Durham E-Theses

A Theology of Failure: Ontology and Desire in Slavoj Žižek and Christian Apophaticism

ROSE, CHRISTA,MARIKA

Marika Rose

A Theology of Failure:

Ontology and Desire in Slavoj Žižek and Christian Apophaticism

This thesis offers a re-reading of the Christian apophatic tradition *via* the work of Slavoj Žižek in order to articulate an account of Christian theology and identity *as* failure, as constituted by a commitment to Christ as both its cornerstone and the stone on which it stumbles. In Dionysius the Areopagite's marriage of Christian theology with Neoplatonism, the ontology of Neoplatonism is brought into uncomfortable but productive tension with key themes in Christian theology. These tensions are a crucial aspect of Dionysius' legacy, visible not only in subsequent theological thought but also in much twentieth century continental philosophy as it seeks to disentangle itself from its Christian ancestry. Twentieth century discussions of the relationship between apophatic theology and continental philosophy attempt to grapple with this inheritance.

The work of Slavoj Žižek, I argue, is an attempt to move beyond the impasses of twentieth century philosophy not by escaping but by *returning* to metaphysics, drawing on the work of Hegel and Lacan in order to articulate an account of the material world as an intrinsically ruptured economy. This form repeats itself in those structures which subsequently emerge from the material world – in particular, the structures of the individual subject and of the social order and the ways in which both are constituted by desire. This thesis traces the implications of this peculiar ontology through, first, the Derridean problematic of the gift and, second, the Žižekian problematic of violence (both of which, I argue, are structurally homologous with the Christian theological problematics of creation and fall). The thesis offers a critical and theological engagement with Žižek's ontological and erotic account of transformation before returning to Dionysius in order to demonstrate how Žižek's work makes possible a materialist reading of apophatic theology and Christian commitment to the church.

A Theology of Failure:
Ontology and Desire in Slavoj Žižek and Christian Apophaticism

Marika Rose

Thesis submitted to Durham University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Research conducted in the Department of Theology and Religion

2014

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

Works by Dionysius the Areopagite

Celestial Hierarchy	'The Celestial Hierarchy' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 143-191.
Divine Names	'The Divine Names' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 47-131.
Ecclesiastical Hierarchy	'The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 193-259.
Letter 1-8	'The Letters' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 261-289.
Mystical Theology	'The Mystical Theology' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 133-141.

Works by Slavoj Žižek

Desert of the Real	*Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002).
Enjoy Your Symptom!	*Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (London: Routledge, 2008).
First as Tragedy	*First as Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso, 2009).
Fragile Absolute	*The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).
How to Read Lacan	*How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006).
Indivisible Remainder	*The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).
In Defense	*In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).
Iraq	*Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004).
Less than Nothing	*Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).
Metastases	*The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005)

On Belief	*On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001).
Parallax View	*The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).
Sublime Object	*The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
Tarrying	*Tarrying With The Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).
They Know Not	*For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008).
Ticklish Subject	*The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000).
Totalitarianism	*Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2011).
Violence	*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009).

Statement of copyright

Acknowledgements

Try again, fail again, fail better.
Samuel Beckett[1]

'The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone',
and
'A stone that causes people to stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.'
1 Peter 2:7[2]

(God) in the name of vulgarity, horror and impurity.
Marcella Althaus-Reid[3]

---

[1] 'Worstword Ho' in *Nohow On* (London: John Calder, 1989), 101.
[2]   NIV.
[3]   *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.

1. Introduction

Whichever way you look at it, theology has failed. It is not always clear exactly when the rot set in. Perhaps the problems began when it ceded its role as the Queen of the sciences and accepted a subordinate role in the academy; or perhaps when it allowed itself to be relegated to the private sphere, the impotent realm of femininity and domesticity. Maybe it was Protestantism's neglect of sacramentality and community in favour of a theology of word and individual salvation which first caused it to stumble; or maybe the source should be located in Descartes' fatal re-orientation of philosophical thought around the individual subject. It could be that the problem lies a little further back, with the birth of the modern university and the corresponding separation of theology from contemplation and prayer, or the separation of natural from revealed theology. Maybe we can blame Constantine and the church's capitulation to the temptations of power and the empire, the nefarious influence of Greek philosophical thought, or perhaps St Paul's introduction of misogyny and homophobia to the church, along with an emphasis on submission to the power of the state.

But it is tempting here to go back a little further in time to consider the persistent thick-headedness of Jesus' disciples: their faithlessness, their obtuseness, their blundering and stumbling. Could we talk also about the disasters of Israel? Her adultery (literal and metaphorical), her genocides, her sins of hospitality, of leadership, of obedience. The jealousy, the incest, the truculence of the patriarchs; the hubris of the builders of the tower of Babel; the murderous rage of Cain; right back to Adam and Eve. And perhaps the Garden of Eden itself is not so much the symbol of some precarious moment of perfection before the Fall but precisely the dangerous fantasy that such a state did once exist and might yet again be possible.

Theology has failed, then; it is, like Hegel's 'Calvary of absolute Spirit', 'the site of skulls', littered with its own failures.[1] On this, theologians agree, even though (or perhaps because) there is no consensus as to what theology is, what it is trying to achieve, or what it looks like. Perhaps we can narrow it down this much, and say that it is, specifically, the systematic theology of the white, male, heterosexual Western world

---

1   Hegel uses the term 'the Calvary of absolute Spirit' in the final paragraph of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 493); in *Tarrying*, Žižek cites this phrase, pointing out that the German for Calvary is *Schädelstätte*, literally 'the site of skulls'; he connects this to Hegel's infinite judgement 'spirit is a bone' (268).

which has failed, which inhabits now a world overrun by its misbegotten children, by heretics, secularists, and fundamentalists who view their ageing, corrupt progenitor with a mixture of horror, contempt and irreverence; it responds with some mixture of desperation, frustration or blithe obliviousness. Is it time for the theology of the oppressors to die, along with its God? Perhaps. It is possible, at least, that the time has come for it to be led to the guillotine, or – perhaps more likely – to be left to quietly expire. A systematic theology which desires to live has two options. Faced with a world in which the secular threatens to escape its grasp and become (what it is not yet) truly independent of Christianity, in which the voices of those whom it has oppressed rise up to challenge its dominance and stand in judgement upon it, it can seek to re-assert its authority, to re-colonise those people and places that have escaped from its grasp; or it can reflect instead upon its own failure. This thesis will attempt the latter.

Christian theology has always been revitalised by risky encounters with those who are foreign to it; like its Israelite ancestors, it has a taste for defiling itself with foreign gods. This transgression of its own bounds is particularly apparent in its historical dalliances with philosophy, a discipline at best precariously distinguished from theology. In the Western world in the 20th century the genealogy of these couplings became yet more complex, as the continental philosophical thought with which theology grappled first emerged from its own loins only to return into its arms in the 'theological turn' of the late 20th century.[2] Smith and Whistler describe this later shift as the theological contamination of philosophy;[3] as I will discuss later, it might equally be understood in terms of (re-)colonisation.

This uncomfortable encounter between theology and continental philosophy suggests itself as one terrain for an attempt to think theology's failure. For all that the two might understand themselves as competitors, the crisis of the Enlightenment project with which continental philosophy grapples closely parallels the crisis of the Christian churches in the 20th century: both are, in different ways, crises of universality, Christendom and masculinity and as such, perhaps, crises of the Greek philosophical and Roman imperialist legacies which have so profoundly shaped the history of the Western world.

---

2   I discuss the ways in which contemporary continental philosophy is born out of theological thought below, section 3.1.

3   'Editor's Introduction: What Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?' in Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, eds., *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 2.

1.1 The linguistic turn

One dominant narrative of the recent history of Western thought – with which this thesis takes issue – would say that in the Enlightenment, humanity took up once again the task it had abandoned at Babel: to fashion a building so high that it would reach up to the heavens and dethrone God. New tools – science, Cartesian philosophy, secular reason – made it seem possible to conquer the world with the human mind. Perhaps, after all, human hands could build utopia? Enlightenment-era Europe sought to colonise not only the physical world but the entire realm of science, knowledge, and understanding. But this dream ended, tragically, in the 20th century, as the tools the Enlightenment had fashioned – science, bureaucracy, political theory – were used to fashion not a new Jerusalem but Auschwitz, the gulags, and the atomic bomb.

Amidst the ruins of this new Babel sprang up new languages, new philosophies, which emphasised difference, incompleteness and contingency. Any single story about the world, they argued, would always fail. Language is not a neutral tool with which to pick up and examine the world; it is partial, imperfect, and contingent. Language speaks us as much as we speak it; we have an imperfect grasp on the words we use, which in turn have an imperfect grasp on the world we speak about, and although our words can shape the world they do so crudely, crushing or concealing complexity and nuance. Thinkers like Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida paid attention to the difference and diversity which continually evades comprehension: to the slips of the tongue which betray our unconscious desires; the internal contradictions which expose the limits of our totalising theories; the always present gap between our words and the world.

Yet this crisis of secular reason was always also a crisis of theological speech; however eagerly the secular has sought to emancipate itself from its progenitor and theology to disinherit its rebellious progeny, it is many centuries since European imperialism could claim to be free of Christianity.[4] The birth of the secular from Mother

---

4   While I would take issue with Milbank's desire to reinstate theology as a universal discourse which rules over every other branch of human knowledge, his thesis in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) that 'the secular' emerges from and remains deeply entwined with theology seems basically accurate. Something similar is true of Denys Turner's claim that 'atheist' attempts to deny God are very deeply shaped by the theological traditions which they are reacting against (Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason' in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15). And yet, with Smith and Whistler, I would resist the inference which both Turner and Milbank draw, namely that thought which begins with theology can

Church (however closely they remain tied to one another) has been traumatic for both: just as the secular has been forced to confront the limits of its power and the extent of its dependence, theology has had to confront the shrinking of its authority and reach.

Apophatic theology has been one resource to which both continental philosophy and Christian theology have turned to grapple with these questions. As language seeks to swallow everything that is into its gaping maw, the apophatic tradition inaugurated by Dionysius the Areopagite seems to promise to muzzle language, to teach it humility and to set it firmly in relation to a future fullness which is yet to come, endlessly deferred, always hungered for and yet never fully present. Smith and Whistler identify three branches of the 'religious turn' in continental philosophy – 'the religious turn in phenomenology … a Christian brand of deconstruction … and feminist appeals to Mariology'[5] – and apophatic theology bears a relation to all three. The phenomenological work of Jean-Luc Marion never entirely transcends his earlier theological engagement with Dionysius the Areopagite; John Caputo returns over and again to apophatic and mystical concepts; and the work of French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva returns repeatedly not only to the figure of Mary but also to the theme of mystical theology. In many ways, the focus on apophatic theology within continental thought represents the convergence of the theological turn and the linguistic turn.

