There is an inherent delay that Heidegger describes in extending the medium of the holy as the distance that makes near. Divinities are messengers for the godhood—that is, the form of the gods which demands the holy’s medium. Thus, Heidegger’s writings on Hölderlin are rife with impurities: there is no pure present isolated from a pure past and pure future; there is no presencing that is not somehow a withholding—an absencing, or “concealed reserving.”¹¹⁷ Presence as remaining, as a trace of ‘that which has been’ operates within the position of the cloud mentioned in Hölderlin’s “Homecoming”: it partly obstructs (withholds), partly mediates (lets shine). If time and presence are construed as trace or even translucency, it is because the poet has instructed the thinker thus. The poet is the model of one who “remains, and himself brings the trace of the/ gods that have fled...”¹¹⁸ If we are to understand how the uncanny can ‘belong’ to the origin in its exile or departure from the origin, it is through this cloud. In Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin’s “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” the cloud alludes to gaiety.¹¹⁹ And in this reading, gaiety is another name for the holy play. The cloud between the heights dwells in the “play of holy rays”: the gaiety that

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 145. Though Heidegger is talking about the German encounter with the foreign fire of the Greek gods, we might benefit from a little abstraction here—insofar as it removes nationalistic biases.

¹¹⁶ As Simone Weil points out, this figure of the hearth also appears in Philolaus’ “‘first harmonized entity, the One, which is in the centre of the sphere... The One is the source of all things’” by which we can think separate things together in their distinction. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 458-9.)

¹¹⁷ Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 43.

¹¹⁸ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 172.

¹¹⁹ Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 37.

“preserves and holds everything within what is safe and sound.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, the cloud resembles Hölderlin’s exilic demigod: just as the cloud passes on gaiety’s light to the lightless depths, the poet-demigod “brings the trace of the flown gods” to the godless dark.¹²¹ But the poet can open, like light, if he dwells within and *is* the between.¹²²

The poet’s vocation is to “b[e] in the middle” so that the “sons of earth drink/ Without danger heavenly fire.”¹²³ It is as if the poets have found a way to shelter the fire, indeed, to communicate the fire as the condition for sheltering. The poet brings fiery light to humans like Prometheus, but in a way that veils, shades, the gods’ mystery. Because poets do not aspire to be as gods, but occupy the between, they do not fall prey to human conceit. Unlike the “Titan” who coerces heaven, or those who “make a/ Vile trade of it, exploiting the Spirit,” the poet “undaunted...remains/ Alone with God...and needs no weapon and no wile.”¹²⁴ The poet does not force the divine’s deprivation, “spen[ding]/ In trifling waste” or “cheaply us[ing]” “all the powers of heaven.”¹²⁵ Rather, the poet exhibits another deprivation in acknowledged lack: an openness giving thanks, even as he struggles to produce an echo’s song.¹²⁶

Poetic saying is “scarcely” being allowed to “unveil”¹²⁷ the “composed mystery” of this holy fire; and yet, the poet must create a revealing veil.¹²⁸ Heidegger claims that

¹²⁰ Ibid., 37

¹²¹ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 172.

¹²² Insofar as to be is to be within, these terms are inseparable.

¹²³ Ibid., 309, 311.

¹²⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press Poetry 2004): 235-237.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 233, 235, 237.

¹²⁷ Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 235.

¹²⁸ Heidegger, “Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 48.

without this poetic saying—which preserves the mystery through mediation—we would have two alternatives: the confusing “darkness of the holy wilderness”¹²⁹ or the consuming, “searing excess of the holy fire.”¹³⁰ The poet mediates each: journeying through the holiness of exile, while preserving the fire from his distant hearth.¹³¹ By poetizing the hearth (the moments when the uncanny encounters beings-at-home), the poet makes the holy known to both humans and gods. He allows the gods to warm themselves in his words, such that the fire of the hearth is not for humans alone.¹³² As we will see in the next chapter, Heidegger concludes: if thought and language are to take on this hospitality—this abode where the familiar and uncanny can meet without eradicating one another—they must become more like love.¹³³ If thinking accepts the poet’s “law” of “strict mediatedness,” and the poet’s task of founding an “embrac[ing]” space, he must be open to the interdependency, the intimacy, of the infinite in everything finite.¹³⁴

II. SIMONE WEIL: THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF METAXU

For Heidegger, the poet’s holiness is instrumental in founding a medium of “richer relation[s]”¹³⁵ between earth and heaven, awaited gods and exposed humans, infinite possibilities and the constraints of resolution. This is no less the case for Simone

¹²⁹ Heidegger, “‘Germania’ and ‘The Rhine,’” 232. Elsewhere, he calls this holy wilderness “nature” and joins it with “primeval confusion” (Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 85). Without the poet, nature could not be ablaze with the brightness of holy fire; without the poet, the holy fire could not have a medium to illuminate, or a means to brighten, nature.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³¹ Like the river, the poet bears the locality of the hearth, the home, in his journeying. (Heidegger, *The Ister*, 148)

¹³² *Ibid.*, 154.

¹³³ Heidegger, “As When on a Holiday,” *Elucidations*, 90-91.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³⁵ Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” *Elucidations*, 187.

Weil. She, too, claims that we should take our hints of holiness from the openings that artists both create and *are*.¹³⁶ And yet, significantly, she would add to these mediators the incarnational God. Unlike Heidegger, Weil does not remain abstract about demigods; Christ remains, for her, a singular figure of holiness. Weil's interpretation of Christ not only involves the historical Jesus, but also the paradox of incarnation,¹³⁷ and thus of creation,¹³⁸ of artwork,¹³⁹ of sacraments,¹⁴⁰ and crucifixion.¹⁴¹ In each case the infinite suffers itself to become finite, while yet pointing toward what it cannot contain.¹⁴² Thus the God-man not only exemplifies the allusive relation of opposites (both as contradiction and analogy)¹⁴³ in sacrificial opening, but also in beauty. In the case of the artist, the poet, Christ, the beautiful, and the suffering that opens compassion, Weil struggles to articulate the holiness of intermediaries, of the *metaxu*. Again, this holiness cannot be that of illusory separation—the false detachment of indifference, or the false reverence of ideological idolatry. Rather, holiness lies somewhere between these forms of distance; for to think God is to permit the “infinite distance and infinite nearness of God.”¹⁴⁴ To hold both ideas in mind is to approach the mystery of incarnation. It is also to hold open the

¹³⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 422.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴² “Metaxu. Every representation which draws us toward the non-representable. Need for metaxu in order to prevent us from seizing hold of nothingness instead of full being.” (*Ibid.*, 233.)

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 404. One is reminded of Heidegger's description of Being as the “composed mystery of the reserving nearness.” (Heidegger, “Homecoming/To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 48.)

channels through which divinity can reach humanity, through which humans can become more divine.

For Weil, we can only encounter divinity, and think upon it without violation, if we focus on “the link supplied by [the] relation” of “two truths conceived simultaneously.”¹⁴⁵ Weil calls this relation the *metaxu*; and thus it is not simply a correlation, but the relation that permits the distance of mediation. To think upon the holy, is to utilize the distinctions it imposes, not as license for violence, but as the opening of communication:

Let us imagine two prisoners, in neighboring cells, who communicate by means of taps on the wall. The wall is what separates them, but it is also what enables them to communicate. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.¹⁴⁶

The *metaxu* relationship is “the negation of the absolute” insofar as it employs difference as mediation. But it is also what points to the absolute as beyond negation.¹⁴⁷ In order to prepare for this understanding, traced in the next chapter, we will look closer at the components of *metaxu*: thinking God through beauty (as the mediating incarnation of the good) and suffering (as the felt separation that permits relation to God).

In Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin’s “Remembrance,” we have one possible ligament between beauty and suffering. The poet articulates beauty as Being, “the original unifying One,”¹⁴⁸ but only insofar as he engages in a “winged war” against contrary winds.¹⁴⁹ The poet must venture into the foreign, and encounter its difference

¹⁴⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 341.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 156.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

through deprivation, in order to speak of peace.¹⁵⁰ While this suffering is said to open the poet, and bring him into the “open realm” of the holy,¹⁵¹ there is no denying that, for Heidegger, the poet’s greeting of the holy entails receiving the “destiny of Germany’s future history.”¹⁵² Weil would perhaps resonate with the capacity of the holy—whether as beauty or kenotic suffering—to deprive us of definitive consolation.¹⁵³ She, like Hölderlin, would speak of the never finished “striving” that perpetuates “wakefulness,”¹⁵⁴ and even makes possible our ability to read the signs of God.¹⁵⁵ However, there is no doubt that Weil’s poet produces beauty in a way more akin to ethical attention than nationalistic reception.¹⁵⁶ She would criticize Heidegger for “leap[ing] over the metaxu”¹⁵⁷ of nationality. He forgets that history should be the means of resisting ideological appeals to national destiny. Even the “native land”¹⁵⁸ should be a separation and a link: a home that shows us what travelers we must be. Heidegger’s poet, as the mediating between, must place his critique on Heidegger’s profoundly unethical tendencies as “statesman.”¹⁵⁹ It is the poet, Weil insists, who attends not only the beauty of existence, but necessarily the concreteness of others’ need:

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 154-156.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁵² Ibid., 171.

¹⁵³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 211.

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger, “Remembrance,” *Elucidations*, 156, 158.

¹⁵⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 449.

¹⁵⁶ Indeed, Weil can only think of the nation, or the city, as a metaxu: a “feeling of being at home” that must uproot, must make one capable of “being at home in exile.” (Ibid., 298.)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 298.

¹⁵⁹ One of the gravest errors of Heidegger’s thought may be that he saw himself in the role of the poet, but in a demonically distorted manner. In his position as Rector at the University of Freiburg, Heidegger claimed not the threshold between the people and the gods, but the threshold between the Nazi Party and the academy. He dangerously linked the role of the poet with the thinker and the statesman in the

The poet produces beauty by fixing his attention on something real. The act of love is produced in the same way. To know that this man, who is cold and hungry, really exists as much as I do myself, and is really cold and hungry—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.¹⁶⁰

Attention to concreteness: this the poet fixated upon beauty, and the compassionate attending pain, must suffer together. Attention is a prerequisite to acts of “truth, beauty, and goodness” because it does not leap over the metaxic structure of reality.¹⁶¹ Attention reads the world through the metaxu of the body, and treats the objects of its aim as metaxic: as both separate from and related to its experience. The metaxic thinker not only resembles the sensitivity of the poet to the world, but also the sensitivity of a vulnerable subject to the pain of other subjects. According to Weil, these carnal relations prepare us to approach the mysterious, metaxic structure of the incarnation. Christ, creation, and the crucifixion are one testament to the space opened when the infinite becomes finite: they are allusive structures that reveal and conceal God.

How might beauty and pain open thought, that we might think (and respect as unthinkable) the divine? Weil hints that the link between beauty and pain first came to her as a “poetical inclination”—an analogy borne of her experiences with migraines.¹⁶² The painful pressure of the sufferer, and the unspeakable awe of the observer halted before beauty: both decenter the ego’s capacity to will, to speak, to think. Indeed, a strange obedience occurs, linking compulsion to what is compelling. Pain and beauty

lectures given shortly after his years as Nazi appointed rector. (Heidegger, “*Germania*,” and “*The Rhine*,” 126-127.) It is worth noting that this link between the thinker, poet, and statesman is later modified by omission of the statesman, for example, in his 1944 lectures. Heidegger, *Introduction to Philosophy: Thinking and Poetizing*, trans. Phillip Jacques Braunstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 449.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 449.

¹⁶² Ibid., 318.

both open one's attention, applying it "at its fullest to the object."¹⁶³ In a counterintuitive way, the sufferer and the beholder of beauty become radically fixated without the fixity of attachment. Beauty and pain strip the self, not to a false nothingness, but to a helpful opening. They remind the ego that it is more akin to the metaxic medium of time-space: a domain whose distinction lies in its ability to receive what it is not.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, for Weil, the ego *is* only insofar as it admits that it is not God.¹⁶⁵

But the ego is not entirely bound to the logic of a 'zero sum game'—whereby God appears when I disappear. Weil does wish that she could get out of God's way, or dissipate the metaxu that she herself is between "God and the earth."¹⁶⁶ And yet, she knows that she can only disappear insofar as she abides by her metaxic logic: "Let the 'I' disappear in such a way that Christ, thanks to the intermediary formed by our soul and body, himself goes to the help of our neighbor."¹⁶⁷ Only that which in the ego prevents the soul and body from being intermediaries must disappear. The ego is born with a sense of false divinity, "to want to be divine as creatures."¹⁶⁸ And it can be rid of this false divinity only insofar as it participates in the divine as an intermediary. Weil's logic of necessary mediation supports her subversive notion of Christ as a "pure imitation."¹⁶⁹ Imitation typically implies impurity, a degraded copy that loses some of the original essence. Weil seems to suggest that only through mediations can we approach what is

¹⁶³ Ibid., 449.

¹⁶⁴ Weil meditates on this possibility through Plato's khora. (Ibid., 248.)

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 236.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 403.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 358.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 216-217.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 217.

pure. Purity entails eradicating false (violent) purity, not removing oneself from embodiment.

Embodiment provides a rule for thinking the metaxu; but not all attempts at mediation, particularly conceptual ones, resemble the body in its “purifactory power of the play of contraries.”¹⁷⁰ The aim of one’s thought—be it a neighbor, a painting, or Christ—loses its purity when it loses its porous, mediating capacity. When a thought (or its object) becomes a possession, clutched tightly, it devolves into illusion. In contrast, metaxic thinking prizes delineation not as grip points but as constraints that make meaning mobile. It conceives walls as openings.¹⁷¹ Thus, when Weil speaks of purity in the context of metaxu, she emphasizes that force is antithetical to this purity.¹⁷² Force does not accept limitation; but purity can only communicate itself through limitations. Force forges a false infinity that does not acknowledge its own interactions with finitude. However, metaxic thinking “tries to conceive the same thing, at the same time, as both infinite and finite.”¹⁷³ One must think God as sacramentally present (infinite in the finite) and apophatically resistant (the infinite beyond the finite).

And yet, even “the thought of God” must disappear if it “interpose[s] itself between us and other creatures”¹⁷⁴ It is not that God cannot be placed as a hermeneutic for the world, applied to interpret our sense of wonder and of holiness.¹⁷⁵ Rather, a concept of God that poses the logic of ‘God versus Creation’ must be renounced. God

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁷² Ibid., 457.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 462.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 358.

¹⁷⁵ In these senses, the idea of God is rightly held as a way to God, and “God himself,” who is a way. (Ibid., 457.)

cannot serve as an interpretive lens if thinking God entails ignoring creatures. This is not to say that God is totally present in creation. Weil's claim is stark: "It is impossible for God to be present in creation except in the form of absence."¹⁷⁶ God can be read in every manifestation, but only in the "relationship proper to each appearance. [Thus one must] know in what way each appearance is not God."¹⁷⁷ Given this apophatic sacramentality, God must be both "present and absent...in the soul"¹⁷⁸: absent insofar as God cannot be fully adequate to our representations and perceptions, and present insofar as we might act on God's behalf to manifest the good. Because God is "both present and absent in creation,"¹⁷⁹ and both linked to and separate from us, God speaks through the experiences of isolation (pain) and connectivity (beauty). God speaks in the silences that pain both induces and suffers; God is present in the beauty that intimates the absent Good. Because beauty, in its contradictions and allusive play, is irreducible, it begs (even begets) ongoing attention. Beauty, like the *gelassenheit* of phenomenology, cultivates our desire to let be. Even as it attracts us, it demands renunciation—that perhaps pain above all teaches us.

But what are the distinct roles of beauty and suffering in opening the ego to God?

Let us first approach what Weil means by suffering. Suffering, she writes, initiates "a loss of contact with reality," but it does not do so in the same way as the illusions of the imagination.¹⁸⁰ Instead, it wrenches us from an illusory notion of reality (presence of objects to our perceptual possession). From this displacement, one discovers

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 419.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 358.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 358.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

a hunger more real than the need for secured possession. For example, in suffering the loss of a loved one, one cannot simply long for the restoration from death. Rather, one must consider the “loss itself as an intermediary” for understanding the reality of absence. From the place of deprivation, one realizes that ‘what is real’ need not be what readily appears—be it a consolation, or a surrogate for the loss.¹⁸¹ “Pain is a metaxu,” and therefore it cannot be “leap[t] over”¹⁸² by ignoring loss or dismissing it as “providence.”¹⁸³ Like a sign, suffering is “born of this link”¹⁸⁴ between deprivation and palpability, between what is difficult to express and how it nonetheless presses upon us in concrete ways. In other words, “Affliction forces us to recognize as real that which we do not believe to be possible”; the real becomes not what is totally present, but what seems impossible, absent to proofs of actuality. As the awareness of impossibility, suffering is the school of detachment. When we become detached from the ego, we can be in contact with the reality of God’s absence as a manner of presence.¹⁸⁵ It is as if our misery, which reminds us of our finitude, is the very condition for understanding the infinitude of God.¹⁸⁶ It is not simply that suffering ‘puts us in our place;’ it renders us without place, without footing. Suffering opens us to the void that cannot be satisfied by imagination; it disinherits us of our idols. As Weil writes, “Affliction prevents us from eating of the tree

¹⁸¹ “To explain suffering is to console it; therefore it must not be explained.” (Ibid., 229.) One is reminded of Emmanuel Levinas’ acknowledgement that “The future can bring consolation or compensation to a subject who suffers in the present, but the very suffering of the present remains like a cry whose echo will resound forever in the eternity of spaces.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 91.

¹⁸² Weil, *Notebooks*, 22.

¹⁸³ Weil resists any theodicy of providence in connecting it with the “Great Beast” (Ibid., 380) and in opposition to “the purity of God’s love” (Ibid., 267). In general she resists any attempt to speak of God in terms of such calculations (Ibid., 150.)

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 240.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 236.

of life which would make false gods of us.”¹⁸⁷ Where there were once idols, and the sins of consolation,¹⁸⁸ affliction leaves only irreducible voids. “The acceptance of suffering is thus the acceptance of the void.”¹⁸⁹

Weil remains austere regarding the necessity of voids; however, she is not sadomasochistic with regard to suffering. Pain is instructive; but she knows that its voids can “exhaust” and even kill “certain parts of the soul.”¹⁹⁰ One must suffer a void, and endure the “feeling of impossibility,” that one might resist illusory consolations. However, for the voids in which no consolation should enter, there is yet a balm. Her suggested balm, in fact, can only be applied where there are voids: “Grace fills, but it can only enter where there is a void waiting to receive it, a void for whose creation it is itself responsible.”¹⁹¹ Grace both heals and is responsible for the feeling of impossibility. Indeed, grace seems to transfigure the impossible weight of suffering into an emptiness readied to receive abundance. It is for this reason that Weil links the impossible with both anguish and the good,¹⁹² and the irreducible with both suffering and beauty.¹⁹³ The experience of impossibility, in the allusive metaxu of beauty and of suffering, provides the “sole gateway leading toward God.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 257.

¹⁸⁸ “All sins are attempts to fill voids.” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 24.)

¹⁸⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 227.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁹² Ibid., 416-417.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 308.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 431.

In both suffering and beauty, thought encounters what is “impenetrable for the intelligence.”¹⁹⁵ The ego enters the threshold of their metaxic structures and oscillates until it is opened to hold the contradictions. *In pain*, one senses God in the form of absence.¹⁹⁶ The desire for God privileges as real what is absent, and therefore becomes a detachment from objects, from self. The void maintained then becomes a medium of grace. *In beauty*, one senses “a part of matter which, through the senses, renders spiritual perfection sensible.”¹⁹⁷ But this reality (which Weil calls ‘spiritual’ to mark it as irreducible to—not divorced from—the demands of matter) also remains in a threshold. One cannot simply assimilate the beautiful as if a desirable food. Beauty, like suffering, perpetuates hunger, and opens the ego to an otherwise.¹⁹⁸ If suffering, as the felt absence of God, cultivates our ability to wait, to be vigilant, this attentiveness, for Weil, “corresponds with the beautiful.”¹⁹⁹ Just as in suffering one cannot “recoi[l]” from the affliction and seize it, so too beauty is “a fruit one contemplates without stretching out one’s hand.”²⁰⁰ Weil calls both contemplative exercises: thought without objectification, desire without object.

In order to understand why Weil is able to describe contemplation as the encounter with beauty, the experience of affliction, *and* compassion toward the hungry,²⁰¹ we must better understand how beauty emphasizes the hunger induced by God’s presence.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 308.

¹⁹⁶ “The apparent absence of God in this world is the actual reality of God. The same is true for everything. Whatever is in appearance is unreality.” (Ibid., 424.)

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 308.

¹⁹⁸ Suffering and beauty are, for Weil, the gateways of alterity. “Existence of something other than myself. Relationship between Beauty and Suffering.” (Ibid., 308.)

¹⁹⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 150.

²⁰⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 283.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 281.

If the truth of beauty is its ability to stir a desire that cannot be satiated, then God's presence in beauty is not an altogether satisfying one. God cannot be possessed, except perhaps as non-satiety.²⁰² Beauty trains us to desire what disrupts our need with a greater hunger.²⁰³ It whets an appetite for singularity,²⁰⁴ but not without disrupting the satisfaction of one's particular point of view.²⁰⁵ Though beauty demands personal investment, the "unselfing"²⁰⁶ of beauty draws us into a contemplation that "excludes introspection."²⁰⁷ It demands an ego without 'I,' a person irreducible to her one perspective.

In this way, Weil claims, the aesthetic encounter signifies the only proof of God: it shows that we can be drawn out of ourselves into an otherwise order. Beauty opens the possibility of "lay[ing] aside perspective": "transfigur[ing] the sensibility by illuminating it with the light of the universal."²⁰⁸ Beauty "succeeds" insofar as it is a metaxu that separates and joins the particular and the irreducible, the personal and impersonal.²⁰⁹ Beauty, like God, is "beyond all sense perception" and yet it is "no abstraction," since it

²⁰² Ibid., 60.

²⁰³ Though Weil emphasizes in her *Notebooks* that one ought to refrain from eating beauty, this does not mean that she would advocate for lasting hunger as it arises in the other's need. Her rhetorical rebukes against digestion, eating, and expansion, change their tone when meeting the obligation of others: translation (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 67-68), nourishment (Ibid., 6-7), and edible beauty (Ibid., 93).

²⁰⁴ See Weil's description of the beauty of devotion to a singular religion. (Ibid., 245.)

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 232.

²⁰⁶ This term is Iris Murdoch's as she reads Simone Weil's understanding of beauty and decreation. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 369. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 245. Elaine Scarry summarizes Murdoch's reading of Simone Weil in relation to justice in *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 111-113.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 240.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 281.

²⁰⁹ In this way, she also ties beauty to the incarnation. In its regard for flesh and spirit, beauty is the closest "incarnation of God" we can perceive. (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 150.) See also, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 109.

takes residency in the concrete. As in great art, there is “something essentially anonymous about it... Thus the beauty of the world proves that there is a God who is at the same time personal and impersonal, and neither just the one nor the other.”²¹⁰ It is “beauty alone” that “enables us to form an idea of this mystery”—the personal God who yet absolves from one point of view. It is for this reason that Weil sees God in the neighbor who: is anonymous like the beautiful work,²¹¹ but is also like the encounter of suffering, in which God’s impersonal person can be sought.²¹²

The beautiful, not unlike the irreducibility of suffering, instantiates a metaxu by creating an attraction (link) that “keeps us at a distance and implies a renunciation” (separation).²¹³ Similarly, we can only unite ourselves to God by keeping distance.²¹⁴ For Weil, “Distance is the soul of the beautiful”,²¹⁵ and thus when she writes of the incarnation,²¹⁶ creation²¹⁷ and crucifixion²¹⁸ as the distance of God from God, she claims as beautiful not only God’s renunciation but our imitation of these mysteries.²¹⁹ Beautiful the distance that keeps us from taking for granted nature’s sublimity; beautiful the distance that keeps us from rendering God a conceptual object to wield in power; beautiful the distance desire stirs in our deepest grief, that grace might take root in the

²¹⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 241.

²¹¹ Weil, “Last Thoughts,” *Waiting for God*, 50.

²¹² Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, 110.

²¹³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 149.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²¹⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 298.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 380.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 564.

²¹⁹ “The imitation of beauty in the world, that which corresponds to the absence of finality, intention, and discrimination in it, is the absence of intention in ourselves, that is to say the renunciation of our own will.” (Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, 115.)

void; beautiful still, the distance that allows us to behold, and respond to, our neighbor in need.²²⁰ The good deed to satisfy the hungry, the poem to honor the irreducibility of concreteness, the suffering of an innocent: all are ‘without why,’²²¹ and demand our response without will or calculation. Thus, they share in beauty’s “reality without attachment,” though not without attention, attraction even.²²² Beauty remains distant so as to resist assimilation, but near so as to attract our fullest attention. Thus, the sin against beauty, and the root of all vice according to Weil, is to digest what we should only regard.²²³ Attention should not digest its object, but practice the “voluntary distance” of “renunciation and restraint.”²²⁴

Suffering is precisely the corrective against the vices of digestion, insofar as it prevents the filling of voids. Those who leave open the medium of distance, and serve as mediators shaped by the metaxu of beauty and suffering, participate in “holiness itself.”²²⁵ We will come to see in the next chapter how the metaxic structure of beauty and suffering alludes to the elusiveness of the Go(o)d; and its consequent transfiguration of thinking into love. But as a hint, let us not pass over the eroticism of Weil’s holy

²²⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 298, 449.

²²¹ Ibid., 300. Weil links misery and beauty in this “finality without end”—a move that suggests Kant’s aesthetics as a way to approach God. (Ibid., 613.) Insofar as beauty is, for Weil, ‘without why,’ she also reminds us of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart. David Kangas, “Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete’s Good-Bye to the Virtues,” *Journal of Religion* 91, no. 3 (2011): 299-319. Maria Lichtmann, “Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: *The Mirror of Simple Souls* Mirrored,” *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 65-86. Weil remains particularly close to Porete in her thinking, as Anne Carson has artfully shown. Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 155-240. Of course, the contemplative who made the phrase “without why” popular for poets and philosophers, is Angelus Silesius. Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, trans. Maria Shradly (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 54.

²²² Weil, *Notebooks*, 319.

²²³ Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, 105.

²²⁴ Ibid., 89. “The religions which have a conceptions of this renunciation, this voluntary distance, this voluntary effacement of Go, his apparent absence and his secret presence here below, these religions are true religion, the translation into different languages of the great Revelation.” (Ibid., 89.)

²²⁵ Weil, “Concerning the Our Father,” *Waiting for God*, 144.

mediation. It is Plato's *metaxu* as mediatory *eros*²²⁶ that Weil cites as the crucial marriage of suffered deprivation (*penia*) and abundant irreducibility (*poros*).²²⁷ The allusive structure of *metaxu*—separation as link, absence as a kind of presence, pain's void as a preparation for beauty's generation—hinges on the erotic and its ethical implications for thinking.²²⁸ Just as I cannot digest the other, nor diminish the distance opened by her beauty, I am not permitted to apprehend God. Though I am permitted touch, I am not permitted totality. Metaxic thinking therefore respects the distance that separates, for only in God is there any possibility for true encounter.²²⁹

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS: THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF ETHICS

It is necessarily difficult to transpose the allusive structure of *metaxu* into Levinas' work for two reasons.²³⁰ First, to conceive the sameness of Levinas' thought to that of another thinker is to miss Levinas' ethical prohibition against thought's homogenizing tendency. Second, for Weil, the *metaxu* is as much union as it is separation, rendering her problematic to Levinas' emphasis on absolute separation. In order to address the methodological claim implied in the first point, we must briefly address the content of the second. Then, we can begin to nuance Levinas' relation (as absolute separation) as yet holding allusive potential.

²²⁶ For Diotima, *eros* is this ambiguous being between immortal and mortal, gods and men. Plato, *The Symposium*, 202E, 205E.

²²⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 319.

²²⁸ *Metaxu* appears throughout her notebooks, more than any notion of immediacy (Ibid., 21-22, 48-49, 103, 107, 126, 193, 207, 217, 222, 228, 232-233, 239, 241, 250, 258, 272, 296, 298, 302, 333, 358, 363-364, 371, 385, 401, 422, 449, 476, 596, 608).

²²⁹ "The point at which parallels meet is infinity." (Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *Waiting for God*, 137.)

²³⁰ To say nothing of the difficulty of using "allusive" as a word in the case of a thinker whose discourse is "antiludic." See footnote 26 in the introduction to this work.

Like Rosenzweig, Levinas adamantly resists the mystical implications of *methexis*; and he distrusts any thinking that would equate access to truth with union.²³¹ No doubt, he remains particularly suspicious of this maneuver as a Christian device,²³² insofar as the union suggests pagan interpretations of the Man-God. While Levinas commends Weil's "greatness of soul" in her ethical practices and in her suffering for the other, he doubts the role of union in these efforts.²³³ For Levinas, the encounter with God can never be a union—no matter how brief. If union were possible, the "uncanniness of God and the strange fecundity of the encounter" would be reducible to an order, an understanding of contemporaneity.²³⁴ The question then becomes whether the *metaxu*, even as it holds possibility for communication and a kind of knowing, preserves the "ambiguity of transcendence"—its unassimilability.²³⁵

Weil clarifies that participation through a *metaxu* "can add nothing to, [and her] non-participation take nothing away from" the reality of the "infinite joy" in God, and therefore "is of no importance at all."²³⁶ God's alterity, or infinity, is not extended or restrained based on her participation in that infinity. Her sense of participation is less like

²³¹ See, for example his repudiation of fusion as a possibility for God and humanity in the eschaton. Emmanuel Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 31. Though, one must wonder if Levinas and Weil wouldn't consider union as an impossibility made possible in the child. Reflecting on Lucretius, Weil describes the impossibility of sexual union, and the unsatisfiability of physical desire, which can only produce "the child...something that is foreign to [both man and woman]." (Weil, *Notebooks*, 578.) See Levinas' description of fecundity and paternity (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 267-280).

²³² Levinas does not altogether disparage the Christian notion of the Man-God as a "relationship with transcendence," but would like to move away from its connotation of "naiv[e] or pantheis[ti]c" fusion. He permits the God-Man as the basis for ethical substitution, but not as an ontological claim about God's becoming one with humanity. (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 54-55). No doubt, he is more critical of Weil because she "ignored" her Jewish inheritance in favor of what he would consider to be this paganism. (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 133).

²³³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 133.

²³⁴ Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 55.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

²³⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 335.

the naïve paganism of the God-Man, and more like the possibility of covenant.²³⁷ If one abides by her description of *metaxu*, as the separating link that permits communication while preserving distance, perhaps Levinas' is incorrect to confuse its communication with communion. Indeed, Levinas' own philosophy hinges upon the ethics implied in language.²³⁸ Furthermore, his accusation that Weil's meditation merely concerns the "interiority" of the "inner man," fails to acknowledge that contemplation, for Weil, is prioritized as attending the needs of the hungry.²³⁹

Though the contemplation of beauty is not divorced, for Weil, from the ethics of attending others' needs,²⁴⁰ one understands Levinas' concern when she writes, for example, "Beauty is an imitation of celestial harmony; that is to say, a composition of the Same and the Other, in which the Same dominates and the Other is subjugated by compulsion [like the] team of horses in *Phaedrus*."²⁴¹ Or moreso troubling: "The *violence* that is done to the Other to bring it into harmony with the Same. We must imitate this."²⁴² This statement appears directly after she discusses the Soul of the World as mediatory.²⁴³ How could someone who prizes mediation as the link of opposites, or the preservation of

²³⁷ The language of covenant is Levinas' in describing the relation we have to God through the ethical relation to the defenseless. (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 57.)

²³⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73. Also, Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48-59. See also Krysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutics of Nearness*.

²³⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 140. Levinas suggests that contemplation can never be passive in the way that ethics demands. He does not use the word "contemplation" in the way that Weil does; for she speaks of contemplation as what precisely resists thinking as digestion or appropriation. For Levinas, however, contemplation is "an intention, that is, a desire, a movement to take hold of something, to appropriate something for oneself..." (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 38.)

²⁴⁰ Indeed, the aesthetic order, for Weil, is based upon contemplation—attention to the concrete, respect for the unassimilable—and not pleasure's evasion. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 260.) Furthermore, she would not advocate for beauty's disinterestedness as an excuse for unethical suggestions, as in "the sacred privilege of art for art's sake." (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 24-25.)

²⁴¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 246.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 373.

distance, advocate for the violent chastening of the other brought into the same? I would argue that, for Weil, harmony is not totalizing.²⁴⁴ Pythagorean harmony exists when notes are played together in their difference; it is not monophony.

However, the greatest stumbling block, for Levinas, is that Weil equates God with the Same, and *all else* with the Other that must be violently incorporated into God's will. To be clear, when Weil employs the opposition of sameness and alterity, and the violence of the same upon the other, she is *not* thematizing the ethical relation. Though, she may be speaking, in a way, about what Levinas calls the "good violence" that interrupts an entity's claims to unity.²⁴⁵ She would agree unequivocally with Levinas that it is unethical to force someone into the totality wrought by ideologies, by war, by factory labor, or by unjust readings disguised as 'knowledge.' When she writes of the other's assimilation into God, she does so in the lineage of many contemplatives. In this lineage, the ego's otherness is its recalcitrance to the divine life. Precisely in its clinging to volition, phenomenal intentionality, and knowledge, the ego must be violated; these harmful mediations may thwart one's responsiveness to God and responsibility to neighbor.²⁴⁶ In this sense, Levinas and Weil are not altogether opposed. Granted, the severity of Weil's vision of the violated ego nevertheless permits God's presence and peace. It may not allow for the particular dissonance Levinas describes in the ethical

²⁴⁴ For this reason, Weil's vision of societal relations, or even friendships, stresses the distinctions often erased by collectives. "The intelligence is defeated as soon as the expression of one's thoughts is preceded, explicitly or implicitly, by the little word 'we.' And when the light of the intelligence grows dim, it is not very long before the love of the good becomes lost." (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 26.)

²⁴⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 43.

²⁴⁶ On this point of clarifying Weil's use of sameness and difference in contrast to Levinas' use of this opposition, I am indebted to Wendy Farley. Her work on women contemplatives reveals the difference between the violence Levinas critiques, and the violation of ego endured in the divine-human relation. Wendy Farley, *The Thirst of God: Contemplating God's Love with Three Women Mystics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

encounter: the restless relation without relation, the disruption of our attempts to “conceive of relations.”²⁴⁷ Then again, for Weil, the relation to God, despite its occasions of peace and beauty, is not unlike Levinas’ description of the violence that the other does to me.²⁴⁸

Weil and Levinas both suggest that “we are in relation.”²⁴⁹ However, Levinas radically suggests that, because we are *in* relation, because the “face of the man is the medium [*metaxu?*] through which the invisible in him becomes visible and enters into commerce with us,”²⁵⁰ we cannot claim immediate knowledge of the relational structure itself.²⁵¹ Again, there is some debate as to whether Weil suggests the possibility of immediate knowledge; she certainly pursues, like Nicholas of Cusa’s ‘coincidence of opposites,’ a non-dualistic thinking that bends the structures of mediation. But she refutes as illusory any attempt to bypass the relational structure we ourselves are and are *in*. The incarnation of Christ, and her belief that we participate in this role of mediation, is not our exemption from reason, nor our key to an immediate access to reality.²⁵² Nor is it our excuse for claiming, through reason, a correlation of truth with intelligibility.²⁵³ The

²⁴⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 140.

²⁴⁸ Thus, Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*, where the other wounds me with her needs, and holds me hostage, is more akin to what Weil describes in the relation to God.

²⁴⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 140.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁵¹ Thus Levinas, reading a “Jewish moment” in Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*, attributes to humans the “necessary” place as “intermediary” in the “Redemption of the World.” Levinas, “‘Between To Worlds,’ The Way of Franz Rosenzweig,” *Difficult Freedom*, 192-193.

²⁵² He claims, for instance, that Simone Weil has never understood the Torah, because, to his thinking, she has attempted a “direct contact with the Sacred unmediated by reason.” I would suggest that her philosophy is permeated by the centrality of metaxic mediations—where reason and the unintelligible have their moments (Weil, *Notebooks*, 318). Their differences in understanding perhaps stem from the ways in which incarnation is not simply an “emotional communion” for Weil. (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 144.)

²⁵³ “God has made us free and intelligent in order that we should renounce our will and our intelligence. To renounce them means, in the first place, in the representational sphere, to exercise them

incarnational connotation of *metaxu*, for Weil, is neither an ontological justification of volitional ethics. It is rather the opening of the very possibility of service.²⁵⁴ The metaxic relation to God is not a license for consuming anyone who does not fit into my view of God. It is rather the basis for chastening one's stubborn ego, that love might consume my view of others. One's sense of identity must be violated in the sense of disruption, interruption, wounding, that its will might become *willingness to love, to read generously*. Weil's language of subjugation and alignment is a rebuke upon the unyielding self that wishes to totalize.

Admittedly, Levinas' polemical reading of Weil occurs in a volume of essays on Jewish topics, written in the decade following World War II. Given this context, Weil's dismissal of the Hebrew Scriptures in favor of Platonic interiority and Christian incarnation proves problematic. Nonetheless, one could argue that the metaxic structure of Weil's incarnational hermeneutic preserves a paradoxical distance and proximity of God. Yes, she advocates for oneness with God; but only insofar as this requires violating the self's claims of autonomy. She does not expect self-annihilation to give way to homeostasis. Its violence is not that of the totality, but the chastening of the self's will in favor of the other. Not unlike Levinas' description of substitution, Weil thinks the self through its ability to be "for the other."²⁵⁵ Levinas affirms being-for-the-other as carnality,

correctly (according to just rules) and in their fullness; and in the second place, to know that the reality of the representable is unreal as compared with that of the non-representable." (Weil, *Notebooks*, 280.) One is reminded of St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Random House, 2005).

²⁵⁴ "It is not *because* the Word became incarnate that we have to serve men in their flesh... It would be truer, although still incorrect, to say that it became incarnate especially in order to teach us to serve men in their flesh." (Ibid., 280.)

²⁵⁵ "To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction, is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say to the destruction of oneself. It is to deny oneself. In denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by a

when he cites the “Jewish proverb which says that ‘the other’s material needs are my spiritual needs,’”²⁵⁶ or when he too speaks of Christ appearing, as non-appearing, through those in need.²⁵⁷ For Levinas, incarnation occurs only insofar as the subject awakens to the “primordial dative of the *for another*, in which the subject becomes a heart, a sensibility, and hands which give.”²⁵⁸ Incarnation is not, for Levinas, an ontological claim about the paradoxical mingling of God and humanity, but an ethical one, opening the embodied response to the neighbor.²⁵⁹ Incarnation is exposition to the other, “the possibility of giving.”²⁶⁰ This is perhaps where Weil and Levinas remain strangely resonant in their philosophy, if not in their historical understandings of the Jewish faith.

Levinas’ notion of God revealing himself in the neighbor, “as absence rather than presence,”²⁶¹ is not quite like Weil’s linking wall of two prisoners trying to communicate. For in Weil’s example, the wall is perhaps secondary to the relation between the prisoners who cannot see one another. However, in the ethical encounter, the person to whom I relate without relation does not become secondary to my relation with God. The other person is my priority; she *is* the relation with God.²⁶² The human is not “just a creature to whom revelation is made, but something through which the absolute of God

negative affirmation. One gives oneself in ransom for the other.” (Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” *Waiting for God*, 91.)

²⁵⁶ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 24.

²⁵⁷ Levinas mentions Matthew 25:31-46 when asked, “Concretely, how is this responsibility for the other translated?” Levinas, “*Is it Righteous to Be?*”: *Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 52.

²⁵⁸ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 168.

²⁵⁹ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 39.

²⁶⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 69.

²⁶¹ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 32.

²⁶² Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 107.

reveals its meaning.”²⁶³ For Levinas, to be human is to be responsible “as mediator between *Elohim* and the world by ensuring the presence or absence of *Elohim*.”²⁶⁴ This entails that the face of the neighbor not only mediates God to me as the presence of the infinite, but that I in turn mediate God to her in responsibility. In this relation, certain walls—that of concept, phenomenal intentionality, volition—are not necessary. Indeed, Levinas spends great effort on eliminating these walls, letting distance do the work that other mediations (concepts, phenomenality) imposed.

Here, the contemplative strain of Weil seems near Levinas, if not for her Platonic belief that beauty and Being are erotic mediators for God. Weil reads the *metaxu* as Platonic eros—paradoxically participating in humanity and divinity, deprivation and abundance—whereas Levinas would resist this parallel. According to Levinas, the Platonic eros, as *half*-divine mediator, implies that full divinity is “full coincidence or unification of differences.”²⁶⁵ Weil would likely stress the opposite—that eros is only half-divine because it is not fully kenotic, totally deprived, totally unsatisfied. There is no denying that Weil’s sense of divinity is linked with perpetual hunger. As previously noted, her understanding of beauty entails that we resist consumption, meanwhile transfiguring the attention it hones into charity. However, for Levinas, beauty is more often than not a disengagement from ethical responsibility, not a preparation for it.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Levinas, “‘In the Image of God,’ According to Rabbi, Hayyim Volozhinek,” *Beyond the Verse*, 161.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁶⁵ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 22.

²⁶⁶ Levinas suspects beauty insofar as artwork “sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute.” (Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 1.) He is further concerned that art constitutes a “dimension of evasion” from responsibility (*Ibid.*, 12), an evasion philosophy itself perpetuates in Heidegger (*Ibid.*, 13).

Thus any attempt at showing a resemblance between their language of presence-absence, and their descriptions of the (im)mediation of God, proves difficult. Namely, the attempt to reflect upon their similarities shows not simply the aptitude of thinking, but its aporia: there is a violation of their distinctness in the attempt to conceive, to write, their relation.²⁶⁷ Insofar as Levinas must borrow Greek concepts to speak his Hebraic claims, he himself cannot escape thinking's tendency toward the language of presence, the use of mediating concepts, or the markings of dualistic categories like Same and Other.²⁶⁸ He does so, at times disparaging the illusion of Greek thought, while recognizing its allusive tendencies. It might therefore be best to challenge the correlation that he sometimes makes between Greek thought and obsessions of intelligibility, of presence.²⁶⁹ For even Levinas employs Greek terms—such as the Good Beyond Being and eros—in their allusive stretch, suggesting the infinite in its resistance to ontological presence. He employs the distinction of Same and Other in order to inhabit it ethically as otherwise than conceptual, as otherwise than a statement about Being. Perhaps Levinas' writing best models the allusive potential,²⁷⁰ insofar as it points to what cannot end in writing, insofar as every 'said' in his works resists the congealing of concept. His writing is a

²⁶⁷ Jean-François Lyotard notes that, in writing about Levinas, one “[does him] justice only by mistreating [him.]” In other words, if one wishes to bring an alternative thought to Levinas, in order to preserve the alterity and not merely resonate with him, there is a “discourse of persecution” involved. (Lyotard, “Levinas' Logic,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 118).

²⁶⁸ Derrida writes of this difficulty in “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 79-153. Levinas, too, acknowledges that he cannot simply leap outside of ontology, but rather attempt to employ the ontological in the direction of the ethical. (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 19.)

²⁶⁹ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 101.

²⁷⁰ When I remark that it is allusive, I think primarily of Blanchot's remark upon his friend's work, “in a certain sense Levinas stands out and breaks with a tradition he understands completely... this tradition serves him as a springboard and a frame of reference.” (Blanchot, “Our Clandestine Companion,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 48.) Also, see Blanchot's framing of the problem, “how can philosophy be talked about, opened up, and presented, without by that very token, using a particular language, contradicting itself, mortgaging its own possibility?” (Ibid., 45.)

‘saying,’ suggesting the encounters his thought demands, absent from, but prepared in, the ‘said’ page.²⁷¹

In utilizing philosophical writing to articulate an ethics prior to philosophical thinking, Levinas acknowledges the paradox of human existence: “us[ing] the ontological *for the sake of the other*.”²⁷² Thus he borrows concepts such as Plato’s “Good Beyond Being” or Descartes “Idea of Infinity,”²⁷³ to articulate moments when the thinking of Being is interrupted. However, for Levinas, these are not concepts for mere contemplation.²⁷⁴ The “idea of infinity in us...aims at what it cannot embrace and is in this sense the infinite.”²⁷⁵ And thus we cannot simply hold the infinite in an idea, but rather the infinite is experience in its most radical sense: “a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same.”²⁷⁶ Again, Levinas’ name for this encounter with the other is the face. The “epiphany” of the face interrupts my thinking in its “absolute frankness.”²⁷⁷ The face is not capable of the duplicity of art, or of human language.²⁷⁸ It is not a mere signifier “which is always already deserted, betrayed by the being it reveals.”²⁷⁹ The “presence of infinity,” is manifest in the face insofar as the “expressed *attends* its expression” without being

²⁷¹ As Derrida remarks, “For the face to present the other without metaphor, speech must not only translate thought. Thought, of course, already must be speech, but above all the body must also remain a language.” (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 102.)

²⁷² Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 28.

²⁷³ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 53.

²⁷⁴ “In thinking infinity the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*. Infinity does not enter into the *idea* of infinity, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept.” (Ibid., 54.)

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁷⁸ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 29.

²⁷⁹ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

reducible to a co-presencing.²⁸⁰ The face, as an “infinite which blinks,” is not simply a “sign of departure,” but is also the “open of an abyss in proximity” that refuses “speculative audacities.”²⁸¹ Included in this charge of speculative audacity is phenomenology; thus the irreducibility of the face cannot be phenomenologically reduced to a “play of physiognomy.”²⁸² In this sense, Levinas’ method is not the Husserlian phenomenology of intentionality and appearing; but its radicalization as an intentionality that is not merely theoretical.²⁸³

Because the face is both proximity and abyss, Levinas’ emphasis on the presence and “pure act”²⁸⁴ of the face’s expression is not a perpetuation of the “metaphysics of presence” he critiques.²⁸⁵ This presence is not the revelation of ontological truth; “it resists identification.”²⁸⁶ The presence of the infinite, in the face, transcends ontological categories of presence; it points to an absence unlike the distance we ascribe to the space between intentional thought and its object, or between the poet and his creation. The infinity of the face is both a proximity and an absence, since infinity “cannot be concretized in a term; it contests its own presence.”²⁸⁷ Appearing as a trace, the face

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 55. The frankness of the face is not what Levinas calls a relationship of rectitude, the “immediate” relationship “between a sign and the signified [that] belongs to an order of correlation.” The face is frank, but it is also, as trace, “*unrectitude* itself.” (Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 103.) It is significant that the face is immediate (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91.)

²⁸¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 93.

²⁸² Ibid., 93.

²⁸³ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 87-88.

²⁸⁴ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

²⁸⁵ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 19.

²⁸⁶ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

²⁸⁷ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 120.

critiques the consciousness of presence.²⁸⁸ Therefore its proximity is not a contact that could be thematized; it is a contact that makes thematization restless.²⁸⁹

Levinas compares this absence-presence not to a sign, but to the possibility of language itself: “the fact that a sign, exterior to the system of evidences, comes into proximity while remaining transcendent, is the very essence of language prior to every particular language.”²⁹⁰ The face is not an allusion; nevertheless, it demands the allusive structure of ethical saying—the presence that manifests an absence, a proximity that is transcendent.²⁹¹ The face thus “proceeds from the absolutely absent. His relationship with the absolutely absent from which he comes *does not indicate, does not reveal* this absent; and yet the absent has a meaning in a face.”²⁹² The allusive structure of the face’s ‘language’ is not its indication, but its signification of an absence beyond phenomenal

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 121.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 122. As Jill Robbins summarizes, “In *Totality and Infinity*, ethics happens in and as language. The language that accomplishes this nontotalizing relation to the other is primordial: it precedes and underlies all language as communication... Ethical language is interlocutory and interpellative: it never speaks about the other but only to him or her.” (Jill Robbins, “Who Prays?,” *Phenomenology of Prayer*, 32.) In this sense, language can be an everyday site of ethical transcendence, not unlike prayer. (Ibid., 33-34.) It can also be implied in skepticism: “thought of in this sense, indeed, [language] would not allow satisfaction with absolute knowledge or allow transparent communication.” (Blanchot, “Our Clandestine Companion,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 47.)

²⁹¹ I say ‘presence that manifests an absence’ so as to avoid construal with transcendence as indeterminate neutrality—as in Levinas’ ‘there is’ that is the “impossibility of not being, as the incessant insistence of the neutral, the nocturnal murmur of the anonymous, as what never begins... since it eternally eludes the determination of beginning... it is the absolute, but as absolute indetermination.” (Ibid., 29.) Alphonso Lingis would remind that, Levinas’ “sensitivity is exposure, not to nothingness, but to alterity.” (Alphonso Lingis, “The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 222.) Lingis carries this refrain of “not nothingness” in his essay, concluding, “Alterity is not nothingness, which could only the nihilation of being. It is not ideality, self-sufficient and absolute in its immobile present. Alterity is what is positive enough to appeal to being and separate enough from it to order it imperatively. This kind of alterity Levinas locates neither in the death that summons all that lives nor in the ideality of the law, without executive force, but in the face of another.” (Ibid., 227.)

²⁹² Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 355.

revelation. Indeed, “the relationship which goes from a face to the absent is outside every revelation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories.”²⁹³

Even though the face of the neighbor never simply reveals or dissimulates God, the third way of the trace is not mere indeterminacy. Rather, there is an oscillation in which the “equivocation [of presence-absence] is never dissipated.”²⁹⁴ Because there is an ambiguity inherent to the face’s frankness, the subject remains obsessed, obligated. But an obligation to whom precisely? What would be the signification of this face as trace, which calls upon me “without equaling me in consciousness, ordering me before appearing”?²⁹⁵ What could the face express to mark its vulnerable proximity, and its transcendence of the system of signs? The transcendent face of the other initiates expression in the radical sense,²⁹⁶ “You shall not kill” (and likewise, you shall not reduce me to your thinking). The face, in resisting my knowledge with his unspoken plea, “speak[s] before speaking”²⁹⁷: a saying over which I have no power because it is the refutation of power.²⁹⁸ My obligation is not to an authoritative power, but to the other in her mortality, her vulnerability.

The face’s expression is thus not unlike “an open hand,”²⁹⁹ or the “nudity” of skin³⁰⁰: not a mere container of the infinite, or the surface relaying “Being”; but a

²⁹³ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 103.

²⁹⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 94. Though ethical saying is the preferred response (as responsibility) to this equivocation; Levinas does suggest that, insofar as the ‘said’ is employed, prophecy and poetry are best in maintaining the irreducibility of the Other. (Ibid., 170.)

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁹⁶ Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 20.

²⁹⁷ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 122.

²⁹⁸ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

²⁹⁹ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge Press, 1988), 169.

vulnerability of “presence abandoned by a departure, exposed to everyone...torn up from culture, law, horizon, context.”³⁰¹ This is not to say that the language of the face is an expression of “autochthonous being.”³⁰² It is “auto-signifyingness.”³⁰³ It is without context not because it is universal, but because it is singular. Unlike Weil’s *metaxu*, the face is not the separating link of the particular and the universal, nor the *methexis* of the concrete and the ideal. The face’s incarnation does not lie in its materialization of a “correlative of understanding.”³⁰⁴ The face is radically incarnate, as resistant to idealization as touch.³⁰⁵ Therefore, its language cannot be deciphered as “coherence and truth of the information transmitted,” but rather as an experienced “event of proximity.”³⁰⁶

In this encounter with the face, one discovers that infinity is not a matter of willing its expression, nor contemplating its concept.³⁰⁷ It is a matter of desire more

³⁰⁰ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 121.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 121. Levinas’ characterization of the face as torn, like a trace, from all context invokes—whether intentionally or not—Heidegger’s characterization of Jews as worldless. Some might argue that this characterization animalizes the Jews, since Heidegger claims that the animal is without world. Though Heidegger himself resists the human being as *animal*—rational or otherwise—one must note the contradictions that surface in Heidegger when he writes of the Jews. These contradictions render the Jewish people, according to Heidegger, both elusive and pervasive. Though Heidegger’s *Schwarze Hefte* have not yet been published in English, there is already good conversation occurring. On the anti-Semitic tones of these notebooks (the Jew described as worldless and calculating) see Michael Marder, “A Fight for the Right to Read Heidegger,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2014, accessed July 21 2014, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/michael-marder/?_r=0. By point of contrast, see Michael Marder “The Other Jewish Question,” and Martin Gessman, “Heidegger and National Socialism: He Meant What He Said,” *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks: Philosophy, Politics, Anti-Semitism, Emory University iTunes U*, October 22, 2014, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/heideggers-black-notebooks/id918162338>.

³⁰² Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 121.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰⁷ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 56. (That is, if contemplative is taken as a being caught up in concept, or uniting with it, instead of how Simone Weil and others would speak of it—as the perpetuation of desire.)

radical than the ego's desire to be (*conatus essendi*).³⁰⁸ The “ethical resistance”³⁰⁹ of the face shapes desire as that which cannot be satisfied because “it does not call for food,” especially that of the thought.³¹⁰ Desire is obsessive rather than possessive.³¹¹ True desire opens up, or “hollow[s] out,”³¹² the subject who thus becomes an opening, ever exposed to the summons of the neighbor.³¹³ The exposure of the subject, as subjected to and responsible for the other, is the possibility of ethical saying. The language of ethical saying:

consists in the relationship with a being that in a certain sense is not by relation to me... a being that stands beyond every attribute which would precisely have as its effect to qualify him, that is to reduce him to what is common to him and other beings—a being, consequently, completely naked.³¹⁴

Naked has two meanings, one elusive, another illusory. Elusive: to preserve the other as transcending all qualifiers that one would use to clothe or cover his difference. Illusory: to reduce the other to what is common to all, thereby conceptually stripping him down. The “pure knowledge” of language—a knowing purified of a certain knowledge—attests to this precarious relation.³¹⁵ The other is not the sum of our symbols, no matter how concrete; the other should neither be stripped of her difference and particularity. The nakedness of the neighbor is his vulnerability, and his demand of our responsibility.³¹⁶

³⁰⁸ Levinas, “Transcendence and Evil,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 185.

³⁰⁹ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

³¹¹ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 119-121.

³¹² Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 58.

³¹³ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 120.

³¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹⁶ One is reminded of Simone Weil's admonition, “It is true that we have to love our neighbor, but, in the example that Christ gave as an illustration of this commandment, the neighbor is a being of

But how to respond without first mediating the other through concepts, through the language of thinking?³¹⁷ As previously expressed, Levinas is not naïve with regard to mediation: technology, thematization, and calculation are necessary in designing, say, any plan to feed the hungry. However, the medium of the face, as an epiphany “without mediation,”³¹⁸ requires first a different kind of saying than that of “means and ends.”³¹⁹ In his text, *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas does not altogether “obviate the language of metaphysics,”³²⁰ but expresses the insufficiency of it as a Heideggerian ‘saying-showing’ of Being. Ethical saying, prior to words and poetized thinking, “is a responsibility for the neighbor,” which must be present in every “said” of the law. Before we can establish institutions of justice, we must accept as primary the responsibility without limit. In order for justice to be possible, the sub-ject must signify her subjection to the other. This exposure, as the communication that conditions all communication,³²¹ makes the sub-ject a “sign”³²² of signification itself as “the one-for-the-other to the point of substitution...that is, responsibility.”³²³ According to Levinas, the poet’s saying, exposed to the gods, is not the sign of holiness. It is ethical saying, as exposure to the other,³²⁴ that

whom nothing is known, lying naked, bleeding, and unconscious on the road. It is a question of completely anonymous, and for that reason, completely universal love.” (Weil, “Letter VI,” *Waiting for God*, 50.)

³¹⁷ Levinas remains concerned not only about the mediating concepts that ultimately obscure alterity in their appropriation; he also wishes to resist the “collectivity” that attempts to mediate the interpersonal through a “third term.” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 98.)

³¹⁸ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 351. In “The Trace of the Other,” he suggests that the face is without mediation and without context. But I would lean more on his understanding of the face’s epiphany as “a direct optics—without the mediation of any *idea*.” (Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 47.)

³¹⁹ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 28.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³²¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48.

³²² *Ibid.*, 49.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

that signals the holiness of justice.³²⁵ The separation of the Other, who in turn separates me (“me voici!”) from my “I,” must found the capacity of law to distinguish. The former holiness (setting apart) of the Other makes possible the latter ontological distinctions.

That is to say, the ethical saying founds the said, the laws and institutions of justice. The “unsayable saying” of the Good beyond being—the ethical relation of the subject to the infinite other—“lends itself to the said” in the ontological structures of justice.³²⁶ Ethics thus prepares ontology,³²⁷ insofar as the “said” of justice must take into consideration (and comparison) multiple others. Only an ontological structure—which for Levinas entails synthesis and co-presencing—can effectively measure justice. We must have such ontological distinctions, because the ethical relation as one-for-the-other becomes complicated by the third person; this third has just as much claim for my responsibility. However, as Derrida notes, “‘illeity,’ the emergence of the question, of the third, and of justice, designates *sometimes* the interruption of the face to face, *sometimes* the very transcendence of the face in the face to face.”³²⁸ In the latter case, illeity is the trace of God.³²⁹ In the former case, illeity is the third person who initiates the need for

³²⁴ Ibid., 45-51.

³²⁵ Ibid., 45.

³²⁶ Ibid., 44. Krzysztof Ziarek helpfully clarifies that “Levinas’s critique of philosophical discourse does not aim at the destruction of language; rather, it inverts itself in order not to simply disclaim the validity of thought but to affirm the alterity of the other. The critique that shows how language is unable to render justice to the other does not signify only a failure of language, of ‘Greek’ language. Levinasian analyses do not imply any negativity, any limits for language: the other does not mark the boundaries of intelligibility, and the fact the other ‘overflows’ does not impose the burden of failure upon language but hints at the other’s alterity with respect to language, alterity that leave its trace only in language.” (Ziarek, *Inflected Language*, 77.)

³²⁷ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 29-30.

³²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 60.

³²⁹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 359.

institutions of justice.³³⁰ Levinas suggests the ethical relationship (the one for the other) does not need the ontological aspect of justice (as politics, morality, law),³³¹ because between two there is the diachronic time of two singularities; and only between more than two is there need of some comparison. However, one must ask if, given his model of the infinite illeity in the neighbor, the subject and the neighbor haven't always ever been more than two? The need for politics and "law courts...as soon as there are three,"³³² seems strange insofar as the subject and the neighbor already imply the third, the illeity of God, in which the neighbor appears.

But this reinstates the unique exemption of Levinas' ethics, and his God, from ontology. The other neighbor might demand ontological considerations; but the alterity of God is what challenges their priority. Because God is "absolute[ly] remote, [the neighbor's] transcendence turns into my responsibility."³³³ As otherwise than the neutral "It" (*Es Gibt*) of Being, God "maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal 'order' itself."³³⁴ Ethics, as this personal order is the allusive "field where the Infinite is in relationship with the finite without contradicting itself by this relationship."³³⁵ It is a field of diachronic desire, attempting to relate, without reductive relation, to what eludes.³³⁶ The subject's sincerity—giving without possibility of

³³⁰ Not only the other neighbor, but also the "third" of governments (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 21, 30.)

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³³² *Ibid.*, 21.

³³³ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 165.

³³⁴ Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 107.

³³⁵ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 171.

³³⁶ It is allusive insofar as Levinas uses the language of "point[ing] toward": "God, as the God of alterity and transcendence, can only be understood in terms of that interhuman dimension which, to be sure, emerges in the phenomenological-ontological perspective of the intelligible world, but which cuts through

withholding—must be ever after the presence-absence of the neighbor’s face. And both the subject and the neighbor, in turn, are ever after the “first saying”³³⁷ of the “trace of illeity”³³⁸: God. The subject and the other’s face bear the “trauma” of God’s trace, the non-place of the ethical encounter: “the absence in which the infinite approaches.”³³⁹ Thus, for Levinas, there is no *eschaton* in the theological sense, where God and humanity might meet face to face in a co-presence to one another.³⁴⁰ Rather, God’s infinity inhabits every other, that holiness might become infinite responsibility.³⁴¹ It will be necessary then, in the next chapter, to track the manner in which Levinas’ elusive God bends thinking into a vigilant desire—without alleviation, or hope of an *eschaton*.³⁴²

IV. JEAN-YVES LACOSTE: THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF LITURGY

In affirming as ethical the move of the self out to the neighbor who ‘appears’ in the trace of God, Levinas contests the “pure expenditure” of the nihilist. The nihilist’s departure into the void, according to Levinas, still maintains the self as its terminus. In contrast to this “departure without return”³⁴³ into the void, Levinas advocates for ethical ‘work’: the patient, vigilant move from same to other without Heideggerian nostalgia for

and perforates the totality of presence and points towards the absolutely other.” (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 20.)

³³⁷ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 126.

³³⁸ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 107.

³³⁹ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 121.

³⁴⁰ Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 30.

³⁴¹ See Derrida’s interesting assessment of the “resemblance” of the face to God as *analogia* (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 143.)

³⁴² In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas certainly uses ‘eschatology’ as a potent metaphor for a time that resists history, as in infinity’s resistance to totality. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22-24). Nevertheless, he has some “reservations about the term eschatology” insofar as the Christian eschaton implies the closure of the gap “between man and the absolutely other.” (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 30).

³⁴³ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 92.

homecoming. The work of ethics remains oriented toward alterity—which, for Levinas, is neither a void for grace to fill, nor an encounter for the appropriative event of the homeland. The direction is a “one-way movement” insofar as it does not calculate recompense, or the promise of future arrival.³⁴⁴ Because the original Greek term for this work (*λειτουργία*) denotes “a putting out of funds at a loss,” Levinas calls ethics liturgy. Ethics is an ongoing work that surpasses me, achieving effects I can never count because it is “an action for a world to come, a going beyond one’s epoch.”³⁴⁵ Liturgy as ethics entails working “in the present for the most remote things, for which the present is an irrecusable negation.”³⁴⁶ It is not that liturgy is an infatuation with the future, requiring Heidegger’s project; it is a discipline of patience, with an understanding of time as always interruptive, diachronic.³⁴⁷ It would seem that, from within these interruptions, there is not only the disruption of my totalizing will, but a space of leverage against the totality of what presently *is*. Because ethics pursues what it cannot grasp, it is a relationship with the ab-solute—what absolves itself from concept or calculation.³⁴⁸

If this relationship to the ab-solute is our being-before-God, and not simply our being-for-the other, how might we inflect this term, *liturgy*? Is there a certain priority for

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁴⁷ As Derrida reminds, “the liturgy of work should not even be *subordinated* to thinking [as economic calculation].” (Derrida, “At This Moment in This Work Here I Am,” *Re-Reading Levinas*, 39.) So in some sense, Levinas accepts Heidegger’s attempts, outside the calculative tendencies of projection, to resist calculative thinking. Of course, insofar as Heidegger still prizes thinking as the supreme passivity, he misses Levinas’ ethical passivity.

³⁴⁸ As Jeffrey Bloechl incisively summarizes, “Recall the etymology of Levinas’ word *absolute*: it absolves itself from the relation; it has already withdrawn from us...every move that each of us makes is aimed at the absolute—without, of course, grasping it, even as an idea.” (Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, 110.) See Levinas’ translation of the “abusive word” of the absolute into the face (Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *The Religious*, 81). Though, as Derrida suggests, insofar as Levinas is writing about the absolute, “the ab-solving erasure must not be absolutely absolute.” (Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I am,” *Re-Reading Levinas*, 35.)

being-before-God in founding the possibility of being-for-the-other?³⁴⁹ Levinas does not always distinguish between the being-toward-God and being-for-the-neighbor.³⁵⁰ Though, he might distinguish between the temporality (diachrony) in which we meet the neighbor, and the “immemorial past” of the God “beyond being.”³⁵¹ This latter distinction assumes some priority of the trace in making possible the enigmatic epiphany of the face. Already the question of God’s priority over against the neighbor has an ontological register: it assumes that God is a being posed against other beings. Levinas, no doubt, avoids this dilemma in placing both God and the neighbor beyond the structures of Heideggerian Being. But is there another way to speak of the otherwise than Being than reproaching Heidegger’s temporality via the neighbor?³⁵²

Whereas Levinas primarily disturbs Heidegger’s temporality of being-toward-death in being for-the-other, Lacoste spatially jars Heidegger’s being-in-the-world. Though Lacoste is not unconcerned with the structures of time,³⁵³ he privileges metaphors afforded by space and place³⁵⁴: margin,³⁵⁵ interstice,³⁵⁶ topological subversion,³⁵⁷ and liturgical architecture.³⁵⁸ Even in his description of what liturgical time

³⁴⁹ This question assumes a distinction antithetical to Levinas’ work, insofar as “being-for-the-other” is the “order...of holiness.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, ix.)

³⁵⁰ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 106-107.

³⁵¹ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 73.

³⁵² Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *The Religious*, 76-88.

³⁵³ See, for example, Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 85-86.

³⁵⁴ “...the liturgical experience, which must intensify the ethical experience of conversion (see §§ 27-29), also requires the subversion of that which possesses no ethical meaning, that is, our relationship to place.” (Ibid., 31.)

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 68. (This is just one example among many, as are the following citations with regard to other spatial terms.)

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 36-38.

“teaches us,” he writes of history as “a *place* for the beginning of existence” and liturgy as the site of a “between.”³⁵⁹ There is no need to over-emphasize Levinas’ preference for temporal words and Lacoste’s use of spatial terms—since time and space allude to one another in shared metaphors.³⁶⁰ However, I mark the difference to help shift the vocabulary of Levinas’ infinite into Lacoste’s concern with the ab-solute as it “tremble[s]”³⁶¹ presence in the “margins” of experience. In so doing, Lacoste is never too far from Levinas’ attempt to emphasize the otherwise than Being, or being otherwise. Indeed, he accepts Levinas’ claim that “liturgy...is ethics itself.”³⁶² Lacoste extends this claim in suggesting that ethics and liturgy have the same “stakes”: “challenging the provisional in the name of the eschatological.”³⁶³ In challenging the provisional, both liturgy and ethics require an abstracting maneuver.³⁶⁴ They allow one to dislodge from facticity in order to better attend it,³⁶⁵ thereby understanding the human “beyond what can be derived from our facticity.”³⁶⁶ Because liturgy never divorces itself from facticity,

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 84. [Emphasis mine]

³⁶⁰ And since Lacoste’s eschaton is as much a critique of Heidegger’s temporality in being-toward-death. (Ibid., 60-61.) Moreover, Levinas writes of the trace as “the insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines toward a past and a time.” (Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 358.)

³⁶¹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 85.

³⁶² Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 350. Lacoste acknowledges Levinas use of the terms dia-cony and liturgy “in order to take into account the exigencies that others [*autrui*] bring to bear on me” (Ibid., 72).

³⁶³ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 76.

³⁶⁴ Liturgy as a “bracketing of being-in-the-world” and ethics as a “step back that enables us to take hold once again...of a relation to the real in the element of praxis that anticipates the eschatological reign of God.” (Ibid., 76.)

³⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that this abstracting maneuver opposes the supposed disinterestedness of objectivity, and the separation from reality that constitutes ideological illusions. Levinas calls these latter distances a “non-place”: “the necessity to tear oneself from being in order to place oneself, as a subject, upon an absolute or utopian ground, on a terrain that makes disinterestedness possible.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 6.)

³⁶⁶ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 76.

but creates a space within the world for the definitive, its structure is an allusive method of abstraction. But how does its allusive structure differ from, or prepare for, ethics?

Lacoste approaches this question through another: according to moral and political reasoning, is liturgy a *divertissement*? Does liturgy “require of us an exodus out of the world or a marginal dwelling within it?”³⁶⁷ In other words, does liturgy cause one to abstract from the world in a way that an ethics, rooted in the “moral exigency...inscribed in the immediate (phenomenological) givens of consciousness,” would not?³⁶⁸ In asking this question, Lacoste characterizes Levinas as a phenomenologist who grounds ethical prescription in description of certain experiences.³⁶⁹ It is as if, for Lacoste, Levinas accepts being-in-the-world as primary in the way that Lacoste himself does.³⁷⁰ Though he acknowledges that Levinas’ description is far from *Mitdasein*,³⁷¹ he states that its distance depends on Levinas doing philosophy more radically than Heidegger. He reads Levinas’ “ethics...as first philosophy” as deeply phenomenological—whereby the authority for an ethics comes from the world.³⁷² Because he reads Levinas this way, he accuses him of “passing over in silence everything

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

³⁶⁹ Levinas, like Lacoste, performs a phenomenology of inexperience. Levinas writes that his ethics is founded on “a responsibility that I contracted in no ‘experience,’ but of which the face of the other through its alterity and through its strangeness, states the command that came *from who knows where*.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xiv.)

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 71.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 72.

³⁷² Ibid., 71. See also Lacoste’s (perhaps false) assumption that the ethical obligation functions in Levinas through the phenomenological imposition or constraint. (Lacoste, “Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 144.) If Lacoste were correct in reading Levinas this way, Tillich would agree with Lacoste that the phenomenal being of the other cannot found ethical prescription: “We cannot be obedient to the commands of a stranger even if he is God.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 136.) But if God, as Levinas would argue, were the very possibility of obligation—apart from phenomenal evidence, human authorities, or ontological proof—would not Tillich be nearer to Levinas’ understanding of ethics?

that does not constitute our being-in-the-world as moral obligation.”³⁷³ In this sense, he reads Levinas as a philosophy of the same, whereby all must fit into an evidence of ethics. According to Lacoste, Levinas cites as evidence my being “natively surrounded by others (by ‘the face’)” to show how impossible it is to establish a distance, or “caesura, between [my] worldliness and the order of duty.”³⁷⁴ Lacoste claims that Levinas’ “annexing the prescription...to the domain of elementary experiences” prevents him from simply deriving an ought from an is. But the weakness of this strength, for Lacoste, is that because there is no distance between ‘ought’ and ‘is.’ Because “description, such as Levinas approaches it, includes prescription,” he closes the space that would grant leverage for his critique. Levinas writes “against the violence of history” by “attributing to things an evidentiality they do not possess in the world.”³⁷⁵ According to Lacoste, Levinas inscribes his critique of the provisional in the provisional, without admitting as much.³⁷⁶

I would disagree with the claim that, for Levinas, phenomenological description makes ethics inevitable. He remains most sober about the failures of philosophy, even beings-in-the-world, to maintain the ethical relation. Furthermore, his ‘phenomenology’ of the face is not evidence for the moral obligation; it *is the obligation*. Lacoste perhaps overestimates Levinas’ fidelity to phenomenology;³⁷⁷ and he certainly misses the mark if

³⁷³ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 71.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁷⁶ Perhaps because Lacoste primarily cites Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*, and not *Otherwise than Being or God, Death, and Time*, he neglects that Levinas’ sense of the definitive, the absolution of the Other, is not inscribed in the provisionality of being.

³⁷⁷ Indeed, Jean-Luc Marion points out that Levinas’ project is a “reversal of intentionality and phenomenality.” (Marion, “The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas,” *The Face of the Other and the*

he assumes that Levinas offers a philosophical *apologia* for ethics. Often enough Levinas uses phenomenology to reverse Husserlian intentionality;³⁷⁸ or he follows Heidegger's being-in-the-world to suggest its shortcomings. Yes, he describes the command in the face; but the command itself is less linked with phenomenological description than it is with the enigma of what escapes phenomenal appearing. Further, contrary to Lacoste's suggestion, "is" and "ought" are not so tightly woven for Levinas, if for no other reason than the question of ontology—even as a support for deontology—is not the definitive one.³⁷⁹ The question of obligation operates in a realm 'otherwise than being.' Ethical obligation is as much indebted to scripture,³⁸⁰ and a phenomenology at its limits, than to what can be reduced to phenomenological evidence.

Even if one resists Lacoste's reading of *Totality and Infinity*,³⁸¹ one must understand why he can claim that "the diversion that liturgy has as its task is perhaps alone in permitting us *to rigorously ground the ethical meaning of our facticity.*"³⁸² He assumes that Levinas conflates the imposition of the Good with how the world imposes

Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 225.

³⁷⁸ "Responsibility for the other, going against intentionality and will, which intentionality does not succeed in dissimulating, signifies not the disclosure of a given and its reception, but the exposure of me to the other, prior to every decision." (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 141.) See also Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 61-73. Levinas claims that despite his departure from Husserl, he is doing phenomenology. He maintains that his "method is, all the same, an 'intentional analysis'" wherein his ethics his "in some fashion more ontological than ontology." (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 87, 90.)

³⁷⁹ Levinas, "Initial Questions," *God, Death, and Time*, 7-10.

³⁸⁰ Though Levinas "do[es] not deny that [his philosophical and confessional texts] have a common source of inspiration." However, he does claim that he "would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of [his] philosophical texts, to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument." (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 18.) This summons the debated effect of his quoting scripture throughout his philosophical corpus. Though he does not use it as proof, he employs it in his phenomenological negations (See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 8-9).

³⁸¹ See, for example, Lacoste's summary of *Totality and Infinity* in footnote 5 (*Ibid.*, 201.)