Yet the central contention of this thesis is that the narrative which focuses on the tyranny of language is at best incomplete. It is curious that apophatic theology has been adopted by thinkers concerned with the death of God, the end of metaphysics and the escape from ontotheology when its genesis is the encounter between still-emergent Christian orthodoxy and Neoplatonic metaphysics. The question of the limitations of language has, for theology, been inseparably caught up with the question of materiality and its relation to God because both are derived from a more fundamental problem: the problem of economy.

---

never escape its determination by theology, will always be outdone by theology. To reject the notion of a pure origin, as this thesis does, is also to insist on the possibility that – as I will argue later – effects may exceed their causes, that the end is not wholly determined by the beginning.

5   'Editor's Introduction', 2.

1.2 On the economic problem

        In the apophatic tradition which begins with Dionysius the Areopagite in the 6th century, three crucial themes – language, desire, and ontology – are drawn together by their common relationship to the figure of economy. To speak about economy is, as Derrida says, to speak about:

> The figure of the circle [which] stands at the centre of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise … the – circular – return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home … the *odyssean* structure of the economic narrative … [following] the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved ones or to himself; he goes away only in view of *repatriating* himself, in order to return to the home from which the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen, the lot divided, destiny commanded. The being-next-to-self of the Idea in Absolute Knowledge would be odyssean in this sense, that of an *economy* and a *nostalgia*, a 'homesickness', a provisional exile longing for reappropriation.[6]

Economy, then, is the circular figure of exchange, causation, return, identity and completion. It becomes a problem for thought when the question arises whether what appears to be a self-contained, closed system is in fact in relation to something which exceeds or escapes it; whether immanence is broken open by transcendence. For much of Christian theology, the basic problem of economy is that of the relation between God and the world. So, for example, in the economy of the Neoplatonic account of creation with which much of Christian theology grapples, everything that is begins in the perfectly simple One, goes out into the multiplicity of creation, and returns back to its source, where everything is comprehended and reabsorbed, completing the circle and assuring the mastery of the One over difference and multiplicity. Apophatic theology, particularly the thought of Dionysius, both draws on and problematises this Neoplatonic economy, appropriating its basic motif of exodus and return, yet seeking at the same time to affirm the goodness of creation and some sort of ongoing existence for that which comes from and returns to God: the economy is never quite completed. Some of the key points of tension within the Christian tradition arise from this economic model. Denys Turner highlights two of these issues relating to the origin of the economy of the created world. First is the problem of differentiation – if God is One, how can that which is not God come into being? Second is the problem of divine freedom – if God is

---

6   Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6-7.

entirely sufficient unto Godself, a closed economy, how and why would God choose to create?[7] Turner argues that both of these questions are resolved by the Christian-Neoplatonic notion of *eros*: desire, he says, is what holds together in human experience both freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation.[8]

But these two questions of the divine relation to the created world are mirrored by two questions of the relationship of the created world to the divine. First is the problem of the *persistence* of differentiation – whether, if everything that is comes from God and will return to God, it is possible to think of this emergence as anything other than a fall to be regretted and undone; whether the material world can be thought of as a good in itself or merely a ladder to be climbed and then thrown away on the ascent to God; whether human individuality will persist once union with God has been attained. Second is the problem of human freedom – why, if created beings are intrinsically ordered towards their end in God, if union with God is the highest human good, they would ever choose to sin. These problems are less easily resolved by the appeal to *eros*, and continue to trouble theology.

Moreover, the particular form of the Neoplatonic economy is not without its problems. Two in particular are worth commenting upon briefly. First is that Neoplatonism sets up the abstract unity of God/the Good in opposition to the particular materiality of the created world. This opposition between the material and the intellectual tends to play out in the history of Christian theology in troubling ways – not least in the pervasive misogyny and racism of Christian theology and practice. Second is that the metaphysics of participation, which sees things as good only insofar as they participate in God, tends to equate participation in God with participation in the church. This pushes theology towards a hierarchicalism and colonialism which seeks to incorporate the whole world into itself, and denies not only independence but even the right to exist to individuals, cultures or groups which trouble or challenge Christian orthodoxy.[9]

However, this problem of the economic relationship between God and the world which dominated philosophy and theology for many centuries was displaced by Descartes and those who followed him, in a shift which represents a kind of Copernican

---

7   Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 49-53.
8   *Eros and Allegory*, 56-64.
9   For a more extensive discussion of these claims, see below, chapter 2.

revolution in philosophy, a re-orientation away from the problematic of the relationship between God and the world to the question of the relationship between the human subject and the world.[10] But the philosophical inheritance of post-Enlightenment thought means that traditional theological accounts were often reworked in order to articulate this other relationship. So, for example, the traditional reading of Hegel's thought has him eliding the difference between self and God, positing an ontology in which the self and God are ultimately the same, and external reality is just a necessary stage in the process of self-realisation. This version of Hegel is a sort of gnostic-Neoplatonism where the procession of the self into multiplicity is not a fall to be regretted and undone but a necessary step on the way to full knowledge. The same problems of economy, freedom and distinction recur in a new form, as do the tendencies towards mastery, misogyny and colonialism.[11]

As a result of this shift from God to the individual subject as the centre of the economic problem, what occurs in later continental thought is the 'linguistic turn', a relentless textualism which foregrounds questions of discourse, language and hermeneutics, explicitly rejecting any kind of 'ontotheology', that is, any attempt to name a firm foundation for being, language or subjectivity. This linguistic turn entails an affirmation of groundlessness, albeit one which is haunted by materialism: both the Marxist spectres of Derrida's later work and the curiously insubstantial human body which returns to spook feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, which makes itself known as fluidity and plasticity yet which can neither be incorporated into or exorcised from within language.

It is the economy of the subject, then, which represents the key problem for much continental philosophical engagement with apophatic theology. Late-20th century continental philosophy focused on the philosophical legacy of Heidegger and Husserl, concerned with an epistemology and ontology in which the individual is at the centre of the constitution of the world. Its key themes are language, otherness and contingency as the limit to human meaning-making. Derrida in particular offers an account of economy as ruptured, a circle inescapably interrupted by that which is its condition of possibility and impossibility. He discusses this moment of rupture in relation to the apophatic

---

10 Thomas A. Carlson, drawing on Heidegger, describes this as the shift from God as the ground of being to subjectivity as the ground of being (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 53-55.
11 I discuss some the ways in which this transformation occurs and its consequences for philosophy and theology below, in chapter 3.

moment where language fails, but also to the notion of the gift as that which exceeds the economic logic of exchange and ethical issues such as hospitality which concern the openness of individual, familial and national economies to that which is other than them. Similarly, Lacan's psychoanalytic reworking of Freud shifted from Freud's emphasis on the biological and material factors which shape the emergence of the subject to a focus on the *linguistic* constitution of the subject.[12] In theology this corresponded to a great proliferation of texts on the topic of hermeneutics, the emergence of narrative theology and, crucially for our purposes, to a renewed interest in apophatic theology in general and in Dionysius the Areopagite in particular.

More recently, however, continental philosophy (and, in its wake, theology) has taken what is described as a 'materialist' or a 'speculative' turn, which has led to a renewed interest in the question of whether it is possible to speak about the material world as it exists outside of human language and experience, and a new focus on the natural sciences: maths, quantum physics, neuroscience and biology. Slavoj Žižek's work, particularly after 1996, belongs roughly within this materialist turn. The shift from pre-modern to modern philosophy was, roughly, the shift from an ontological economy of the material world grounded in God to an epistemological economy grounded in the individual subject. The shift from modern to postmodern thought was, roughly, the shift from a positivist affirmation of the possibility of knowledge and completeness to a negative affirmation of necessary incompleteness. Žižek's work, however, shifts back from epistemology to ontology and from the negative acknowledgement of incompleteness as limit to a strong affirmation of incompleteness as the positive condition of both being and language. In his work, the economic themes of language, otherness and contingency as limit are transposed into the themes of materiality, the self-otherness of subjectivity and contingency as the condition of possibility for all human existence and knowledge. Žižek's work seeks to bring together language, materiality, the self and the political community around a shared model of a ruptured economy which he draws from the work of Hegel, Lacan, and Schelling.

In many ways, then, Žižek's work represents a *return* to the central concerns of the Christian apophatic theology which drew on Neoplatonic ontology to articulate the interconnectedness of being, language and desire. The fundamental questions with

---

12 As Marcus Pound says, 'For Lacan, it is as if everything Freud said was absolutely true, only he was really talking about language' (Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 6).

which his work grapples are, as for Christian theology, the problem of differentiation (how can the world come into being out of nothing, and is it ever possible to attain ontological, ethical or political harmony?), and the problem of freedom (how can genuine newness emerge from the economy of cause and effect, and is there such a thing as human freedom?). But where Neoplatonic Christianity asserts God as that which grounds every economy and guarantees reconciliation, for Žižek it is the intrinsically conflictual nature of material being itself which makes possible the diversity and complexity of not only the material world but also the individual subject and the social order. If the Cartesian revolution represents the beginning of a shift from an account of the world as grounded in and by God to an account of the world as grounded in and by the individual, and the post-war shift towards poststructuralism and linguistics represents a shift from an account of the world as grounded in an individual who can – at least potentially – master it to an account of the world as constituted and yet unmasterable by the individual, then the shift towards materialism represented by Žižek is a shift from an account of the world as that which escapes the individual to an account of the world as that which escapes God, which can be conceived in terms of a 'creationist materialism'.[13] Much recent theological engagement with Žižek focuses, unsurprisingly, on the explicitly theological themes within his work; it is the argument of this thesis that it is in fact Žižek's ontology which most deeply unsettles theology and which, as a result, offers the most fertile resources for theological thought.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The problem of economy is inescapably bound up with the problem of identity, its borders and its limits. Chapter 2 will examine the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, from whose marriage of Christian theology and Neoplatonism the Christian apophatic tradition emerged. Dionysius' account of the economy of the created world and of theological language connects the structure of being to the structure of human desire. This connection is determinative for much subsequent theology; and yet the particular form which it takes in Dionysius' work contains a series of antagonisms around the themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism, which prove troubling yet also fruitful for Dionysius' inheritors.

---

13 *Sublime Object*, 161.

From the ontological function of the motif of economy arises a no-less important political function. Economy is not only the problem of the nature of the material world, of the systems of cause and effect, but also the problem of the household, the bounded political unit; the problem of economy is therefore also the problem of the family, the state, and the empire. Chapter 3 will track this motif of economy through recent theological and philosophical engagements with the apophatic tradition, focusing in particular on the work of Jacques Derrida which is from very early on caught up in the question of the apophatic. Derrida's work affirms the impossibility of completion, asserting that the condition of possibility for any identity is always also its condition of impossibility. Reconciliation is impossible, then; and yet Derrida's work is struck through with the desire for the impossible end to arrive, caught between the affirmation of the necessity of deciding and the impossibility of doing so.