³⁸² Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 70.

itself upon us.³⁸³ And yet, he seems equally suspicious of Levinas' appeals to an otherwise: what gives Levinas the ability to claim that the face obligates us, with the priority of an immemorial past?³⁸⁴ Lacoste suggests that this is a claim founded in the ambition of phenomenology: "to (re)capture the originary or, at least, the initial...before violence has taken hold of the world and its history, [in order to] propos[e] its alternative to the imperialism of violence."³⁸⁵ It is not that Lacoste himself denies this ambition in his own phenomenology; he claims that "liturgy subverts an erasure of the originary."³⁸⁶ His main contestation to Levinas is that he is not overt about the departure he takes from the world, from within the world, to critique the world.

Lacoste calls this departure, this "distance [which] is necessary for a true vantage point," liturgy.³⁸⁷ He agrees with Heidegger that the structures of the "world" and "earth," of its phenomenological "call," do not necessarily give an ethical order: "no relation to the world is given whereby, at once, we would be in an ethical situation and an other I would necessarily appear to us as a brother" for whom we are responsible.³⁸⁸ And the structures of world and earth neither necessitate a liturgical space. Lacoste concedes to Levinas that being-in-the-world is not amoral. Yet, he describes the construal of "human faces we meet" as "brothers to whom we are completely indebted" as a "free and charitable overdetermination" of our facticity. In other words, Lacoste believes that ethics is more like liturgy, rooted in facticity, but deriving the power of its claims from a

³⁸³ Ibid., 72.

³⁸⁴ Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," *The Religious*, 83-85.

³⁸⁵ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 71.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 88.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 74.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 72.

“surplus.”³⁸⁹ To ethically critique the structures of facticity, one must inhabit the liturgical “margins of history.”³⁹⁰ To claim the other’s absolution, one must occupy a threshold less subjected to the chiaroscuro of the Good in the world.³⁹¹

The “liturgical interstice” allows us to be-in-the-world while “exacerbat[ing] our not-being-at-home.”³⁹² In placing the ego’s existence before the absolute, before God, Lacoste’s subject is aware of the eschatological possibilities never totally derived by facticity, knowledge, or ethical gestures. The liturgical non-event establishes the ego not as unequivocally for the other, but caught in the tension between its “empirical identity (its “consciousness”) and the eschatological vocation (the “soul”) it attests to in liturgy.”³⁹³ The soul’s vocation is as much ethical as it is liturgical, insofar as both involve responding to a call.³⁹⁴ But while the ethical “enables us to discern the eschatological meaning of this vocation,”³⁹⁵ it is the liturgical that prepares the symbolic space from which we experience “how far away from the *eschaton* we actually exist.”³⁹⁶ The distance of the eschaton amplifies one’s care for, even restlessness in, the world—which can be taken up ethically.³⁹⁷

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 80.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 80.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 72-74.

³⁹² Ibid., 74. Tillich claims that God’s omnipresence (which need not be entirely at odds with Lacoste’s ‘inexperience’) provides the courage to accept—not to negate entirely—“the insecurities and anxieties of spatial existence. In the certainty of the omnipresent God we are always at home and not a home, rooted and uprooted, resting and wandering, being placed and displaced, known by one place and not known by any place.” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 278.)

³⁹³ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 75.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 75.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 75.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 72.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 76.

Nevertheless, Lacoste insists that, whereas ethics tends toward questions of response and responsibility, liturgy emphasizes inoperativity, uselessness, even the stillness of sleep.³⁹⁸ Though Levinas³⁹⁹ and Heidegger⁴⁰⁰ both prize a certain passivity that breaks the activity-passivity dichotomy, Lacoste tends to focus on thinking's patience and ethics' passivity as *necessities*. Liturgy, in contrast, bespeaks a surplus of uselessness. Its surplus critiques not only the link between being and doing, but also between being and thought. Lacoste mentions a certain sleep and certain vigilance insofar as they mark a surplus that render us powerless.⁴⁰¹ Vigilance alone is not liturgical; even the "reveler" can push himself to ignore biological need.⁴⁰² Key to liturgy is its surplus over the claims of necessity in a way that is not merely defiance of biological need. In discussing sleep as a metaphor for liturgy, he does not discount that sleep is a biological need; but it is also an experience of a need that stills want, that dulls will. Prayer, similarly, is not simply an operation to serve biological need, even if many tout its benefits for the body. For Lacoste, prayer is an admission that we are in relation to what is needless, absolute because not necessary.⁴⁰³

Indeed, liturgy does not even submit to the necessary structures of time. It is a non-time, insofar as time forces our concern with future projects (Heidegger).⁴⁰⁴ The liturgy "divests us" of our concern with ourselves, even as it intensifies this concern into

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 78-80.

³⁹⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 92, 121.

⁴⁰⁰ Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 64, 70, 75.

⁴⁰¹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 79.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 79-80.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 82-83.

a restlessness for the Parousia presence.⁴⁰⁵ This is a significant motif in Lacoste: divestment and diversion, via one's liturgical relation to the Absolute, *intensifies* one's relation to the factual world. The liturgical intensifies both one's relation to history, and one's anticipation of an eschatological achievement in history. The liturgical can ever "satisfy" us; it can, at best, shape our choices to see the world in its allusions to God.⁴⁰⁶ As allusive, the liturgical "remind[s] us that the Absolute, which we are free to encounter, is never close to us without this very proximity sheltering a still greater distance."⁴⁰⁷ Though liturgy does not permit an experience of God's Parousia presence, it yet grants "intervals" of proximity.⁴⁰⁸ These intervals "offer us the joys of definitive peace here and now" without tearing us from the "concrete hold" of the world.⁴⁰⁹

This proximity of peace is not banal. Liturgy does not simply give us the "more than necessary offerings."⁴¹⁰ Liturgy promises us peace, but it does so through disruption; indeed, the Absolute "promises to 'disrupt' us for eternity."⁴¹¹ Liturgy is the ability to accept disruption, and its gifts, which could not arrive if liturgy simply "divest[ed] us of our concern with the world."⁴¹² The disruption, the disquiet, of liturgy is its "power to

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁰⁶ This intensification demands one's entire being, and is never derived from a pure reason and its impositions. As Lacoste writes, "When it is a matter of realities that are 'created' (but that we do not yet know are created!) and that allude to a 'creator,' it is by us, in our integrality, rationality, affection, and decision, that this allusion would be accepted." (Lacoste, "Knowing God through Loving Him," *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 143-144.)

⁴⁰⁷ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 84-85.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹² Ibid., 86.

subvert” the reality it nevertheless confirms (provisionally).⁴¹³ The subversion of the real does more than disturb our concepts; it grants us subversive symbols. In the subversion, which Lacoste calls a “conversion,”⁴¹⁴ we come to realize that the structures of our being-in-the-world are not definitive. Indeed, in their liturgical bracketing, they are exposed as diversions from an original time. This original time is not Heidegger’s origin that can be remembered by the poets as a destiny for the people. The originary time of liturgy is a different kind of remembrance, “concentrat[ing] on nothing that has taken place in the world and its time; it is another name for the time and attention we devote to God.”⁴¹⁵ Thus, this originary time is neither Levinas’ immemorial past, if for no other reason than liturgy does not operate as an obligation, but as a longing for the Parousia.⁴¹⁶ It is the opening of a possibility for “think[ing] our vocation” as an exposure before God: both enjoying this incomplete possession of the Parousia, and remaining patient in the inexperience of the Absolute. For Lacoste, then, it is not that one enjoys God as in Schleiermacher’s “feeling” or “immediate ‘knowledge’ [*savoir*].”⁴¹⁷ The liturgical does not deny a relation to God through knowledge; and it is not impeded by Hegelian *Erkenntnis*, or “rationally acquired knowledge.”⁴¹⁸ However, liturgy does not singularly serve theological knowledge; it is a site “in which [one] awaits the morning when the experiential will confirm the conceptual contents of knowledge.”⁴¹⁹

⁴¹³ Ibid., 87.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

The liturgical relation, unlike the ethical one, does not altogether deny the gifts of conceptual knowledge. Liturgy engages our “reality in its entirety” in order to subvert its ultimacy.⁴²⁰ When concepts are symbolically subverted in liturgy, the consciousness learns patience and powerlessness. Knowledge cannot claim a “hold over God,” neither can “attentiveness and expectation.”⁴²¹ It is this experience of negation without complete eradication, this apophasis that never denies the desire for presence, that liturgy cultivates. Lacoste names this experience hospitality. It is not simply ethical hospitality, nor one’s openness to being. It is less satisfying, insofar as the extended invitation to God does not simply expect the presence of the Other demanding my responsibility. It is not that Levinas would emphasize the presence of the Other as a satisfaction of presence. Quite the opposite, the other hollows out my desire, and never satisfies my attempt to commend myself as ethical. However, insofar as the Other is a discernible Other, a neighbor whose proximity is too near as to render me an obsessed hostage, he encounters me in a way I cannot even expect of God.

If the guest, the Absolute, comes at all, he will “come in his own time...or perhaps already has come incognito.”⁴²² There is never an assurance, this side of death, that the Absolute will appear in the frankness of a face or in the “definite intimacy of the immediate.”⁴²³ At best, the liturgical subject has the sacraments: “in which the Absolute occupies a place here and now,” without negating the interposition of the world between us and God. In the doctrine of real presence, and even in incarnation, our participation in

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 91.

⁴²² Ibid., 92. Levinas has suggested as much (Levinas, “A Man-God?,” *Entre Nous*, 57).

⁴²³ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 92.

the Absolute's occurs "only on the condition that the world interposes itself," and is therefore never rendered "diaphanous and theophanic."⁴²⁴ This "chiaroscuro omnipresence" of God only stirs our restlessness. Restlessness, in turn, aids in "hasten[ing]" the Kingdom's arrival, but only "asymptotically."⁴²⁵ Thus, restless prayer is not our offering of goods works, but the confession of "empty hands."⁴²⁶

This is not to say that we have no part in the liturgical inexperience of God. Indeed, Lacoste insists that "dwelling liturgically" is ultimately "born of a decision we make."⁴²⁷ It is a decision because our inherence in the world does not necessarily demand our subversion of this world. Accordingly, Lacoste defines liturgy as "the resolute deliberate gesture made by those who ordain their being-in-the-world a being-before-God."⁴²⁸ We can avoid this choice entirely, taking as definitive the constraints of flesh, and the non-transcendable world. We could even choose to dwell poetically, in the Heideggerian *Geviert*, wherein we can be mortals before gods without ever having to question the ultimacy of Heideggerian facticity. Liturgy contests both the absolution of concepts and the structures of facticity, releasing us from: any claim to definitive holds, mastery of our own work, ownership of our own death, projection of our own projects. However, it only does so through symbolic subversion. Liturgy does not call us to flee

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 39.

the world, or to immolate our flesh. It is much more subtle.⁴²⁹ In closing, then, I will offer brief descriptions of three symbolic subversions that Lacoste provides.

First, his figure of liturgical *exclusion*—the vision of St. Benedict. In prayer, St. Benedict has a vision of the world as “a little ball lost in the immensity of the sky.”⁴³⁰ This vision does not negate St. Benedict’s inherence in the world. However, it offers an example of “the situation of him who faces the world and finds himself momentarily *excluded* from it.”⁴³¹ The world does not become a mere being for St. Benedict; he still experiences the world as a horizon in which beings are manifest. Nevertheless, the vision’s alternative implies that one can achieve distance from the world from within it: “the topology of inherence can at least be exceeded symbolically and (since it is a question here of a new relation to the world) perhaps ontologically.”⁴³² Lacoste does not suggest that we subvert topology by making the world a totality, or mere representation. Rather, in contemplation, “being-there finds itself bracketed.”⁴³³

Second, his figure of liturgical *reclusion*—the “eccentric dwelling” of the ascetic in his cell.⁴³⁴ The “being-there” of the ascetic is not the denial of Heideggerian world, since from within the cell the ascetic’s desire for God “remind[s] him of his not-being-at-

⁴²⁹ Lacoste attributes this subtlety to the God who proposes our participation without imposing. “God does not appear to us as the Alps appear to us, like a great object the existence of which would impose itself on us. And God does not appear to us at the end of a constraining argument like the one that constrains us to admit that Socrates is mortal if he is a man and all men are mortal. God appears to us, on the contrary, as that in whose favors we can take part, or not.” (Lacoste, “Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 146.)

⁴³⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 23.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

home and his foreignness.”⁴³⁵ And neither is the Heideggerian earth absent because “even the most humble dwelling can embody a homeland for man.”⁴³⁶ However, in his cell, “the recluse is neither a foreigner nor at home: he is there only to face up to the demands of the absolute.”⁴³⁷ Exposed to this demand, the ascetic does not, in turn, demand that God become a guest in his cell. Indeed, in occupying the cell, he has established a marginal topology that disrupts the false worship of place. He attempts to be nowhere, “*symbolically*, his place is a *nonplace*.”⁴³⁸ In removing himself from the society of men, and the demands of production, the recluse attempts to inhibit the world to “the ineluctable point of contact between facticity (being-in) and the freedom that opts for liturgy.”⁴³⁹ Though the recluse can never ultimately violate the calls of the world and earth, he can bracket them in his attempt to “unreservedly concern oneself with God.”⁴⁴⁰ He “dispos[es] of place”⁴⁴¹ in a way not unlike Heidegger’s poet. Except that from his threshold, his nonplace, he can better “herald the definitive realities” that Heidegger would dismiss as religious.⁴⁴² Lacoste maintains that the recluse can allude to an eschaton he never possesses.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 27. Interestingly, Levinas writes of the liturgical elevation of mourners as a “non-place.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Poetry and Resurrection: Notes on Agnon,” *Proper Names*, 12-13.

⁴³⁹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 27.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 29. The pilgrim, not defined by the particularities of territory, also figures this subversion (Ibid., 29-30).

Third, his figure of *madness*—the “extravagance” of asceticism furthered in the “transgression of the fool.”⁴⁴³ If the ascetic is a symbol of “nonpossession” pushed to its most literal interpretation, Lacoste does not therefore deny the power of its symbolism.⁴⁴⁴ The ascetic may convey a naïveté in his very literal attempts to subvert the world; but he is nevertheless significant in pushing to its limits the belief that the “Absolute alone ‘suffices.’”⁴⁴⁵ In this belief, the ascetic closely resembles the fool. If the ascetic furthers this minimalism in his literal poverty; the fool assumes minimalism in his crudeness. Lacoste does not glorify the madness that alienates, but rather emphasizes the special freedom of the fool.⁴⁴⁶ The fool chooses to transgress the world by “assum[ing] the characteristics of the mutilated human, poorer than is any other.”⁴⁴⁷ Similarly, he assumes the impoverishment of ignorance, which actually serves to critique the “experiences said to fully encompass the definite truth of the I.”⁴⁴⁸ Lacoste’s fool is a humorist, able to expose the sage’s pretensions to absolute truth.⁴⁴⁹ The fool exists in a “fragile domain of anticipation,” more aware than the sage of the limits of speculative knowledge, and the conceits of realized eschatology.⁴⁵⁰ Yet, because the fool is happy with the provisional,⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁴⁹ Richard Kearney also associates humor with “deep *humility*” and reminds: “True mystics and saints were, it is often said, noted for their humor. Recall Eckhart: ‘God told me a joke and seeing him laugh taught me more than all the Scriptures.’” (Kearney, *Anatheism*, 42-43.) One is also reminded of Scott Cairns *Idiot Psalms*, particularly the one that closes: “Make me to awaken daily with a willingness/ to roll out readily, accompanied/ by grateful smirk, a giddy joy,/ the idiot's undying expectation,/ despite the evidence.” Scott Cairns, “Idiot Psalm 2,” *Idiot Psalms* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2014), 21.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 181.

he gets to enjoy peace “today even without this desire [for God’s presence] being fulfilled.”⁴⁵² Even though the sage claims to understand the definite, the fool exposes this understanding as a consolation without joy. Chastened by the inexperience of God, the sage compensates with concepts that render God present to thinking. The fool, though never denying the inexperience of God, sees in the sage’s prize of wisdom a “paradoxical impotence to let the definitive shine through in the provisional ahead of its time.”⁴⁵³ The sage permits God to enter concepts in a way he will not allow God to enter experience. In this sense, he remains poorer than the fool, who allows God to appear: as disruption of definition, as stir of desire, as critique of conceptual constraints.⁴⁵⁴

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Again, Lacoste does not refute the role of knowledge in the liturgical encounter.⁴⁵⁵ But this respect for knowledge need not suggest that, when one emerges from the liturgical encounter, “it is to the concept that he is returned, as though to a norm that sets the standard for all experience, with no possibility of another authority creating

⁴⁵¹ It is not impossible for the fool to be, in his praise of the provisional, a poet. Adam Zagajewski, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” and “Kierkegaard on Hegel,” *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, trans. Clare Cavanagh, Renata Gorczynski, Benjamin Ivry, and C.K. Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 60, 88.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁵⁴ As Lacoste writes of Kierkegaard’s God, who appears in his *Philosophical Fragments*, without simply being an object present to thought: “And God does not appear in order to be thought because the sole aim of the appearing is to be loved by us. To appear in order to be loved and for this alone, however, requires that God be present in a kenotic mode: God must be loved but not dazzle. There is appearance, for there is presence in the flesh. Yet, and this is the important point, there is not appearance for thought or for belief. The God of the *Fragments* is not present for us to believe that he is present. God is also not present, *a fortiori*, in order for that presence to become the object of philosophical or theological thought. The sole *logos* to which Kierkegaard appeals is that of love.” (Lacoste, “On Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 131.)

⁴⁵⁵ “Liturgy requires knowledge. But knowledge calls for liturgy.” (*Ibid.*, 183.)

such a norm.”⁴⁵⁶ God comes to thought, but “first gives us to think that the work of the logos will lead to misunderstandings if it does not enable us to encounter God.”⁴⁵⁷

Though concepts can lead us to exposition before God, they can also hinder us.

“Conceptual elaboration” is not rendered futile by the gospel; neither should rehearsing the narrative of salvation history be the only theology.⁴⁵⁸ The difficulty of any thinking— theological or otherwise—is to not let the conceptual apparatus occlude what it is intended to illuminate.⁴⁵⁹ The aim of this chapter has been to suggest how each thinker evoke allusiveness by drawing attention to non-conceptual dimensions of awareness. It is not as though they neglect concepts, or shirk their capacity for understanding. Rather, through what is not entirely reducible to conceptual correlation, they advocate for a thinking more like Rosenzweig’s allusive naming. As in the discipline of naming, they respect the richness, the alterity, the concreteness, and the ambiguity of reality, without letting this respect mandate a silence for thinking, or eliminate a relation (linguistic, ethical, or liturgical) altogether.

How to speak toward the reality of God in its holiness, its absolution from and proximity to us? Certainly Levinas’ ethical saying suggests that thinking alone, if conceived as apart from praxis, is not sufficient to this task. But granting that we wish for thinking to prompt an ethical reverence (and responsibility) for difference, how might language convey the revelation of God, without this revelation being reduced to our thinking of it? Lacoste would ask for an articulation of how the Absolute comes to us in

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁵⁹ Or, to draw this point away from the metaphor of illumination, for Levinas, the rigors of rationality should not distract from, but rather support and learn from, the demands of responsibility.

our embodied being,⁴⁶⁰ even as it finds a means of displacement via the soul.⁴⁶¹ But what understanding of language, and therefore thought, could reflect this threshold position: of Heidegger's thinker-poet, readied before the destinal sending of the gods; of Weil's metaxu, separated to connect us through its distance; of Levinas' ethics, receiving the Other without conceptual assimilation;⁴⁶² of Lacoste's liturgical encounter, 'placed' on the margins of being-in-the-world?

This allusive ligament—by which our understanding of what *is* stretches reflexively toward an *otherwise*—cannot be merely conceptual. Each thinker resists rendering the ab-solute as an object for the grip of concept (*Begriff*). They have reminded that thinking must be more porous: opened to receive, to host, what cannot be merely conceived.⁴⁶³ Tillich names this capacious thinking, and its language, symbolic. The symbol is not a concept, insofar as concepts “objectify” and “reify.”⁴⁶⁴ According to Tillich, concepts are attuned to substances, essences; symbols are more attuned to the relation of the absolute to particular, though provisional, mediations. For example, Tillich distinguishes between the symbol of immortality, and the concept of immortality. As a symbol, immortality is “the experience of ultimacy” that perhaps begins in “man's immediate awareness that he is finite and that he transcends finitude exactly in this awareness.”⁴⁶⁵ The capacity for self-transcendence alludes to immortality—not as a

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁶² Despite Levinas' emphasis on ethics as ever going out toward the other, this does not mean that the other does not come towards me that I might receive, or welcome, the Infinite. (Derrida, *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas*, 18.)

⁴⁶³ Granted, if concept were construed as nearer to birthing (conception) than gripping, its usage would seem more appropriate.

⁴⁶⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 411.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 410.

conceptual preoccupation about the soul's substance—but as the qualification (or to use Lacoste's word, bracketing) of finitude. Immortality is the possibility of a hope that though “our finitude does not cease to be finitude...it is ‘taken into’ the infinite, the eternal.”⁴⁶⁶ Or as Lacoste would say, we are not definitively our empirical selves, but have a reality that can only be defined eschatologically.

Tillich calls this process essentialization, which must be confusing given Rosenzweig's critique of essence, and his own critique of reification. It is key to Tillich's theology that essentialization “undercuts the absoluteness” of demonized religious symbols, and their conceptual forms.⁴⁶⁷ Essentialization is what exposes finitude (of individual potentialities, of theological expression, of religious institutions) as such. However, the *symbol* of essentialization is not its conceptual counterpart—the absorption of everything finite into “a state of immovable perfection.”⁴⁶⁸ As a symbol, it is the “awareness of the element of ‘ought to be,’ and with it the awareness of responsibility, guilt, despair, and hope.”⁴⁶⁹ In other words, Tillich's symbol of essentialization is implicit in Heideggerian anxiety, and explicit in Levinasian responsibility: it is the capacity to not only acknowledge our existential possibilities, but also the demand of our responsibility

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 411.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 407.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 405.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 406.

for them to the point of affirming the other's singularity.⁴⁷⁰ Essentialization, as a symbol, alludes to what eludes every existential negation, every finite concept.⁴⁷¹

The difference between the symbol of immortality and its conceptual form is that the latter devolves into "the question of evidence."⁴⁷² Tillich claims that, in metaphysics, the symbol of immortality gave way to "Platonist arguments" regarding the immortality of the soul and the existence of God.⁴⁷³ Natural theology, according to Tillich, often depended naively upon these arguments, "unafraid of the unavoidable primitivistic and superstitious consequences."⁴⁷⁴ By demanding faith in concepts of the "naturally immortal substance,"⁴⁷⁵ instead of existential adherence to the symbolic content of the soul, Christian theology invoked philosophical critique (Locke, Hume, Kant among others). Though arguments for the existence of the soul, and for God, have been largely deemed unsatisfactory, certain philosophers of science still discuss symbols such as the soul, God, and immortality in conceptual terms of evidence. Insofar as atheists defend their position as the 'natural response' to the lack of evidence, they require concepts that do not account for the symbolic content of Christianity. Their critiques of religion often repeat the errors of the church (confusion of concept and symbol) instead of expose them. Tillich reminds that often critiques assume proof or disproof of religious concepts, without regard for their symbolic import.

⁴⁷⁰ This is a claim that not only takes into account Tillich's Heideggerian strain (the individual before his destiny), but also the ways in which his understanding of essentialization is somewhat Levinasian: a "condensation" of "the eternal significance of the individual person's uniqueness... especially [expressed] in his face." (Ibid., 406, 413.)

⁴⁷¹ It is akin to Origen's "restitution of everything" without removing the stakes of existence. (Ibid., 407.)

⁴⁷² Ibid., 410.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 410.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 411.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 411.

This wedge between symbol and concept remains crucial for any thinking of the ab-solute, insofar as such thinking should avoid making holy its own conceptual distinctions.⁴⁷⁶ But how does one prevent thought from devolving into either religious fideism or the limits of empirical proofs? How to think what has a reality irreducible to our *knowledge* of that reality?⁴⁷⁷ For Tillich, symbols are most capable of expressing the infinite, or the “ultimate,” because they participate in the reality to which they point; they represent a reality to which they relate though they, properly speaking, are not that reality.⁴⁷⁸ Symbolism is not a participation, or representation, wherein alterity (in this case, divine reality) is assimilated fully into the confines of the word, as Levinas might criticize. The symbolic word operates neither as the correlation of concept,⁴⁷⁹ nor the arbitrariness of a sign (which, for Tillich, has nothing to do with the reality toward which it points except through convention.)⁴⁸⁰ The symbol’s participation in reality may be more akin to the face’s relation to the trace of God in which it stands. It makes proximate the infinite, even as the infinite must necessarily resist nearness.⁴⁸¹

Even though Tillich speaks of symbols in ontological terms, he employs “ontology” in the way that Levinas employs metaphysics: the ontological, as the

⁴⁷⁶ See Tillich’s critique of the demonic element in absolute judgments (Ibid., 406-407).

⁴⁷⁷ This is not just a question for theology, but also for philosophy and the sciences, insofar as they rely on theoretical or speculative moments.

⁴⁷⁸ Tillich, “The Meaning of Symbol,” *The Essential Tillich*, 41.

⁴⁷⁹ Though, Tillich will write of the important correlation between the symbol and its receivers. (Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 239.) This method of correlation need not be read as the ‘same’ reducing the ‘other’ to itself in an assimilation (as Barth or Levinas might critique.) Tillich’s method of correlation simply suggests the hermeneutic circle whereby we cannot hear the symbol, even in its alterity, unless the symbol appeals to us somehow—either by responding to a question, or even initiating a question, of ultimate concern. (Ibid., 59-66.)

⁴⁸⁰ Tillich, “The Meaning of Symbol,” *The Essential Tillich*, 45.

⁴⁸¹ See Richard Kearney’s reading of Paul Ricoeur, particularly the latter’s suggestion that “An idol must die so that a symbol of being may begin to speak.” (Kearney, *Anatheism*, 76-77.)

metaphysical, resists reduction to history, dogma, or concept. Though symbols are not the face,⁴⁸² demanding my ethical response, symbols deeply inform our ability to respond ethically, to be chastened in our demonic reductions of the Other to the same.⁴⁸³ Tillich's symbol resembles, without replacing, the "concrete abstraction" of the face.⁴⁸⁴ Like the face, the symbol is neither abstract "like the brutal sensible datum of the empiricists," nor like the metaphysician's concept, born of "the logical process starting from the substance of beings and going from the particular to the general."⁴⁸⁵ Tillich's symbol can claim its position of concrete abstraction, of alluding to the absolute, as otherwise than empiricism or mere concept, because of its sacramental quality. The symbol, under Tillich's description of the sacramental, is not the real presence of God in God's representation, but the mediation of the holy that is not, strictly speaking, the medium itself. Insofar as language participates symbolically in a reality that exceeds it, it can be the basis not only for ontological but also moral (ethical) distinctions.⁴⁸⁶ Tillich's understanding of symbol entails an existential posture: permitting one to dwell in ambiguity even as one makes necessary ethical distinctions.

As in the example of immortality, religious symbols are not a release from the existential stakes implied by human finitude, nor a deferral of the subject's responsibility, nor an exemption from the claims of reality. It is rather that symbols allow thought to

⁴⁸² Or as Levinas writes, "This coming from *elsewhere* [of the face] is not a *symbolic reference* to that *elsewhere* as to a term." (Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 102.)

⁴⁸³ Jill Robbins has raised the question about the metaphoricity of the face, while remaining sensitive to Levinas' project. (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, xxiv.)

⁴⁸⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91.

⁴⁸⁵ Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 102.

⁴⁸⁶ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 63-84.

approach reality differently than signs do in mathematics⁴⁸⁷ or in logical positivism.⁴⁸⁸ If Levinas wishes to critique philosophy, he must show how its concepts exclude the alterity to which they attempt to point—or as Tillich might say, how the concepts fail symbolically under demonic distortions.⁴⁸⁹ Levinas writes about alterity in such a way that his language disrupts the concepts under his critique, and therefore comes to resemble the epiphany of the face he describes. His writing bears the wounds of the Other, in a way not wholly unlike the face who bears the proximity of God.

The difficulty of Levinas'—or even Heidegger's—dismissal of the symbol lies in the fact that they think the symbol is a diversion, a mask, that cannot respectfully mediate alterity. The symbol, they suppose, decorates alterity with some metaphysician's indulgence. Tillich might say that they are dealing with the “concept” of symbols, and not with their symbolic possibilities. He could cite the way that both Heidegger and Levinas articulate a trace that does not merely indicate presence, or reveal definitively an absence, and thereby makes proximate a reality insoluble to ‘brute’ fact and conceptual abstractions. It may be that a richer understanding of Tillich's ‘symbol,’ in contrast to concepts and signs, reflects the Levinasian ‘third way’ between revelation and dissimulation.⁴⁹⁰ This third way of symbolic language, in turn, will require that we hear in Tillich's symbols not only Weil's sacramentality, but also Lacoste's inexperience of God. The symbol, for Tillich as for Weil and Lacoste, is a relation to reality that does not

⁴⁸⁷ “...not everything in reality can be grasped by the language which is most adequate for mathematical sciences.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 54.)

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁸⁹ “In such experiences [of the holy] religion lives and tries to maintain the presence of, and community with, this divine depth of our existence. But since it is ‘inaccessible’ to any objectifying concept it must be expressed in symbols.” (*Ibid.*, 131.)

⁴⁹⁰ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 103.

demand its co-presence or correspondence to experience, to phenomenal categories, to thought. It is not that Tillich's symbol is the definitive allusive structure, canceling out the poet's encounter with the holy, or the subject's encounter with the face. Rather, I use Tillich's symbol to articulate why the allusive mode permits thought and language to engage the ab-solute without dissolving it into concepts and empty words.

This remains the bind of thinking, and its language, with regard to the ab-solute: by definition, the infinity of the neighbor, and the Infinite God, are not beings that one could grasp physically or conceptually.⁴⁹¹ And yet, we somehow have contact with what we cannot grasp: the *name of God* enters the mouths of prayer and praise,⁴⁹² enters the mind like a trauma,⁴⁹³ and the neighbor yet *appears*, giving herself to be encountered, if even as a “counter-phenomena.”⁴⁹⁴ God has historically informed our concepts of alterity, truth, justice, and beauty—even if the phenomenal world and conceptuality cannot be said to contain God. But this understanding of God's holiness, if only construed as the separation that informs our conceptual distinctions, distracts us from Levinas' point: the name of God, which preserves God's absence, is the call to responsibility for the neighbor who is all too proximate.⁴⁹⁵ Even the name, *Adonai*, is not an intimacy that brings God near to Abraham, but rather becomes the means of God's departure (“his

⁴⁹¹ Being may not be adequate to God at all. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹² The mouths of human beings and cosmic beings, as Psalm 19 suggests.

⁴⁹³ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 161.

⁴⁹⁴ Jean-Luc Marion uses this phrase to describe Levinas' face in its irreducibility to “intentional objectivity.” (Marion, “The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas,” *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 224.)

⁴⁹⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 69.

actual effacement”) that reflexively obligates Abraham to the three strangers.⁴⁹⁶ I take this detour to acknowledge that any consideration of the symbols for God stands in the shadow of Levinas’ resistance to symbolism. The question then becomes: how might we speak of God in symbols that are less like concepts or signs, and more like proper names?⁴⁹⁷ The face has a reality apart from the “concept, idea [or] symbol” of God;⁴⁹⁸ but it surely resembles the “proper name” of God insofar as it “assert[s] an irreducible relation to the knowledge which thematizes, defines or synthesizes.”⁴⁹⁹ A language that names does not simply construct symbols *about* the face, *about* God, but more significantly, speaks *toward* the face, and remains *directed to* God.

In order to approach, in the next chapter, how naming gives way to a thinking of the ab-solute that is more akin to love, we must briefly return to Tillich’s understanding of symbols. We must ask if they could function more like Levinas’ “proper name” and less like Levinas’ suspected “sign”? It is not that Tillich’s allusive understanding of symbol can attain to, or replace, the particular “immediacy” of the face.⁵⁰⁰ Supported by his analysis of the “symbol of God” and its confession of God’s non-symbolic reality,⁵⁰¹ Tillich understands the difference between an allusive symbol and an elusive reality. But given that even Levinas *writes* of the face in a way that performs his ethics, what mediations best allude to alterity, rather than occlude it?

⁴⁹⁶ Levinas, “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts,” *Beyond the Verse*, 125.

⁴⁹⁷ This will be further explored in the next chapter. Rosenzweig is, of course, not alone in considering the difference between name and concept. See for example, Jean-Luc Marion’s meditation on Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Divine Names*. (Marion, “The Distance of the Requisite and the Discourse of Praise: Denys,” *The Idol and the Distance*, 137-195.)

⁴⁹⁸ Levinas, “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts,” *Beyond the Verse*, 125.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰⁰ On the face’s immediacy, see Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91. It is immediate not in terms of easy access, but as irreducible to its mediation.

⁵⁰¹ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 61.

The symbol's mediation, as a participation in what exceeds it, is not holy.⁵⁰² Rather the symbol is, like any medium, the means through which holiness might reach us. Through religious symbols, the holy reaches us not simply as a thought, but as a mutual opening of "reality" and the "soul."⁵⁰³ Thus, the symbol is not a mere vessel for the holy that we can discard, but a key that continues to unlocks us. Tillich has already suggested that demonized concepts prevent this opening to the divine reality. It is not that concepts are inherently demonic, but that concept—insofar as it denotes the possessive grip of comprehension—can thwart the opening that the absolute demands. Symbols, too, can be demonized, lifted from their limits as supposed absolutes; but even this demonization occurs when symbols are treated as conceptual propositions, subject to definitive proof or refusal. In point of fact, symbols are not linguistic signs, which can be debated in their arbitrary assignment. They are neither the signs of a logical positivist, which can be drawn upon as evidence. Furthermore, unlike signs or concepts, symbols are not the property of an inventor; they have their own life. As Tillich distinguishes, "different from signs, symbols are born and die. Signs are consciously invented and removed."⁵⁰⁴ Though signs, too, point beyond themselves, symbol's both point toward and provisionally take in the reality.⁵⁰⁵ They mark its excess not as a matter of arbitrary indifference that then becomes a correlation (like the sign), but as the basis of relationship that preserves difference.

⁵⁰² Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 68.

⁵⁰³ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 59.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁰⁵ They respire and suffocate depending on whether "the situation is ripe for them." (Tillich, "The Meaning of Symbol," *The Essential Tillich*, 42.)

Symbols are thus better suited (than concepts and signs are) to the alterity they describe: they are not reducible to the will or consciousness of an individual or collective.⁵⁰⁶ The symbol is like a being in its mortality and its resistance to reduction; it is also a means of opening an otherwise than what *is*. Tillich writes of the symbol in a way similar to Levinas' articulation of the face: the symbol "opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us."⁵⁰⁷ The symbol is the mechanism of a beyond-within, "a transcendence within immanence."⁵⁰⁸ It is a manner of expressing God without eliding God's disruption of expression. Though, of course, this opening of reality—especially as Tillich continues to compare symbols to poetry and music⁵⁰⁹—can ring of a Heideggerian revealing-concealing of Being. However, in religious symbols, what is revealed is not simply the chiaroscuro of Being (as Lacoste might say), but God's absence as a reality beyond phenomenal revealing-concealing. Religious symbols have two fundamental levels in play: a "level which goes *beyond* the empirical reality we encounter...and the level which we find *within* the encounter with reality."⁵¹⁰ The former, transcendent level, is an attention to God's empirical absence (Lacoste), and an allusion that draws us into to the otherwise than what *is*. The latter, immanent level is the means by which we encounter God this side of death. Tillich knows that the symbols in which we write and imagine God are not God. And yet, "in our relationship to this ultimate we symbolize and must symbolize. We could not be in communication with God if he were only 'ultimate

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰⁸ Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," *Face to Face with Levinas*, 48.

⁵⁰⁹ Tillich, "The Meaning of Symbol," *The Essential Tillich*, 42.

⁵¹⁰ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 61.

being.”⁵¹¹ Of course, the name “ultimate being” can be held symbolically, informed both by a desire for the absolute and the risk of mediation demanded by ultimate concern.⁵¹²

To express God as “absolute” is the only unsymbolic, “direct and proper statement.”⁵¹³ Apart from this, every other statement is symbolic, indirect. It is significant that Tillich intentionally selects the “most abstract” name for God: “being-itself or the absolute,”⁵¹⁴ by which he also means, “the infinite.”⁵¹⁵ The abstraction preserves God’s distance, and challenges the relative limitations of symbols. And yet, it is *especially because of* this confession of the absolute God, that Tillich prizes symbolism. Symbols do not violate God’s infinitude in the same way that a concept would. Symbols are both abstract and concrete—the distance of the infinite in the proximity of the finite. As such, they avoid two violating reductions: the narrow demand of literality (as in strict empiricism), and the all-enveloping concept of totality (as in disembodied speculation).⁵¹⁶ As Derrida suggests, the name of God “*at the same time* imposes and forbids translation” into symbols.⁵¹⁷ From the name of God as infinite—YHWH as the name of what absolves itself from speech, from thought—comes the multiplication of symbols, and the proliferation of mediators whose lives inherit this allusive significance.⁵¹⁸ While symbols,

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 61.