This aporia is taken up by two key strands of theological thought: Radical Orthodoxy and 'deconstructionist Christianity'. Yet if the problem of economy is in part also the problem of colonialism, of the desire to swallow up everything that is into a single system, then both of these responses remain within the logic of colonialism. Radical Orthodoxy responds to the groundlessness of deconstructive apophaticism simply by more forcefully re-asserting the traditional Christian metaphysics of participation, denouncing the 'nihilism' of Derrida et al and appealing instead to the 'peaceful ontology' of the Christian metaphysics of participation. Faced with philosophical thought which seeks to assert its autonomy, its independence from theology, Radical Orthodoxy responds with the crudest tools of empire, seeking to force philosophy to bow the knee once more to theology; reacting to continental philosophy's condemnation of the violence of ontotheology by violently asserting its own peacefulness.[14] In contrast, the deconstructionist Christianity of John Caputo and others is superficially more conciliatory, more willing to cede ground to philosophy and to acknowledge the failures of Christian theology. But where Radical Orthodoxy more or less explicitly desires a return to the good old days of British empire and muscular Christian dominance, deconstructionist Christianity too often resembles theological colonialism with a human face. In its uncritical relation to its own particularity, it might be compared to the notion of 'the secular' which has been so roundly criticised of late for its failure to come to terms with the overdetermination of its notions of universality

---

14 As John Caputo puts it, this is the 'vintage violence of theological imperialism' (*The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 161.

by Christian theology.[15] By emphasising uncertainty and respect for otherness, it covers over its particularity; by refusing to identify the bounds of its identity, it risks colonising all difference and claiming it for its own. Moreover, in refusing to articulate the nature of its own commitments, it remains too easily paralysed by indecision, unable to act, to make a decision which will cut through the complexity of competing interests and claims upon its attention.

Chapter 4 will turn to Žižek as a resource for rethinking economy and so for re-conceiving theology's failure. Žižek draws a fundamental distinction between desire and drive, which are two ways of relating to this fundamental impossibility at the heart of all identity and which function according to the logic of masculinity and femininity. Masculine desire both knows that identity is impossible and yet will not give up hope in the possibility of wholeness, whereas feminine drive, realising that no object can ever satisfy it, instead begins to derive its satisfaction precisely from repeatedly missing the object of desire. Desire aims for wholeness and repeatedly fails; drive does the same thing but failure is precisely its aim. This fundamental model of the distinction between desire and drive functions, in Žižek's work, to give an account of how the cataphatic and the apophatic relate to one another, as an indication of the form which a genuinely revolutionary community might take. On my reading it can also be taken as a model for the nature of Christian commitment.

Chapter 5 will explore the ways in which Žižek connects his account of desire and drive to ontology. Where traditional apophatic theology relies on a problematic Neoplatonic ontology, Žižek's thought rests on the claim that the material world, the social order and the individual subject alike are structured as internally ruptured economies, failed wholes broken apart by a transcendence which arises from their own immanence. This model allows Žižek to undermine or transform a number of traditional ontological dualisms such that the two sides of the dualism are not straightforwardly opposed to one another but exist as an *internal* conflict. This ontological claim in turn transforms the Dionysian problematics of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universalism.

Chapters 6 and 7 will return to recent discussions between theology and

---

15 See, for example, Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Daniel Colucciello Barber's *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

continental philosophy over the nature of economy via a discussion of three deeply economic notions: the gift (a key problem for Derrida and his theological interlocutors), violence (both a Derridean theme and a favourite theme of Žižek), and the Christian theological notion of creation *ex nihilo*. Understood in terms of economy, these three notions are related insofar as all represent an attempt to speak about that which disrupts economy. Examining the three alongside one another functions to illustrate further the relationship between Žižek's thought and earlier discussions of the relationship between continental philosophy and apophatic theology, but also to illuminate what is at stake for Žižek in his often controversial accounts of violence as politically transformative.

However, there are numerous problems with Žižek's use of the notion and rhetoric of violence: in particular, it is often unclear in his work how the difference between 'good', desirable, revolutionary violence and 'bad', undesirable, oppressive violence might be specified; and there are also reasons to question his preference for the language of violence, death and destruction to specify the point at which newness enters the world. Chapter 8 will address these two issues, turning to the psychoanalytic language of trauma in order to clarify Žižek's sometimes ambiguous language of violence, and to feminist and post-colonialist accounts of the relationship between birth and death and the borders of identity in order to account for the relationship between birth and death, fidelity and betrayal, identity and otherness.

Finally, chapter 9 will conclude with a Žižekian rereading of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* alongside the Lacanian account of the four discourses which structure the political relationships between individuals, language, knowledge and desire. It will suggest that Žižek's work offers the possibility of repeating Dionysius differently, under the aegis of a Žižekian materialism within which apophatic theology is the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of cataphatic theology. To understand Christian identity according to the logic of drive is to understand it not as a commitment to a particular set of answers, a particular vision of harmony, but precisely as the commitment to a particular problem, the problem of what it means to be faithful to Christ. This problem is never just an abstract theological question but is always incarnated in the body of Christ, the church. Such an account has the potential to liberate theology from the need to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, and set it free to love the world around it in all of its grotesque materiality, in its beauty and its horror.

1.4 Failure and fidelity

The question of failure is necessarily bound up with the question of what it means to be faithful, knowing that perfect fidelity is impossible; what it means to commit to a cause, to a community, to an event, knowing that failure is not merely inevitable but constitutive; what it means to speak, knowing that language is inadequate. This thesis attempts both to propose and to enact such a model of faithfulness; both form and content, methodology and argument arise from the attempt to be faithful to the church, to Christ, to the task of theology; and also to Žižek and Dionysius, the two key figures around whose work it circles.

What does it mean to be faithful? The New Testament opens with Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, and in doing so ostensibly positions Jesus as the culmination of Israel's identity, the true descendant of the patriarchs and the rightful inheritor of the promises which God made to Israel. And yet, unlike the scriptural genealogies it deliberately evokes, this genealogy is disrupted by the intrusion of five women: Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law and continue the family line; Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who betrayed her own people to aid Israel's entry into the promised land; Ruth, the Moabite who chose the ties of love over those of land and family; Bathsheba, whose husband was murdered because of a king's adulterous desire for her; and Mary, Jesus' virgin mother, who (like all of these women) belongs in the genealogy by marriage rather than birth and yet is Jesus' only claim to his place therein. The genealogy is structured mathematically, as three sets of fourteen generations; yet the women interrupt the smooth patterning of the begats; they sneak in at odd moments, irregularly, bringing with them the most horrifying spectres which threatened Israel's constitution as a holy people under God. They are foreigners, idolaters, and prostitutes; they represent Israel's failure to be racially, religiously and sexually pure. And yet all are, despite this, righteous and heroic figures; all, in different ways, ensure the continuation of Israel, its identity, its claim to be faithful to its calling.

In the same way, Žižek endorses an understanding of faithfulness as inextricably bound up with, as in some way dependent on and constituted by betrayal:

> In the same way as Christ needed Paul's 'betrayal' in order for Christianity to emerge as a universal Church (recall that, amongst the twelve apostles, Paul occupies the place of Judas the traitor, replacing him!), Marx needed Lenin's 'betrayal' in order to enact the first Marxist revolution: it is an inner necessity of the 'original' teaching to submit to and survive this 'betrayal'; to survive this violent act of being torn out of one's original context and thrown into a foreign

landscape where it has to reinvent itself – *only in this way is universality born.*[16]

As I argue in this thesis, fidelity and repetition are for Žižek the ways in which newness enters the world; repetition is not straightforwardly a faithful reproduction of that which is being repeated any more than a child is a faithful reproduction of her father.[17] To speak about faithfulness and betrayal, Žižek draws explicitly both on the Christian language of death and resurrection[18] and on the language of sexual relationship, of copulation, which is so important to Christian theological narratives of purity, fidelity and identity.[19] For Žižek, to love is to sacrifice everything for the beloved; only to betray the beloved precisely out of fidelity.

It is this Žižekian account of faithful betrayal which this thesis seeks to enact, and in whose name the Neoplatonic ontology that so deeply shapes the apophatic tradition is rejected even as the basic move by which it was constituted is repeated, differently. The misogyny, the colonialism, and the hatred of both the body and the material world which so profoundly form much traditional Christian theology are shored up by the language of an unadulterated fidelity which shies away from vulgarity, horror and impurity.[20] Although this thesis extensively engages with feminist and liberation theologies only in chapter 7, it is throughout concerned with the question of how to betray Christian theology in the name of faithfulness to the materiality of the church.

Reading Žižek against himself, the thesis suggests that faithfulness to the event of Christ is not faithfulness to a particular way of reading the significance of Christ's death on the cross and the entry of the Holy Spirit into the community of believers. Rather, it is fidelity precisely to the materiality of Christ himself, which is to say, to the church understood in a materialist sense not as an idea or a set of ideas but as a particular group of people, a particular set of institutions, a particular collection of texts

---

16 *Lost Causes*, 176. Žižek is not exactly justified in his claim that Paul replaces Judas – Acts 1:12-26 names Matthias as Judas' replacement.

17 Whilst I do not exactly share Ian Parker's conviction that 'there is no theoretical system as such in Žižek's work', for this reason he is right to claim that 'every attempt … to be a "Žižekian", will fail' (*Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 115, 114).

18 So, for example, in *Less than Nothing*, 837, Žižek directly argues that fidelity *is* resurrection, and is necessarily preceded by the negativity of the death drive.

19 The motif of the sexual relationship and its impossibility is present throughout Žižek's work but is particularly evident in *Less than Nothing*, which is structured as a sexual encounter between Hegel and Lacan.

20 This is the argument of Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

and practices. It is fidelity to a body, therefore, that is as ill-defined, fluid and mutable as any other body – which always exceeds and undermines any particular interpretation, any attempt to identify the universal core of Christianity.[21] It seeks to be faithful to the God made known in Christ – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. It seeks to read both Žižek and Christian theology according to the logic of drive rather than desire, according to the logic of creation *ex nihilo* which delights in the diversity, the multiplicity, and the particularity of the world, which rejoices in its own repeated failure to comprehend, the fecundity of its transgressive encounters and miscegenous couplings. Perhaps, this thesis suggests, Žižek can help theology to fail better.

---

21 This reading relies on Žižek's materialist account of the example which 'remains the same in all symbolic universes, while the universal notion it is supposed to exemplify continually changes its shape, so that we get a multitude of universal notions circulating around a single example (*Less than Nothing*, 364), and on Žižek's claim that truth is only made possible by transference, that the dogmatic commitment to a particular figure is more fecund than the 'neutral', 'objective' discussion of a particular set of ideas, such as Lacan's demand to his followers not for 'fidelity to some general theoretical propositions but precisely fidelity to his person' (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 116-120).