⁵¹² “The risk of faith is based on the fact that the unconditional element can become a matter of ultimate concern only if it appears in a concrete embodiment.” (Ibid., 28.)

⁵¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 239.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 239.

⁵¹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 10.

⁵¹⁶ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 65-67.

⁵¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 108.

⁵¹⁸ “We are all mediators, translators. In philosophy, as in any other domain, one has to deal, without ever being sure, with what is implicit in the accumulated reserve, and thus with a great many mediations...together with the responsibilities assumed by these mediations.” Jacques Derrida, “An Interview with Derrida,” *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1988), 71-72.

with respect to the Ab-solute, are finite, the Ab-solute is also the beginning of symbolic generativity. The Ab-solute affords the metaphoric depth of symbols in which “the religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man’s spiritual life.”⁵¹⁹

Noting the allusive structure of symbols, Tillich suggests that God is not simply a signifier among others, nor a concept in which to gather some absolute spirit of history. God is a name in which we are actively, imperfectly, involved. This name is the ongoing play between “that which transcends infinitely our experience of ourselves as persons, and that which is so adequate to our being persons that we can say ‘Thou,’ to God, and can pray to him.”⁵²⁰ If we encounter the ab-solute in a symbolic engagement, we can neither accept only the “unconditional element of God” nor the personal element. Otherwise, we would perpetuate either the illusion that God is incapable of coming to mind, or the illusion that God is unable to subvert our polarities.⁵²¹ The ab-solute requires that we say its name under erasure: it is otherwise than our allusions to it; and yet this otherwise founds the possibility of an allusive relation.

The withdrawal of God is not only God’s abyssal ab-solution. It is not simply a theological interpolation of the elusiveness of Heideggerian Being. Neither is God’s withdrawal totally equated with: the felt absence of God in our suffering; the good’s irreducible, inconsumable presence in beauty; the absolution of God from the empirical, the will, the mind; nor the transcendence of the other’s face. At least insofar as they are

⁵¹⁹ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 7.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁵²¹ If Levinas stresses the unconditional, negating the ego-thou relationship, it is not without granting the Other as the possibility of a certain relationship, a religious ‘relation without relation.’ (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.)

written, for Tillich, these are singular symbols that point toward, and no doubt proliferate in, the divine reality. Tillich's assertion of 'God qua absolute' (who no less grounds relationships) does not trivialize the realities for which these symbols stand. Saying that these words, these thoughts, these claims, are "symbols" negates neither their capacity to name God's alterity, nor their allusion to the in/experiences (phenomenological, aesthetic, ethical, liturgical) they engender. Each thinker's works afford rich symbols insofar as they incite thinking toward what cannot be left to the page. Because of, *not in spite of*, God's ab-solution, we need symbols—not least of which is the reader who herself becomes implicated in *the act* of allusion. Allusive living accepts the task of mediating the im-mediate: the burdensome, never completely received, gift of articulating, thinking-after, and pointing-toward the insolubility of the ab-solute.

You, poet: a tongue—held when divinity gives, giving when it withholds.

You, sufferer: of pain, a cry that listens; of beauty, a beholder dispossessed.

You, hostage: words like hands, stretched to say, "Here I am."

You, wanderer: exiled, but never homeless; toward God without God.

CHAPTER THREE

ELUSION: DISTANCE OF THE AB-SOLUTE

Love Song out of Nothing

You, being less than either dew or frost
 Which sun can melt, are deader than the dead
 Who once at least had life. You never fled
 Because you never came, were never lost
 From me since never held; you cannot boast
 Of having been a whole, so leave no shred,
 No footprint on the ground you did not tread.
 For where no flesh has been there is no ghost.

Mirage upon the desert of my mind
 Are you to me who walked alone before
 You formed from crooked heat waves of my thought.
 For when I mourn the want of you, I find
 I only mourn a part of me, no more,
 Who, minus you, am nothing but a nought.¹

Poet Vassar Miller bends thought to turn language's corners in her sonnet, "Love Song out of Nothing." The title, for instance, can be read as describing the love song that brings one out of nothing, the love song that emerges from personal deprivation, and also the love song born of an encounter with absence. What love can respect such absence, be born of it, recognize itself in it, without misconstruing it as mere illusion, a "mirage upon the desert" of one's mind? How to think one's way into this love, which mutually determines the lover and the beloved, away from the grip of essence, substance, and the distinction "flesh" places upon "ghost[s]"?

To welcome God's alterity, some have provocatively compared loving God with loving the dead.² But what is this apostrophe to the deader than the dead—the

¹ Vassar Miller, "Love Song out of Nothing," *If I had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991), 19.

insubstantial presence that can be addressed but not delineated on the continuum of Being? Why even speak *to*—and not simply *of*—this strange beloved who eludes the categories of part (“shred”) and “whole”? There is an apophatic reach in Miller’s address that is not mere negation. The poem treks through a series of denials, in which the speaker mentions a spectral presence hardly there. She concludes that this absence is somehow palpable, even constitutive. Without this nothing, the speaker would be “nothing but a nought.” And when she mourns the lack of this absence, she mourns a part of herself. The absence elusively challenges—and in its withdrawal gives her—her being.

It is significant that this poem is called a “love song” and not a thought experiment. If written only out of thought, the speaker would have to halt at “You formed from crooked heat waves of my thought.” Thinking distinguishes, at best, its own illusions, its own phantoms,³ and remains on the track of what those illusions might occlude. Only a thought transposed into the hollows of desire, can pronounce the name of what eludes thought’s grasp. This is no ‘mystical’ maneuver, as Rosenzweig (and Levinas) might fear. At the edge of what words can perform, what thought can classify, the speaker alludes to a formative absence. The absence gathers her best metaphors and eludes them; and *this*, Rosenzweig attributes to God. Starting from Rosenzweig’s suggestion that we make thought closer to language (allusive), I will move into the capacity of allusive thought to be more like disinterested love (honoring the elusive). I grant that such a task will be, in many ways, fated to the allusive insofar as I am

² Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 317-329.

³ For a list of these possible phantoms—suggesting that God’s reality is behind the world, or adequated to mind, or akin to either nothingness or everything—see Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 86-89.

attempting this through language. It will be enough if we can glimpse the flicker of this name, elusion, as it prevents allusive thinking—language itself—from regressing into the illusory mode of thought. I suspect that a certain love can lure our thinking about the absolute, the holy, away from its violent potential.

When Rosenzweig first approaches the distinction between thought and word, he does so by setting up the example of a lover and his beloved. The lover must trust in all that the name of his beloved engenders, even though his thinking may never be able to exhaust what this trust demands. In a sense, the beloved is absent to thought in a way that she is not to her name. The name sees her within the flux of time, and awaits what might come to presence from the ‘absence’ of the future. When thought becomes more akin to love, “we look for nothing beyond, do not try to walk suspiciously around the object; nor do we peer into its depths, but accept it rather as it is, as it hastens toward us. And then we leave it behind and wait for whatever is to come tomorrow.”⁴ One develops this capacity to wait, embedded in a life without essences, by recognizing the elusiveness of God’s name—without this elusiveness being either nothingness or everything. For Rosenzweig, God is the reserve of all names that remain absent,⁵ the capacity for allusion to resist the illusion of either (1) dismissing things in the world, persons, and God, as mere appearance, or (2) husking from them their distinctness in order to retrieve an essence. In the critique of these illusions, God’s word is the possibility of our naming as a divine—not merely philosophical—enterprise: the potential to engage others in their distinctness, as well as the capacity to wait for what this name would come to mean over

⁴ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

time. God is not the essence of naming, but the guarantor of a process whereby we embrace what comes to us and release what flows away from us in time.

God only confirms names in some unnameable time—the future toward which our words work. Until then, Rosenzweig advocates, we must remain open to the world, and not seek some other world beyond it.⁶ Reminiscent of Heidegger,⁷ he writes,

Just as we caught hold of a world existing in the realm of God and man, we must daringly seize upon a life which is content to be an in-between state, merely a transition from one thing to another. Let us reject the ever present answer, “Life is,” “Man is—” and let us become part of this onward-moving life of man. Her life “is” not, it simply occurs [*geschieht*].⁸

Would it be betraying Rosenzweig to suggest an elusive domain that tugs at thought? Not necessarily. The elusive is not another world, but the capacity to engage the world otherwise than as essentially known. In Rosenzweig, the elusive is not structured as an essence but as an occasioning.⁹ To prevent thinking from presenting the essences of ego,

⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷ As Van Buren quotes from Heidegger’s 1919 lectures, “‘Everything flows,’ having its ‘primal source from the in-itself of the streaming experience of life,’ from ‘the flowing stream’ of the *Ereignis* life.” (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 274-275.) This is not to say that Rosenzweig follows Heidegger’s suggestions about what Dasein is in its occurrence. And Heidegger did not apparently know of Rosenzweig, despite their geographical proximity. Rosenzweig had knowledge of Heidegger, specifically in Heidegger’s discussion with Ernst Cassirer at an academic congress in 1929. Based on this discussion, Rosenzweig placed Heidegger in the lineage of his own teacher, Hermann Cohen. He located Heidegger and Cohen in the “new thinking” that returns philosophy from the ideal to the individual. Of course, as Karl Lowith recounts, Cohen and Heidegger, and in turn Heidegger and Rosenzweig, part ways in their understandings of eternity, of God, and therefore of mortal being. Karl Lowith, “M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig: Or Temporality and Eternity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 3.1 (September, 1942): 53-77. See also Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁸ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 80.

⁹ Temporality brings with it the elusive structure of dispossession, but also the promise of the present as it works for the future. Thus the dispossession is not without gift. “No, this is definitely not essence. How can a moment constitute ‘essence’—the moment which is forever disappearing, forever being devoured by the past?...The moment cannot be ‘essence.’ The moment cannot be at all. And even if it could exist, it is already gone, it has turned into the past. It cannot struggle, even for an instant, against the pull of the past. And so the moment must be lost, and with it the present, and with it man’s being present to himself.” (Ibid., 81.)

or world, or God to itself, Rosenzweig emphasizes how the “ever-passing world speaks [through the] mouth” of an elusive caller—one who summons us to the future that both renews us and makes us responsible.¹⁰ This caller is “an ultimate secret, and again it is no secret at all.”¹¹ As the absolute future, God is too embedded and too remote for comprehension. Time prevents us from objectifying God, yes, but also prevents us from believing we can fathom humanity or the world.¹² God is exterior to the world, as humans are exterior to God and the world. One cannot husk the world of itself in order to reach God, or remove the shell of humanity to reach God’s divinity. For Rosenzweig, alterity is not inscribed in a zero sum game, but in the bridges of names. And God’s name as received in time is precisely the basis of this bridge and the paradox of its distance.¹³

As Rosenzweig helped us to see in the previous chapter, the elusion of God is not that God is nothing or that God is everything, but that God, too, is something.¹⁴ As something, God calls us to “live [our] particular and unique present,”¹⁵ but also permits that we call upon God—both as a proper name and a noun that consecrates. God’s name

¹⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹¹ Ibid., 83. Perhaps this secret caller implies Levinas’ “final secret of being” as Jeffrey Bloechl sensitively summarizes it, “being is both shot through with constant violence and charged with endless responsibility by virtue of its relation with an Infinite whose very infinity is immune to comprehension. Because we are incapable of accommodating that infinity, we are defined by violence; but because that infinity is therefore the ultimate interlocutor of our every individual word or deed, that violence is always framed in a wider responsibility.” (Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, 221.)

¹² Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 85.

¹³ Or as Rosenzweig conceives it, God’s name maintains a division and a reconciliation, the distance of the “truth [that] waits” for humans and the possibility of grasping it—not in thought—but in responsibility to the “proper time.” (Ibid., 93.)

¹⁴ Rosenzweig reminds that often, in the desire to render God as essential, one carries the logic that God can only transcend appearance by being “absolute nothing.” He probes this logic, asking: “Is *nothing* truly the ‘order’ which is the essence behind appearance—pure, unadulterated appearance as well as the appearance of something, to somebody, about something? Is there no other way out?” He finds that to characterize the beyond of appearance as nothing is as problematic as characterizing essence as everything. (Ibid., 70.)

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

is the maintenance of its two-fold character: to embrace and distinguish. And this name, the name that begets naming, is the birth of difference just as it is the interruption of a certain indifference.¹⁶ Like time, the name of God thus “gather[s]” in such a way as to promote proliferation, growth, dispersal, infinite networks.¹⁷

For Rosenzweig, we are present through the words of God spoken into time; we then become present to the world through our words. This presence is not the kind that arises in representing an essence to thought. If we claim that our words are capable of capturing essences, it is no accident that we cannot respect the complexity of our neighbor, or the elusion of God.¹⁸ God’s name, as eluding the demands of essence or identity, prevents us also our identification of God as pure difference.¹⁹ God’s name, not unlike Rosenzweig’s understanding of time, eludes and thereby opens allusions, preventing their congealing into illusions.

¹⁶ (Ibid., 92.) As Ricoeur, through Levinas, writes, “‘Transcendence owes to itself to interrupt its own demonstration’....The word ‘God’ appears only at this point where the hypostasis of the said is suspended at the moment of getting under way. In this precious interval, the word ‘God’ remains ‘the only one that does not extinguish or absorb its own saying’ (151). We must always unsay it as a proper name and a common noun.” Paul Ricoeur, “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinking of Testimony,” *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 124.

¹⁷ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 92-93.

¹⁸ Perhaps Levinas had this in mind when, in his 1979 preface to *Time and the Other*, he writes: “But then eternity—the idea of which, without borrowing anything from lived duration, the intellect would claim to possess a priori: the idea of a *mode of being*, where the multiple is one and which would confer on the present its full sense—is it not always suspect of only dissimulating the fulguration of the instant, its half-truth, which is retained in an imagination capable of playing in the intemporal and of deluding itself about a gathering of the ingatherable? In the final account, would not this eternity and this intellectual God, composed of these abstract and inconstant half-instants of the temporal dispersion, be an abstract eternity and a dead God?” (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 31.)

¹⁹ I summon Edward Farley’s voicing of the problematic and possibility of divine concealment. “Here too we have an ever-present undermining of the interpretive language at work, but in this case, what qualifies language and renders its metaphors unstable is not a concreteness we experience but the ultimate mystery of God. No term stands still, not even the name, God, not the negations and qualifiers not even formal terms like ‘exist’ or numbers. This problematic then is unique. How can one understand the way in which this unthematizable (non)entity comes to discourse, belief, worship? (It never comes into view.)...The problematic then was to understand why an ultimate Mystery was connected to human transformation, and why that connection brought about a specific cluster of metaphors: power, love, creativity, justice.” (Farley, *Thinking about Things*, 259.)

As intimated earlier, a respect for the alterity that is not nothing requires that thought stretch itself towards love. And if it is a love that is more than an “egoisme-à-deux,”²⁰ it must resemble an erotic movement never satisfied.²¹ In its resistance to satisfaction, this love edges on disinterestedness:²² it approaches the other in her perpetual retreat, never desiring to consummate in knowledge what the ab-solute has left to distance. It is not that this distance, opened by God’s ab-solution, is the limitation of a certain thinking. The infinite is not a limit before which thought and expression altogether cease. It is rather the endless extension of a limit, which demands that thought resemble patience, vigilance, desire. The ab-solute, as an out-pacing lure, is not the end of thinking, but the extension of its possibilities. As Jean-Luc Marion nimbly notes:

The ab-solute dissolves the tie that ties it to our thought. It undoes itself, whence our undoing, which, rigorously, is attuned to the ab-solute as such and, in its undoing, honors the ab-solute. Far from it being the case that the factually and theoretically unavoidable impossibility of thinking the ab-solutely unthinkable should end the enterprise of thinking, that impossibility authenticates and, in a sense, inaugurates the enterprise. The experiential verification that the unthinkable is not illusory consists precisely in the fact that thought does not manage to think it. Thought is intensified by failing before the unthinkable. That failure becomes its first recourse and a new incitation—I would therefore say: not only is it necessary to speak distance, but the impossibility of speaking it in the mode of other statements guarantees it as such, and even accomplishes it.²³

Far from dismissing thought and expression, the ab-solute incites them. Thus, as was discussed in the last chapter, speaking this distance, thinking it, requires language that

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 66.

²¹ In suggesting this erotic movement, I recall Rosenzweig’s language of being “content” in “an in-between state” and becoming “part of this onward-moving life.” (Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 80.)

²² For this reason, when I write love, I do not draw a value distinction between *eros* and *agape*.

²³ Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 141. See also Scott Cairn’s piece, “And Why Theology?” *Idiot Psalms* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2014), 17-18.

admits its own incommensurability.²⁴ In order to stress this generative distance of the absolute, I will return once again to the thinkers. Each performs a thinking that, at times, remains open, like love, to what ever eludes thought's reach. Thus elusion, as I attempt to describe it through these thinkers, is not properly a concept, nor a modality for thinking. It is rather like a lure that stretches thought from presence-absence, toward an absence that opens thinking to the ab-solute.

This opening, if it is at all a cure for the unhealthy thinking Rosenzweig locates in abstraction and essentialization, must not occasion our withdrawal from life, but rather intensify our opening toward it. The ab-solute eludes not like a "remote God, [or] isolated man, [or] fenced-in world."²⁵ But rather, it eludes like the holiday does the workday,²⁶ or like the prayer eludes the thought²⁷: separate from and interwoven into the everyday, providing an occasion to ask as much as an occasion to express gratitude, affording the courage to engage life even in accentuating life's frailty.²⁸

²⁴ As Meister Eckhart writes of the prophets: there is, no doubt, an integrity to silence before the absolute; but should one choose to speak, it should be in "gross matter," so that the very disproportion between the concrete and the absolute preserves an erotic distance. Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 137. This is, for Carson, the eros of analogy: "Plato's analogies are not flat diagrams in which one image (for example, gardens) is superimposed on another (the written word) in exact correspondence. An analogy is constructed in three-dimensional space. Its images float one upon the other without convergence: there is something in between, something paradoxical: Eros." Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (London: Dalkey Archive, 2009), 145. Regina Schwarz would claim that poetry is best suited for this disproportion, this non-convergence. She writes of George Herbert that "he never makes the claim that his verse is adequate to its subject, that he can describe God; to the contrary, he writes verse about that inadequation....Herbert's poetry does not try to offer a mental or sensory picture of the miracle of divine love; it does not try to contain its subject. Rather it somehow depicts a miracle that language can only point toward." Regina Mara Schwarz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 6.

²⁵ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 96.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

²⁸ These characteristics recall Rosenzweig's description of the holiday, of prayer, and of life's encounter with death implied in the relation that respects God's (and man, and the world's) exteriority. (*Ibid.*, 96-103.)

I. MARTIN HEIDEGGER: THE ELUSION OF THE LAST GOD

Herein lies the difficulty of claiming that God's absence is not nothing, but is rather generative for thought's extension into disinterested love: there are too many corpses. And we grow weary, perhaps, of the worn, Christian maneuver whereby a death signals reason's failure and love's opening. There the corpses lie: the God ill-fit to my experiential constraints; the God strangled by philosophical (mis)understandings; the God of popular piety, made impotent by fastidious theologians; the God dismissed by incarnation's inevitable affairs with idolatry; all this, to say nothing of the God crucified. And what holy ghosts do these thinkers summon?—God: in the tight, undoing lines of a poem; God: in the unintelligible cry of suffering; God: in the sacramental power of beauty; God: in the care for the hungry and oppressed; God: insoluble to my inherence in the world; God: in the unsymbolic reality that births our symbolic formation.

An agnostic could praise as much—poetry, justice, suffering, beauty, and symbolic subversion—without the name of a certain God. But could these be praiseworthy, according to these thinkers, without the holy as absolute? With my companions, I have hardly praised God. I have only provided, in the last chapter, mediums in which the 'immediate' God might resist illusory notions of presence. Surely, even the elusory, indefinite, and borderline abstract God is not a God before whom one could sing and dance, despite my taking hints from Heidegger.²⁹ It is a God before whom one could shout, cry, and marvel, like Job. Perhaps.

And yet, even Job's outcries are poetic: laments and eventual praises. And in Vassar Miller's poem, the speaker *does sing* out of nothing, to no one strictly present. She

²⁹ Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," *Identity and Difference*, 72.

finds that she herself is the possibility of song because her soul has opened to the aperture of an absence. What song is this, and what piety of thinking does it demand? The love song out of nothing, in its trills of negation, is not a praise of nihilism. Likewise, the god of Heidegger's poet is not the nihilistic evacuation that occurs in "the devaluation of god to the status of highest value."³⁰ As Ben Vedder elucidates, for Heidegger, this construal of God in terms of value,³¹ making,³² progressive history,³³ and providence³⁴ is the death of God. It is far more dangerous than the claim that God is "unknowable or that his existence is shown to be improvable."³⁵ Thus, the elusiveness of God must not be confused with God's death. To the contrary, the realm of the holy disappears, along with the question of beyng, when truth becomes a matter of empirical demands.³⁶ In short, there can be no coroner for God's death, only poets who attend gods' absence as a hint, passing-by. Thus, Heidegger's articulation of divine absence is both a critique of a certain absence (the godless-ness of metaphysics)³⁷ and the hint of an otherwise absence: the last god who cannot be fabricated,³⁸ but only sown in the preservation of an opening.

In his 1943 lecture on Hölderlin's "Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones," Heidegger reminds that the distance of the god, the god's withdrawal from presence, is uniquely

³⁰ Vedder, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion*, 149.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

³² *Ibid.*, 161-163.

³³ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149. Or as Tillich writes, "If you start with the question whether God does or does not exist, you can never reach Him; and if you assert that He does exist, you can reach Him even less than if you assert that He does not exist. A God about whose existence or non-existence you can argue is a thing beside others within the universe of existing things." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 4-5.)

³⁶ Heidegger, *The Event*, 97-101.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

sung by the poet.³⁹ The poet's song is otherwise than denial of illusory gods; and his vocation is not limited to philosophical expressions of the ontotheological God's death. According to Heidegger's 1942 text, *The Event*, it is the thinker who "venture[s] into" the aforementioned "experiences of godlessness."⁴⁰ By contrast, the poet does not pile the corpses of dead gods, but "prepar[es] the advent of the gods" in their very absence.⁴¹ Whereas the thinker "seek[s] for what is without holiness"⁴² and thus teaches the poet to question, to wander from metaphysics, the poet "find[s] what is questionless": the god to come who can neither be made nor calculated.⁴³ The poet teaches thinkers that the "god's absence" is also not a deficiency that could be eliminated by "cunning" or by "force."⁴⁴ The poet affirms the thinker's dismissal of "an accustomed God"; but this does not mean the poet advocates for godlessness.⁴⁵ The poet is a "singer who cares" for the "greeting" of the gods to come.⁴⁶ And for this care "there is only one possibility":

...without fear of appearing godless, [the poet] must remain near to the god's absence, and wait long enough in this prepared nearness to the absence till out of the nearness to the absent god there is granted an originative word to name the high one.... 'Cares like these, whether he likes it or not, a singer/ Must bear in his soul, and often, but the others [the thinkers] not.'⁴⁷

³⁹ Heidegger, "Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones," *Elucidations*, 46.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *The Event*, 282.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 283.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁴⁴ Heidegger calls these thinkers, "kindred to the poet," "countrymen." (Heidegger, "Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones," *Elucidations*, 47-49.)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

The poet's vocation is not an excuse for thinkers to remain outside the homecoming of the holy.⁴⁸ Thinkers must still heed—and help⁴⁹—the poet as he maintains the hints of the last god: a passing-by still to come.⁵⁰ Both the thinker and the poet have a role in preserving an opening that is otherwise than nothingness.⁵¹

This opening—which Heidegger at turns attributes to Being, the holy, and to the source or “primal something” (*Ur-Etwas*)—is un-differentiating, indifferent. But this “indifference” is not nothingness.⁵² It is not the objective stance that a theoretician might attempt, disregarding personal experience or historical time.⁵³ It does not permit us to reify objects, persons, or events into static things—as is Heidegger's concern with the dualism implied in religion's eternity or philosophy's absolutes.⁵⁴ This immediate, indifferent medium is the source of differentiation, of the events in which something occasions or enowns. Just as Rosenzweig's statement that God is “something” does not intend to render God as a static thing, or as an empty, formal category, Heidegger's attempt to think God as possibility does not suggest that God is a matter of indifference to history. To the contrary, this primal something (that is neither thing nor nothing) permits

⁴⁸ Indeed, their distinct ways of ensuring the “other beginning,” otherwise than metaphysics, make them “near each other.” (Heidegger, *The Event*, 207).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions*, 23.

⁵¹ Thinking grounds the time-space of the founding of beyng. In *The Event*, Heidegger refutes the primordality of the holy as the “inceptual beginning.” (*The Event*, 255-256). Thus he even claims that the thinking of the history of beyng is prior to poetizing (*Ibid.*, 261). This is not say that the holy is no longer the immediate medium—it is, “the abiding that bestows an abode as the temporal-spatial playing field of Dasein” (*Ibid.*, 261).

⁵² Heidegger as quoted in Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 274.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵⁴ The polarizing distance of eternal vs. temporal, or absolute vs. relative is precisely what Heidegger wished to avoid in the “formal indication” that could only allude to an ab-solution from theory, and lead back into the event of living. (*Ibid.*, 326-327, 335-337.)

the differentiation of what comes into being in the freedom of its heterogeneity.⁵⁵ To think this primal something, Being, in its relation to the holy, is to welcome the God who is free to appear precisely as a kind of non-presence, as alterity.

Even though the thought of being entails the freedom connoted in indifference,⁵⁶ this is not a freedom from God per se. Certainly, the thinker can, in the absence of God, collapse the clearing of being and thereby shut out the poet's holy dimension. But this is a distortion of indifference. The thinker's true freedom lies in her ability to preserve the distance of God as such, beyond the reach of theism or atheism. It is not, then, that Heidegger's philosophy implies an indifference to the possibility of gods.⁵⁷ Rather, Heidegger's poet seeks a clearing in which God is no longer simply a value alongside other beings or concepts.⁵⁸ The poet's god is the possibility of the historical, contextual, relational God—precisely in God's ab-solution from any theory of presence.

⁵⁵ As Van Buren notes, "Here [in Heidegger's course in 1919] we see more clearly the an-archic character of the *Ereignis* of the primal something, and anarchic *arche*, which means that no one differentiation and effect of it, that is, a particular lifeworld, can be raised to the level of a universal *arche*, principle/kingdom, and privileged over other effects, except at the cost of becoming an ideological myth and principle of ontological violence. In Heidegger's SS 1919 lecture course, we read, 'Every reality exhibits its own, peculiar, individual mark [*Gepräge*]. There is nothing absolutely homogenous; everything is other, *everything actual is an heterogeneity*.'" (Ibid., 276.)

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *The Event*, 230.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" *Pathmarks*, 266-67. Heidegger addresses the "misinterpretations" of his work, among which is the assumption that it is godless and nihilistic, and therefore denies possibilities of transcendence. (Ibid., 263-264.) He concludes, "What is going on here? People hear talk about 'humanism,' 'logic,' 'values,' 'world,' and 'God.' They hear something about opposition to these. They recognize and accept these things as positive. But with hearsay—in a way that is not strictly deliberate—they immediately assume that what speaks against something is automatically its negation and that this is 'negative' in the sense of destructive.... We pitch everything that does not stay close to the familiar and beloved positive into the previously excavated pit of pure negation, which negates everything, ends in nothing, and so consummates nihilism. Following this logical course we let everything expire in nihilism we invented for ourselves with the aid of logic." (Ibid., 264.) One might assume that just as Heidegger's "opposition to 'humanism'" is not a defense of the inhuman, his opposition to a certain theism is not a defense of the godless "but rather opens other vistas" than those proposed by theism and atheism. (Ibid., 265.)

⁵⁸ Ibid., 265.

God, as absent or absolute, is neither being nor nothingness, but the elusory passing-by that can occur in the “between” of being.⁵⁹ Heidegger’s description of being as the “between,” in his 1936-38 *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, is intentionally elusive. Intelligibility, as an idolatry of facts, is “suicide” for philosophy.⁶⁰ Thus Heidegger claims that only a few “future ones” are capable of receiving “the intimation and intrusion of the absconding and nearing of the last god.”⁶¹ Only a few thinkers of being can remain in the “un-rest of questioning [that] is not empty uncertainty.”⁶² The thinker’s questioning is not simply an equivocal stalling, but the “opening-up and guarding of that rest”⁶³ of which the poet sings. Heidegger’s *Contributions* does not speak plainly about this rest. But the description of questioning—as a seeking that comes “into the nearness of being” via restraint—suggests that this rest is what the poet seeks in “Homecoming”: “What you seek, it is near, already comes to meet you.”⁶⁴ This seeking does not have a distinct object, since this would be calculating according to Heidegger. However, the questioning search, which preserves the opening-withholding of truth, is what the poet calls a quest for “the real find.”⁶⁵ And what might this real find be? Heidegger, following Hölderlin, names it joy. The poet sings of a joy that names the “pure opening” of a “gaiety [that] preserves and holds everything within what is safe and sound. Gaiety heals fundamentally. It is the holy.”⁶⁶ When the poet sings

⁵⁹ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶⁴ Heidegger, “Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones,” 41.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

of the marvel that things are, he “‘opens’ things into the rejoicing of their presence.”⁶⁷

Joy is never far from the poet’s ‘mourning in readied distress.’ The joy that remains near in beings is the placing withdrawal of Being. It is intimately connected with the mourning of the gods, who can only be anticipated in the hints of their absconding.

As in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, the poet’s song is never divorced from the sheltering of truth as concealment.⁶⁸ The poets, and the thinkers who heed them, must be able to express both the healing quality of the holy (the opening of the presence of beings) and the mourning implied in the withdrawal of the holy (the absence of the gods). Consequently, the thinking of being cannot simply confuse the divine with “givens” of monotheism, or even “polytheism.”⁶⁹ When Heidegger writes of the gods, in the manner of Hölderlin, he is not confirming the existence of many pagan gods, but rather “indicat[ing] the undecidability of the gods whether one or many.”⁷⁰ This undecidability is not “the mere empty possibility of decisions,”⁷¹ but rather a way of disrupting the notion of God as the “cause of beings, as the un-conditioned, the infinite, the absolute.”⁷² One makes a decision to remain undecided about the nature of God, so

⁶⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 317.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 345.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 345.

⁷¹ This statement would have to be compared to Ben Vedder’s assertion that the last god “opens the perspective of the possible.” (Ben Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*, 178.) Lacoste, compared to Heidegger, is less polemical on this point—and nearer to Vedder’s hope of God as possibility. He notes, with Clement, how philosophy (even thinking of God as First Cause, or Absolute) can be preparation for the encounter with God, the God proposed as love. Because Lacoste associates possibility with the form of love, he concludes, “We thus can never praise *possibility* enough. Everything is opposed to the reasoning that would render *necessary* the affirmation of God. Whether it is in the so-called natural order or the so-called supernatural order, God is given to be known and given to be loved, as we never respond to love with love *by necessity*. In order to *be able to* grant our assent to the existence of God, we *must* decide freely and take part.” (Lacoste, “Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 147-148.)

⁷² Heidegger, *Contributions*, 345.

that God is not reducible to whatever one thinks of being, or beings, at any given moment. To be clear, when Heidegger dismisses these names of God—especially the “infinite” which he elsewhere uses to describe the relation between humans and gods⁷³--he does so polemically. He does not explicitly consider, in this text, what these words might entail in an allusive register.⁷⁴ He believes them too mired in the language of being as “constant presence and objectivity.”⁷⁵ Though this God of presence and objectivity acquired the best qualities of prior philosophical categories, for Heidegger, the acquisition backfired: making presence and objectivity godlike.

In sum, the gods do not *have* being, if this suggests that they are posed as Beings above or below being. Rather, the gods need *beyng*⁷⁶—insofar as *beyng* implies an abyssal founding, and the impossibility of proving.⁷⁷ The poet speaks this need of the gods; and philosophy must think *beyng* as the poets sing the holy. One ought not speak of *beyng*’s “absoluteness” as constant presence, but as the absolute opening that permits revealing and concealing.⁷⁸ *Beyng* is that opening the gods need, insofar as *beyng* is the “‘between’ amidst being and the gods.”⁷⁹ It is thus never more ‘present’ than beings and never more ‘absent’ than the gods. According to Heidegger, the gods need history and

⁷³ Martin Heidegger “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” *Elucidations*, 189.

⁷⁴ Though, in stating that he doesn’t like these “determinations” because they do not derive “from what is godly about God but from the essence of beings”—he begins the work of hearing these words otherwise. (Heidegger, *Contributions*, 345.)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁷⁶ There is some confusion, of course, when Heidegger changes the way in which he spells being. I have tried to maintain editor’s translations to reflect these changes in his attempts to re-think Being. Here, he uses *Seyn* (written as *beyng*), where as in other works, he uses Being, or ~~Being~~ (translators have written Be-ing) in contrast to the metaphysics of being (as presence, objectivity).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

philosophy, but as holy, they are not reducible to any one moment in the history of philosophy. It is as if being is the site of *eros*, opened by the distance of the “temporal-spatial playing of the passing-by.”⁸⁰

No doubt, Heidegger’s language of being as “intimacy” and “refusal” suggests that thought, if it wishes to approach the “trembling” of divinization, must stretch itself like an erotic between.⁸¹ Heidegger is most invested in preserving this site of belonging as longing, distance, reserve. To conflate the gods and humans, heaven and earth, would be to close the thinker’s realm and the poet’s opening. It would be the annihilation of the holy’s shelter in the thoughtful ones. And no doubt also an annihilation of the holy itself—through which nature, expanded by bright gaiety, opens a space where “the infinite relation comes to its shining appearance.”⁸² Without this spaciousness, which the poet finds and preserves, the singers of holy traces could not call out; nor could the divinity glance and send its voice of destiny.⁸³

Furthermore, the very question-worthiness of the holy depends upon this spaciousness.⁸⁴ The opening of a possible decision about the gods directly resists God as absolute—if this term means “essence, conceived purely and simply in itself as constant presence and objectivity.”⁸⁵ Heidegger’s elusive description of the last god, and the absence of the gods who provisionally play in presence as “gaiety,”⁸⁶ suggests rather that god, like the being it needs, is *ab-solute*: insoluble to our religious solutions, irreducible

⁸⁰ Ibid., 192.

⁸¹ Ibid., 188-189.

⁸² Martin Heidegger “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” *Elucidations*, 189.

⁸³ Ibid., 193.

⁸⁴ Quoting Hölderlin’s “Columbus”: “and it is necessary/ To question heaven.” (Ibid., 193)

⁸⁵ Ibid., 345.

⁸⁶ Heidegger, “Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones,” 37.

to metaphysical determinations, withdrawing even as it grants hints. The elusion of this ab-solute is a lure for thought, and for the burdensome care of the poet. Heidegger thus moves former metaphysical claims of the absolute ground into an ab-solute abyss (*ab-grund*). This abyssal ab-solution “withdraws all thinking of beyng from every merely human engagement” even as it asks for Dasein’s opening.⁸⁷

The task of thinking beyng, and thereby opening the realm of the holy,⁸⁸ requires that truth remain irreducible to proof or certainty. For the poet’s finding and the thinker’s seeking, ab-solute truth is the opening that reveals and conceals, an absolution that gives in its withdrawal. This otherwise ab-solute is as much a critique of absolute presence, as it is the ontotheological god, and the human conceived as “animale rationale.”⁸⁹ To withdraw from the *causa sui* vision of God is to also withdraw from the dangers of a subject who, after dismissing this god, assumes the mantle of self-actualization and the supposed autonomy of technological production.⁹⁰ Heidegger’s opening for the last god assumes not only the death of the ontotheological god, but also instructs against human appropriation of its categories (*causa sui* as the license for autonomy, the Creator God as a license for uninhibited making) for themselves.

At stake in Heidegger’s elusive, last god is the “sudden occurrence and remaining absent of truth” as the event of beyng.⁹¹ The last god is not a myth that fixes, like a medicine, the ailment of truth as *esse* or *tekne*.⁹² Rather, thinking the gods as otherwise

⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 346.

⁸⁸ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” *Pathmarks*, 267.

⁸⁹ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 347.

⁹⁰ See Ben Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*, 122-128.

⁹¹ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 185.

⁹² Heidegger, *The Event*, 85.

than either enduring essence or human production, helps to think being as otherwise than “the most general property of beings and thus their emptiest determination, as if we already knew ‘beings’ and the task were merely to abstract that ‘general’ feature.”⁹³ The gods, like the truth of being, are not an enduring essence; they are rather an absence endured that truth might be an intrusion. Heidegger claims that the “event [of] the intrusion and remaining absent, advent and absconding of the gods cannot be compelled by thinking.”⁹⁴ Thought can, however, prepare a moment wherein the holy might be “accessible and endurable”⁹⁵—namely, in the thinker’s attending of the poet’s word.

In his attempt to move from theological categories toward *poiesis*, it may be that Heidegger makes possible an understanding of truth nevertheless significant to any thinking of revelation’s intrusion⁹⁶: apart from human compulsion, but compelling in its revealing-concealing of the gods. Heidegger describes the truth of the gods as a passing-by⁹⁷ that opens Dasein and beings to their capacity of “sheltering the truth of being.”⁹⁸ This capacity is an “oscillation” between (1) needing to bring being into beings in order to think it, but also (2) a belonging to being that shirks “lostness in beings.”⁹⁹ It is as if

⁹³ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 185.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹⁶ This is not to ascribe to Heidegger a covert preoccupation with theology in his expressed phenomenological departure from it. I do not suspect Heidegger of being an incognito theologian, but rather as—inadvertently or not—providing resources for the theology’s response to the ontotheological problem (insofar as he addresses the relation between how we think about Being and how this affects, or is affected by, our thinking of God).

⁹⁷ Jean-Francois Courtine notes that Heidegger perhaps used the image of God as passing-by (Exodus 33:22-23) in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. Jean-Francois Courtine, “Les traces et le passage du Dieu dans les ‘Beiträge zur Philosophie,’” ed. Marco-M. Olivetti, *Filosofia della rivelazione* (Padova: CEDAM, 1994), 523-524. Heidegger had commented upon this passage in Bultmann’s seminar in 1924. (Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*, 171.)

⁹⁸ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 23.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

the revealing-concealing nature of truth (as *a-letheia*) can only be approached insofar as we acknowledge that beings both reveal and conceal being. But why is this understanding of truth so necessary for “the moment of the great decision regarding the remaining absent and advent of the gods”?¹⁰⁰

According to Heidegger, truth cannot be approached immediately, “but only in grasping time-space”—that is, the possibility of mediation.¹⁰¹ Time-space as the “essential occurrence of truth,”¹⁰² suggests that being is intimately connected to a certain nothingness: a “not” of the “not yet” and the “not any longer.”¹⁰³ Thus, the event of being consists in a refusal that is “essentially other than sheer absence.”¹⁰⁴ The “abyssal” withdrawal of time-space gives: it founds the opening of Da-sein, the “there” through which “selfhood and what is true of beings first come to be grounded.”¹⁰⁵ Because Heidegger links the refusal of being with the hint of the gods, he determines the event of the “other beginning of history”¹⁰⁶ as a decision posed by the gods’ elusiveness. This elusion of the gods, again, does not suggest that the last god is plural, but rather suggests an inherent richness of divinity that both needs and escapes its every sheltering in beings.¹⁰⁷ The last god cannot therefore be an entity of presence, but is rather more akin to the abyssal ground of being: a “withholding [that] is not nothing; instead, it is a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 293.

¹⁰² Ibid., 296. Truth, as a revealing-concealing, resembles time-space (Ibid., 293-294.)

¹⁰³ Ibid., 324-325.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 326.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 297.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁷ I highly recommend reading Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

preeminent and originary kind of leaving unfulfilled, leaving empty. It is thereby a preeminent kind of opening up.”¹⁰⁸

If the gods of metaphysics are frequently construed as beings, it is unsurprising that Heidegger renders the last god as more like space-time: the opening of a possibility for an otherwise. Just as the absence of the gods is not nothing, the event of their withdrawal and advent—as the event of *beyng*—is not mere emptiness. As Heidegger clarifies, “‘Emptiness’ is actually the fullness of what is still undecided and is to be decided, the abyssal ground that points to the ground.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, the last god is not the ground of truth; this ground is “the truth of being.”¹¹⁰ Rather, the god eludes this ground while alluding to, pointing to, it. The god is the possibility of grounding. But as possibility, the god is a unity not expressed in the ground’s separation. In “call[ing] god” the opening of a remoteness that promotes undecidability—a generative emptiness, the manifestation of a concealment—Heidegger ascribes to god the possibility of truth as “privation” and “expectation.”¹¹¹ God is an abyssal founding of the question regarding “whether the god is moving away from us or toward us.”¹¹² In short, the last god demands that the thinking of truth be more erotic: foundering our attempts to grasp definitively, a deprivation of certainty that is abundant with possibilities.

As Heidegger suggests in his 1936-38 text, *Mindfulness (Besinnung)*, knowledge about the last god is a certain “fundamental knowing-awareness.”¹¹³ Far from

¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 299.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 301.

¹¹³ Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, 203.

fundamentalism,¹¹⁴ this “thinking and speaking” of the gods is an “‘uncertain’ certainty” that avoids both: the requirement of certainty from those who distrust “incertitude,” and the scientific “mania resulting from a mere intellectual zeal that is associated with ‘world-views.’”¹¹⁵ God is not a production of worldview, and is therefore never “a being about which man knows something at times this way and at times another way; god is never a being whom man gets closer to in varying distances.”¹¹⁶ Rather, godhood takes its cues from the “truth of Be-ing.”¹¹⁷ That is to say, whether we consider God as a thing or as the creator has much to do with how we think being “as produced and producible presence.”¹¹⁸ Be-ing need not reveal itself as this notion. Indeed, it is integral to Heidegger’s project to guide thought into an otherwise be-ing than presence and production. At stake in this re-construal of be-ing, for theologians who think it, is a less totalizing approach to godhood. Thus, when Heidegger emphasizes the gods’ absence, he does not intend it as a nihilistic gesture wherein anything we say about the gods is “arbitrary” or determined by “empty pretension.”¹¹⁹ Heidegger resists precisely this: the alternative of relating to gods as objects, or not relating to them at all. He senses that if we treat be-ing as an object, as a being, then we will be incapable of relating to god otherwise than as an object to calculate, prove, or produce.¹²⁰ For Heidegger, there is a resemblance between the forgetting of be-ing and the de-godding of the divine, insofar as

¹¹⁴ When Heidegger writes of the fundamental (like his writing of the essential), it must not be confused with traditional meanings. By fundamental he means “belonging to the ‘t/here’” (Ibid., 211).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 209.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 212.

both come to stand for “the ground of explanatory representation in general.”¹²¹ God is far from godhood when the “‘godly’ [is construed] as ‘the beyond human.’” We can only return to a sense of godhood, according to Heidegger, by listening in the stillness of the gods’ flight. In this stillness of an absence, we must reverentially question how the gods might be *otherwise than present*, otherwise than “something graspable and handy.”¹²²

Across Heidegger’s works, the signifiers of absence amass: the abyssal opening of a ground, the possibility of a decision cleared in the remoteness of the gods, the uniting cleft of time-space that permits being its inherent intimacy with negation. In each case, the truth of being (as it relates to the last god) lies not in “correctness of representation,”¹²³ but in provisional truths sheltered by Dasein. While this is all very convoluted, and necessarily resists definitive interpretation, we can surmise that, for Heidegger, the last god is what eludes all other gods, especially the Christian God.¹²⁴ Though, as Heidegger once described the structures of Christian factual life as riddled with waiting, it would seem that this possible god could be, in some sense, more Christian than the Christian “worldview.”¹²⁵ As a worldview, Christianity traffics in cultural and political representations of presence, thereby neglecting its place in the

¹²¹ Ibid., 212.

¹²² Ibid., 214.

¹²³ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 74.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 21-22. Dnaiela Vallega-Neu helpfully suggests that the “abandonment of being carries a double sense: in a narrow sense, it indicates a clearly privative mode in which beings are abandoned by being; beings are deprived of their very essence (being) in what Heidegger conceives as the present era of machination. In a wider sense, the abandonment of being also indicates positively be-ing’s occurrence; be-ing is experienced to sway essentially as withdrawal, yet a withdrawal through which beings may become manifest as such.... Yet this withdrawal and enowning (this temporal event as which be-ing occurs) tends to conceal itself ‘behind’ *what* it lets appear: beings. As a consequence, instead of beings experienced in their temporal eventuation and passing away, beings are represented (*vorgestellt*) as constantly present substances with certain attributes. In this determination of beings, be-ing ‘refuses’ (*versagt; verweigert*) its essence and beings remain abandoned by being.” (Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger’s Contributions*, 57.)

“*between* where confusion presses on and, in like measure, the god continues to abscond.”¹²⁶ According to Heidegger, Christianity—and even the anti-Christian worldview that nevertheless reflects Christian values—has neglected the ways in which ‘truth’ is not structured as being (if this term denotes objectivity, presence, fixity).¹²⁷ Thus, Heidegger suggests that humans must experience the “plight of the abandonment by being”¹²⁸—a plight inherent in the “intimately experienced” remoteness of the gods.¹²⁹

In the abandonment, the ab-solute occurs as an event of dis-lodging from fixity. It is not that all is cast into nihilistic chaos. Humans can shelter beyng in beings through creativity.¹³⁰ But because this creativity is not under the demands of technical machination—usefulness, productivity, measurement, calculation—it is a sheltering that acknowledges beyng’s immeasurability, and the gods’ elusion. Because poetic measure-taking respects the immeasurable,¹³¹ poets are perhaps best equipped to instruct us in the act of sheltering.¹³² Their images, which take measure by opening an allusive “between,”¹³³ are not “mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar.”¹³⁴ To dwell as the poet in this between is to measure our sheltering “Against the [kindness of the] Godhead.”¹³⁵ The remoteness

¹²⁶ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 22.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³¹ Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 211-227.

¹³² Heidegger, “Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 49.

¹³³ Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 219.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

of the gods is their kindness; indeed, as Hölderlin writes, “God’s absence helps.”¹³⁶ The absence of the gods is their gift.¹³⁷ Their withdrawal is generative not of machinations that reduce, but rather of creations that portray the irreducible mystery of manifestation.¹³⁸ The question remains, how might thought be more like *poesis*: graciously remaining in the allusive between,¹³⁹ opened by the elusion of the gods?

The charitable aspect of poetry depends upon its preservation of the erotic structure of time-space, of the gods: withdrawal that generates the possibility of reception. As a listening-response to the call of a clearing, Heidegger links poetry and thinking “in the element of saying.”¹⁴⁰ Saying is not our “relation to being in terms of representation and production...[or] propositional assertions.”¹⁴¹ Saying is not even Heidegger’s own “reflection upon language.”¹⁴² Saying is more like singing: “turned away from all purposeful self-assertion. It is not willing in the sense of [personal] desire.”¹⁴³ Singing holds its words differently, gently; not as information but as gift. Thought as song turns humans “toward the space of the heart,”¹⁴⁴ a response befitting the spacious clearing in which things appear. Deep calls unto deep. Thinking must be more the hollowing out of

¹³⁶ Qtd. in Heidegger, “Homecoming/ To Kindred Ones,” *Elucidations*, 47.

¹³⁷ Heidegger reads the “kindness” of the gods as *charis*. (Heidegger, Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 226.)

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹³⁹ Allusive in the sense of a play of sending and withdrawal that constitutes being, and the gods, for Heidegger. See John Caputo’s reading of Heidegger’s *On the Essence of Ground*. John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 73-89. See also Derrida’s description of the “possibility of play” in Heidegger that founds the interplay of absence and presence. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1972), 264.

¹⁴⁰ Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” *On the Way to Language*, 83.

¹⁴¹ Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 135.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

questioning,¹⁴⁵ the opening up of a sounding, than the ability of the mind to grasp. Thinking, if it sings its words, experiences truth as “a gleam, a flight, a spark/ A thrust of flames, a stellar trace—/ And then again—immense—the dark/ Round world and I in empty space.”¹⁴⁶ The truth of the event of being, and the possible advent of the gods, comes to us in quick flickers. We may wish to preserve these truths in beings, but we must remember that beings are not the truth of being, and entities are not the fullness of the gods. Thought must function, like poetry, as a domain of allusive “suggestion[s],” that protect how the absolute “elude[s] our every effort to say it.”¹⁴⁷

To protect the elusion of the gods from within the between of being, Heidegger suggests that thinking must be more akin to thanking:¹⁴⁸ an endeavor of the heart¹⁴⁹ whereby one is grateful for what gives, but also respectful of what is withheld.¹⁵⁰ Thus, there are at least two moves for thought in the experience of an absence: (1) to “take to heart” what withdrawals as a matter of concern,¹⁵¹ and (2) to let the matter of concern be “left exactly as it is.”¹⁵² If ‘taking to heart’ suggests a devotion to what eludes our grasp,

¹⁴⁵ Questioning is thinking’s piety. (Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” *On the Way to Language*, 72.)

¹⁴⁶ This revealing-concealing, appearing and emptiness, Heidegger gleans from Gottfried Benn’s poem. (Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” *On the Way to Language*, 73.)

¹⁴⁷ Heidegger, “A Dialogue on Language: Between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” *On the Way to Language*, 41. Heidegger suggests that even to answer the question, “What is called thinking?” is “to keep asking, so as to remain underway....for adventurer-like, we roam away into the unknown.” (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 169.)

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 64.

¹⁴⁹ *Noein* as “taking-to-heart” appears at the conclusion of Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 203-244.

¹⁵⁰ The poet does not claim givenness as a “treasure” to be possessed, but as the gifted “opportunity to learn the renunciation in whose self-denial the relation of word to thing promises itself to him.” (Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” *On the Way to Language*, 69.) This opportunity is the beginning of what is “more than mere opportunity”—the “giving of room” of “possibility.” (Ibid., 92-93.)

¹⁵¹ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 203.

¹⁵² Ibid., 203.

it is only through a thinking that does not assimilate alterity.¹⁵³ Thinking, with regard to the ab-solute, begins as a “scenting” or “divination” of the heart.¹⁵⁴ Then the heart seeks to gather, to read (*legein*) according to its cares.¹⁵⁵ This is well and good since we cannot speak of the elusory without gathering some words to it; the ab-solute comes to us, if even in hints, with a certain intelligibility. But the revelation of the ab-solute is not reducible to the intelligible. Thus, thinking must not only be a momentary contact with the ab-solute, but also be a letting-lie, a letting-be otherwise than initially thought.¹⁵⁶ Thought exercises the patience of *gelassenheit*: never simply awaiting the confirmation of its intuitions, but ever open to the elusion of what appears as withdrawal.¹⁵⁷

In a dialogue written near the end of World War II, Heidegger intensifies this waiting: “Waiting [as thinking is] never awaiting; for awaiting is already involved with

¹⁵³ Taking-to-heart is an active perception but it “does not make over what is take[n].” (Ibid., 203.)

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 207.

¹⁵⁵ This language of understanding as devotion and love appears not only in his 1951-1952 lectures, but also much earlier in his Winter 1919-1920 lectures. “It is nonsensical to get caught up in phenomenological forms of expression—any of its levels whatsoever—and their formulations and then, *statically*, to absolutize them. They are thereby *robbed* of their sense of expression and of their living *function*....Understanding is in *love*; to *achieve* in *devotion*—not in facts, but rather in meaning, as vital relations of life; not in talking about the world and in the rhetorical machinations about the world and religions, in initial progressions towards a new transcendent or transcendental region, in order to then live there; but rather to love the nearness and to strip away all nearness from all farness and so to come into the genuine farness of the origin.” Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology: Winter Semester 1919/1920*, trans. Scott M. Campbell (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 128-129.

¹⁵⁶ Heidegger claims that this approach is the “basic stance” of phenomenology: “In phenomenology, since it now stands right at the beginnings, the attitude which is constantly checking and revising, is, thereby, not just necessary. Rather, the ultimate giving of tendencies, which are constantly to be regenerating, belong to it as original science....The primacy of scientific *researching* tendencies is in itself a letting-open-up of perspectives and of constantly-commencing-anew.” (Ibid., 21.)

¹⁵⁷ This is particularly helpful in learning to love the other person, as Gabriel Marcel describes it: “[Patience] is radically opposed to the act by which I despair of the other person, declaring that he is good for nothing, or that he will never understand anything, or that he is incurable...” Gabriel Marcel, “A Metaphysic of Hope,” *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 40.

representing and [it] latches onto what is represented.”¹⁵⁸ Waiting is a desire without object,¹⁵⁹ a love that lets be.¹⁶⁰ It is not that there is no expectation of the last god “to come.”¹⁶¹ But rather, expectation must endure radically: “In waiting we leave open that upon which we wait....Because waiting lets itself be involved in the open as such.”¹⁶² The last god is not a teleological end,¹⁶³ but the opening of a history in which we relate to be-ing, and to divinity, as irreducible to our every representation.¹⁶⁴ To care for this last god, to take it to heart in thinking, is to “stay in this betweenness,”¹⁶⁵ opened by the possibility of a god who may come, is always already coming.¹⁶⁶ To think the ab-solute is

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 75. Levinas confirms this mode of waiting (without an awaited term) in the register of waiting for God. (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 95.)

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶⁰ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” *Pathmarks*, 241. Heidegger also affirms the link between thinking and loving (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 20-21.)

¹⁶¹ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 325.

¹⁶² Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 75.

¹⁶³ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 325.

¹⁶⁴ In waiting upon the last god, Da-sein carefully prepares for the event of naming that goes beyond mere representation or concept: “an event in which at once the nameable, the name, and the named appropriate one another.” (Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 77.)

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶⁶ There remains the apparent difficulty of teasing out the difference, in Heidegger, between Being (whether written as be-ing, beyng, or **being**) and God, since they are so closely linked in the event of appropriation (en-owning), and similarly framed as an elusive withdrawal. Ben Vedder links them both as possibility, claiming that Being concerns the opening of potentialities, and the last god, too, as the opening of an otherwise than actual god. (Ben Vedder, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion*, 237-272.) Van Buren recounts Karl Löwith’s remarks, “If one translates the ‘true reality’ and ‘real truth’ with ‘truth of being’ and ‘being of truth,’ the dimension of ‘spiritual life’ reaching into the transcendent with ‘existence,’ ‘God’ with ‘being,’ and the ‘self-loss’ of contemporary humanity in the ‘content of the breadth of the sensuous world’ with the fall into the world and the forgetfulness of being, one can thus recognize the later Heidegger already in his qualifying dissertation.” (Van Buren, *The Young Heidegger*, 375.) Derrida implies that even for the great proponent of post-onto-theo-logical thinking, Being and God are confused. As he observes, Heidegger began writing a crossed-out being, which by his own admission, is the beginning of a theology. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2. Marion notes that “there is an affinity between the nevertheless appropriated withdrawal of the *Ereignis* and the unrestrained gift where God at one and the same time abandons the world by withdrawing from it, and, in this intimate withdrawal, manifestly abandons to the world its trinitarian basis.” This affinity is not identity. Marion insists that the event of Being cannot be God, but is perhaps the “*medium* or *analogon* of the trinitarian play.” In Marion’s comparison of Paul and Heidegger, the distance Being takes from beings is not the same as the distance

to wait patiently, erotically,¹⁶⁷ while preparing the opening of an otherwise time-space into which the gods might intrude.¹⁶⁸

II. SIMONE WEIL: THE ELUSION OF THE GO(O)D

For Heidegger, preparation for the gods entails a “preparation for our history.”¹⁶⁹ Human subjects become “builder[s] and steward[s]” of the site in which the gods might appear. But this preparation does not entail decisions about “the good and bad, decline and recovery of the tradition, amiability and violence.”¹⁷⁰ Preparation does not entail value distinctions, since Heidegger wishes to precisely avoid the god of highest value. Rather, preparation requires grounding truth in the allusive space: “the temporal-spatial playing field” that lets beings be, lets god have need of being.¹⁷¹ In this poetic

God gives as “depth” in the “fourth dimension” of “charity.” (Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 246-248.) See also: Lorenz B. Puntel, *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion*, trans. Alan White (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

¹⁶⁷ “The true philosophical stance is never that of a logical tyranny, which frightens light through its staring. It is rather *Plato’s* επος. But that has a yet more vital function than with *Plato*. The επος is not just a *motive-ground* of philosophy. Rather, philosophical activity itself requires a releasement of itself [*ein sich Loslassen*] into the ultimate tendencies of life and return to its ultimate motives. The stance that is opposed to phenomenological philosophy is a harnessing-itself [*ein Sich-Einspannen*] into something. This philosophy requires instead a releasing-of itself [*ein Sich-Lolassen*] into life, of course not into its superficiality. Rather, what is demanded is deepening of the self into its originality.” (Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 198.)

¹⁶⁸ Though, it is difficult to know what this intrusion might entail, especially if one considers Heidegger’s remark, in passing, that “it is impossible for a god to ‘speak’” because it, like an animal, is not “open to the superior power of Being.” Is this because God, like animals, are not “compelled by need” or is this because, a god—in Heidegger’s conception—cannot properly speak except perhaps in the poet’s opening to Being? (Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 80.) Is it fruitful to think of a god as not in Being, and therefore not compelled by its needs, while yet suggesting that this god is in need of Being? This question remains difficult insofar as one is unclear about what Heidegger means by Being in every case. A god cannot speak insofar as a god is not a being who has struggled to be. But insofar as Being is not that of the being’s struggle to be, as in Heidegger’s reading of Heraclitus, but the possibility of relating to what is not present to thought or directly available to the senses, perhaps there is room for a god to speak in the poet.

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 191.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

preparation, one “merely sees and grasps the things that *are*, so as to help these beings (in which a distortion reigns as something essential) into being and to bring history to its native soil.”¹⁷² While one may appreciate this preparation, prior to particular “‘contents,’ ‘opinions,’ and ‘itineraries,’”¹⁷³ it is difficult to know what the structures of building, and stewardship, might entail if values and measurement are dismissed as calculative.

Heidegger’s language is often the subtle shift of tautology, a repetition without specific content that nevertheless displaces. Correspondingly, the truth of the last god is better expressed in art than in a philosophical system, or a prescriptive ethics.¹⁷⁴

But what if the beauty of art—what Heidegger calls “the pointing that allows the appearance of what is invisible”¹⁷⁵—is, as Plato suggests, integral to the good? Or to put it otherwise, is not the disinterestedness of beauty a hint of the good’s ab-solution: absolved from inflexible moralism, absolved from the utilitarian mandate? Heidegger passes over Plato’s connection of the true, the beautiful, and the good, because it has—or so he argues—made beings accessible only through cultural meaning and the valuation of ideas.¹⁷⁶ But in Weil’s reading of Platonic philosophy this is decidedly not the case.¹⁷⁷ The good and the beautiful remain irreducible to the demands of necessity,¹⁷⁸ and the culture of consumption. The good eludes creation, while making possible its beauty—

¹⁷² Ibid., 191.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 191.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 191.

¹⁷⁵ Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” *Elucidations*, 186.

¹⁷⁶ Heidegger, *Contributions*, 165.

¹⁷⁷ For Hölderlin, the beautiful mediates the transcendence of God, not as an affirmation of our knowledge about God, but as a garment that reveals in its veiling (Heidegger, “Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven,” 179).

¹⁷⁸ Even though Weil writes that beauty is “a concordance between harmony and necessity” (Ibid., 514), and thus involved with “chance and the good” (Ibid., 266), the good is precisely what we must seek even as we are “incapable of attaining it.” It therefore goes “over and beyond necessity” (Ibid., 514).

again remembering that beauty is the potential for beings to be. The good is the invisible toward which the beauty of letting-beings-be points. The good is the trace left in God's withdrawal from the world. Thus to wait upon God, for Weil, is not to prepare the possibility of history, but to attend, and witness to, the impossibility of the good.

The impossibility of the good is not its futility, but its impossibility to be perfectly realized in creation. Therefore, the good cannot be an object we represent to ourselves, because it eludes our common distinctions between "good and evil."¹⁷⁹ Its unconditional demand, its impossibility, is a purification of our attention. As in the "attention directed toward God," the good is only 'present' insofar as our attention to it exists.¹⁸⁰ One might hear a resonance with the preparative waiting of the poet, or the vigilance of the thinker of being. But Weil pushes this attention further into the realm of prayer. For Weil, prayer is a waiting upon the good because it does not seek a certain result. Prayer has an orientation; but it is more akin to the consent of desire than to will.¹⁸¹ Because the good is "intimately related" to consent, it nurtures a passivity, an opening, of the soul to what cannot be properly willed.¹⁸² In Weil's articulation, the good is not far from Heidegger's description of *gelassenheit* and the pious obedience of thinking. Weil's intellectual inheritor, Iris Murdoch, describes this obedience as the capacity to "see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection."¹⁸³ So while attention to the good does resemble Heidegger's phenomenology

¹⁷⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 405.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 527. Likewise, God is present, for Weil, only according to "our consent to his presence... Consent is an act; it can only be actual, that is to say in the present." (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 146.)

¹⁸¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 527.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 527.

¹⁸³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 39.

as letting-be, it opens thought toward an ethical register of justice, compassion, and discipline.

For Weil, the good—not the question of being—is the orientation that opens thinking, and calls for its receptive response. The good is not secondary to Being, but foundational for its emergence. It is only sought “for itself. Thus [the] Good alone is absolute.”¹⁸⁴ As absolute, the Good “has no opposite”; it absolves from “the good which is correlated to evil.”¹⁸⁵ We often confuse the relative good for the absolute good, because the former is the only goodness “within our reach.”¹⁸⁶ Unfortunately, in its evaluation of moral and aesthetic goodness, society “sheds the colour of the absolute over the relative.”¹⁸⁷ One can follow this critique of society, hearing it previously in Heidegger’s dismissal of ‘good and evil’ as culturally determined. In contrast to societal absolutes, Weil’s absolute is not a withdrawal from all relations, but an intensification of relationality as it qualifies the relative good. The absolute good grants the capacity to compare: “A certain thing is good or bad with respect to..., in so far as...” This nuance of degree is not always honored by culture. Culture, in her view, encourages a “monopoly of the individual”—an illusory form of the absolute as autonomy.¹⁸⁸

According to Weil, the ego often misconstrues the absolute good with the assumed goodness of absolute autonomy. Therefore, central to Weil’s articulation of goodness is a renovation of modern subjectivity. Because the good alone eludes will, and the calculations of means-ends, the ego oriented toward the good must undergo

¹⁸⁴ Weil, *Notebooks*, 527.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 592.

decreation. Despite its connotations, the process of decreation is a radical employment of one's freedom. Decreation is the freedom to achieve "the destruction of the 'I.'"¹⁸⁹ This is not to say that decreation is a negation of the will brought about by its supreme exertion. Often decreation accompanies the "external destruction" of suffering.¹⁹⁰ Whether the ego undergoes internal or external destruction, suffering on behalf of the good is integral to Weil's description of love. Suffering, as the palpable absence of God, is preparative for the "empt[y]ing] of self through love."¹⁹¹ This emptying is necessary for decreation; and thus any language of asserted freedom intends a radical offering of the self to the "reanimat[ing]" "injection" of love.¹⁹² One must think love, then, as what empties the ego without this emptiness necessitating utter annihilation. Decreation makes something created "pass into the uncreated," without making it "pass into nothingness."¹⁹³ The emptying of the ego through love is not its erasure, but its foundation for hospitality.

The ab-solution of the good thwarts the ego's attempts to make absolute distinctions; but this is not a delivery unto relativism. The decreeted ego is neither a 'rational animal,' nor a disenchanting nihilist, but a loving intellect. The latter takes form as an "indifferen[ce] to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism

¹⁸⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 26.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 28. Levinas may resonate her claim that the suffering of the ego is preparative for encountering the ab-solute. For Levinas, Suffering suggests for us an encounter with mystery, be it the unknown of death or the alterity of the other. Suffering is constituted by "the entire absence of a dimension of withdrawal" in which there is still "some free space for an event" of death (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 69). Death, not unlike the intrusion of the other, is a "situation where something absolutely unknowable appears. Absolutely unknowable means foreign to all light, rendering every assumption of possibility impossible, but where we ourselves are seized." (*Ibid.*, 71.)

¹⁹² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 29.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

and atheism.”¹⁹⁴ This indifference must not be confused with invulnerability or deferral of responsibility. The ego must be highly responsive—supple and open as water, which “is indifferent in this way to the objects that fall into it.”¹⁹⁵ The ego, like water, does not weigh its objects of thought, but lets them “weigh themselves, after a certain time of oscillation.”¹⁹⁶ This description of the intellect is called loving in a way Heidegger might appreciate: letting beings reveal themselves to us before we dismiss or calculate them. But Weil attributes this loving intellect to theological wisdom. The “indifference of thought...is in no way incompatible with the love of God.”¹⁹⁷ The decreation of the ego is an *imitatio Dei*. Just as “God renounces being everything”¹⁹⁸ so we must feel ourselves absolved, through renunciation, from becoming too attached to something.

Weil’s distinction between decreation and the nothingness of destruction informs her understanding of creation as it relates to the good. It is not that the good shuns creation; but that it is imperfectly scattered throughout it, mixing with the distortions of evil.¹⁹⁹ Decreation then, is not the destruction of this worldly self because of its createdness. Decreation is a mode of welcoming goodness, as “co-creators,”²⁰⁰ through renunciation.²⁰¹ Through the renunciation in which we “cease to be,”²⁰² we do not deny the necessary condition of our being in order to receive God. Rather, we create a manner

¹⁹⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 40.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 33.

¹⁹⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 69.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁰¹ This is the closest Weil comes to saying what the good might be for us, even as it eludes our every effort. “We should renounce being something. That is our only good.” (*Ibid.*, 33.)

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 33.

of being-in-the-world that is not wholly dictated by necessity or evaluation.²⁰³ For Weil, being (as the necessity of creation) is the “screen between God and us so that we can be.”²⁰⁴ Without the screen of necessity, without our inherence in the world, we would be “exposed to the direct radiance of [God’s] love, without protection... we [would] be evaporated like water in the sun.”²⁰⁵ The ego is in the world that it might exist as an ‘I,’ but also that it might refuse the ‘I’ as its definitive expression.²⁰⁶

Weil’s being-before-the-good resembles certain aspects of Heidegger’s letting-be, and Lacoste’s being-before-God: namely, the ability to think otherwise than valuation, and the possibility of being-in-the-world while also, in some sense, ceasing to be. However, in order to suggest precisely how Weil’s understanding of the good shapes her understanding of God, we must follow her notion of God’s ab-solution. As ab-solute, the good is only ever the good (a tautology that keeps the good from its representations); but as ab-solute, it is also, for Weil, God—“whose sole existence lies in being the good.”²⁰⁷ God is in the manner that goodness is—which is to say, both *is* and *is not*.²⁰⁸ Just as the ab-solute good is hidden to creation, so too God is ab-solute insofar as God “hid[es] himself.”²⁰⁹ The holiness of God hides itself “*in the world*”;²¹⁰ but this does not mean that

²⁰³ Ibid., 31.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 32-33.

²⁰⁶ In words that remind of Lacoste’s distinction between the empirical and eschatological ‘I,’ Weil explains: “The being of man is situated behind the curtain, on the supernatural side. What he can know of himself is only what is lent him by circumstances. My ‘I’ is hidden for me (and for others); it is on the side of God...” (Ibid., 38.)

²⁰⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 527.

²⁰⁸ As Iris Murdoch writes, taking her hints from Weil’s renunciative attention, the good is akin to God insofar as the latter is “a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*.” (Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good*, 54.)

²⁰⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 38.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

the Go(o)d is utterly hidden from creatures. God is present insofar as God is the Creator; we know God partially through creation. But God is ‘absent’ insofar as creation is a veil. The perception of God as present must be held with its contradiction: the ab-solution of God from every being. God creates God’s veil in the very act of creating.

But how can Weil speak of absence, and ab-solution, if by definition they do not appear? Weil notes that there is a presence to absence, through the Spirit given us in our decreation. God, as holy, eludes “consciousness in a certain measure,” and the possessive “having” of creatures.²¹¹ But insofar as creatures experience the tear of dispossession, there is a quasi-death that prepares an opening for the Spirit. This Spirit is God’s presence *as* God’s absence from everything. The Spirit haunts, a ghost of holiness that both affirms creation and draws us beyond it. This beyond, again, is not the draw of the absolute that pulls us wholly out of the world; it is, for Weil, a humility that notes how the structures of existence are not definitive expressions of the good, of God, and indeed, of our selves. Absence can thus mark the transcendence of God and goodness as otherwise than being.

One may protest that the absence of the Go(o)d is not neutral, but rather suggestive of evil.²¹² How is the Go(o)d’s elusion distinguishable from the absence we feel in the evil of affliction, how different from Hell—“a nothingness which has the pretension and gives the illusion of being”?²¹³ How can one practice disinterested love of the Go(o)d when, for Weil, the Go(o)d of the world can be confused as evil? Weil seems to say that God’s absence is both the Spirit of the absent Creator in creation, and an

²¹¹ Ibid., 38.

²¹² Discussing the work of Philippe Nemo, Levinas suggests that the absence of the good, even if expressed in the horrors of evil, is the way in which we know the good—by its absence, and our desire for it. “A last reversal of the analysis: evil strikes me in my horror of evil and thus reveals—or is already—my association with the good.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 131.)

²¹³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 27.

experience of the soul who suffers “extreme affliction.”²¹⁴ Because God as creator is also, for Weil, the “author of the evil which we are hating,” we must decipher which presence and which absence is of God.²¹⁵ In loving the absent God, we must not only “love God through evil as such...while hating this evil.”²¹⁶ We must also be able to distinguish the absence of God from the destructive absence that evil, through suffering, might impose. Intellectual calculation cannot be key to this distinction because evil “flies from the light” of knowing.²¹⁷ Only in doing good, or “refusing to allow ourselves to do evil” do we experience good and evil at all.²¹⁸ We are integral to the Go(o)d’s manner of presencing and hiding in the world.

Thus, even if Weil must call God the author of evil—because God is author of the world that has evil in it²¹⁹—she does not intend that God is a force of evil. God rather permits the distance between creature and God, a distance that is both constitutive of our capacities to love, and our ability to conceal the good in evil. Distance can be the prerequisite for equanimity; but it can also be the incapacity to attend God’s presence-absence in things. Evil is “always the destruction of tangible things,” and therefore a denigration of creatures’ sacramental participation in the good, and in God.²²⁰ Thus, God is not the author of destructive distance even as God is involved in one’s decreed expanse. Decreation active in suffering might feel like evil, even what we might call a certain hellish evacuation of God from being. But evil is not suffering, even as they

²¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 75.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 75.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 71.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 79.

²²⁰ Ibid., 76.

testify, in closely aligned ways, to the absence of the Go(o)d. Suffering, God can employ toward love; evil destroys even the possibility of love. So if Weil states that we must love God through evil, it is a call to loving the ab-solute go(o)d by knowledge of what it is not.

Suffering, in contrast to evil, is the experience of God's palpable absence. Insofar as God uses suffering for redemptive purposes, God is present in this felt absence. For Weil, God is the creator of a world in which God can be experienced as absent. God is also insoluble to the creatures in which God is present. This is the basis of God's absolute goodness, and the potential for evil. Evil occurs whenever we make God's empirical absence a license for the degradation of beings. God's absence is not an excuse to ignore the partial presence of God in beings. God can only be partly present in beings insofar as the Creator marks creation. But how we respond as creatures—to the limitations of our freedom and to necessity's veil of God—determines our inclination to evil. Evil is a maligned response to finitude. We misuse our finite freedoms, and thereby do evil, when we respond to finitude with the force of limitlessness.²²¹ When we pretend to a false infinity, we commit the evil of not accepting limitation. Our bad infinity is a violent over-reach, a forceful imposition that Weil often calls expansion.²²² Limitless expansion of the ego remains in stark contrast to God's infinity: the impossibility of the good that lures us even as it outpaces us.²²³ According to Weil, only the Go(o)d's infinity can limit the limitless. Nevertheless, the ego is instrumental in this task of preserving infinity against destructive limitlessness.²²⁴

²²¹ Ibid., 69.

²²² Weil, *Notebooks*, 84.

²²³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 96-97.

²²⁴ Ibid., 70.