2. Ontology and Desire in Dionysius the Areopagite

2.1 Introduction

Even if it were desirable to do so, it would not be possible to obtain a knowledge of Dionysius untainted by the recent uses of his work in both theology and philosophy. The history of Dionysian scholarship in recent centuries is so thoroughly bound up with the range of concerns which have motivated his readers that it is no more possible to pry Dionysius' texts cleanly from the fingers of those who have set out to attack, defend or make use of him than it is to establish with any real exactness the identity of this pseudonymous author.[1] As various commentators have pointed out, however, this is not necessarily a bad thing.[2] The concerns of Dionysius' contemporary readers have given rise to an extraordinary flourishing of scholarship which has both unearthed previously unrecognised aspects of Dionysius' thought and made it possible to draw on these discoveries in the interests of repeating Dionysius differently, which is the goal of this thesis.

However, it is necessary to start somewhere, to pick a moment at which to enter the hermeneutical circle, and so this chapter will focus on a discussion of Dionysius'

---

1   Numerous twentieth-century accounts of Dionysius' work have preoccupied themselves with the attempt to speculate on the identity of the original author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, who is universally acknowledged to be writing under a pseudonym. As early as 1969, Ronald Hathaway was able to list twenty-two different theories as the author's identity (in *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1969) 31-5). More recent accounts have tended to acknowledge the futility of this quest: David Newheiser describes it as 'fruitless' (*Hope in the Unforeseeable God* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2012), 7); Alexander Golitzin says that in the absence of 'new evidence, any future attempts at identifying our author will doubtless be met with … failure' (*Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Thessalonika: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikôn Meletôn, 1994), 24-5), an assessment with which Charles M. Stang concurs (*Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No Longer I'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28); the important recent collection *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)) makes no attempt even to engage with the issue.

2   Sarah Coakley, while expressing reservations about the 'post-Heideggerian' interest in Dionysius, acknowledges her own indebtedness to this 'upsurge of interest' and suggests that 'a post-modern access to pre-modern texts has allowed the reconsideration of a lost, transformative option in anthropology' ('Introduction' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 1, 6); Mary-Jane Rubenstein argues that deconstruction's reception of Dionysius is marked by a faithful infidelity which reads 'him through, and against, himself' in a manner which reflects Dionysius' unsettling of his own claims ('Dionysius, Derrida and the Critique of "Ontotheology"' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 208); and David Newheiser argues that Derrida's apparently anachronistic reading of Dionysius is more faithful to certain aspects of Dionysius' work than the supposedly more historically sensitive readings of Andrew Louth and Alexander Golitzin which 'force Dionysius to fit a predetermined schema' ('Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius' in Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow (eds.), *Reading the Church Fathers* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 29).

work, its distinctive characteristics – which arise principally from Dionysius' idiosyncratic coupling of Christian theology and Neoplatonism – and the mixed legacy he bequeaths to his theological offspring. This account will function as a first attempt to sketch the contours of the Dionysian problematic, to which subsequent discussions in the thesis will return repeatedly, focusing in particular on his conjunction of *eros* and ontology, and the consequences of this marriage for his account of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universality.

2.2 Dionysius

Much ink has been spilt over the question of whether it is Neoplatonism or Christianity which dominates in Dionysius' work; what is essentially unquestioned is that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is characterised precisely by the conjunction of Christian orthodoxy[3] with Neoplatonism.[4] Not only does the question of Dionysius' orthodoxy obfuscate the perpetually contested identity of Christian orthodoxy (which is particularly clear in the recent discussions of Dionysius' work which have pitted Eastern and Western Christianities against one another);[5] it also elides the deeply formative influence Dionysius himself had on the shape of theology in both East and West.[6] It is clear that Dionysius was influenced by both Christian and Neoplatonic sources; and it is

---

3   An orthodoxy which was at the time Dionysius wrote still in important ways emergent, as is clear from the scholarly energies which have been exerted to establish Dionysius' precise relationship to the Monophysite controversy of his time: examples include Rosemary A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist (*Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), and John Dillon and Sarah Klitenic Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

4   The discussion of Dionysius' relationship to Neoplatonism is a near-universal feature of scholarly engagements with the *Corpus Dionysiacum*; particularly worthy of note are Henri-Domnique Saffrey, "New Objective Links Between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus" in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); Dillon and Wear, *Despoiling the Hellenes*; and Christian Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction to the Structure and Content of the Treatise on the Divine Names* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

5   As Paul L. Gavrilyuk discusses, much of the twentieth-century discussion of Dionysius by Orthodox theologians has made polemical use of his work to distinguish Orthodox from Western theology ('The Reception of Dionysius in Twentieth-Century Eastern Orthodoxy' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 178).

6   For example, Giorgio Agamben credits Dionysius' angelic hierarchies with the sacralisation of both ecclesiastical and secular structures of power with ongoing consequences for political theology in the West (*The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 152-153); Bernard McGinn says that Dionysius' work was 'the fountainhead of speculative mystical systems for at least a thousand years' (*The presence of God: a history of Western Christian mysticism. Vol. 1, The foundations of mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 158); and Denys Turner says that Dionysius 'invented the genre' of mystical theology 'for the Latin Church' (*The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13).

no less clear that in bringing these two together, he produced a synthesis in which both of its constituents were transformed by their mutual encounter.[7] Rather than engaging with these well-rehearsed debates any further, then, I will seek here to sketch out some of the key co-ordinates of Dionysius' Neoplatonic Christianity and its legacy for subsequent theological thought.

In response to (what is perceived as) a tendency in recent Western philosophical engagements with Dionysius' work to focus on the *Mystical Theology*,[8] several recent historical accounts of Dionysius have focused their attention on the connections between the *Mystical Theology* and Dionysius' other works: the *Divine Names*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Letters,* and in doing so have both clarified what is distinctive about the theological system which Dionysius bequeaths to future readers and highlighted some of the deep tensions within his work – tensions which are, as I will argue, in many ways as important to Dionysius' legacy as his constructive solutions to theological problems.

Denys Turner argues that Western Christian thought has its origins in the convergence of Christianity and Platonism and, more specifically, in the convergence of the narrative of Moses' encounter with God at the top of Mount Sinai and Plato's allegory of the cave, naming Dionysius as the most influential figure in this meeting of myths. This coupling – particularly clear in the *Mystical Theology* – begets two of the determining metaphors of subsequent Western theology: darkness and light, and ascent and descent.[9] But there is, as Turner acknowledges elsewhere,[10] more to Dionysius' conjunction of Christianity and Platonism than simply the bringing together of these

---

7   This is the argument of both Schäfer, who argues that the Dionysian corpus is 'the most intricate single project ever of merging a systematic philosophical tradition with Christian thought' which produces 'an indissoluble union featuring a new quality' (*Philosophy of Dionysius*, 9); and Stang, who reads Dionysius' choice of pseudonym as a deliberate attempt to signal his intention of effecting 'a new rapprochement between the wisdom of pagan Athens and the revelation of God in Christ' ('The Significance of the Pseudonym', in *Rethinking Dionysius*, 12).

8   Denys Turner, for example, argues that contemporary philosophy in general, and Derrida in particular, give undue weight to the *Mystical Theology* whilst neglecting the rest of the Dionysian corpus (Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, 'Introduction' in eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-4, and Turner, 'How to read the pseudo-Denys today?' in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 no. 4 (2005), 428-429; this accusation is neither entirely just in its assessment of contemporary philosophy - as Newheiser points out (*Unforeseeable God*, 61) – nor accurate in its attempt to portray the tendency to disproportionately engage the *Mystical Theology* as a recent phenomenon when in fact it dates back as least as far as the medieval Western reception of Dionysius, as Coakley points out (*Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 3).

9   *Darkness of God*, 11-12.

10   In, for example, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 42.

two narratives. Reading the *Mystical Theology* in the context of Dionysius' work as a whole, key themes which emerge are Dionysius' use of the Neoplatonic language of Oneness to describe the source of all things;[11] his equation of Neoplatonism's basic pattern of emanation and return with the Christian narrative of creation and redemption;[12] the invocation of Plato's *Symposium* in the use of the language of *eros* to describe that which drives this movement; and his invention of the term 'hierarchy' to describe the structures of authority in both the church and the angelic orders – both of which become, on Dionysius' account, tightly bound to the process of progressive ascent by which creatures make their way up to the creator.

Dionysius' conjunction of Christianity and Neoplatonism, then, binds tightly and almost inseparably together being, language, and the structure of human society around the figure of what is, essentially, a closed economy in which everything that is takes its origin in the One, God, from which it emerges into multiplicity and complexity only to return to union with the source from which it came. Žižek argues that ontology consists essentially of the claim '"thinking and being are the same,"', that 'there is a mutual accord between thinking (logos as reason or speech) and being'.[13] In this sense, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is profoundly ontological. Moreover, it is thoroughly erotic insofar as it is *eros*, desire, which drives both creation and redemption, both emanation and return; which forms the basis for God's relation to the created world, the created world's relation to God, and the relationships between creatures.

2.3 *Eros* and ontology

As Denys Turner argues, *eros* plays a crucial role in Dionysius' Christian-Neoplatonist synthesis.[14] In particular, as I discussed briefly in the introduction to this thesis, *eros* solves two key problems of the Neoplatonic account of creation – the

---

11 For Dionysius' work, 'One' is the first – and hence most appropriate – name of God, (*Mystical Theology*, 138), an emphasis which is generally taken to derive, at least in part, from Plato's *Parmenides* as filtered through the works of Neoplatonists including Plotinus and Proclus (e.g. McGinn, *Foundations of mysticism*, 32, 48, 58-59; Dillon and Wear, *Dionysius*, 10; Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1994), 71).

12 Although there have been debates about exactly how much this model of emanation and return has been transformed by its encounter in Dionysius' work with Christian notions of creation (see, for example, Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Chapman, 1989), 84-86), it is clear that this pattern is in some sense the basic model for Dionysius' understanding of the relation between God and creation.

13 *Less Than Nothing*, 874.

14 *Eros and Allegory*, 47-70.

problem of divine freedom and the problem of differentiation. However, in its Dionysian form it also creates a number of interconnected problems for theology – the problem of human freedom, the problem of materiality, the problem of hierarchy and the problem of universality. All of these bear some relation to economy.

The problem of creation is essentially the problem of how an economy comes into being. Neoplatonism begins with the simplicity of the One – that is, the One's entire self-sufficiency, completeness, and lack of differentiation. The One needs nothing and is eternally unchanging. So how can the world come into being? To begin, to start something, to decide without cause for doing so, is to rupture the economy of the One which is, in its simplicity, perfectly complete, lacking nothing. This is the problem of divine freedom: if God wants nothing, needs nothing, and is entirely complete unto Godself, why would God create? And if the One is perfectly simple, entirely without parts, how can it give rise to the multiplicity and diversity of the material world? The problem of creation, then, is twofold: *why* did God create; and *how* does One become two, and three, and many?