How could one prepare the ego for this vocation of attending, preserving, the Go(o)d's infinity? How could one even think it since, by definition, the infinite eludes the limitations of knowledge? Again, Weil suggests that God "wears himself out through the infinite thickness of time and space in order to reach the soul and to captivate it" via the incarnation of Christ, through the irreducibility of beauty, and the felt impossibility of suffering.²²⁵ In response, one must consent in an instant—"brief as a lightning flash"—to God's occupation of the soul.²²⁶ This occupation is not a lasting mystical participation in God.²²⁷ For God promptly abandons the soul, "leaving it alone and it has in its turn, but gropingly, to cross the infinite thickness of time and space in search of him whom it loves."²²⁸ Life is a long search, never exhausted, for the impossibility of the Go(o)d. Its impossibility is its necessity, "in other words it is supernatural."²²⁹ This search seems an "obedience to nothing," insofar as it seeks something beyond conception, beyond the consolations of imagination, beyond every consideration of incentive.²³⁰ It is an attention "directed towards pure and impossible goodness," that then shapes the ways in which we handle—with the disinterested investment of an artist—other beings.²³¹

²²⁵ Ibid., 88.

²²⁶ Ibid., 88.

²²⁷ It is not mystical insofar as it is not an ongoing *methexis* that conflates God and the human. Weil's mysticism requires an otherwise than being, a shifting of horizons beyond being. She criticizes natural theology's attempts to prove God's mercy from the created world. Mysticism, for Weil, is the belief that "there is infinite mercy behind the curtain of the world" as opposed to a mercy "in front of the curtain" that justifies certain cruelties. (Ibid., 111.)

²²⁸ Ibid., 89.

²²⁹ Ibid., 88.

²³⁰ Ibid., 96.

²³¹ "In this way virtue is entirely analogous to artistic inspiration. The beautiful poem is the one which is composed while the attention is kept directed towards inexpressible inspiration, in so far as it is inexpressible." (Ibid., 97.)

This is not a good that can be definitively achieved, just as God can never be definitely known.²³² Weil writes that attention to the Go(o)d's elusion is not a task that could be crossed off one's list, but is instead the foundation for every instantiation of the good: that is, pure desire. Desire attends the Go(o)d by eagerly inviting its presence, but never confuses this presence as total. Pure desire is not a matter of force, so often linked with the assertion of presence; it is therefore "devoid of all spirit of conquest."²³³ Desire does not claim access to God through power over other beings, or through aversion of alternative interpretations. It is a love that views the 'infinite thickness of time and space' as a "bridge" to the Go(o)d, which must be preserved as such. Thus this desire is not entirely an abandonment of the necessary in favor of the impossible; it is the welcoming of the impossible into the necessary conditions of existence. Because one can only provisionally draw the Go(o)d into existence, through flashes of consent, the Go(o)d demands humbled hospitality. It is a welcoming without consummation since "this impossibility forces us continually to desire to seize the unattainable through and beyond everything that we desire, know, and want with our will."²³⁴ It is a desire that pushes beyond what we desire, taking on the insatiability of disinterested love.

One cannot point to the Go(o)d as a reality consummated; neither can one capture the Go(o)d in a concept to be passed on programmatically. Weil prizes as real, especially with respect to the Go(o)d, that which is not graspable. If we claim to have grasped the Go(o)d, we are deceived.²³⁵ Like Weil's God, the good can only appear as absence. The

²³² Weil goes so far as suggesting that we cannot do this good, because we are not good—not in this elusory sense that only God "alone is." (Ibid., 96.)

²³³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 457.

²³⁴ Ibid., 412.

²³⁵ Ibid., 220.

elusion of the Go(o)d manifests as an “absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self.”²³⁶ It is evident, though remains “often hard to discern,” in the “humble man.” The humble person interiorizes the absence of the Go(o)d as his own impoverishment.²³⁷ As Iris Murdoch describes:

Because he sees himself as nothing, [the humble man] can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue and its unique value and the endless extent of its demand. Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the Soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering, but to death. The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good.²³⁸

Iris Murdoch draws upon Weil’s decreation as a way of “preserv[ing] in oneself *only* that which is passive.”²³⁹ In many ways, Weil describes the humble man, even the incarnate God, as Plato’s khoratic receptacle: “the ability to preserve in oneself *only* that which is passive.”²⁴⁰ It is not that the humbled, kenotic, khoratic self is unable to act; rather one is better able “to silence the motives and incentives in oneself, and act” according to the Go(o)d for its own sake. Weil’s absent God eludes our demands of power, will, and partiality; but her God renders us no less capable to act on the part of goodness. God’s absence shapes our interior life; giving a presence to the vacancy as love.²⁴¹ God

²³⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good*, 101.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²³⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 248.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁴¹ Weil characterizes the distance of God as initiated by God in order to establish the love learned by and preserved in distance. “God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love. He created love in all its forms. He created beings capable of love from all possible distances. Because no other could do it, he himself went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. The infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion.” (Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” *Waiting for God*, 72.) Weil characterizes the love of the Trinity as an infinite nearness; but because of “the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, there is also an infinite distance. The totality of space and the totality of time, imposing their immensity, put an infinite distance between God and God.” (*Ibid.*, 74.)

demands a goodness without force: a “weak,” “non-active action” that resembles Christ’s passion.²⁴² Clearly, Weil’s Go(o)d is not the stuff of “kings and masters of the world,” but the love that meets suffering, without the consolation of conceptual grip.²⁴³

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS: THE ELUSION OF THE INFINITE

Levinas resists appealing to love, insofar as it implies the “bourgeois ideal of love as domestic comfort or the mutual possession of two people living out an *égoïsme à deux*.”²⁴⁴ But in considering Weil’s Go(o)d—as the possibility of love without the consolations of a certain presence—Levinas would concede the import of a love that suffers for the other. This would be “love without lust,”²⁴⁵ since lust stems from a need that seeks fulfillment. Not unlike Weil’s characterization of attending the absolute Go(o)d, ethical love does not seek “self-satisfaction,”²⁴⁶ nor “remuneration,”²⁴⁷ nor the “consolations” of a promised future.²⁴⁸ It certainly avoids, as Weil and Heidegger would appreciate, a waiting too easily filled by whatever “corresponds to a grasp and a *comprehension*.”²⁴⁹ Levinas, like Heidegger and Weil, uses the word love to suggest not some emotive experience, but rather, a way thought might release its conceptual holds in an obligation to alterity. And yet, here the comparison might end. For Levinas, love is not

²⁴² Weil, *Notebooks*, 221.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁴⁴ Qtd. in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 66.

²⁴⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 163.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

simply desire for the beautiful in its instantiation of the Go(o)d; nor is it Heidegger's letting-be. As responsibility, this love is prior to ontological considerations, or is an emphatic application of them.²⁵⁰ Responsibility for the neighbor, even dying for him,²⁵¹ “ventures all the way to significations of the beyond of being and nothingness, beyond reality and illusion.”²⁵² Ethical love is thus not only one's engagement with the neighbor, but also the possibility of one's relation to the Go(o)d beyond being.²⁵³

There are at least a couple snags in pulling this language of the ‘Go(o)d beyond being,’ through Heidegger and Weil to Levinas. First, this language is rarely Heidegger's, though he does speak of a God as otherwise than ontological. Second, Weil does not have Heidegger's project of *beyng* in mind when she appeals to Plato's Good beyond being. Levinas respects the Platonic suggestion of a Good beyond being²⁵⁴ (despite its reliance on Socratic “reminiscence”),²⁵⁵ and takes Heidegger emphatically in his attempt to dislodge God from ontotheology. He extends these thinkers to their most radical, if even subverted, points. Levinas calls this method of emphasizing “*via eminentiae*”²⁵⁶ —

²⁵⁰ On this point, Weil may actually be similar to Levinas when writing: “The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former....Rights are always found to be related to certain conditions. Obligations alone remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world....There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned. The obligation is not based upon any *de facto* situation, not upon jurisprudence, customs, social structure, relative state of forces, historical heritage, or presumed historical orientation; for no *de facto* situation is able to create an obligation.” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 3-5.)

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁵³ Levinas, “God on the Basis of Ethics,” *God, Death, and Time*, 136-139.

²⁵⁴ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 67.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

whereby his work is “in some fashion more ontological than ontology.”²⁵⁷ He transmutes the ontological exposure of being-in-the-world into its most radical form as ethical exposure, being-for-the-other, even exposure toward the elusive God.²⁵⁸

Levinas’ God is absolute (insoluble to being and its relation to thinking) and therefore requires a waiting unsatisfied by knowledge or comprehension. And yet, Levinas’ God is not simply a clearing, neutralized by the annihilating force of God’s departure.²⁵⁹ Levinas’ God is neither the suspended opening toward an impersonal being of beings; nor is his God entirely mediated through the opening of the human soul united to God’s will; nor is his God an incarnated divinity, if this incarnation would be the definitive hermeneutic of messianism.²⁶⁰ One could argue that Levinas’ God has a similar effect upon thought as Weil’s and Heidegger’s: his God demands patience, resists consolation, and entails the dispossession of a never-at-home thinker or a decreed soul.²⁶¹ One could even argue that Heidegger’s ‘letting-be’ conditions the Go(o)d of Levinasian ethics;²⁶² or that Heidegger’s notion of being is necessarily assumed in the

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 89.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 108. Another example of this methodological emphasis is his ability to take Heidegger’s *Jemeinigkeit* (as a mineness I cannot shirk, not because I possess myself but because it is “impossib[le] to decline”) and translates it into a radical responsibility that is uniquely mine. (Ibid., 92.)

²⁵⁹ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 97. Derrida characterizes Heidegger’s divinity in this way, according to Levinas’ reading, but then suggests how Being is not exactly neutral and impersonal, but rather—as even Heidegger suggests—is the “*Being-of* this existent, and does not exit outside it as a foreign power, or as a neutral impersonal element.” (Ibid., 136.)

²⁶⁰ This would be problematic for Levinas not only for philosophical reasons, but also because he cannot take the position of a literal Messiah in light of the crisis of Auschwitz. (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 206.)

²⁶¹ Levinas pushes, perhaps further, in “denucleation.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 12.)

²⁶² “Not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics—in Levinas’s sense—can be opened without it. Thought—or at least the precomprehension of Being—*conditions*... the recognition of the essence of the existent (for example someone, existent *as* other, *as* other self, etc.). It conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this ‘letting-be’ of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible.” (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 137-138.)

ability to hear the call of the other in her singularity.²⁶³ And one could hear in both Levinas and Heidegger the Go(o)d that Weil describes—as it pushes us beyond any philosophical or moral security.

However, the point I would emphasize, in distinguishing Levinas' absolute as it eludes (and in this elusion marks) thought, is the way in which the phenomenal concreteness of the other *is* the enigmatic ab-solution of God.²⁶⁴ As such, the ethical encounter is an allusion—a reference—that undoes referentiality, stretching it into elusion. The other urges thought to think “beyond what it is able to contain in the finitude of its cogito.”²⁶⁵ Thus, God does not simply elude us in the unattainable goodness of what we desire, but rather eludes in closeness, in “the undesirable proximity of others.”²⁶⁶ It is an infinity too present, impossible to avoid with the ‘presence’ of being to thought. Levinas is not a pantheist; his description of the face does not adequate God with all beings. Rather, God is the dimension of height and receding: the beyond that distends the “temporality of hope,” and diachronous non-fulfillment, more than it responds to our preoccupations with being.²⁶⁷ God is the elusion in which the face of the other can be said to appear, without this appearance being merely a sign of presence. That is to say, God is

²⁶³ Or, as Derrida argues, “Every determination, in effect, presupposes the thought of Being” not as a concept, but as the name for what permits naming, “permits the emergence of every possible difference.” “Without it, how can one give meaning to Being as other, as other self, to the irreducibility of the existence and the essence of the other, and to the consequent responsibility?” (Ibid., 140.)

²⁶⁴ Levinas, *“Is It Righteous to Be?”*, 171.

²⁶⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xiii.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 69.

²⁶⁷ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 65. One is reminded of Gabriel Marcel’s description of time as a patient hope that resists the reduction of the other. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 40.

the trace in which a face might signify its inadequation.²⁶⁸ The other's non-manifestation to intentionality is precisely located in a non-place: the elusion of God's passing.²⁶⁹

In a glory that awakens but does not illuminate,²⁷⁰ the other halts our philosophical inquiries by placing our being in question; she does so with a potency that is not violent.²⁷¹ It is the difficulty of the other's "absolute proximity and absolute distance"²⁷² that puts phenomenology in question,²⁷³ and in turn points to the elusive, "invisible, unthematizable God."²⁷⁴ The task of this section will be to delineate how Levinas' God could "com[e] to mind"²⁷⁵ as otherwise than a presence; and how this elusion of the absolute God, in turn, prepares thought *not* for "nothingness," but for the "dis-inter-estedness" of ethical love.²⁷⁶ In seeking both of these possibilities, we must engage Levinas' suggestion that love and dis-inter-estedness are made possible only through the idea of the Infinite, through God.²⁷⁷

²⁶⁸ Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 65.

²⁶⁹ Thus both God and the neighbor seem, as Derrida writes, to mean "phenomenality as disappearance." (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, 129.)

²⁷⁰ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 73.

²⁷¹ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, 96.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷³ This questioning of phenomenology might look like, for example, Levinas' questions that begin his meditation on "Transcendence and Phenomenology": "How can a thought go beyond the world that is precisely the way by which the being that it thinks is assembled, whatever the heterogeneity of its elements and the variety of their modes of being? How can the transcendent signify the "wholly other," easy to say certainly, but which the common fund of the thinkable, and of discourse restores to the world and as a world? It is not enough that, in what is thinkable, a difference is revealed or a contradiction opened such that there gapes an interval corresponding to transcendence or even nothing, before which the dialectical and logical resources of thought would be used up in impotence." (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 124.)

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

When Levinas writes of dis-inter-estedness—as disinterring persons from their rootedness in being (*esse*)—he is not advocating the illusory non-place of ideology. Modern epistemology, he argues, distrusts as ideology any attempt to “tear oneself from being in order to place oneself, as a subject, upon an absolute of utopian ground.”²⁷⁸ It is fair to take this suspicious stance, given the failures of ideologies that claim to escape from being-in-the-world. However, the alternative modern epistemology suggests—“neoscience and neopositivism”—is no better.²⁷⁹ The sciences often paradoxically construct reality as “a world of being without human traces.”²⁸⁰ They posit by eliding the one who posits, covering over her constructions. While they do not move the subject to the ‘view from nowhere,’ the sciences have their own mode of disinterestedness that attempts to cover, and thereby ignores, its own interests. Levinas often links this tacit investment not only with the *conatus* most sharply witnessed in war,²⁸¹ but also with the death of God. Because it privileges presence and the results of willed experiments, positivism confuses God’s silence with either the right to assert God’s power in absentia, or the license to proclaim God’s death.²⁸²

These intellectual forms of disinterestedness can, at best, aspire to the *gelassenheit* of Heidegger. They can attempt to let-be what arrives, even as they find

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 7. See also John Caputo’s discussion of the real and the absolute. (Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 210-216.)

²⁸¹ Levinas characterizes the attempt to understand an essence as inherently related to *interesse*. “And what else can positivity mean but this *conatus*? Being’s interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence’s interested. No entity can await its hour.” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 4.)

²⁸² Ibid., 5.

ways to prepare for the discovery.²⁸³ But Levinas is more radical: dis-inter-estedness is a “leavetaking” (“adieu”) from “the firm ground, [from] presence” not into being (“essance”) but “unto God [*à-Dieu*].”²⁸⁴ This God is not brought near like a result in an experiment, or like things shining in the fourfold. Rather the subject must accept distance by practicing time “as an awaiting—as patience, more passive than any passivity correlative of acts—[that] awaits the ungraspable.”²⁸⁵ In order to dislodge from thought as the grasp of being, Levinas adds that this time encourages thoughts “more thoughtful than the positive ones.”²⁸⁶ In other words, thought must not respond to God’s elusion with negation, as in Levinas’ characterization of negative theology.²⁸⁷ Rather, to preserve God’s elusion, thought must be put in question. This is why Levinas likens the thought of the infinite to the outpacing of time: the time that “is a question, a search, a demand, and a prayer.”²⁸⁸ Thinking can only attain to this dis-inter-estedness, this disruption of the priority of being and its intelligibility, through “the exposure to another...proximity, obsession by the neighbor, an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain.... a pure deficit, an increase of debt in a subject that does not have a hold on itself...”²⁸⁹ And yet, dis-inter-estedness, as the disturbance of the Infinite, is not simply made possible by “an

²⁸³ This ambiguity is inherent to any ‘invention,’ since the term (*inventio*) suggests both contriving, making, and *discovering* what is not merely contrived.

²⁸⁴ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 50.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁸⁶ Another example of Levinas’ *via eminentiae* method. (*Ibid.*, 50.)

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 120. Granted, Levinas may not admit the ways in which negative theology is not a simple negation. It serves to question, not simply negate, thought’s categories as they apply to God.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁸⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 55.

interminable series of failures” in thought, nor the “impossibility of coming to an end.”²⁹⁰

According to Levinas, these ‘bad’ infinities are not the elusiveness of the Go(o)d.

The elusion of the good is its “deficit, a wasting away and a foolishness in being; to be good is excellence and elevation beyond being.”²⁹¹ This good, as “the possibility of the beyond,”²⁹² may be desirable in the manner that one desires the possibility of God. But it is not therefore the same as Heidegger’s poet who waits in the erotic between, preparing for this possible God. According to Levinas, goodness, like God, cannot simply be a matter of desire, if this desire is said to intend toward an object.²⁹³ God and goodness are not objects, but rather the elusive lure that alludes back (refers, *renvoi*) to the undesirable other, the neighbor for whom I am “non-erotic[ally]” responsible.²⁹⁴ It is as if the function of allusive thought, whereby the ethical encounter directs us toward the height of God, turns us in an “ir-rectitude” back toward the other.²⁹⁵ Though God and the good call forth desire, they are also radically separate from desire “by a separation of holiness.”²⁹⁶ Holiness thus becomes the distance of a God who is:

...other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence....In order that the formula ‘transcendent to the point of absence,’ not signify the simple explicitation of an ex-ceptional word, it

²⁹⁰ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xiv.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹³ To be fair, as has already been mentioned, Heidegger describes the possibility of waiting without object. Though, Levinas questions his thinking in its practice. Heidegger seems to have a preoccupation with Being as the destinal sending of the German people’s history. I would argue that Heidegger strives to keep his waiting, especially in the 1940s onward, to a waiting without the specific arrival of its object. Unfortunately, Heidegger’s waiting neither expresses the arrival of a neighbor who demands an ethical response.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

was necessary to restore this word to the meaning of every ethical intrigue... [of] the approach of the neighbor, that is, of his face or his forsakenness.²⁹⁷

The distance of God's holiness, or God's "transcendence to the point of absence," is not God's place as the "'first other,' or the 'other *par excellence*,' or the 'absolutely other'"—all of which would imply an ontological ranking. God's alterity is not the potency of an absolute entity, but an ab-solution from being that takes on meaning precisely in the alterity of the neighbor.²⁹⁸ This "ir-rectitude"²⁹⁹ by which God's absence turns me toward the proximity of the neighbor, absolves God from having to be an "object [or] interlocutor,"³⁰⁰ and ex-cepts God's name. *And yet*, this name of God, which signifies God's absence more than it ensures God's presence, is not nothing; it takes on meaning in the ethical encounter. God, as the uncontainable Infinite that perpetuates the differance (deferral and difference) of diachronous time, extend the distance between the neighbor and me. But God does so in such a way that this distance is not the futility of an abyss, but the possibility of non-indifference toward the neighbor.³⁰¹ Levinas insists that this is not a mere "play on words."³⁰² God as the "breaking up of consciousness that aims at ideas, already differing from all content," is a difference that is not simple negation of relation; God is rather an "exceptional relation."³⁰³ God, the Infinite that is "wholly other than thought," cannot be contained in the thinker who strives to "encompass and

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 69-70.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 131. Levinas calls the idea of God "the very absolution of the absolute" insofar as God absolves from, and thereby breaks up, ontological determinations of "investment, synopsis, and synthesis [that] merely encloses in a presence, re-presents, beings back to presence, or lets be." (Ibid., 63.)

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 69.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 69.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 71.

³⁰² Ibid., 63.

³⁰³ Ibid., 63.

comprehend.”³⁰⁴ But, Levinas insists, the difference of God is not a matter of indifference. God relates to the “psyche of subjectivity” as both different from its ideas, but also an idea within the mind.³⁰⁵

The idea of the Infinite is “in me,”³⁰⁶ and yet prior to my consciousness, even prior to my “ethical obligation to the other.”³⁰⁷ Thus, Levinas must describe how God could be considered prior to being, and thereby found an ethics that precedes ontology. To approach this dilemma, Levinas associates God’s holy separation with an “immemorial past”³⁰⁸ that can never be synchronized with, but nevertheless opens the possibility of, dia-chronous time.³⁰⁹ God’s elusion is signified in the “immemorial past that is unrepresentable and was never present...[wherein] I am committed, in responsibility for the other, according to the singular figure that a creature presents, responding to the *fiat* of Genesis.”³¹⁰ A command that operates more like an “unassumable trauma,”³¹¹ my perpetual debt of substitution (being-for-the-other) precedes my sense of contract and freedom.³¹² And because God eludes us like “a ‘more’ in the ‘less,’”³¹³ any obedience to God is an awakening to alterity that ever outpaces

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 63.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 63.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 159, 161, 166.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 96.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 166.

³¹¹ Ibid., 70.

³¹² Ibid., 71.

³¹³ Ibid., 59.

us.³¹⁴ As exposure toward the other, the idea of the Infinite (that, for Levinas, is named God) facilitates an obedience prior to hearing a specific command.³¹⁵ This indebtedness is prior to memory or acceptance. It therefore diverts my desire for the Go(o)d that can be enjoyed, directing it instead into a hungry obsession for the neighbor.

The other can never be assimilated into the digestion of enjoyment not simply because of her singularity, but also because of the structure of temporality that the immemorial past opens. Just as I cannot represent to myself the immemorial past when I was created as a being-exposed-to-the other, so too I live on in a temporality that prevents my catching up to the neighbor. The other “leaves me without a present for recollection or a return into the self... [and] makes me late.”³¹⁶ This inability to catch up to the other in comprehension, or in re-presentation of the other to myself, is a feature of Levinas’ temporality. It is not simply a resistance to the metaphysics of presence that Heidegger seeks to thwart in his being-toward-death. Levinas’ dia-chronic temporality, founded in the immemorial past, becomes viable because he does not grant ultimacy to the being-toward-nothingness. The infinite does not support a temporality garnered in the fear of death; neither is it the “fright before the Sacred” that makes us dream of an eternal rest.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ As Levinas writes, “the unto-God is not a finality.” (Ibid., 177.) Consequently the toward God that leads us to the neighbor asks that our vigilance for the other be like an insomnia. This insomnia is not the prevention of rest, but an intensification of consciousness. Consciousness is derivative of insomnia. Insomnia, as the ethical alertness to the other that cannot be brought into the rest of the same, is prior to the “modification” consciousness. (Ibid., 58.)

³¹⁵ This obedience is a “pure witnessing that bears witness not to a previous experience, but to the Infinite, it is inaccessible to the unity of apperception, it is nonappearing, and it is disproportionate to the present.” (Ibid., 74.)

³¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

Levinas' temporality suggests a fear for the neighbor, as "a reversion of this waiting for God into the proximity of another."³¹⁸

Levinas' sense of temporality as an excess (immemorial, unrepresentable, diachronically opposed to any synchrony) is not the temporality of ontology.³¹⁹ The temporality suggested by the immemorial precisely thwarts ontological time's assembly of its "dispersion...in the present."³²⁰ Levinas' immemorial goes beyond the time of being as presence, correlation, identity. It is therefore suitable to the interruption of the ego by the beyond-being of the Go(o)d, though also confused with the without-being of evil. As in Weil's comparison of the infinite good and limitless evil, Levinas notes that the excesses of evil can resemble the transcendence of the Infinite. However, God's elusion is by no means adequated with evil, even if evil and suffering are also a "rupture with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world."³²¹ The alterity of evil, its excess, is both its resemblance to the Go(o)d,³²² and its difference from the Go(o)d. Evil though excessive, driving us to an "awaiting that intends infinitely more than this awaited,"³²³ is not the transcendence of the Infinite Go(o)d; it does not ask responsibility. The Good "elevat[es]" the "evil that pursues me" into my responsibility for the suffering of the other.³²⁴ Evil's excess pushes us to calculative thoughts of

³¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

³¹⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise the Being*, 31-43.

³²⁰ Ibid., 38.

³²¹ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 128.

³²² Insofar as both awaken the soul to an order beyond the supposed neutrality of being. (Ibid., 132.)

³²³ Ibid., 132.

³²⁴ Ibid., 134.

remuneration and desert. But the Go(o)d's infinity "is wholly contrary"³²⁵ to this calculation and its attempts to comprehend evil. Levinas' idea of the infinite can therefore condemn theodicy (God's presence to our calculations of justice) even as it concedes theophany (God's proximity in the face of the other). Accordingly, Levinas cannot privilege recovery over against rupture, nor knowledge (the "sense" of laws) over against sociality (the sensibility demanded by the face-to-face).³²⁶

It is in this ambiguity that dia-chrony does its most radical work: the Other is not correlated with evil; and the excess of evil need not equal the excess of the Go(o)d that directs us to the Other. Because neither recovery nor rupture, neither good nor evil, neither knowledge nor sociality have the last word to synchronize history—the "approach of an Infinite God"³²⁷ gives "the enigma's word."³²⁸ This is a word that refutes finality, correlation, adequation, theodicy, even phenomenal intentionality: it is the word that "solicits across a face, the term of my generosity and my sacrifice."³²⁹ Sacrifice for the other is the response solicited in the face. But the gratuity of this sacrifice, demanded by the face as "a proximity interrupting the series," can "appear" "only if it enigmatically comes from the infinite and its immemorial past."³³⁰ That is to say, the face is only a face in its eruption into the "passage of God."³³¹ This passage is not present, but as "the

³²⁵ Ibid., 134.

³²⁶ Ibid., 134.

³²⁷ Ibid., 134.

³²⁸ Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 73.

³²⁹ Ibid., 73.

³³⁰ Ibid., 73.

³³¹ Ibid., 73.

absolute that withdraws,” it leaves the trace of God’s “antecedence...relative to a world which cannot accommodate him.”³³²

This non-accomodation of the world to God need not be mourned; it provides the basis for ethics precisely in its subversion of the order in which God would have to be present, and available to certainty. This “way of the Ab-solute,” which remains an enigmatic riddle to “everything that is shown, signaled, symbolized, announced, remembered, and thereby ‘contemporized’ with him who understands,” asks us to respond to the “allusion” of God’s “incognito” in the face.³³³ The allusion of the face, which marks the proximity of God precisely in God’s elusive non-appearing, turns Levinas to a text in the Gospel:

I was led to Matthew 25, where the people are astonished to hear that they have abandoned and persecuted God. They eventually find out that while they were sending the poor away, they were actually sending God himself away. I always said later on, after I became acquainted with the concept of the Eucharist, that the authentic Eucharist is actually the moment when the other comes to face me. The personality of the divine is *there*, more so than in the bread and wine. But I have read this in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 58, the people are said to seek “to know God’s ways,” “to draw near to him” (v. 2). God, though, will only approach when the people help the poor, feed the hungry (v. 7).³³⁴

Thus when Levinas turns to think God “on the basis of ethics,”³³⁵ or God as the withdrawal that makes possible the ethical encounter, he does so by emphasizing the immeasurable. The immeasurable, by definition, baffles one who would await either the assurance of God’s full presence, or the eschatological reward of good behavior.

³³² Ibid., 73.

³³³ Ibid., 71-72.

³³⁴ Levinas “*Is It Righteous to Be?*”, 255-256. As Simone writes, “The text of the Gospel is concerned only with Christ’s presence in the sufferer...The Gospel makes no difference between the love of our neighbor and justice.” (Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” *Waiting for God*, 84-85.)

³³⁵ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 136-139.

An ethics founded in God's infinity entails "a responsibility without measure, which does not resemble a debt that one could always discharge, for, with the other, one is never paid up."³³⁶ The ethical "imperative of gratuitous love" extends thought into an "order of holiness."³³⁷ Holiness, in this case, would not be adherence to an absolute distinction posited by dogma, but rather reverence for the ab-solution of God.³³⁸ God's ab-solution—though no less given in the thought of the Infinite, signified by the face, or dispersed as immemorial time—remains a necessary distance. One cannot cross this distance except in the proximity of the neighbor. God's absolution transcends our intentional, teleological and even dialogical aims. But it is precisely in God's resistance to our aims' need, hunger, and satisfaction that a love "more perfect than satisfaction" becomes possible.³³⁹ God's distance distends the space in which a face might appear, and in which a love, never satisfied nor satisfactory, might respond to it.

IV. JEAN-YVES LACOSTE: THE ELUSION OF THE ESCHATON

For Levinas, the idea of the Infinite is given to us like a trauma, and the face is given to phenomenality even as it withdraws from intentionality. These gifts do not ask our receptivity. That is, if reception is a return to the self, any "generosity" toward the other who gives herself to be "reached without showing himself touched," must be an "ingratitude."³⁴⁰ Going toward the other, which is inevitably a movement toward God,³⁴¹

³³⁶ Ibid., 138.

³³⁷ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, ix.

³³⁸ Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 161.

³³⁹ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 108.

³⁴⁰ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *Deconstruction in Context*, 349.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 359.

requires a “departure without return.”³⁴² It is for this reason that Derrida reads Levinas’ ethical encounter as an “eschatology which awaits nothing [and] sometimes appears infinitely hopeless....It is given as such and renunciation belongs to its essential meaning.”³⁴³ In the ethical encounter, one works toward a future that is “indifferent to my death”,³⁴⁴ my work³⁴⁵ must prepare for a time beyond my time, “a time that would be without me.”³⁴⁶ Levinas founds the possibility of sacrifice upon the refusal of triumph, and the renunciation of its foretaste. Therefore, the ab-solution of God, “the absolutely absent from which [the other] comes,” is not a revelation of God, even if it is the site of God’s word to us.³⁴⁷ God’s transcendence, as a trace of the immemorial past, “refuses immanence.”³⁴⁸ This is, of course, not to say that God’s transcendence, as absence, refuses relationship; God’s absence “renders visitation possible.”³⁴⁹ And yet, is this visitation of God, through the face, not cause for hope even as it is the command for responsibility?

Or, to put it in Lacoste’s terms, could this ethical encounter be a “‘rehears[al],’ by anticipation, [for] what will (certainly, maybe, etc.) come”?³⁵⁰ Levinas admits the possibility of foretaste in Kant’s “rational hope,” where “in the finite time there opened

³⁴² Ibid., 349.

³⁴³ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, 95.

³⁴⁴ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 349.

³⁴⁵ “A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.” (Ibid., 348.)

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 349. Levinas perhaps takes this notion from the Biblical story of Moses, who prepared his people for the promised land that he himself did not enter. (*NRSV*, Deuteronomy 34.)

³⁴⁷ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, 355.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 355.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 354.

³⁵⁰ Lacoste, “The Phenomenality of Anticipation,” *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now*, ed. Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 15.

another dimension of originarity...that had a meaning other than finite *or* infinite time.”³⁵¹ This hope, not unlike Levinas’ eschatology without hope, does not answer “to a need to survive.”³⁵² This hope would signify not only a relationship with the infinite,³⁵³ but also the possibility of “awaiting in time” wherein the being-toward-death is not ultimate.³⁵⁴ Kant’s rational hope would not only resist the *Sein zum Tode*, but also a certain knowledge.³⁵⁵ In this context, Levinas admits that hope is not simply desire for a reward, but “the relationship with something beyond-measure.”³⁵⁶ And thus his eschatology, despite indications otherwise, could be said to have a certain hope, perhaps even a certain anticipation that does not return to the calculations of the Same. Not all anticipation of the Go(o)d commits itself to satisfaction. If hope is precisely a relation to the unsatisfiable (*satis*, measure), it could be an “enjoyment” that does not satisfy hunger but increases it.³⁵⁷

The difficulty of Levinasian ethics is that its radicality cannot admit the possibilities for transcendence inherent to being-in-the-world. Yes, Levinas admits that his particular utopian ethics³⁵⁸ does not altogether refuse a place in history.³⁵⁹

³⁵¹ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 63-64.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁵³ “Wholly other and uncontainable [*in-tenable*], unrepresentable, outside the having of possession, without punctuality that would let it admit designation, outside what can be encompassed by comprehension where the succession of qualitative duration is synchronized by memory and the project—the In-finite nevertheless does not exclude a relation with the seeker.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Positivity,” trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwarz (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁵⁵ Levinas uses both *connaissance* and *savoir* when describing this resistance. (*Ibid.*, 64-65.)

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵⁷ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 68.

³⁵⁸ Utopian not in the sense of Bloch or Marx, but in a resistance to the rootedness of Heideggerian ontology as the temporal-spatial playing field of being.

Nevertheless, Levinas argues that history and being-in the world, as Heidegger describes them, cannot found an ethics whose command precedes us and draws us to the other who exceeds synchrony. Lacoste's eschatology also challenges the definitive claims of history and Dasein. And yet, because Lacoste is not preoccupied with avoiding a "return" to ontological structures, he can write of an eschaton that is both transcendent to the world, and yet permits us to be otherwise within the structures of the world. One could argue that Levinas has in mind a specific return—the return to the Same that characterizes Western philosophy and subjectivity. The symptom of this return would be the privileging of calculation, satisfaction, certainty, and happiness over patience, immeasurability, questioning, and suffering-for-the-other. But Lacoste approaches the "non-place" as not only opened by a Levinasian "disinterestedness."³⁶⁰ The non-place of liturgy certainly disrupts being; but Lacoste remains clear that this disruption—the eschatological as it resists the empirical—is never without a certain promise given to beings-in-the-world.

Granted, this may fall to the distinction that Levinas makes between philosophy and religion. Though Levinas doubts the "formal opposition" between the God of philosophers and the God of the prophets,³⁶¹ he does claim a methodological difference in religion's response to God. Religion, according to Levinas, "believes it knows much more [than philosophy]. I do not believe that philosophy could console. Consolation is a function entirely different, it is religious."³⁶² It is hard not to hear this word, "consolation,"

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 81.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 57.

³⁶² Ibid., 86.

as a negative feature. Certainly for Heidegger and Weil, thinking must resist consolation; and ethics as first philosophy, for Levinas, must resist the complacency of the same. However, in his depiction of the search for God in philosophy, Levinas does not always acknowledge philosophy capacity to resist answers. And indeed, he recants his claim that religion tends towards consolations, when he cites the Biblical search for God as God's search for us, God's questioning us in a manner far from consoling.³⁶³

Between these apparent contradictions opens a space for thinking that is neither strictly philosophical (if this were to mean the search for answers and absolute knowledge) nor strictly religious (if this were to mean either the search for consolation, or the endless questioning of God in the face of the other). As stated in the previous chapter, Lacoste describes this space—wedged in the margins between consciousness and soul, between eschatological withholding and empirical givens—as liturgical.³⁶⁴ In order to understand the mark of the elusive *eschaton* upon Lacoste's thinking of an allusive liturgy, we must consider: 1) what Lacoste claims to be the differences “between philosophical and theological reasoning,”³⁶⁵ granting his refusal to dismiss either one as unnecessary for being *in* while provisionally *beyond* the world; 2) how Lacoste's eschatology differs from Heidegger's waiting for the possible God, or Weil's attending to the Good, or Levinas' patient sacrifice to the time without me. We can then begin to ask why, for Lacoste, the *eschaton* is not simply a consolation for thinking, but rather an

³⁶³ Ibid., 85.

³⁶⁴ Which is to say that liturgy “occup[ies] the location it subverts, but it also presents itself as a practice in time, the coherence of which every phenomenology will recognize even if there are paradoxes to be discerned in it. The space and time it opens are, however, those of a disinterestedness, of leave taken from the play of the world. The world obviously never ceases to lay claim to anyone, even when someone wishes to divest himself of all interest in it: facticity surrenders only to death.” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 52.)

³⁶⁵ Jean-Yves Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.3 (July 2007): 262-282.

elusion of an absolute future, whereby God's promise gives to thought its patient disinterestedness *and* its pressing hope.

Levinas, Weil, and Heidegger stress that thought must exercise waiting and learn patience. For Weil, this entails a thinking that remains “equally welcoming and equally reserved with regard to every [thought].”³⁶⁶ This indifference assists her in loving God as she might wait upon and absent lover—not as an illusion, but as what eludes thinking even as it demands it. For Heidegger, waiting entails a preparation of history for the God that has passed, and the preparation of metaphysical thinking towards poetic thinking. Levinas would suggest that the waiting of the poet and the philosopher are not sufficient: the former, because her task seems an attention to either the impersonal *Es Gibt* or the pagan gods of place; the latter, because letting-be is a phenomenal exercise inevitably interrupted by the enigmatic mode in which the face dis-appears. Levinas certainly expects thought to be patient (a waiting without object), but only because it has been convicted by the dia-chronous time of the other, who demands our patience in ethical work. This patience is not a slowness in response; Levinas’ characterizes my response to the other as demanding urgency, even if it is always doomed to be too late. And yet, because Levinas links ethical patience to an eschatology without hope,³⁶⁷ its urgency derives not from a promised “Absolute Future”³⁶⁸ but from the irrefutable authority of an immemorial past.