Turner argues that it is the language of *eros* which makes it possible for Dionysius, and the theology which comes after him, to deal with the problem of creation. He says that, in human experience, it is in *eros* that 'the polarities of freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation' are held together.[15] To love is, Turner argues, to feel compelled to undertake particular obligations to the beloved whilst simultaneously recognising that this erotic obligation is entirely free, the free gift of lover and beloved to one another.[16] Similarly, to love is to desire absolute union with the beloved and yet also to be absolutely individualised by the encounter with the beloved other. I am, Turner argues, never more myself than when I love and am loved; and yet to love is to desire to become one with the beloved other. Love is that which in human experience makes most sense of the paradoxical language which Dionysius uses to describe the human encounter with God: the 'brilliant darkness' where one 'knows

---

15 *Eros and Allegory*, 58. Turner describes these internal polarities as the 'dialectics of eros' (56)**,** which is – in light of the concerns of this thesis with Žižek's Hegelianism – an interesting choice; although, unfortunately, by 'dialectics' Turner really seems to mean nothing more than a 'tension' or 'paradox' (60), one of the central arguments of this thesis will be that a Žižekian reading of Dionysius really does make possible a dialectics of *eros*.

16 In contrast with later commentators, Dionysius explicitly equates *eros*, desire (or, as Colm Luibheid has it, 'yearning') with *agape*, love (*Divine Names*, 81).

beyond the mind by knowing nothing'.[17]

2.4 Freedom

Yet this language of *eros*, steeped as it is for Dionysius in the myths and metaphysics of Plato and his interpreters, is not without its problems. The notion of the simplicity of the One – important both to Plato and to the Neoplatonists – is the notion that all good things – justice, freedom, life, beauty etc. – come together and are identical within the One which gives rise to everything that exists. Just as all things come from the One, so all things are to return to the One; this return is both the inherent *telos* of human life and the ultimate good for human beings. Everything that is good or desirable is united in the One. And so two questions arise. First, if all being comes from the One and is, in the One, identical with goodness, where does evil come from; can evil exist at all? Second, if everything that is desirable and good for human beings is in the One, why would anyone choose to do anything which was not directed towards their end in the One? How, as Dionysius puts it, 'could anything choose [evil] in preference to the Good?'[18]

For Plato, these questions were relatively easily resolved: the essential problem was ignorance. Nobody wants to be unhappy; desiring anything other than the good makes a person unhappy; therefore the only explanation is that they *think* that what they want will make them happy – and therefore that what they want is good – but they are wrong.[19] While there is an element of discomfort with materiality which – as discussed below – becomes, especially as filtered through Neoplatonism, in some ways close to a sense of the world's fallenness, it is only really in the encounter with the Christian doctrine of sin that evil becomes a problem for Neoplatonic ontology. For Dionysius' predecessor Gregory of Nyssa, the solution is to make human beings wholly culpable for their ignorance: God is the sun which enlightens the world, and if we are unable to see clearly it can only be because we have chosen to shut our eyes to the divine light.[20]

---

17 *Mystical Theology*, 135, 137.
18 *Divine Names*, 84.
19 See, for example, Plato's 'Meno' in in *Protagoras and Meno* trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin, 1956), 124-125. There are of course nuances to this Platonic account of the problem of human wrongdoing (for example, the discussion in the 'Phaedrus' of the soul as charioteer seeking to manage the two horses, intellect and the passions (trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38-42), but in general Plato is relatively untroubled by the problem of evil and concerned primarily with the question of knowledge and ignorance.
20 'We do not hold that the luminary in anger pushes into the ditch someone who does not choose to

Dionysius shares this dual emphasis on evil as willed ignorance, and yet his discussion of where evil comes from focuses much more strongly on the question of the ontological status of evil. What is evil? Where did it come from? What caused it?[21] These are at heart economic questions: how was the divine economy, the cycle of cause and effect, emanation and return, ruptured? Dionysius' solution is simply to suggest that evil *does not exist*. All being comes from God; and so anything which has being cannot be entirely evil because insofar as it exists at all it must continue to participate in God.[22] Just as for Plato, those who desire evil do so only because they are ignorant of the good, so for Dionysius those who are evil are so only insofar as they have fallen away from both knowledge of and participation in the good.[23] Evil is a distortion, a corruption; not a thing in itself but 'a deficiency and a lack of perfection … evil lies in the inability of things to reach their natural peak of perfection.'[24] It is parasitic upon the good, and can neither cause itself nor be desired for what it is in itself.[25] Yet although it is 'weakness, impotence, a deficiency of knowledge … of desire', those who sin are nonetheless culpable because God 'generously bestows such capacities on each as needed and, therefore, there can be no excuse for any sin in the realm of one's own good.'[26]

As thorough as Dionysius' account of evil is, however, it does not exactly solve his basic problem. Evil is only explicable as a lack, a failure, a weakness; and yet those who fall short are to be blamed for doing so because they were strong enough to do otherwise. So *why* would anyone – human or angel – ever sin? There can be no reason, no justification for sin; it is a lack which somehow escapes the created economy. Sin, in short, is structured in a manner which exactly parallels creation itself: as an excessive, unjustifiable, inexplicable act which ruptures economy. This parallel is mirrored even in Dionysius' account of the relationship of evil to being: just as God 'falls neither within the predicate of being nor of nonbeing',[27] so also evil 'is not a being … nor is it a

---

look at it.' Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses,* trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 71.

21 *Divine Names*, 84.
22 *Divine Names*, 85.
23 *Divine Names*, 87.
24 *Divine Names*, 92.
25 *Divine Names*, 94.
26 *Divine Names*, 96. This account of evil as privation is, of course, not unique to Dionysius; Augustine, for example, argues that 'evil does not exist at all', but rather 'all things that are corrupted serve privation of some good' (*Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 124-125.
27 *Mystical Theology*, 141.

nonbeing.'[28] And yet where the free excessive act of the God who is neither being nor nonbeing is fertile and generative, bringing into being all the multiplicity of the created world, the free excessive act of human and demonic beings which has neither being nor nonbeing can only bring death: it 'never produces being or birth. All it can do by itself is in a limited fashion to debase and destroy the substance of things.'[29] The free act of evil is thus arguably the point at which humans most closely resemble the God who created them, it is where human beings are *most divine* in their relationship to the economy of creation; and yet it is this aneconomic act which brings for them death and condemnation. Where God exceeds economy out of the overflow of divine goodness, the human transcendence of economy can be thought only as lack.

2.5 Materiality

Moreover, this account of evil as privation, as a descent down the ladder of being, causes further problems for Dionysius as he attempts to bring together Neoplatonic ontology and Christian theology. Both Platonism and Neoplatonism tend towards the denigration of materiality and the elevation of the abstract and the immaterial. In the hierarchical ascent of Plato's *Symposium*, the desire of the lover leads him upwards in a process of increasing abstraction away from the material and the particular:[30] beginning with the love of an individual beautiful body, the lover comes first to reject attachment to this particular body in favour of an appreciation of all beautiful bodies, next to the realisation that beautiful practices are more beautiful than beautiful bodies; beautiful knowledge than beautiful practices, until finally he comes to love above all 'that particular knowledge which is knowledge solely of the beautiful itself.'[31] The goal of the philosophical quest for knowledge is to get as far away from the body as possible.[32] This disdain for the material world is, if anything, intensified by Neoplatonism. Where Plato aspired to a political order governed by philosopher kings,

---

28 *Divine Names*, 85.
29 *Divine Names*, 86.
30 I use the male pronoun here as Plato does because it is importantly indicative of the basic misogyny of Plato's thought which, as I will discuss below, is inextricable from his privileging of the abstract and universal over the particular.
31 Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, trans. M. C Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49-50.
32 Here, though, it is worth noting Grace Jantzen's argument in *Death and the Displacement of Beauty. Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 193-221 (discussed in more detail in chapter 7) that, although on balance Plato sides with the universal and abstract against the particular and the material, there are elements of his work which disrupt this emphasis.

the Neoplatonists – writing amidst the slow collapse of the Roman Empire – aspired not to rule the world but to escape it.[33] Plotinus, a key figure within Neoplatonism, was said to seem 'ashamed of being in the body',[34] living a deeply ascetic life, and suggesting that 'the perfect life, the true, real life, is in that transcendent intelligible reality, and that other lives are incomplete'.[35]

This is the inheritance with which Dionysius grapples, then, and which he seeks to reconcile with two key Christian affirmations: that of the essential goodness of creation and that of the incarnation of God in Christ. Such a reconciliation is by no means easy to achieve and this mismatched coupling gives birth to a theology of the material world which is thoroughly conflicted. Matter is good, Dionysius argues, because insofar as it has being it participates in the Good. It is not a heavy weight which drags souls away from God and towards evil.[36] And yet even as Dionysius explicitly refuses the equation of the descent down the hierarchy of being with the descent towards sin, this association is constantly reinforced by his discussion of the nature of both evil and material being. Evil is a falling away, a lack of the good: and yet, on Dionysius' account, the hierarchy of created being is defined precisely as the hierarchy of greater or lesser participation in the good. Of created things, some 'share completely in the Good, others participate in it more or less, others have a slight portion only, and, to others, again, the Good is but a far-off echo ... this has to be so, for otherwise the

---

33 McGinn says 'the liberation that Plotinus strives for is a private and personal affair, as well as one that seems limited to a philosophical elite' (*Foundations of Mysticism*, 55); Grace Jantzen explicitly connects this to Neoplatonism's political context, arguing that Plotinus 'turned away from the violence of the fragmenting empire to an eternal world, where beauty never decays' (*Foundations of Violence*, 342). This ethical and political aspect of Plotinus' thought is problematically absent from Eric D. Perl's *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), which focuses on the abstractly philosophical aspects of both Dionysius and Perl's work to the exclusion of all else, missing the ways that, say, Dionysius' account of the relationship between the ontological structure of reality and the hierarchical structure of the church problematises his reading of the cycle of remaining, procession and return as 'a dynamic, though non-temporal, "motion" or "process"' (35).
34 Plotinus, *The Enneads* vol. 1, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 3, cited in Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 351.
35 Plotinus, *The Enneads* 1.4.3, 181. Margaret Miles offers a more nuanced account of Plotinus' attitude to the body than Jantzen, although her suggestion that Plotinus' claim that matter is 'evil' ought not to be taken to have 'moral overtones' seems to be stretching the bounds of plausibility, and she still acknowledges that, for Plotinus, bodily nature should be 'eliminated' from thought as far as possible (*Plotinus on Body and Beauty: Society, Philosophy and Religion in Third-century Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 97, 104). Similarly, Pierre Hadot's argument that, for Plotinus, we 'must accept our own bodies with gentleness' is inextricable from his claim that 'To accept the universal order is to accept the existence of degrees of goodness, and, thus, indirectly, to accept evil' (*Plotinus, or, The Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 94, 103).
36 *Divine Names*, 92-93.

most honoured, the most divine things would be on the order with the lowliest.'[37] Ignorance 'scatters those in error'[38] and yet angels are higher up in the hierarchy of creation because, in contrast to the 'fragmentary and varied nature' of human activities, they are 'unified intelligences'.[39]

One of the ways in which Dionysius seeks to bring together the Neoplatonic desire to move up the hierarchy of being with the Christian affirmation of the created world is his assertion that, while created things draw closer to God by moving up the hierarchy, each thing has, nonetheless, a direct relationship to God.[40] Different beings differ according to their proximity to God and yet God is equally close to all beings. Although this introduces into Dionysius' work a sense of the direct involvement of God in each element of creation, however, this does not result in a straightforward affirmation of the 'permanent validity' of the sensible world as Golitzin suggests,[41] but begets instead a profound conflict at the heart of Dionysius' attitude to materiality.

A parallel difficulty arises from Dionysius' attempts to grapple with the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return. If all things come from God and are to return, ultimately, to God, how can this return be thought as anything other than the undoing of creation itself? How is it possible for the created world to return to God without simply ceasing to exist? How can the closure of economy mean anything other than death? As Thomas Carlson's reading of Dionysius suggests, it is this relation between completion and death which is the basis for the link which mystical theology from Dionysius onwards repeatedly makes between mystical unknowing and death.[42] However, this is only one side of the story: as Giorgio Agamben argues, other elements of the Christian tradition after Dionysius wrestle with the question of how to continue to think both the governance of God and the activity of God's creatures after the return of

---

37 *Divine Names*, 86.
38 *Divine Names*, 76.
39 *Divine Names*, 106-107.
40 e.g. *Divine Names*, 66-67; Louth suggests that this modification of Neoplatonic emanation functions both to emphasise the fundamental difference between God and creatures and to ward off the polytheism of much Neoplatonism (*Denys*, 84-85). While I don't disagree with this suggestion, I would argue that this direct relationship between God and creatures is also important insofar as it allows Dionysius to affirm the goodness of each created thing in its particular place in the created hierarchy, although he is unable to consistently maintain this affirmation. While Alexander Golitzin overstates the extent to which Dionysius escapes the Neoplatonic distrust of materiality, he is correct here to argue that the direct dependence on God of the world is intended to give 'permanent validity' to the created order (*Et introibo*, 164).
41 *Et introibo*, 164.
42 *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 244, 247, 255-256.

all things to God.[43] If the function of the hierarchy is, as Dionysius argues, to draw creatures up towards God, there must come a point at which this ascent ceases. Here, for Dionysius as well as for the later theologians Agamben discusses, there is nothing for beings to do except engage in continual praise of God.[44] There is a difficult tension here, however: on the one hand, there is a clear sense that to ascend the hierarchies is to move closer to God, and there is some sense in which, for human beings at least, this ascent is both desirable and possible: catechumens, for example, on the lowest rung of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are like 'children … unready and unshaped', and are expected therefore to proceed up the hierarchy in order that they might be 'brought to fullness.'[45] Dionysius repeatedly affirms the value of moving away from the material and towards the immaterial: the impious should 'shed their attachment to material things';[46] scripture, liturgy and hierarchy are given to 'lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual, from sacred shapes and symbols to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven.'[47] And yet the desirability of ascent up the hierarchy is not absolute: Louth is partly (though not entirely) right to claim that Dionysius' 'hierarchies are *static*: they are not ladders up which one climbs.'[48] No human being can ascend higher than the position of hierarch: above the ecclesiastical hierarchy is the celestial hierarchy, the order of angelic beings. The metaphor of ascent which so thoroughly shapes Dionysius' work as a whole is in conflict with his affirmation of hierarchy.

By seeking to maintain both that God is immediately present to all being *and also* that beings are differentiated precisely by their relative closeness to God, such that the *telos* of human existence is both increasing participation in God *and also* continuing, distinct existence, Dionysius does not then escape the Neoplatonic queasiness towards materiality but simply adds to it a Christian affirmation of the material world. The conflict between these two persists as a central antagonism within his work – an antagonism which, as I have argued elsewhere, persists through much of

---

43 *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 160-162. Agamben also argues persuasively that this question is a problem not only because of the desire to affirm the persistence of the created world but because the Trinitarian economy becomes so entangled with the created economy that it becomes impossible to conceive of the former outside of the latter: 'The Trinitarian economy was essentially a figure of action and government. It corresponded perfectly … to the question regarding the state not only of God but also of the angels and the blessed after the world's end' (163).
44 *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 162; *Celestial Hierarchy*, 165.
45 *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 215.
46 *Divine Names*, 113.
47 *Celestial Hierarchy*, 147.
48 *Denys*, 105.

the Christian tradition.[49] This central antagonism is clearly visible in the overriding consensus that Dionysius' work as a whole downplays the importance of the incarnation,[50] but also plays out in complex ways in the reception of Dionysius' account of ontological, eschatological and ecclesial hierarchies.

2.6 Hierarchy

The question of hierarchy is the point at which Dionysius' work comes most inescapably into contact with questions of politics and power, and readers of Dionysius are deeply divided as to the question of whether Dionysius' theological invention of the notion of hierarchy can be redeemed.[51] Hierarchy is a problem for several reasons. First, the association of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the ontological hierarchy which progresses Neoplatonically away from the material and towards the immaterial is closely bound up in the history of the church with the denigration of those groups of people who are more strongly associated with materiality, immanence and immaturity – particularly women but also slaves, children, and colonised people. Luce Irigaray describes the ways in which the Platonic myth of the cave relies on the masculine denial of dependence on the material and maternal,[52] and this erasure of women is no less present in Dionysius' writings. Although it is historically likely that women in the church of Dionysius' time would have played a significant ecclesial role, they are strikingly absent from his work.[53] Moreover, on Dionysius' account women would be entirely excluded from the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – and hence

---

49 Marika Rose, 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 541-551. Denys Turner similarly suggests that 'the stress of these tensions [between Dionysius' affirmation of hierarchy and of the direct dependence on God] will leave their mark upon the imagery which he left as his legacy to Western theologians' (*Darkness of God*, 48).

50 As Gavrilyuk points out ('The Reception of Dionysius', 182), Golitzin is the major exception to this consensus, but this is largely because of his tendency to read back later Orthodox theology into Dionysius' work. Newheiser's recent thesis contains a discussion of the incarnation which is more sensitive to the nuances of Dionysius' text (*Unforeseeable God*, 82-84), and explicitly argues that this reading of Dionysius exempts him from Moltmann's critique of theologies which conceive eschatology as the escape from time and therefore from embodiment (94-97); but he also acknowledges the problem of irreconcilable tensions within Dionysius' work, which I discuss more fully below.

51 Whilst the term 'hierarch' as a name for a bishop predates Dionysius' work, Dionysius is generally acknowledged to be the originator of the term 'hierarchy' (as pointed out in e.g. Paul Rorem's 'Foreword' to Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

52 Luce Irigaray, 'Plato's Hystera' in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243–364.

53 As noted by both Louth, *Denys*, 55 and Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 96.

from the highest degrees of human perfection – simply by virtue of their gender. Mary Jane Rubenstein registers discomfort with the implications of an all-male hierarchy, but hints that it might be possible simply to dismiss this as 'an unavoidable cultural remnant', glossing over the extent to which women's exclusion is very profoundly implicated in the notion of ecclesiastical and ontological hierarchy itself.[54] Grace Jantzen more plausibly argues for the profoundly gendered nature of the Dionysian hierarchies, pointing out that by associating progress towards God both with progress up the ecclesiastical hierarchy and with intellectual ascent, Dionysius' work doubly excludes women, who have historically been refused access both to positions of ecclesiastical power and to education.[55]

More contentious is the extent to which Dionysius' invention of hierarchy can be understood as, firstly, the theological legitimation of structures of power both within and without the church and, secondly, as an account of hierarchy which is essentially unquestionable by those lower down. The text which gives Dionysius' readers most cause for discomfort here is *Letter 8*, which addresses Demophilus, a monk who has violated the ecclesiastical hierarchy by criticising the decision of a priest (in Dionysius' ecclesiastical hierarchy priests significantly outrank monks). Dionysius responds by rebuking Demophilus, strongly asserting the correlation between an individual's position in the hierarchy and their proximity to God. Those who are further up the hierarchy simply do have a greater capacity for receiving God;[56] for a person lower down to challenge them is always a violation of justice.[57] 'Even if disorder and confusion should undermine the most divine ordinance and regulations', Dionysius writes, 'that still gives no right, even on God's behalf, to overturn the order which God himself has established. God is not divided against himself.'[58] It is not impossible that a member of the hierarchy should prove unworthy of their position, but this violation of the divinely ordained order can only be corrected by those who remain within the bounds of authority given to them by that order.[59]

Of the commentaries on Dionysius' text, Paul Rorem's comes perhaps closest to a disinterested historical account, making very little attempt to draw theological

---

54 Rubenstein 'Dionysius, Derrida', 205.
55 *Power, Gender*, 107.
56 *Letter 8*, 274.
57 *Letter 8*, 275.
58 *Letter 8*, 272.
59 *Letter 8*, 274-275.

conclusius from his reading of Dionysius. It is interesting, then, that he takes this *Letter* as straightforwardly setting out Dionysius' understanding of hierarchy and authority within the church, and also suggests that 'the Dionysian writings profoundly shaped the idea of hierarchy in the Christian tradition … [and] also influenced the overall picture of reality, as it was transmitted down through a vertical structure, as "the order which God himself has established" … a concept gladly embraced by Christian monarchs of all kinds.'[60]

Those who more clearly attribute theological authority to the Dionysian corpus are queasier. Louth balks at the suggestion that the hierarchies 'express a notion of distance from God' such that union with God is reserved for those at the uppermost ranks of the hierarchies, suggesting – somewhat implausibly – that 'Denys rarely mentions that notion of the hierarchy',[61] whilst simultaneously acknowledging that this reading is 'the most natural suggestion (which Denys himself takes up, when he speaks of the seraphim)'.[62] Similarly, in order to sustain this claim, Louth argues that 'the *Mystical Theology* nowhere mentions the hierarchies' and that perhaps, therefore, they 'are irrelevant for the purpose of that treatise'.[63] It not clear how Louth intends to reconcile this argument with the claim – arguably the most distinctive contribution of his own reading of Dionysius – that 'the *Mystical Theology* has a liturgical context, and indeed that it relates especially to the hierarch and his role in the liturgy.'[64] Louth goes on to conclude that, contra the contemporary tendency to see 'all men and women' as equal and society as formed from mutual agreement,[65] Dionysius' notion of hierarchy makes space for individual difference and independence, and 'finds room within this strictly hierarchical society for an escape from it, beyond it, by transcending symbols and realising directly one's relationship with God'.[66]