³⁶⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 40.

³⁶⁷ He characterizes any provisional utopia, and its anticipation, as a “return to immanence”—as in his reading of Bloch. (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 97.)

³⁶⁸ Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 265.

Though Levinas writes of the immemorial past as “a time before time,” he dismisses the description of transcendence as absolute future, or as a “time after time.”³⁶⁹ He bases his rejection on the claim that the immemorial past is not a thematization: “The search for the Infinite, as Desire, accedes to God but does not lay hold of him; it does not thematize him as an end. Finality would be insufficient to describe the relationship with the infinite.”³⁷⁰ Again, this lack of finality is not a lack of urgency or direction. Levinas can admire in Bloch the dual assumption that, in light of death, there is nothing one can do—and yet, “there is much one can do.”³⁷¹ Levinas describes the virtue of Bloch’s “rid[ding] death of its anguish” as the ability to work toward spending oneself entirely, without this work being a “diversion.”³⁷² Here there is a sort of impatience, and a hope, that one can exist in such a way that death can do nothing except “against the empirical being that I was.”³⁷³ No doubt, Levinas might describe the virtues of Lacoste’s philosophy in a similar fashion. There is, in Lacoste, never a full departure from the world, and the empirical I. And yet, there is the suggestion of another reality, an “eschatological I”³⁷⁴ which is not entirely subject to the ultimacy of death.

Levinas and Lacoste are not entirely antithetical to one another in their attempts to preserve God’s elusion of ontological time. But they do develop differently its emphasis. Lacoste does not assume that an absolute future implies a temporality irreducible to our grasp and thematization. He does not dismiss its potential, as Levinas does, by confusing

³⁶⁹ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 97.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷⁴ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 60-62.

being-toward-the-eschaton as being-toward death.³⁷⁵ In *Experience and the Absolute*, Lacoste remains clear that the “eschaton is not available to us, and the definitive is given only in the form and under the conditions of the provisional.”³⁷⁶ Its provisional gifts would be the recognition, in liturgy, of the absolute future’s “intrinsic structures.”³⁷⁷ But even to speak of this gift is to speak of the eschaton as an elusion of the provisional, not its eradication. In a liturgy shaped by the testimony of an absolute future, we “elud[e] being-toward-death’s every possible determination of the present.”³⁷⁸ This eschatological elusion is not nothing; it is a critique of the “worldly order of verifiable knowledge” that suggests death as the only definitive event.³⁷⁹ To suspect this anticipation of an absolute future as possession, or immanence, would be to miss the point. The absolute future dispossesses us of the finality of death and the security of verifiability.

As such, the eschaton cannot be confused with the need for satisfaction, nor with Hegel’s reconciliation of the infinite and the finite at the cross. Lacoste resists Hegel’s eschaton because it renders the Absolute as “immanent in the world”: an event that consummates everything, absorbing even the promise of a resurrection into the reconciliation of Christ’s death.³⁸⁰ But for Lacoste, the absolute future is as much a promise of resurrection as it is the realization of reconciliation. The absolute future is not a possession for theoretical knowledge, nor does it, as in Hegel’s conception of the cross, enact the definitive in this world. Hegel’s *eschaton*, for Lacoste, is insufficient not simply

³⁷⁵ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 98.

³⁷⁶ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 60.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁸⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 135.

because the eschaton is incalculable and its conception would be totalizing. He finds Hegel's eschaton theologically coherent and insightful; but thinks its preference for the cross' reconciliation insufficient. By ignoring the resurrection or the parousia, Hegel's Absolute is simultaneously too complete (makes the eschaton an event in this world, and its structures of death, definitive) and altogether incomplete (insofar as it does not leave room, indeed incalculable time, for the absolute future not yet.)³⁸¹ Lacoste would not negate the need for the absolute to enter into the provisional; but he would not privilege this entry as an eschatology of death. By definition, the eschaton is for him an elusion of being-toward-death.

As absolute future, the eschaton not only eludes death, but also "all possibility of speculation."³⁸² This elusion is as much the cause of restlessness, as it is the hope for an otherwise provisionally promised in the liturgical encounter. Though the eschaton makes us restless, our place between the empirical and the eschatological does not make us a "battlefield where two principles collide," as in the polemics of being and beyond being.³⁸³ Rather, because of the potency of the eschatological promise—wherein neither Good Friday nor being-toward-death have the final word—we are taught "patience," "powerlessness," *and* "hope."³⁸⁴ When Lacoste advocates patience, he intends both the practice of thought suggested by Heidegger and Weil, the ethical imperative of Levinas, *and* the necessary patience that accompanies the urgency of proclamation. To understand how Lacoste thinks the elusive eschaton through the patience, powerlessness, hope, and

³⁸¹ Ibid., 136.

³⁸² Lacoste, "More Haste, Less Speed in Theology," 265.

³⁸³ Lacoste *Experience and the Absolute*, 61.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 91.

urgency it demands, we must discern how he distinguishes the patience of philosophy, and the patience of theology.

Yes, with Heidegger, Lacoste notes the patience of philosophy, how it “invites us to a long drawn-out labor”³⁸⁵ that is not simply assessed by what it reveals.³⁸⁶ Philosophy, for Lacoste, can be characterized as the interpretation of universals or a rich accumulation particulars.³⁸⁷ And in a suggestion Weil would admire, he reminds that its goal is not simply what it posits, but also the “art of living” it teaches.³⁸⁸ Thus, like Levinas, Lacoste may not draw as sharp a distinction between patient thinking and the praxis of patience as ethics.³⁸⁹ Given Lacoste’s resonance with Heidegger, Weil, and Levinas, it is no surprise that he aims to blur, at times, the distinction between theology and philosophy.³⁹⁰ He notes how they both begin in wonder, and also have a dimension of praise. One could cite Plato’s dialogues, but also, with Lacoste, mention how Rosenzweig’s (and Heidegger’s after him) “new thinking” made possible “the reblending of thought and praise, a nonobjectifying and nonscientific thinking.”³⁹¹ Yes, theology, like philosophy, must be

³⁸⁵ Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 264.

³⁸⁶ So he would agree that philosophy’s goals are more humble than the Hegelian ‘Absolute Spirit’ would suggest. Lacoste concordantly chastens “Hegelian knowledge” insofar as it assumes that “theoretical knowledge” is the “supreme experience of God.” Lacoste suspects as political, and not philosophical, the priority of concept over representation in its diminishment of worship and the “contents of the faith” that are existential as much as conceptual. (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 133.)

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 273.

³⁸⁹ In this way, he follows one of Levinas’ theses in *Totality and Infinity*: “at the risk of appearing to confuse theory and practice, [we] will deal with both as modes of metaphysical transcendence. The apparent confusion is deliberate and constitutes one of the theses of this book. Husserlian phenomenology has made possible this passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority.” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 29.)

³⁹⁰ He posits their shared inheritance in theoretical activity, by recovering both meanings of the Greek “theoria”: “theoretical activity” and “contemplation.” (Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 268.)

³⁹¹ Lacoste, *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, 80.

“careful”;³⁹² its thinking, no less than philosophy, “takes time”³⁹³ and a certain discipline in disinterestedness. However, for Lacoste, the time that theology takes in practicing the “patience proper to conceptual thinking,” is a benefit of the “patience of God.”³⁹⁴ And this mercy, as the apostle Paul warns the Thessalonians, is no excuse to lose one’s sense of urgency.³⁹⁵

The first distinction Lacoste makes for any patient thinking of God would be this sense of urgency.³⁹⁶ Though I am primarily concerned with what the elusive does for thinking—regardless of whether it is inflected philosophically, ethically, or theologically—it is important to consider why Lacoste must distinguish the thinking that abides by the “theological ‘language-game.’”³⁹⁷ Accepting this language-game, according to Lacoste’s reading of 1 Corinthians 7:31, enacts a provisional “‘end of the world.’”³⁹⁸ This is not to say that theological thinking allows us to elude the world,³⁹⁹ but rather to

³⁹² “Theology is hard work. Its speech is careful speech, constrained within a thousand *prologemena* and a thousand excursuses. Its discourse is methodical discourse with no need to be ashamed of its care in finding exact words and exact concepts...” (Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 280.)

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁹⁵ It is not unlike Heidegger’s description of Christian facticity in the urgency of the first Christians—which he then transposes into the poet’s “distress of holy mourning as readiness.” (Heidegger, “*Germania*” and “*The Rhine*,” 94.)

³⁹⁶ This is not say that theological thinking is anti-philosophical. Lacoste understands that philosophy and theology share ways of thinking; but their distinction lies in the ways they inhabit the language of concepts and make them their own. Theology may live in the “apartment” that philosophy has built, or find itself in the foreign tongues that it has inherited (Greek and Hebrew); but it strives to make the apartment its own, and to forge a “third language” that honors its inheritance. (Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 264, 270.)

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁹⁹ As Jeffrey Bloechl remarks in introducing Lacoste, the world does not elude us “because it is, as is God above all, too distant, too much and too far beyond our reach, but instead because it is too near us, so that every reach already presumes it and passes over it, if only to often sink back toward it. The life of faith moves perpetually between that distance and that nearness, and the thinking that attends to such a life must reckon with both [forms of elusion].” (in Lacoste, *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, vii-viii).

mark the limitations of its experiences and definitions. This capacity to bracket the world in liturgy, or in theological thinking, is at best a ““realized eschatology”” chastened always by the ““imminent eschatology”” that would end historical time.⁴⁰⁰ To accept the language-game and existential demands of Christian theology is precisely to experience “an in-between time.”⁴⁰¹ Theology cannot shirk the pressure and proclamation of an imminent end (*eschaton*), even as it is performed in the “delayed parousia.”⁴⁰² The pressure of this end is far from consoling; and it does not let theologians ‘off the hook’ of careful thinking. It intensifies the need for carefulness, for patience, even as it demands a sense of urgency, even uninhibited proclamation.

This would be the second distinction Lacoste makes: unlike philosophers, theologians ought to enjoy sharing, and the demands of intelligibility that accompany it. Lacoste characterizes the philosopher as admirably specialized; he even sympathizes with the “triumphant glee of someone who hugs some piece of knowledge tight and preserves a lofty silence.”⁴⁰³ And yet, this joy of the thinker, especially in the case of an academic, devolves into an anxious silence—one cannot speak out of fear that one “is not quite on top of it.”⁴⁰⁴ For the theological thinker, this anxiety has no place. The time given to theological thinking:

... is not first and foremost a time for the blessedness of believing or silent adoration. It is a time for speaking, with no right of holding back. Yet it is also a time in which the believer is authorized to search for the right words

Thus, the theological thinker engages “what it means to be not only toward-God but also, and at the same time, irrevocably, in-the-world.” (Ibid., ix.)

⁴⁰⁰ Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 264.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 265.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 267.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 267.

to say what must be said, a time in which the impatience of proclamation does not militate against patient application to the labours of thought and expression.⁴⁰⁵

The patient labors of theological thought, and the impatience of theological proclamation, aim asymptotically toward Lacoste's eschatological hope: universality,⁴⁰⁶ intelligibility, and credibility.⁴⁰⁷ Employing these terms, especially in the shadow of Levinas, might make us cringe. But they also permit us to raise a few questions: (1) Does the eschatological vision of Christ's universality totalize the very alterity it wishes to render transcendent? (2) Does the need for intelligibility in discourse necessarily lead to the violating "light" of "consciousness"?⁴⁰⁸ (3) What would be the proclaimer's role in credibility if merely restating the kerygma, or treating it like a "syllogism,"⁴⁰⁹ is "the most destructive of illusions"?⁴¹⁰

First, Lacoste advocates universality based on both Jewish prophecy and Christian texts. He writes of "Israel's hope" as pre-diction and pre-understanding for the Christian kerygma.⁴¹¹ One could rightly rebuke this as a totalizing maneuver, whereby the uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible is assimilated into the universality of the Christian message. However, Lacoste's remarks do not intend to diminish uniqueness, so much as

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 268.

⁴⁰⁶ "The task of theology cannot be understood apart from its roots in the prophetic dimension of the universal Christian experience." (Ibid., 268.)

⁴⁰⁷ "Translation is alert for signification, and makes use of new vocabulary to avoid mistakes about the signified. But that does not say enough when texts are entrusted to us not only that they may remain intelligible, but that their intelligibility may be matched by credibility." (Ibid., 276.)

⁴⁰⁸ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 60.

⁴⁰⁹ Lacoste, "More Haste, Less Speed in Theology," 274

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 276.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 269.

avoid an *ex nihilo* understanding of revelation.⁴¹² According to Lacoste, theology cannot speak, like Levinas might, of truths “immemorially known to mankind.”⁴¹³ The Christian revelation rather acknowledges its genealogy, even as it continues to acknowledge—in its message of the universal “renewal of all things”—the ongoing need for different languages, contexts, and experiences.⁴¹⁴ This does not mean that the Absolute future is therefore assimilated into immanence, and the “finality” this suggests,⁴¹⁵ as it takes form in history.⁴¹⁶ Lacoste’s *eschaton* does not eliminate the need for vigil, or for a departure from history, but intensifies it from within hopeful waiting.⁴¹⁷ Additionally, this movement into different lands, times, and tongues, is not a return to “the dreary reign of identity,”⁴¹⁸ but rather the journey of an exodus. It is a translation that does not solidify the mother tongue so much as “make me understand in my own language...another language.”⁴¹⁹ Lacoste’s particular appeal to Christ, then, is as an event that—if it is to be

⁴¹² “Theology inherits a language before it creates one.”

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 269. Part of this distinction might be that Lacoste is concerned, in this particular article, with Christian speech and the experiences it engenders, rather than the dangers of totalizing thought. He is much more aware of Levinas’ critique in other writings, insofar as his notion of liturgy is the bracketing of Hegelian “universal history.” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 51). In this sense Christianity understands that it is as penultimate as Judaism or any other religion.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 269. Its universalism derives not from a utopian time before time, but a time after time that renders the between-time as penultimate. Because the penultimate suggests provisionality, its universality is ‘pantopic’ rather than simply utopic. (*Ibid.*, 272.)

⁴¹⁵ Levinas’ greatest reservation with regard to eschatology is that its finality might thwart the ethical love that “cannot sleep, can never be peaceful or permanent.” (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 30.)

⁴¹⁶ Levinas understands that God can be said to exist in the history of humanity’s interaction with God. (*Ibid.*, 18.)

⁴¹⁷ “So it is not naïve (or ‘pre-hermeneutic’!) to conceive of the possibility of a language we can all hear, a language which nobody is ruled out a priori from assenting to. Yet the world that harbours us all, harbours differences, too, and with them harbours the perpetual possibility of a block in communication. We want everyone to hear and understand...but there is no universal language, and each time we launch into speech we accept certain perspectives.” (Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 274.)

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

“coherent”—seeks translation into multiple topoi and tongues.⁴²⁰ Lacoste calls this hope for commonality the imperative for an “ecumenical utterance.”⁴²¹ It is not that ecumenism shirks difference in favor of some “nostalgia for Eden that might allow us to name everything so that everyone could understand;”⁴²² it rather accepts the provisionality of perspectives, without these perspectives being so radically exterior to one another that no discourse could occur. Lacoste insists that ecumenical utterances help us avoid both (1) the idolatrous worship of signifiers, and (2) the polemicized call for obscurity, in response to transparency’s abuses.

Aware of Levinas’ critique of “transparent universality,”⁴²³ one might hesitate at Lacoste’s hope for “transparent intelligibility” in theology. However, one could read this hope as otherwise than the violence of totalizing thought.⁴²⁴ In making the gospel more intelligible, one makes more apparent its critique of a certain intelligibility. In speaking of Christ in ways that people might hear, one does not blunt the scandal nor its folly.⁴²⁵ It is an intelligibility that precisely resists the violent light of consciousness.⁴²⁶ In the case of the kerygma, Lacoste assumes that a certain esotericism, or too careful silence, can be violent insofar as it excludes persons without access. This is not to say that his ideal, again, would be that of a syllogism, or the simple repetition of scripture as immediately

⁴²⁰ “We have already, however, seen theology organized as a *charitable* discourse, a knowledge that I could not coherently acquire, properly speaking, if I did not accept the responsibility of passing it on, since the value of possessing it is not the joy of knowing, but the joy of hoping, to which all have a right.” (Ibid., 272.)

⁴²¹ Ibid., 275.

⁴²² Ibid., 274.

⁴²³ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 115.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 274.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 270-271.

⁴²⁶ Insofar as the eschatological I opens a margin to the empirical I that allows the soul to remain irreducible to consciousness and its knowledge.

accessible. The eschaton, or the *parousia*, forestalls the correlation of truth with immediacy, or God with a speculative object. In liturgy, there is the possibility of nullifying a certain distance between God's parousia presence and humanity; but liturgy can not "efface the very real distance separating the historical from the eschatological."⁴²⁷ Consequently, the kerygma pronounced in joyful anticipation of this eschaton, is disruptive before it is ever considered consoling.⁴²⁸

Because theology occurs this side of an elusive eschaton, it "prevents us from closing our present in upon its own particular store of reality," and forbids us from dismissing the "past events where God spoke."⁴²⁹ The eschaton does not close time, but opens both of its ends, even as it intermittently disrupts theology with its "displacements."⁴³⁰ These experiences of displacement, whether induced by the mediation of the text or in immediate (non)experience afford the incredibility that comprises the gospel's credibility. And simply because the Absolute has given a "last word" of credible salvation,⁴³¹ theologians cannot force conversion through language. Indeed, Lacoste suggests that there are other prophetic modes of communicating truth—not least of which would be the signification Levinas locates in ethics.⁴³² As a last word whose finality is an undoing of being's definitiveness, the prophetic word of scripture has

⁴²⁷ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 59.

⁴²⁸ In liturgy, "man's absolute future makes every present 'tremble.'" (Ibid., 59.)

⁴²⁹ Lacoste, "More Haste, Less Speed in Theology," 281.

⁴³⁰ "Theology demands, however, that we break the circle of our self-understanding, that we allow *what we are* to be interrupted by *what others were*, that we submit our capacities for language to the measure of the languages others spoke....All interpretation has in view a fusion of 'horizons,' which mean that we interpret by letting ourselves be interpreted, that the text interprets us as well as we the text." (Ibid., 281.)

⁴³¹ Ibid., 282.

⁴³² Ibid., 269.

a pre-eschatological quality. It is capable of incarnating in the particulars of the present. And yet as elusive, the *eschaton* resists any privileging of the present.

The distance this eschaton implies, and deposits within experience as a disruption of it, is for Lacoste exemplified by Christ.⁴³³ Christ is not the perfect reconciliation of a realized eschaton. But he is the promise that even the fool, the persecuted, the “minimal man” can be both far from the Absolute future, and yet “exist face-to-face” with God.⁴³⁴ Granted, the Absolute, if it is said to come to experience at all, does so as “incognito.”⁴³⁵ Thus any intelligibility one derives from this (non)experience remains a demand made by the non-intelligible.⁴³⁶ Not that the experienced event of Christ “reduce[s] man to incoherence, but paradoxically [allows him to] witness to an alliance and a peace.”⁴³⁷ The anticipation of this peace would be both an act of consciousness, but also the evasion of consciousness. The eschaton arrives in the “inchoat[e]” givens in our time, even as its promise eludes our time.⁴³⁸ Eschatological peace does not collapse the absolute’s

⁴³³ “But it is not in the least improper to suggest that the experience of the crucified Christ, of the minimal man par excellence, manifests precisely what separates the penultimate from the ultimate.” This difference—intensified by the Absolute who enters time to disrupt it—is not an indifference: “One thus learns from the fool and from those who resemble him, as one learns from the crucified Christ, that it is the lot of the reconciled man to exist face-to-face with a God whose paternal countenance is not hidden from him, *coram Deo*, and that all affective confirmation is strictly inessential here.” (Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 192.)

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴³⁵ “The God who intervenes incognito in the nonplace of liturgy can easily be recognized, by those for whom this nonplace opens up a space for his intervention, as he who can grant the wonder of a new beginning. Liturgy cannot compel him to do anything. His grace does not have to come to consciousness and become an affective certainty. But whether his presence is sensible or not (this is of absolutely no import whatsoever), the guest of the liturgical vigil can—alone—resolve the unhappiness caused by the tension between the eschatological I and the empirical I...” (*Ibid.*, 96.)

⁴³⁶ This is not to say that the God who appeals to us as what “must continue to elude our grasp” does so as a “mystery on which no light can be shed (this would deny the possibility of liturgy pure and simple), that it not deal with an absolutely other that it would have to praise without knowing it (which would be a flagrant contradiction), that it not know enough of God to justify itself...” (*Ibid.*, 141.)

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴³⁸ Lacoste, “The Phenomenality of Anticipation,” *Phenomenology and Eschatology*, 15.

distance, but rather asks us to internalize this distance as the gaping of “kenotic existence.”⁴³⁹ Because it demands humility, the eschatological promise does not simply dilute the negation implied in liturgical bracketing; it renders this negation an abnegation, which “compels the I to be nothing but its opening to God.”⁴⁴⁰ In abnegation, Lacoste’s standards of intelligible speech submit to their greater standard: the “measure of love” implied in the content and manner of its proclamation.⁴⁴¹

V. PAUL TILLICH: THE ELUSION OF THE ABYSS

Even the appeal to “kenotic existence,” as a response to the distant *eschaton*, suggests a question implying Christ’s sacrifice.⁴⁴² This question would have to elicit a pre-understanding of Christianity if it is to be distinguished from the less Christological—though just as Biblical—appeal of Levinas to sacrificial, disinterested love. Thinking the ab-solute is as much about the questions that derive from our experiences of a religious tradition, as it is the questions the ab-solute asks us in nonexperience.⁴⁴³ But if the nonexperience of the deferred, *parousia* presence is to resist the correlation of the ab-solute with nothingness, we must tackle a graver problem than justifications—eidetic or experiential—for kenosis. A thinker of the ab-solute must realize that, because the ab-solute is a transcendence often confused with absence (Lacoste, Levinas, Weil) or no-thing-ness (Heidegger), its every expression is at “risk of

⁴³⁹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 194.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁴¹ Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 282.

⁴⁴² Lacoste makes this explicit in his mention of a hermeneutic understanding that recalls both Tillich’s method of correlation and the Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle. (Lacoste, “More Haste, Less Speed in Theology,” 273.)

⁴⁴³ Perhaps this is not structurally unlike Levinas’ thought of the infinite, which enables Levinas to ask questions about the ultimacy of being, and to be questioned by the being otherwise of the face.

being judged meaningless.”⁴⁴⁴ In hollowing the subject (as in Levinas or Weil) or in denuding the other (as in Heidegger’s last god or Levinas’ face), is there a risk of thwarting the very process of deriving meaning? In other words, is it possible that the elusion of God could so denucleate the subject that she can no longer recognize the meaning granted even in this withdrawal?

When Lacoste warns of meaninglessness, he invites the possibility that one’s experience may block access to the experiences of Biblical figures and their language. For Tillich, the risk of meaninglessness is not only *existentiell* (concrete, personal experiences of finitude), but also *existential* (an ontological threat of non-being). We need not confuse kenosis with radical doubt and dispossession of meaning. For Tillich, revelation of the absolute consists neither in pure reception of a subject nor in unassimilable givenness of the ‘object.’ Something occurs, or someone comes, precisely as mystery, and someone “is grasped by the manifestation of the mystery.”⁴⁴⁵ But if this receptivity is to resist the particular possessiveness of demonization, it must be accompanied by one’s courage to be. This courage is neither security nor insecurity, possessiveness nor utter dispossession.⁴⁴⁶ Already in speaking of this courage, we may be reminded of the *conatus* that Levinas reprimands—the ego “posit[ing] himself *for himself*.”⁴⁴⁷ But is all positing of meaning “war,” or all positing of self invulnerability?⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁴⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 111.

⁴⁴⁶ Tillich’s absolute faith is not unlike Ricoeur’s “postreligious faith or a faith for a postreligious age,” as he explicates it. (Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” *Conflict of Interpretations*, 440ff.)

⁴⁴⁷ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 83. I sense that Tillich wants a kind of self-affirmation that is quite different from the *conatus essendi* insofar as it is “affirmation of one’s self in terms of one’s desires and fears. Such a self-affirmation has no unconditional character; ethics based on it are ethics of calculation, describing the best way of getting fulfillment of desires and protecting against fears.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 136-137.)

Levinas leaves open an alternative positing, an otherwise than war: the positing of a subject, in responsibility, that is both glorious and humble.⁴⁴⁹ Lacoste, too, suggests the possibility of abnegation—which is not utter negation of the self, but taking a stance of vulnerability, vigilance, and kenosis, with regard to the ab-solute.⁴⁵⁰ I summon these distinctions for two reasons. First, before entering into Tillich’s presentation of God as abyss, we must distinguish this abyss from the abyssal meaninglessness presented by death and experiences of finitude. Second, if the abyssal God is not simply one’s experience of being-towards-death, we must note how Tillich suggests a manner of being that is neither Heidegger’s *Dasein*, nor the *conatus* that Levinas critiques. In other words, how might the courage to be suggest the elusiveness of Tillich’s abyssal God, and in turn avoid its confusion with nothingness—either that of death or of meaninglessness?⁴⁵¹ This question remains essential to Tillich’s theological claims. In asking it, we sense their resemblance to and departure from Heideggerian ontology.⁴⁵²

Because Tillich writes of the experience of non-being (its “ontological shock”) within the context of God’s “abysmal element,” it is difficult to parse how God’s abyss is

⁴⁴⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 4.

⁴⁴⁹ “To posit subjectivity in this responsibility is to glimpse in it a passivity, never passive enough, of a consummation for the other whose very light glimmers and illuminates out of this ardor, without the cinders of this consummation being able to make themselves into the kernel of a being that is in-itself and for-itself, and without the I opposing to the other any form that might protect it or bring to it a measure. It is the consummation of a holocaust. ‘I am ashes and dust,’ says Abraham, interceding for Sodom. ‘What are we?’ says Moses, still more humbly.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 72.) Also see Levinas’ stance on the self as “uprooted from the concept of an Ego by the question of the Infinite....singular against all generalization in the concept of the Ego, a concept which offers replacements for the irreplaceable me, for me not able to quiet the calling that assigns me and devotes me to responsibility, to the *first person*, to the priority of *I* (which is not the priority of a principle) and that devotes me to it even when I slip away.” (Levinas, “Philosophy and Positivity,” *Transcendence*, 41.)

⁴⁵⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 162-163.

⁴⁵¹ Or even the confusion of the abyss with the human “attitude of passivity” which can actually not receive God insofar as it does not demand courageous acceptance. (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 68.)

⁴⁵² Thomas F. O’Meara O.P., “Tillich and Heidegger: A Structural Relationship,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 249-261.

not the *abgrund* of Heideggerian being.⁴⁵³ And yet, one distinguishing feature—resulting from the difference Tillich makes between theological revelation and philosophical questioning—remains: the “negative” aspect of God’s mystery is never without a “positive,” concrete aspect. This is not the same as saying that the no-thing-ness of Heideggerian Being reveals itself to Dasein in historical sending; if for no other reason than Tillich’s revelation is of a God that does not simply destine the Greeks and the Germans. The revelation of God, as the ground of ultimate being, includes the mystery that is irreducible to one person or group’s particular knowledge.⁴⁵⁴ It could be said that Heidegger’s Being is quasi-mystical in its irreducibility to a certain knowledge (subject vs. object), and is simultaneously revealing-concealing like Tillich’s God. However, because Heidegger’s Being is not God, but the temporal-spatial preparation for a God who may come, Tillich can better attend the religious implications of *aletheia*. If not simply Being, but God as the mystery of Being, can reveal and conceal the ground, what would this entail?

It would first require admitting, with Tillich, that knowledge about Dasein and the world “cannot lead to the revelation of the ground of being as God. It can lead to the question of the ground of being,” which both philosophy and natural theology might do.⁴⁵⁵ If this ground is not simply the absolute ground of the abyss (Being’s exemption from the causality of beings),⁴⁵⁶ but also a revelation of God as the mystery that founds reason, then Tillich borrows from Heidegger’s structure without assuming its content. For

⁴⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 113.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 109-110.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 196.

Tillich, the threat of non-being reveals not only being, but God as Being itself: the possibility of courage in spite of God's abyssal element, and in spite of the particular abyss of meaninglessness.⁴⁵⁷ It is important, in distinguishing Heidegger's influence on Tillich's constructive theology, to distinguish the abyss of existential meaninglessness and the abyss of God's mystery. The abyssal quality of God, Tillich derives from Otto—and perhaps from Heidegger who also read Otto—as the *mysterium tremendum*.⁴⁵⁸ But because the *mysterium fascinosum*—“what grounds man's being”—accompanies the abyssal *tremendum*, the holiness of God, for Tillich, has a “double sense.”⁴⁵⁹ God as both ground (*grund*) and abyss (*ab-grund*) founds both “mystical monotheism” (the transcendence of beings and value most akin to Heidegger's Being),⁴⁶⁰ and “exclusive monotheism”⁴⁶¹ (the transcendence of God over other being-like gods who secures justice, as in Levinas' illeity—the God of Israel.) However, since Heidegger's last god borders on “an abstraction from everything concrete,”⁴⁶² its elusion can be confused with permission for polytheism, or the proliferation of pagan gods.⁴⁶³ Tillich observes that we need exclusive monotheism to communicate God's ab-solution from polytheism, as well as critique “the temptation of the bearers of the holy to claim absoluteness for themselves.”⁴⁶⁴ While one might locate this monotheism in the prophetic strands of

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 226.

⁴⁶³ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 52.

⁴⁶⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 227.

Levinas, in Tillich's Protestant principle, and in Weil's Go(o)d, Tillich wonders whether God's transcendence can be personal, more concrete?

In a certain reading, both the mystical God of Heidegger and the absolute God of Levinas are "in danger of losing the concrete element in the idea of God."⁴⁶⁵ Though Levinas locates God as the infinite in the finite mind, or in the concreteness of the other's face, Tillich might stress that the enigma of this God prevents God's phenomenal personhood. One could debate whether Levinas' resistance to a certain phenomenality is a resistance to concreteness. One might hear in Tillich's definition of exclusive monotheism,⁴⁶⁶ Levinas' immemorial past, which commands us before concreteness and manifestation enter as concerns. Or, one might argue that this immemorial past is meaningless without the concrete signification of the face. To the degree that God is not only a trace of the ultimate, but also a "living God in whom the concrete and the ultimate are united," Tillich designates this monotheism as Trinitarian.⁴⁶⁷ Key to Trinitarian monotheism is not its quantity, but the quality it suggests: mediations of the divine that nevertheless transcend, in their mystery, the structures of mediation.

Tillich's living God is yet mysterious, insofar as God "'precedes' the subject-object relation," and thus eludes the language built upon "the subject-object scheme."⁴⁶⁸ If God eludes language on the basis of its subject-object structure, God also eludes a certain intentionality in phenomenal structures. Heidegger and Levinas would perhaps

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶⁶ "In exclusive monotheism an abstract transcendence of the divine develops. It is not the transcendence of the infinite abyss in which everything concrete disappears, as in mystical monotheism; rather it is the transcendence of the absolute command which empties all concrete manifestations of the divine." (Ibid., 229.)

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 108-109.

agree. Though, Levinas would ask an ethical signification and its responsibility, rather than a poetic signification and its response. Tillich would nuance these possibilities in a tone not unlike Lacoste or Weil: God does not obliterate our reasoning and modes of experience, but rather opens the possibility for an ecstasis from them within their restraints. Tillich is aware that the term ‘ecstatic reasoning’ suggests all the uneasy connotations of mysticism. Yet, Tillich does not dismiss mysticism in the way Levinas might; he rather suggests that mysticism is not the only means of gaining exteriority to the structures of reason. Ecstasis is possible not only in the abyssal submersion of the concrete, or in the trace-like ab-solution of the face, but in Luther’s overcoming of meaninglessness. Faith, as the “accepting [of] acceptance”⁴⁶⁹—“in spite of” the pangs of meaninglessness and anxiety over one’s finitude—provides a confidence that departs from the threat of non-being. The departure is not a negation of non-being, but the ability to accept meaninglessness and doubt, to incorporate it in the “power of being.”⁴⁷⁰ To be clear, this power is not the legitimization of violence toward alterity, but rather the possibility for a meaning that escapes the opposition of being and non-being.⁴⁷¹ Precisely in accepting doubt and despairing of meaning, a meaningful act occurs.⁴⁷² As Tillich writes, “the acceptance of despair is in itself faith and on the boundary line of the courage to be.”⁴⁷³ This faith is neither the eradication of doubt, nor the usurpation of reason. It is precisely an ecstatic reasoning that can “stand the abyss,” by accepting “a hidden

⁴⁶⁹ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 167.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁷¹ Or, read in the symbol of God’s ‘omnipotence,’ Tillich asserts its relation to the power of God that is not God’s causality but God’s irreducible claim that we are inseparable from God’s love. (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 128-129.)

⁴⁷² Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 171.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 170.

meaning within the destruction of meaning.”⁴⁷⁴ Tillich exchanges one ontology for an otherwise ontology: only a recognition of God’s abyssal transcendence, as the power to be, can resist both Heidegger’s mystical “doubt of any concrete content”⁴⁷⁵ and Heidegger’s revelation of Being through abyssal anxiety. If Heidegger’s question of being is *the question of the ab-solute*, Tillich suggests that we respond to it with “absolute faith.”⁴⁷⁶ It is not that this faith suggests a particular content, but neither does it shirk concreteness. It is faith in a God who neither rejects our concreteness, nor dismisses our doubt and despair, but rather embraces them, and transcends them infinitely.⁴⁷⁷

In a certain reading of Levinas, one may persist: why is this ecstatic reasoning necessary, when a certain non-being as kenosis or being-for-the-other, preserves transcendence? But Levinas does not ask the eradication of reason. He urges us to think it otherwise, as the “living reason” that shifts from *thinking of the other* into *living for the other*.⁴⁷⁸ To be precise, the kenosis of ethical sacrifice does not necessarily call for an evacuation of meaning, and the impotency of reason.⁴⁷⁹ For Tillich, meaninglessness would more often provide symptoms of despair than preparation for ethics. Without a

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁷⁵ That is, any concrete content with regard to God, and to some extent with regard to Being, insofar as certain writings suggest that one look beyond beings to Being. Perhaps Tillich has Heidegger in mind when he writes, “The atheistic terminology of mysticism is striking. It leads beyond God to the Unconditioned, transcending any fixation of the divine as an object. But we have the same feeling of inadequacy of all limiting names for God in non-mystical religion. Genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined.” (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 25.)

⁴⁷⁶ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 171.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 174-175.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁷⁹ Levinas does not ask the evacuation of meaning altogether, or of reason, but he does mark its failures in the encounter with the face. “Responsibility is not the privation of knowledge, of comprehension, of grasping and holding, but ethical proximity in its irreducibility to knowledge, in its sociality.” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 165.) He even argues that knowledge has role in responsibility (Ibid., 30.)

certain courage (as faith that invites the power to be),⁴⁸⁰ even responsibility is impossible, according to Tillich.⁴⁸¹ When non-being swallows the self in doubt and meaninglessness, Levinas' arguments for the priority of the other lose their urgency. The despairing self is not the 'minimal man' or the decreed ego oriented to the Go(o)d. The despairing self fails to be for the other, because she cannot even *be* in a way that is capable of response. Incapable of making meaning—if even the “meaningfulness”⁴⁸² of the face—the despairing subject is incapable of love's reasoning.

Tillich asserts reason's ecstasy so that we neither negate reason nor reduce it to the confines of possessive knowledge. Ecstatic reasoning permits the paradox of *in but not of*.⁴⁸³ The revelation of the mysterious, abysmal element of God carries within it a paradox not unlike Levinas' enigma that enters into phenomenality only to resist it: God, as the revelation of an infinite mystery, is “the manifestation of something within the context of ordinary experience which transcends the ordinary context of experience.”⁴⁸⁴ Because the revelation of God both comes to experience while eluding it, it simultaneously “preserve[s] and overcome[s]” the ontological shock of finitude.⁴⁸⁵ Revelation does so by uniting the abyssal and grounding quality of God. For Tillich, God is both “Being-itself” which grounds every finite being, and the God who “transcends

⁴⁸⁰ Tillich's “power to be” must not be confused with the “right to be” that Levinas critiques (Ibid., 168-169).