At the other end of the spectrum are those who take Dionysius' rigid affirmation of hierarchy to be the truth of his system as a whole. Most significant in this regard is Giorgio Agamben, though Anthony Paul Smith's notion of 'weaponised apophaticism' is

---

60 *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.
61 *Denys*, 105.
62 *Denys*, 104.
63 *Denys*, 106.
64 Louth, *Denys*, 101. It is the liturgy of the Eucharist with which Louth seeks to draw parallels, a liturgy which, for Dionysius, specifically requires the exclusion of those lower down the ecclesiastical hierarchy (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 210).
65 *Denys*, 132.
66 *Denys*, 134.

also worth noting. Agamben's account focuses on Dionysius' angelology, arguing that his connection of angels with the notion of hierarchy 'is one of the most tenacious mystifications in the history of Christian literature.'[67] For Agamben, mystical theology is not the most significant element of Dionysius' legacy except insofar as it functions as a cover for 'the sacralisation of power.'[68] It is, he argues, precisely the equation of ecclesial with divine power which Dionysius' work fundamentally seeks to establish, and which is subsequently taken up, more or less explicitly, into extra-ecclesial theories of government; functioning, in fact, as *the* paradigm for 'civil administration and government'.[69] For Agamben, apophatic theology is necessary to an economic account of God's government of the world (and to profane accounts of economy which emerge in the decline of Christendom) because 'the economy has no foundation in ontology and the only way to found it is to hide its origin.'[70] Smith further expands on Agamben's account of apophasis as a cover for a theological power play via a discussion of the function of negation in the work of Thomas Aquinas.[71] By simultaneously grounding government and power in the authority of God and removing God from the sphere of the natural – and therefore universally knowable – Smith argues, Christian theologians both cover over the particularity of their commitment to a specific tradition and invest the representatives of ecclesial authority with a power which is all the more unquestionable for being grounded on that which is ultimately unknowable.[72]

In between Louth's reading of Dionysius' hierarchicalism, which takes it to be essentially benign, and Agamben and Smith's reading, which takes it to be at best deceitful and at worst pernicious, are the readings of Rubenstein and Newheiser, both of whom display an uneasiness with the apparent authoritarianism of Dionysius' hierarchies and yet seek to save him from himself precisely by appealing to the apophatic elements of his thought. Both claim to identify in Dionysius' apophaticism

---

67 *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 152.
68 *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 153, 155.
69 'Having established the centrality of the notion of hierarchy, angels and bureaucrats tend to fuse' (*The Kingdom and the Glory*, 157); cf also 158.
70 *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 54 (Agamben attributes this insight to Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), and argues that this gap between ontology and economy arises for Christianity and not paganism precisely because of the Christian doctrine of creation which asserts the freedom of God in creation, thus introducing a crucial gap between God's being and action (55)).
71 Anthony Paul Smith, 'Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition: Weaponised Apophaticism and Gnostic Refusal' in *Angelaki* (forthcoming).
72 Smith cites here Jean-Luc Marion, who claims (in *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 153) that the move beyond ontotheology implies that '*only the bishop merits, in the full sense, the title of theologian*'.

resources for reading him against himself and so using Dionysius' own text to unsettle the very hierarchies he so firmly sets in place. Rubenstein argues that the hierarchies imply a 'radical interconnectedness of God and all things' which undermines the popular image of the mystic as solitary and narcissistic by insisting on the centrality of community and opposes any distaste for the material world by insisting that 'the wretched world is the means by which we are related to God.'[73] Yet Dionysius also insists on the ascent to God via a male hierarchy, and worries about contamination and the need to keep secrets from those who are unworthy. Dionysius is caught, Rubenstein argues (via Derrida) between the desire to welcome and the desire to maintain theology's purity.[74] Dionysius can, therefore, be read 'through, and against, himself' for 'a theo-ethic that unsettles the very hierarchy and teleology it poses.'[75]

Newheiser takes a similar tack, responding to Agamben's critique of Dionysius by arguing that he misses the tensions within Dionysius' work.[76] As well as identifying a number of incoherencies and contradictions in Dionysius' detailed accounts of the functioning of both ecclesial and celestial hierarchies,[77] Newheiser appeals to the strength of Dionysius' apophatic denials of the possibility of knowledge of God to argue that although 'in relation to theological language, apophatic negativity demands not the cessation of speech but rather the juxtaposition of affirmation and negation, here it consists in simultaneously maintaining a particular account of hierarchy and the recognition that any such account is inadequate.'[78] For Newheiser, this juxtaposition relates to the tension between the present time and the eschatological future, a tension which constantly unsettles theological certainty.[79] The crucial question here is the nature of the relationship of the cataphatic to the apophatic: whether the apophatic merely functions to radically qualify the cataphatic (i.e. a particular set of scriptural, doctrinal and ecclesial structures) or is capable of not only unsettling the cataphatic but forcing its transformation. Newheiser and Rubenstein are right to suggest that the radical nature of Dionysius' apophatic claims has the potential for challenging and transforming his

---

73 'Dionysius, Derrida', 204.
74 'Dionysius, Derrida', 206.
75 'Dionysius, Derrida', 208.
76 *Unforeseeable God*, 15.
77 *Unforeseeable God*, 18-20. Newheiser draws on this account of textual inconsistencies to suggest that Dionysius' hierarchies do not 'achieve the assimilation of earthly to heavenly power that Agamben fears, for the earthly order decisively falls short of heavenly perfection' (19): I think this is overstating the case, as it is far from clear that these inconsistencies are intended by Dionysius; the strength of his rebuke to Demophilus would rather suggest that this is not the case.
78 *Unforeseeable God*, 22.
79 *Unforeseeable God*, 25.

cataphatic claims. Newheiser, I think, downplays the extent to which this potential in Dionysius' work represents not simply an ambiguity or a potential in the text but an antagonism: to fully endorse the apophatic undermining of authority is actively to reject other of Dionysius' formulations concerning the nature of authority and power within the church.

<u>2.7 Universalism</u>

The question of hierarchy is closely bound up with the question of the nature and status of that which exists outside of the church. Dionysius explicitly argues that those lower down the ecclesiastical hierarchy have a lesser capacity for good: 'each rank around God conforms more to him than the one further away … what I mean by nearness is the greatest possible capacity to receive God.'[80] Yet the rigidity of the hierarchies and their close association with the hierarchy of being itself means that there is no space in Dionysius' work to give a nuanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of particular individuals or concepts. Progress towards God is a straightforward process of ascent along 'a specific – one might say prefabricated – journey'.[81] This implies a strongly universalising account of the Church, which certain readers of Dionysius acknowledge: von Balthasar says, regarding Dionysius, that 'not only is philosophy in a non-Christian sense derived for him from the true, revealed Wisdom, but he makes the historical economy of salvation include the whole of history in an all-embracing way' and that his work tends 'towards an historical universality, which is … realised in the conception of the Church as the heart of the world, the source of all form and life.'[82] Alexander Golitzin pushes this logic to its extreme, claiming that 'the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is our context, our world, the place of our strivings and the milieu of our encounter with Christ…Nothing of any validity or truth may be accomplished outside of our hierarchy.'[83] Although Newheiser is right to point out that this model of ecclesial universality is qualified by the apophatic elements of Dionysius' thought,[84] he overstates the extent to which this is the case: the encounter with God

---

80 *Letter 8*, 274.
81 Rubenstein, 'Dionysius, Derrida', 204.
82 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* Vol. 2, *Studies in theological style: clerical styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh and Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 202-203.
83 *Et introibo*, 167.
84 *Unforeseeable God*, 21.

which shatters human speech takes place *within* the ecclesiastical hierarchy – not only is it associated with the liturgy of the Eucharist but Dionysius is very clear that it is accessible only to those who have already made a certain amount of spiritual progress, who have been to some degree initiated into the divine and hence into the church.[85]

This strong correlation between the church hierarchy and participation in truth and goodness is not only troubling in light of its likely political and ethical consequences;[86] it is also completely at odds with the ways in which Dionysius' theology has clearly been transformed and enriched by his encounter with Neoplatonic thought. That ideas such as emanation and return and the simplicity of God are neither inherent nor implicit within earlier Christian tradition is clear not only from the originality of Dionysius' synthesis but also from the internal antagonisms which result from the coupling of these heterogeneous traditions. This is not to say that Dionysius' Neoplatonic Christianity is either a disaster or a dead end (it is evident from his subsequent influence on thought that the combination is in many ways remarkably fertile), but to deny its originality and in fact to argue for the ontological impossibility of such originality is disingenuous at best. Stang claims that Dionysius' pseudonym is specifically intended to 'suggest that, following Paul he will effect a new rapprochement between the wisdom of pagan Athens and the revelation of God in Christ'.[87] While he is right to recognise the novelty of Dionysius' work, he misses the extent to which the pseudonym also functions precisely to obscure this novelty, to suggest that Dionysius' work is more thoroughly consistent with earlier Christian thought than is in fact the case.[88] This dissembling is also evident in Dionysius'

---

85 *Mystical Theology*, 136. For this reason I would take issue with Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate's suggestion that Dionysius' negative theology 'is an inclusive manner of thinking [which has an] "ecumenical" effect' ('Echoes of an Embarrassment: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology – An Introduction' in eds. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate, *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 29).

86 Similar reasoning was used by Humbert of Romans who, in defending the Crusades against the criticisms of those who objected to the unprovoked waging of war by using the parable of the wheat and the tares to suggest that because they rejected Christianity, Muslim communities were all tares and no wheat and could therefore 'be entirely uprooted' ('Opus Tripartitum', cited in Louise and Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: Idea and Reality, 1095-1274* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 110.

87 'The Significance of the Pseudonym', 12.

88 Stang acknowledges the novelty of Dionysius' synthesis when he asserts that, unlike earlier attempts to read Dionysius as *either* Christian *or* Neoplatonic, contemporary scholars realise 'that "pagan" philosophy was always being "baptised" for Christian use' (*No Longer I*, 5), but nowhere addresses the possibility that Dionysius' own failure to acknowledge that this is what he is doing may have shaped earlier scholarly tendencies to see Christianity and Neoplatonism as mutually exclusive alternatives.

treatment of hierarchy as 'a venerable sacred tradition',[89] a statement which, as Rorem points out 'is actually the creation, not the reception' of the notion.[90] Dionysius' notion of an ecclesiastical hierarchy which is essentially inextricable from the hierarchy of being itself means that he must deny that anything new can come from outside the church even as the basic co-ordinates of his work depend on precisely this assumption. Dionysius' commitment to a pure genealogy outweighs here his commitment to the truth.