⁴⁸¹ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 169.

⁴⁸² Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 166-168.

⁴⁸³ Tillich calls this paradox the “Christian solution” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 229), and Levinas the Infinite as a “‘more’ in the ‘less.’” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 59.)

⁴⁸⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 109.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 113.

man unconditionally” in “the divine-human encounter.”⁴⁸⁶ Thus, when Tillich uses the language of “Being-itself” he suggests a God “beyond the contrast of essential and existential being.”⁴⁸⁷ God as Being-itself is not “universal essence.”⁴⁸⁸ Universal essence, according to Tillich, often denotes a totality; it thereby legitimizes both the reduction of God to the unity of “finite potentialities” and the ‘holy’ violence of assimilating others into the same.⁴⁸⁹ Naming God as ‘universal existence’ fares no better, for “the question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered.”⁴⁹⁰ Not unlike Weil, Tillich suggests that the debates about God’s existence are atheistic from the start. Since God is not a being that could be said to exist, Weil would rather link God with the Go(o)d beyond being. And Tillich, not far from her classical conception of the Good, would rather call God as Being-itself, “the power of being.”⁴⁹¹ Power, in this case, is not a being’s violent self-assertion, but the possibility of resisting non-being.

If this ontological language remains suspect, Tillich implies that one could honor both God’s abyss and ground in the language of the “infinite.”⁴⁹² Thus any revelation of God seems to require both the mysterious *ab-grund* of Heideggerian Being⁴⁹³ and the positivity of the idea of the in-finite.⁴⁹⁴ And yet, when Tillich links the unconditional and

⁴⁸⁶ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 167.

⁴⁸⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 236.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁹³ Here, Lacoste and Tillich are closely aligned. That is to say, Lacoste, in his notion of the world’s chiaroscuro, preserves his Heideggerian inheritance (revealing-concealing), but also pushes beyond the constraints of world into the possibility of the unambiguous.

⁴⁹⁴ These comparisons between Heidegger and Tillich do not necessarily affirm Heidegger’s contention that being must be thought in order to think God. Though the structures of Heideggerian Being

the infinite, he also suggests that God eludes the distinction we make between “finitude and infinity.”⁴⁹⁵ God is not infinity, as the noun form suggests, but its adverb.⁴⁹⁶ As *totaliter aliter*, God is not wholly other, but wholly otherwise. There is therefore no relation “of proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite.”⁴⁹⁷ But this “absolute break” is not a matter of indifference; finite beings remain in a relation, without relation, to the infinity of being-itself.⁴⁹⁸ It is a relation of dual characterization, emerging from the fold of the abyssal ground: *creative* insofar as every being “participates in the infinite power of being”; and *abysmal* insofar as everything “participates in the power of being in a finite way, [since] all beings are infinitely transcended by their creative ground.”⁴⁹⁹ God’s relation to us in creativity is not a simply a relation of causality. Tillich reads the *causa sui* notion apophatically as “absolute beginning,” wherein the “category of causality is being denied while it is being used.”⁵⁰⁰ Tillich, unlike Heidegger, does not avoid the language of cause and effect. Though he admits its shortcomings, he does not wish to eradicate its symbolic potential. Rather, he wishes to overcome the causality of “rationalistic theism” and the substance language of “naturalistic pantheism,” by suggesting our participation in the “creative and abyssal ground of being.”⁵⁰¹

are helpful for Tillich, he understands philosophy as deriving “philosophical absolutes” against the background of ultimate concern expressed in “the different types of the idea of God.” (Ibid., 235.) Tillich’s understanding of God is perhaps closer to Levinas’ since, for Tillich, Being-Itself is not just the question of my being or the being of beings, but a name for the infinite.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁹⁶ “Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being.” (Ibid., 237.)

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 237. In this respect, Tillich is not far from Levinas’ assertion that the relation between the infinite and the finite could not be suggested ‘from above,’ as if the same could step outside of her relationship with the other.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 237.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 238.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 238.

One may remain wary of this language of participation. For even though Levinas compares the idea of the infinite to Plotinus' One, he resists the *methexis* that its emanations imply.⁵⁰² And yet, in following Weil and Tillich, one notes how a certain participation does not add to or subtract anything from the infinity of God.⁵⁰³ Tillich's participation is closer to Levinas' notion of the non-indifference of the infinite to the finite. Our participation in the ground of being never erases the difference between the finite and the infinitely transcending ground as abyss; rather, its distance is preserved as *parousial* participation. God and beings can be said to, symbolically, participate in one another through creation, since Tillich's God "has the power of determining the structure of everything that has being" "without being subject to this structure."⁵⁰⁴ As in Weil and Lacoste, Tillich's God creates without being wholly present to creation. God is by or with us, or as Levinas suggests—in us, "but on the basis of being absent, of being separated."⁵⁰⁵ God's transcendence as Being-itself—is the basis of this abyssal separation as much as it is the ground of relation.

If the language of Being-itself seems unnecessarily esoteric, Tillich mentions the symbol of God's life "as spirit" in its Trinitarian significance. The spirit is the unity of God as abyss and God as logos. The abyssal God is "unapproachable," "inexhaustible": "it is the power of being infinitely resisting nonbeing, giving the power of being to

⁵⁰² Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 105.

⁵⁰³ As was the achievement, according to Levinas, of the One whose "procession[s]" did not "compromis[e]...the immutability nor the absolute separation of the Other." (Ibid., 105.) Or as Tillich writes, "The divine life inescapably unites possibility with fulfillment. Neither side threatens the other, nor is there a threat of disruption...one could say that God cannot cease to be God. His going-out from himself does not diminish or destroy his divinity. It is united with the eternal 'resting in himself.'" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 247.)

⁵⁰⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 239.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 245.

everything that is.”⁵⁰⁶ As the second person of the trinity, the *logos* mirrors the abyssal God but does so by making “its fullness distinguishable, definite, finite.”⁵⁰⁷ The *logos* makes distinctions, proliferates them, as God’s words. If we privilege the abyssal God, then we proclaim a God that resists experience in its finitude. The abyssal God refuses touch, “is characterized by absolute seclusion, is the ‘naked absolute.’”⁵⁰⁸ If we manage to conceive of this God at all, it is often through demonic expressions—since they too refuse contact with finitude. If we ignore the *logos* dimension of the Godhead, God’s abyss “would be chaos, burning fire,” and thereby incapable of creating. The Spirit, as the unity of this abyssal power and the creative possibilities permitted by the *logos*, is the Trinitarian principle that allows the finite to be “distinguished from the infinite” without being “separated from it.”⁵⁰⁹ Because of the spirit’s ability to preserve abyssal distance, without this distance being God’s exemption from creation, “the divine life is infinite mystery, but it is not infinite emptiness.” God’s abyssal transcendence is neither nothingness, nor chaos; God’s absence is “the ground of all abundance.”⁵¹⁰

The allusive Spirit that preserves abyssal distance is not, for Tillich, simply a revelation of the abyssal ground of Being, or an idea of the infinite that necessarily transcends our every idea.⁵¹¹ It is, as could be said of each thinker in his or her respective way, a relation of love. For Tillich, the abyssal distance of God is a relation that grants

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 250-251.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 251.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 251.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 251.

⁵¹¹ “Both infinite divinity and finite human freedom make the world transcendent to God and God transcendent to the world. The religious interest in the divine transcendence is not satisfied where one rightly asserts the infinite transcendence of the infinite over the finite.” (Ibid., 263.)

my finite freedom even as it challenges my freedom in its evasion of it.⁵¹² Tillich presents the loving relationship to God as the recognition of mutual alterity. God's love for us finds our transcendence; but God's love also questions our transcendence and "conflicts with our freedom."⁵¹³ It is as if Tillich shares definitions of love with his contemporary, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Could one conceive of a love that would not be an encroachment on the freedom of the other?...If one loves, one finds one's freedom precisely in the act of loving, and not in a vain autonomy."⁵¹⁴ God's ab-solution is not God's vain autonomy, nor does it secure our own. Rather, God frees us from certain finite distinctions, but also, in love, reveals to us our freedom's finitude.

In God's loving relation to humanity, God can be affirmed and denied as subject and object. God is a subject insofar as God "can never become an object for man's knowledge."⁵¹⁵ And God is an object insofar as God involves beings who nevertheless relate to alterity as objecting to our "centered sel[ves]."⁵¹⁶ God's relation to us, as what eludes the "ego-world and the subject-object correlation....is not a relation at all."⁵¹⁷ Tillich, no doubt, sounds like Levinas in this claim. He speaks against a certain relation, whereby one thinks of God "as a partner with whom one collaborates or as a superior

⁵¹² Another way to say this, in a formula that admits both Heidegger's *gelassenheit* and Levinas' ethics, is that love lets the other be by letting her being challenge my own. Tillich privileges the language of freedom, which can be off-putting to readers who privilege Levinas' responsibility prior to freedom. However, this freedom can be preparation for both the courage-to-be that resists the *angst* of Heidegger's being-toward death, and the ethical responsibility in the personal encounter. (Ibid., 263.)

⁵¹³ Ibid., 263.

⁵¹⁴ Maurice Merleau Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 154.

⁵¹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 271.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 271.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 272.

power whom one influences by rites and prayers.”⁵¹⁸ God transcends this sort of relation ab-solutely.⁵¹⁹ God remains “unapproachable” to these distortions of love, just as he remains irreducible to the subject-object relation. Tillich attributes this irreducibility and unapproachability to holiness.⁵²⁰ The relation to the ab-solute, insofar as it models the holiness of a love that permits distance and confrontation, freedom and limitation, *opposes* several illusory relations: (1) the relation in which alterity makes me its object,⁵²¹ (2) the relation in which God becomes another subject, (3) the relation in which God becomes an object of knowledge, and (4) the relation to God as utter distance, which forbids the presence of the in-finite in objects, in persons, in thinking, in experience.

This would be the paradoxical relation: God’s holy ab-solution prevents God’s total presence in all relations; but God’s absence from them is neither total. God’s absence is not nothing, but the expanse that stretches thinking toward love. Love permits the distance of the other’s transcendence, without letting this distance devolve into the illusory distances that calculative leveling (Heidegger), ideology (Weil), indifference (Levinas), and utopianism (Lacoste) in their own ways perpetuate. The distance of God’s transcendence asks that our thought be less like the violence of relative distinctions made absolute, and more akin to the love of alterity in its ab-solution.⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 272.

⁵¹⁹ “The holiness of God makes it impossible to draw him into the context of the ego-world and the subject-object correlation. He himself is the ground and meaning of this correlation, not an element within it.” (Ibid., 272.) Though one cannot bring God into the ego-world, “there is no place to which man can withdraw from the divine thou, because it includes the ego and is nearer to the ego than the ego to itself.” (Ibid., 271.)

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 271.

⁵²¹ I am haunted by Levinas’ ethical disturbance of philosophy. But I do wonder whether it legitimates the Other making me an object (or a hostage) in a way not unlike how the Same totalizes the other. Tillich would characterize my difficulty as the problematic love that depends upon the opposition of “chaotic self-surrender or chaotic self-imposition.” (Ibid., 282.)

⁵²² Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 47.

To be sure, Tillich does not equate God's distance with our estrangement; though the latter may be the condition in which we articulate God's ab-solution.⁵²³ For Tillich, estrangement is our existential departure from our essential being in God.⁵²⁴ Though every being is separated from God, this separation is not without some manner of participation⁵²⁵—for how else would the question of God, and its subsequent meanings arise? But as this participation is marked by the experience of doubt, of not having or of not being adequate, it makes possible one's resistance to God.⁵²⁶ Sin results in one's attempts to eliminate the distance or inadequation implied by God's holiness;⁵²⁷ meaninglessness, or the threat of non-being, arises when one over-emphasizes separation at the expense of encounter. Love regards the holy's distance as different from the abyss implied in an evacuation of meaning, or the erring implied in estrangement. No doubt, estrangement, sin and holiness share in the rhetoric of separation. But in rejecting the illusory distances that prevent thinking from encountering alterity—be it via the poetic, aesthetic, ethical, liturgical or symbolic—each thinker suggests that holiness lies not in one's closure of distance (in illusions of presence), nor in one's disclosure of nothingness (in illusions of absence). Holiness is rather one's *exposure* to the ab-solute: in a relation that is not adequation, in a separation that is not indifference.

⁵²³ As Tillich writes, "separation is not estrangement" (Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 90).

⁵²⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 46. Even Heidegger, who in speaking of nihilistic valuelessness does not resort to the imposition of values (good/evil, righteousness/sin), speaks of our estrangement from Being as straying (Heidegger, *Contributions*, 386.)

⁵²⁵ To be clear, this is a particular kind of participation that does not allow us immediate access to being, or to God. "'Man does not sit on the throne of God', participating in his essential knowledge of everything that is. Man has no place of pure objectivity about finitude and estrangement. His cognitive function is as existentially conditioned as his whole being." (Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 127.)

⁵²⁶ I am reading Tillich's discussion of estrangement in *Systematic Theology II* alongside his comments in *The Courage to Be* (Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 55-61, 79-81, 125-131).

⁵²⁷ Or as Simone Weil writes, "Sin is not a distance, it is a turning of our gaze in the wrong direction." (Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *Waiting for God*, 73.)

Unlike illusory abstractions, holiness perpetuates a relational withdrawal—an ab-solution to which thought acquiesces in love. The thinking chastened, shaped, eluded and made possible by a certain separation, implies the risks and responsibilities opened by distance. Distance permits distortion as much as it permits reverential relations. The infinite, in its remoteness to thinking, could be construed as an absence, as nothingness, as a matter of indifference. It is possible *not* to perceive God’s absence as the basis of kenotic love.⁵²⁸ As Lacoste writes, because kenotic love does not impose, but is humbly “proposed without constraint, [it] perpetually courts the risk of failure.”⁵²⁹ This risk is love’s virtue and thought’s otherwise. In lack, intrudes the holy.

⁵²⁸ I thank Wendy Farley for recalling me to Pseudo-Dionysius’ words: “For assuredly is it not of a Goodness inexpressible and beyond conception, that He makes all things existing to be, and brought all things themselves to being, and wishes all things ever to become near to Himself, and participants of Himself, according to the aptitude of each? And why? Because He clings lovingly to those who even depart from Him, and strives and beseeches not to be disowned by those beloved who are themselves coy...” Pseudo-Dionysius, “Letter VIII,” *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker and Co., 1897), 152.

⁵²⁹ Lacoste, “Knowing God through Loving Him,” *Christianity and Secular Reason*, 135. This is not to say that love is without a certain constraint. Lacoste has in mind the God whose love is more compelling than compulsory. It appears as incognito, and remains irreducible to our thinking of it—especially if that thinking is solely conveyed in ontological proofs or phenomenological exercises. Levinas would agree that difference “does not differ as a logical distinction in already abstract impassability.” (Levinas, “Philosophy and Positivity,” *Transcendence*, 40.) And thus this difference that demands a non-indifference, can be identified “without true or false name, without face and without mask, *incognito* but under an unrefusable constraint to responsibility for the other” (Ibid., 39). Though even this constraint of responsibility, of obedience, receives in Levinas, the name of love: “This obedience cannot be reduced to a categorical imperative in which a universality is suddenly able to direct a will. It is an obedience, rather, which can be traced back to the love of one’s neighbor: a love without eros, without self-complacency and, in this sense, a love that is obeyed, the responsibility for one’s neighbour” (Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” *Beyond the Verse*, 143.)

CONCLUSION

We never come to know
completely
never for sure

It appears
but it doesn't

The heart burned
but it grew chilly

Is it Him
He remains silent
Is it You
He disappears

There is just bread
hands and a gesture

The face always different
always a new face

The evening is drawing near
and the day bows
It's the time of rest
water wine bread

Why didn't you ask directly
didn't seize His legs
didn't hold His hands
didn't tie shadow to bench

We stand thus
the disciples
who didn't get to Emmaus
our arms heavy
with amazement

Was it Him
It was
For sure
Where

The night swept away the traces

Let us ever more quickly
 carry to the others
 the certainty of doubt¹

It may be an occupational hazard: the more wary I am of illusory gods, the more elusive God becomes. God becomes so very wide, which is to say, like nothing in existence—and nearly confused for dead, ineffective, abstract.

I sidestep certain appeals to concreteness, insofar as rigidly held specificity excludes the ‘and yet’ of God, the otherwise of the elusive absolute. When the concrete is given the force of an absolute, as in Tillich’s demonization, I sound the theological alarm. But in my caution, I sometimes remain unable to sound another call: “Surely, the Lord is in *this* place.”² Too suspicious of territorial attachments, I forfeit a certain home. I take to heart Weil’s call for exile, Levinas’ disdain for the nostalgic return, Lacoste’s pilgrim, even Heidegger’s link of the holy and the unhomey. And why do I hear these admonitions louder than Jacob’s faith?³ Perhaps because even Jacob’s “house of God” was but a threshold for heaven.⁴ The tie to land, to a certain temple, to a particular people—and the exclusions that preserve these borders—are not to be confused with the threshold’s porous boundary. Or so I assure myself, and see Jacob’s angel again, posed to wrestle for the name.⁵ The angel refuses me and only asks, “Who do you say I am?” Forced to feet the ground, I stutter my way through a litany of possible answers before saying, “All these and none, are you.”

¹ Anna Kamienska, “Emmaus,” *Astonishments*, trans. Grazyna Drabik and David Curzon (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 58.

² *NRSV*, Genesis 28:16.

³ *Ibid.*, Genesis 28:10-17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Genesis 28:17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Genesis 32:22-31.

*Is it Him
He remains silent
Is it You
He disappears*

*There is just bread
hands and a gesture*

The Christian tradition proclaims unambiguously that God dwelled among us in the Christ.⁶ But Jesus' makeshift, corporeal tabernacle was hardly a temple secured by religious or political powers. His flesh-kept expressions were as cryptic as they were clear. His *logos* was as much written in the sand⁷ as it was etched in cosmic laws.⁸ His incisiveness was a frustration of our every insight. He came clothed, not in the inarguable power of an absolute, but in the vulnerable provisionality of flesh. When Christ came, he did not download the latest update of revelation to our automaton brains. We knew him through mediations; and this was his wish, even as he knew us immediately.⁹ Only as a dissemination left to the soil of times, texts, diverse peoples, could the word of grace proliferate, adapt, and grow.

Christians frustrated with the limits and silences of my heuristic, might ask how the incarnation, in which the absolute becomes concrete, resist both dangers: first, the demonic confusion of the finite as infinite; and second, the inability to attend the infinite as it flickers in the finite? I remember explaining my conundrum—how wide my God became in trying to avoid narrow idolatries—to an uncle admirably well-versed in scripture. As trained by his church, he cited very specific places in the text and concluded,

⁶ Ibid., John 1:14.

⁷ Ibid., John 8:6.

⁸ Ibid., John 1:1-3.

⁹ Ibid., Matthew 9:4, Mark 2:8. John 2:23-25.

“The first thing you need to do is ask yourself if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Once you can answer that question then it can begin to bring clarity to who your God is.”

I wanted to say that his attempt at a very direct question (‘do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God’) led me through very indirect, though pertinent paths. I reflected on each word, both what they implied across interpretations, and what exclusions those interpretations demanded. Allusions to church history, theological and philosophical texts surfaced wildly.¹⁰ He said a phrase, I heard a chorus of responses.¹¹ I thought of the proliferating views on what it means to *believe*.¹² I thought of whether or not ‘Son of God’ makes Jesus singularly divine; and whether he ever intended to start another religion, with him at the center, at all.¹³

My uncle asked unequivocally; my silence suspended the equivocations that support at least 2,000 years of debated nuances. How could I reply to what he considered to be a very concrete, obviously clear, question? I thought of Anna Kamienska’s poem, “Emmaus.” My response flickered. I could not ‘tie shadow to bench.’

¹⁰ The first text to come to mind: Wendy Farley’s *Gathering Those Driven Away*.

¹¹ I am reminded of Jean-Louis Chrétien’s words, “The fact that the answer must necessarily possess a choral character confirms the impossibility of any correspondence. ‘A voice must have in it many voice in order to be beautiful,’ said Joubert, but in order for it to be responsive, a voice must have all voices in it. In calling us, the call does not call us alone, but asks of us everything that voice is capable of saying. All voices are required.” Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 32.

¹² Admittedly, Levinas words arose first on this matter, “*Believe* is not a verb to be employed in the first person singular. Nobody can really say *I believe*—or *I do not believe* for that matter—that God exists. The existence of God is not a question of an individual soul’s uttering logical syllogisms. It cannot be proved. The existence of God, the *Sein Gottes*, is sacred history itself, the sacredness of man’s relation to man through which God may pass.” (Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 18.) I also thought of Gabriel Marcel, “From Opinion to Faith,” *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 120-139.

¹³ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House Inc., 2003).

This is not to say that a theologian should ignore concrete expressions of the divine. After all, the theological business of unmasking an illusory God is precariously near the possibility of debasing something of value.¹⁴ In becoming aware of the varied, necessarily concrete ways that God has been expressed—across time, across religions, between sectarian debates—theological language must strive to preserve God’s elusion of *and* inhabitation in polyvalency. Too often one assumes that concreteness is clarity and that abstraction is necessarily vague. Appeals to the concrete often do not offer one clear vision, but foci for proliferating interpretations. And the vagueness of the abstract is not always the perpetuation of reticence; it can often serve apophatically to preserve the *possibility* of differences—both the difference of God from beings, and the different ways that beings provisionally allude to God.

One might criticize ‘the elusion of God’ as unnecessarily abstract, and frustratingly ambiguous. Only the concrete is helpfully clear, one might say. But this is precisely what I would wish to say otherwise. Preserving God’s irreducibility is as much a task for the concrete as it is for the abstract, for the kataphatic as it is for the apophatic. For example, in some congregations, to say that God is male is to make God concrete and clear; whereas to say God is female, another step toward concreteness, is to bring confusion. If one disagrees with an attribute, concreteness is dismissed as a distorting

¹⁴ “I replied, ‘I know you’re a quiet workman on God’s eternal construction site and don’t like hearing about demolition, but what can I do? Myself, I’m not one of God’s bricklayers. Besides, if God’s bricklayers built real walls, I doubt we’d be able to demolish them. But instead of walls all I see is stage sets. And stage sets are made to be demolished.’....To leave me in no doubt about himself, he replied, ‘What you’ve just said sounds good. But tell me: How can a skeptic like you be so sure he knows how to tell a stage set from a wall? Haven’t you ever doubted that the illusions you ridicule are really nothing but illusions? What if you’re wrong? What if they were genuine values and you were a demolisher of values?’ And then: ‘A value debased and an illusion unmasked have the same pitiful form; they resemble each other and there is nothing easier than to mistake one for the other.’” Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 7-8.

blasphemy; if one agrees with an attribute, concreteness is welcomed as incarnational. To avoid the charge of blasphemy, one could avoid the incarnation altogether, and focus more intently on how God eludes human categories. This is, in large part, what I have done in the concluding chapter; but I do not think it final. One must confess the benefits of the apophatic and the kataphatic strands in theology, and deconstruct their commonly assumed correlation with abstraction and concreteness, respectively.

In the chapter on illusion, I attempted to show that the kataphatic emphasis on God's presence to thought, to beings, to experience, can paradoxically justify certain violent abstractions. A 'concrete' view of God can be an abstraction, insofar as it is obstinately 'drawn away,' held in uncompromising opposition to all other 'concrete' views. In the chapter on allusion, I wished to undo the notion of holiness as 'setting apart' to a fault, while yet preserving distance as holy. I did so by granting that any thought or phenomenon can function in an allusive way, as a distinction that remains in relation to what it excludes. This notion of allusion asks a more diplomatic thinking: the hospitality of a particular view to the translations it engenders and excludes. But to prevent this hospitality of mind (in poesis, in beauty, in suffering, in the face of the neighbor, and in religious symbols) from congealing into another concept of God, I gestured toward elusion. If allusive thinking demands non-totalizing manners of approach, it must attend—even preserve as irreducible—what is lost in every translation. Illusory thinking privileges one translation as true: a perfect correspondence of God's presence to thought, to language, to a particular holy object, or to an ideological position. If allusive thinking shades each appeal to God's correspondence with God's irreducibility to presence, it

must draw upon the absence that the elusion of God gives to thought. This absence gifts to thought its humility and patient desire.

In a sense, I am revisiting Thomas Aquinas' discussion in the *Summa Theologica* (I.i.13) about the divine names and applying it to the possibility of thinking the divine. Aquinas inquires whether there is a complete correspondence between God and our words for God (univocal), or whether there is absolutely no correspondence, suggesting that God eludes us entirely (thereby opening equivocation). If our words perfectly correspond to God, this silences God's capacity to say otherwise. If our words are never able to correspond to God, this silences us. I suspect that Aquinas could not have arrived at the analogical without appreciating the danger (and appeal) of both the univocal and the equivocal. He commends both insofar as the former prizes our relation to God, and the latter God's absolute non-relation. And yet, he avoids both silences—the silencing of God's presence to thought, and the silence induced by God's absence to thought—through the analogical structure. The analogical mode does not mandate a genre of writing. It is a manner of thinking: of touching without enveloping God, as if in an allusive caress.¹⁵ In the caress of thinking, God is neither the unquestionable force that silences our curiosity, nor an object of curiosity alone—unable to spark commitment, conviction, or love.

¹⁵ This term calls to mind Levinas' phenomenology of Eros: "The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it *expresses* love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. It is hungry for this very expression, in an unremitting increase of hunger." (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257-258.)

I attempted to explain this analogical maneuver to a classroom of collegiate artists. Some heard its creativity, some its limitation. “Theology must maintain this analogical manner of expression, because it is most suitable to the incarnation,” I concluded.

One student raised his hand, distraught, “*Then what is your anchor?*” Suddenly my obvious claim felt esoteric, in the worst sense. Precisely in praising the hospitality of theological language, I had isolated him. I fumbled for the implication of his question: my anchor? Had he accused me of that heretical desire for open seas, when his orthodoxy mandated dry land? No, no. He was not suggesting dry land, but an anchor to drop when disoriented by the proliferation of meanings. He pressed further: “If scripture and everything we say about God is just approximate to God, then how can we say we know God? You’re avoiding a commitment. You can’t confess that Christ is *literally* the incarnation of God; and so you say that our words for Christ are imperfect. Is there not one place in Scripture that perfectly describes God?”

I wanted to say, *if there were one place in the text that perfectly described God, why would the incarnation be necessary? If God could make language bend perfectly to God’s contours and our understanding, why involve the body, even the imperfections finitude implies, at all? Is not truth more complex than a falsifiable assertion, more embodied than an argued thesis?* My frustration with evangelism was showing. I wanted to express my regrets about the mis-translations of missionary work, how my team once struggled to convert our Czech neighbors to Church of Christ interpretations (as if proclamation were the correct way to hear Scripture, instead of one, among many, theological ways to live). He asked for my anchor; however, recognition of theology’s totalizing strands weighed heaviest. Avoiding the student’s glance, I mentioned my

preference for the story of Jacob wrestling the angel for a name, and how my relation to God as a source of truth is greatly influenced by that passage. That was hardly an anchor for him; it seemed more a description of my drowning. He said, “Well. I think the passage stating ‘God is love,’ is the perfect communication. It is...univocal.”

In one sense, I felt chastened by his profundity. As a theologian whose task is made interesting by desire and struggle, I privilege my experience of God as ‘wrestling the ab-solute’ for an allusive name. But the student spoke of something else: something that had less to do with the limits of thought’s relation to God and more to do with God’s unlimited, indiscriminate gift: the gift of love that God *is* in Christ. I still maintain that the statement, ‘God is love,’ is *analogical* insofar as what any one person knows by “love” is not absolutely adequate to God. And it is *allusive* insofar as our understandings of love remain shaped by the degree to which they point to the difference of God’s love. But, in saying as much, I draw a distinction between (1) articulating God as a set of propositions about God’s attributes, univocally understood, and (2) thinking the holy absence to such words, such thoughts, as not nothing. The latter is capaciousness, allowing thought to model God’s kenotic love. The former is too narrow for mercy.

One can reference scriptures, repeating them as if univocally understood; but how to proclaim God as love in a way befitting what love does to thought, to language? If I claim to know God definitively, I treat God as a truth object that can be easily passed on and understood by the grips of mind. A grip is not often turned into an embrace, especially when the grip claims to comprehend love. The grip muscles can strengthen and begin to treat other persons as perfectly present to our thinking. In contrast, when I claim to love God, my family, my friends, it is not on the basis of such an adequation. Where

knowledge is imperfect, there is the risk of trust. When one says, ‘I trust God,’ or ‘I have faith in God,’ one does so on credit (*credo*), borrowing from what cannot be possessed. Which is to say, God is the withdrawal that gives us our unending debt of love.¹⁶ The palpable absence of God trains thinking in the stretches of desire and the exercises of dispossession. This blessed impoverishment is love’s holiness.¹⁷

In thwarting the adequation of God to particular beings, institutions, or texts, God’s absence opens thinking not to equivocation, nor even to cagey avoidance of the question concerning God. As in Kamienska’s poem, the holy’s departure opens an uncertainty¹⁸ that makes possible renunciation, amazement, even a greater attention to human bodies. The departure prepares us for receptivity, but it also grants a directive: to relay to others the gift of doubting our absolutes in favor of the ab-solute. Each of the thinkers mentioned have attempted to relay these gifts in the language of God’s proximate distance. They speak of a holy nearness so that one regards, and responsibly engages, the God present in nature and in human beings. But they contextualize this nearness in holy remoteness, so that engagement does not slip into objectification, does not congeal into a desire-less truth, definitively possessed.

God’s absence informs the possibilities of allusive dispossession, and helps us resist the tempting illusions of possessed presence. Surely, one can worship God’s

¹⁶ Here, I follow Kierkegaard’s description of loving God as not unlike loving the dead, the absent. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009), 317-329. And in turn, how this love, in its disinterestedness, is a perpetual indebtedness: “To give a person one’s love is, as has been said, certainly the highest a human being can give—and yet, precisely when he gives his love and precisely by giving it he comes into infinite debt. One can therefore say that this is the *essential characteristic of love: that the lover by giving infinitely comes into—infinite debt.*” (Ibid., 172.)

¹⁷ Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996), 5.

¹⁸ For Kierkegaard, uncertainty is not negation of faith, but the possibility of faith. Or as Levinas writes regarding him, “This transcendence is possible only by way of un-certainty!” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 109.)

elusion to a fault. Neither the atheist's irreverent dismissal of holiness, nor the believer's 'reverent' rejection of material manifestation,¹⁹ can appreciate the opening to which I have alluded. I do not recommend idolizing the void with iconoclastic zeal. The God of negation is not the same as the God who hollows us that we might attend what eludes us. The elusive God neither draws us into a wake of disenchantment, that we might self-righteously ridicule illusions of presence. Rather, the elusive God lures us to that allusive presence, traced by God's non-appearing *in the concrete*, that our abstractions might be more humbly admitted. Certain voids, as definitive refutations, sterilize the desire formed by this apophatic sacramentality. Furthermore, the iconoclasm that reject even the presence of holy ab-solution—whether in icons of Christ, in Hölderlin's poems, in Weil's metaxic beauty, in Levinas' face, in Lacoste's liturgical margin, or in Tillich's symbols—often erect other idols in the rubble of former ones.²⁰ And because these idols are tributes to destructive polemics, they are less primed to respect alterity.

In this sense, I sympathize with philosopher of science, Bruno Latour. In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, he concludes with a meditation on Christian art. He cites as an example Fra Angelico's fresco in San Marco, "Resurrection of Christ and Women at the Tomb."²¹ He describes this painting as a reference: not in the sense of alluding to a prototypical truth beyond mediation,²² but as an object that enacts an

¹⁹ I have in mind the various iterations of iconoclasm debates.

²⁰ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 1-99.

²¹ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 115-116. His reading of this work would be nicely paired with Shelly Rambo's chapter on the "Biblical Witness in the Gospel of John," in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 81-110.

²² Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 121. Though, I would disagree with his reading of "platonian stair-climbing" as pointing to an original that does not exist. It is possible to read Diotima's ladder in Plato's *Symposium* as permitting the soul to approach what is not reducible to—though related to—mediations (the beauty of the forms), and thus return down the ladder with a renewed respect

emptiness to deflect us back to what cannot be found in its constraints. In a sense, the painting initiates the critique of two illusions. First, the content of the empty tomb suggests a Christ who eludes our demands for an empirical presence; this is its theological resistance to the demands of both religious fetishes and scientific facts. Second, the painted figure of Christ in the background is beyond vision though not without the angel's alluding finger. Christ is not altogether absent. The painting resists the belief that the elusive must exceed all expression, or that sensorial mediation is only a copy to point us to an immediate truth. The painting critiques illusion insofar as it "points to the emptiness of the mundane grasp."²³ But its more subtle work is as an allusion: the depiction is not "*about* emptiness, as if one's attention were directed toward nothingness; it is on the contrary, slowly bring us back to the presence of presence: for that we should not look at the painting, at what the painting suggests, but at what is now present to us" in its absence from the painting.²⁴ The viewer oscillates in this movement: between the depiction of Christ's unseen presence, and Christ's visible absence from the tomb; between the painting's mediation, and its potential *as* materiality to suggest what remains irreducible to pigments; between the pious "disappointment of the visible"²⁵ and the piety that turns one away from the tomb to look "not among the dead but among the living."²⁶ According to Latour, the only sin would be to "freeze-fram[e]" this allusive chain by "interrupting the movement of the image and isolating it from the flows of renewed

for the beauty of the laws, of the human form, and of one's beloved. Plato, *Symposium*, tr. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1989), 201A-212B.

²³ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 116.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

image.”²⁷ Not unlike Rosenzweig’s characterization of the arrested stream,²⁸ Latour reminds that both the iconoclast and the iconodule attempt to make material absolute: non-relational, stagnant, impervious.²⁹ By either debunking or idolizing the holiness of a certain presence, one neglects the ways in which materiality is both available and resistant—porous, vibrating, alive.³⁰

The task in honoring this paradox is to permit both the incarnational *and* elusive movement of God. It is to recognize God’s absence as not simply God’s indifference to flesh. Rather, God’s absence is a redirection, like Caravaggio’s “tiny spot of light that redirects the attention” of the Emmaus pilgrims to the crumbs of bread, and the face of Christ.³¹ The redirection is as much a respect for materiality, as it is an attention to the “shadow” that cannot be tied to bench.³² The Emmaus story, especially as Kamienska witnesses to its uncertainties, is as much a testimony to God’s spectral presence in the world as it is a prelude to God’s ascension from it. It is possible that the elusion of God will remain correlated, in thinking, with God’s nothingness, God’s death. And it is highly possible that my advocacy for God’s elusive absence, even as I strive to articulate its allusive mode, will be confused as yet another nihilism. In saying that God’s ab-solution,

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ Rosenzweig, *Understanding*, 65-66.

²⁹ I was struck by the resemblance of Latour’s concern about freezing with Levinas’ remarks about idolatry, especially when reading Jill Robbins’ translation of Levinas’ critique of figural hermeneutics as rendering reality “frozen, unalterable, eternal.” (Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 47-48, 85). Heidegger, too, shares this language of freezing, “Life, as the history of the spirit in its transcendental expression, is objectivized and frozen in a definite moment. Religious, aesthetic, natural-scientific attitudes are absolutized. All philosophy of culture is worldview philosophy. It freezes definite situations in the history of the spirit and wants to *interpret culture*. Worldview is freezing, finality, end, system.” Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2008), 165.

³⁰ Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 49-54.

³¹ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 117.

³² Kamienska, “Emmaus,” *Astonishments*, 58.

is not nothing, I am not thus saying that we must value this absence absolutely. Rather, in the faces of many who ask, either in desperation or in derision, “Where is this living God?” I suggest we offer both a hospitable thinking and the openness of readied hands. May these be our testimony to God’s absolute nearness: otherwise than absolutes, carrying another wisdom akin to love. As Levinas suggests:

According to the models of satisfaction, possession commands seeking, enjoyment is worth more than need, triumph is truer than failure, certitude is more perfect than doubt, and the answer goes farther than the question. Seeking, suffering, questioning would be simple diminutions of the happy find, of enjoyment, happiness, and the answer....Once again this is good sense. This is also common sense. But can the hermeneutic of religious life forego im-balanced thoughts? And does not philosophy itself consist in treating ‘mad’ ideas with wisdom, or in bringing wisdom to love? The knowledge, the answer, and result would belong to a psyche still incapable of thoughts in which the word God takes meaning.³³

³³ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 110.

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