2.8 Conclusion

In bringing together theology, language and being around the figure of an erotic economy, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* sets the terms for much subsequent theological debate, and makes a series of metaphorical and conceptual connections which will prove difficult, if not impossible, to undo. Yet this Dionysian legacy contains crucial antagonisms with which his intellectual heirs must grapple: the structural homology of creation and fall, the dual desire to escape and to affirm the material world, the problematic association of the hierarchies of ecclesial authority and being itself, and an account which simultaneously denies and embodies the transformation of Christianity by the encounter with that which is foreign to it. As a result, it is not straightforwardly – if at all – possible to be simply faithful to Dionysius' work, which is itself internally inconsistent. Dionysius' readers are, to some extent, condemned to failure, to the very diversity and impurity which Dionysius himself seeks to escape. The subsequent chapter will begin by briefly tracing the ways by which this complex legacy makes its way into contemporary discussions of the relationship of continental philosophy and theology, before discussing the mutant forms in which his central concepts emerge in the work of Jacques Derrida, and the subsequent theological response to Dionysius' ideas as they are taken up and made strange by Derrida, focusing particularly on the work of the Radical Orthodox thinkers and of John D. Caputo.

---

89 *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 197.
90 *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 21.

3. Apophatic theology and its vicissitudes

3.1 Introduction

Although much has been made of the recent 'return of religion' in society and the 'religious turn' in continental philosophy,[1] recent accounts of the genealogy of secularism have indicated that it is in fact far from clear that theology ever went away.[2] Similarly, the proliferation of studies on individual continental thinkers and their relationship to apophaticism might prompt one to wonder whether in fact any figure within the continental tradition does *not* have a relationship to apophatic theology.[3] This is, in part, a consequence of the formative influence of Dionysius' work on the Western theological tradition as a whole, but also arises in part out of the historical vicissitudes of Christian apophaticism as the attempt to speak about that which cannot be named. For much of Christian theology, the fundamental theological problem was the question of the divine economy, the relationship of the world to God. Here apophatic theology provided a way of speaking about God as grounding, sustaining and yet also transcending the economy of the created world. But the Enlightenment represented a kind of Copernican revolution, the fundamental re-ordering of the centre of the economic question away from God and towards the individual human subject. Descartes

---

1   For example, Enda McCaffrey's *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); and Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

2   e.g. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), take very different positions on the emergence of secularism yet all agree that 'the secular', at least in its current forms, is enormously overdetermined by Christian theology.

3   To name but a few, recent explorations of apophatic themes in the work of contemporary philosophers include Arthur Bradley's *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004) which deals with Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva; Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), which includes essays on Adorno, Heidegger and Paul Célan; Amy Hollywood's 'Beauvoir, Irigaray and the Mystical' in *Hypatia* 9.4 (1994), 158-185 and 'Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément' in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 145-161, and *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), which contains discussions of mystical and negative theology in Bataille and Lacan (amongst others); and Jeffrey L. Kosky, 'Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology: The Case of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1.3 (2000). http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/kosky.shtml.

sought to make sense of the world beginning from the mind of the individual subject; relying on God not so much to guarantee the source and goal of all things but to bridge the gap between the *cogito* and the rest of the material world.[4] This move developed further with Kant, who effectively transferred to the subject the traditional Christian theological function of God, sustaining all things in their relation to one another.[5] This Kantian shift was in turn taken up by German idealism, in which the central economic questions of earlier Christian theology (how to think the relationship between God and the world? How to maintain that the world is both constituted by and yet distinct from God?) were transposed into the register of the subject: how to think the relationship between the subject and the world? How to maintain that the world is both constituted by and yet distinct from the subject?[6]

Not coincidentally, this move reflected a transformation within Christian theology in general and mystical theology in particular which had begun with the emergence of the university – which meant that the academic discipline of theology became increasingly distinct from the monastic life and the contemplative practices with which it had previously been connected[7] – and continued with the post-Reformation emphasis on individual access to God. Over time, mysticism became increasingly associated with intense emotional experiences, with a privatised form of spirituality and – as is usually the case with things domestic, emotional and material – with women and femininity.[8] It was in part these shifts, though, which paved the way for mysticism's influence on continental thought, as the apophatic mysticism of Meister Eckhart made

---

4   Having established the *cogito* as a certain foundation upon which to build his philosophical system, Descartes turns next to the idea of God to guarantee the existence of material things: 'I judged … that if there were any bodies in the world … their existence must depend on His power' ('Discourse on the Method' in *Key Philosophical Writings* trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997), 94).

5   This is essentially the argument of Christopher J. Insole's 'Kant's Transcendental Idealism, Freedom and the Divine Mind' in *Modern Theology* 27.4 (2011), 608-638, which suggests that this shift occurs specifically as a result of Kant's desire to make space for human freedom.

6   Clayton Crockett makes a similar argument, suggesting that what Radical Orthodoxy misses in its engagement with contemporary philosophy is 'the elaboration of the Kantian sublime into the Freudian unconscious, which locates God at the heart of the subject as a dislocation of power and thinking within the human being' (*Interstices of the Sublime: Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 34).

7   Mark A. McIntosh traces this shift to the 12th century (*Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 7), arguing that it resulted from the rise of scholastic theology and the increasingly intense focus in mystical theology on individual experience (63-65); Denys Turner track the same change in *The Darkness of God* (as summarised in 252-273).

8   See, for example, Jantzen, *Power, Gender*, 326.

its way via Jakob Böhme and Angelus Silesius to the works of Hegel and Heidegger[9] and both the intense visionary mysticism of women such as Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch, and Marguerite Porete, and the works of Dionysius and other founding fathers of the Christian apophatic tradition made their way to France via the influential medievalism of Georges Bataille and the *ressourcement* movement's (re)turn to patristic texts.[10]

All of these strands converge and diverge in complex ways through the history of 20th century continental thought, but arguably their most significant meeting is in the work of Jacques Derrida, which is inescapable in any discussion of Dionysius' contemporary legacy. This chapter explores Derrida's work in relation to apophatic theology, examining the ways in which the Dionysian inheritance is transformed in his writings so as to repeat differently the four themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universalism according to a new configuration of *eros* and ontology. This new configuration in turn becomes a problem for theology. The responses to Dionysius' work are perhaps best captured by the twin poles of Radical Orthodoxy and John Caputo. Although these two appear initially to be dramatically divergent responses to Derrida, both ultimately remain within the same colonising universalism of systematic theology.

3.2 Derrida and Dionysius

In his seminal paper 'Différance', originally presented in 1968, Derrida attempts to give an account of *différance*, a key term within his work. *Différance* is 'neither a word nor a concept';[11] it '*is not*, does not exist, is not a present being … it has neither

9   For example, Thomas Carlson traces the lineage of Dionysius via John Scotus Eriugena and Thomas Aquinas to Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, and from there via Eriugena and Böhme to German Idealism (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 156-157); John Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) consists of a detailed exploration of the relationship between Eckhart and Heidegger in particular; later he argues that Hegel's 'negative dialectics is the corruption [of] the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius (*The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 143). Derrida situates his account of Dionysius' apophatic theology with reference to Silesius, Eckhart and Heidegger in 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', trans. John P. Leavey Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 283-323.
10 For example, Bruce Holsinger's *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) traces the influence of medieval thought – including mystical and apophatic theology – on 20th century French philosophy, arguing in particular that this influence is importantly mediated through Georges Bataille and *nouvelle théologie*; Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy* explores the reception of Christian feminine mysticism by 20th century continental philosophy.
11 'Différance' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

existence nor essence'; it is 'the very opening of the space in which ontotheology –

philosophy – produces its system and its history';[12] it is that which 'maintains our

relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the

alternative of presence and absence.'[13] Derrida acknowledges the parallels between this

account of *différance* and the apophatic tradition, but attempts to distance himself from

negative theology, arguing that although

> the detours, locutions and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will
> resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being
> indistinguishable from negative theology … those aspects of *différance* which
> are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most
> negative of negative theologies which are always concerned with dis-engaging a
> superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of
> presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of
> existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and
> ineffable mode of being.[14]

This disavowal is often taken as paradigmatic of Derrida's relationship to

apophatic theology in general and Dionysius in particular.[15] But to read Derrida in this

way is to miss both the subtleties of his reading of theological texts and the deep

entanglement of his thought with the legacy of Dionysius.

As David Newheiser has established, Derrida engaged with Dionysius' work

from very early on,[16] and Derrida himself acknowledged the persistence of the question

of the relationship of his work to negative theology.[17] His most explicit engagements

---

1982), 3.

12 'Différance', 6.

13 'Différance', 20.

14 'Différance', 6.

15 So, for example, John Caputo says that negative theology 'is always on the track of a
"hyperessentiality"' whereas *différance* 'is less than real' (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida:
Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2; Rubenstein says that for
Derrida, negative theology 'ultimately services an ultra-positive theology' (Dionysius, Derrida, and
the Critique of "Ontotheology"' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, eds. Sarah Coakley and
Charles M. Stang (Oxford and Malden, Ma: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 196); Toby Foshay says that
Derrida 'refuses this "analogy" and "family resemblance" between negative theology and the
discourse of deconstruction' ('Introduction: Denegation and Resentment' in *Derrida and Negative
Theology*, 3); this latter is particularly odd given that it occurs in the book which first published
Derrida's most nuanced and ambiguous account of apophatic theology, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias,
Ways and Voices' (trans. John P. Leavey Jr., 283-323).

16 David Newheiser identifies references to Dionysius in Derrida's work as early as 1952, sixteen years
before he wrote 'Différance' (*Unforeseeable God* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of
Chicago, 2012), 59).

17 In 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' (originally published in 1987) Derrida acknowledges that his
engagement with negative theology involves several stages, and describes himself as 'often' having
promised that 'one day I would have to stop deferring … and at least speak of "negative theology"
itself' (trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 82).

with negative theology occur in 1968's 'Différance', 1987's 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', and 1992's 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices'. While in 'Différance', Derrida primarily seeks to distance himself from negative theology, his later texts are more nuanced and ambiguous. In 'How to Avoid Speaking' he acknowledges that negative theology is not monolithic or univocal, such that 'one is never certain of being able to attribute to anyone a project of negative theology as such'.[18] Both negative theology and *différance* struggle to escape hyperessentiality and the movement of 'reappropriation' the appeal to a 'supreme Being' represents.[19] The comparison with negative theology can 'sometimes give rise to simplistic interpretations'[20] and yet it is, finally, inevitable.[21] Derrida seeks, consequently, to distinguish between negativity as it pertains to the attempt to speak about the Platonic notion of the Good (*agathon*), the hyperessential goal of all being and existence;[22] and as it pertains to the Platonic notion of the *khora*, the unthinkable condition of possibility for being and language, the womb-like not-quite-a-space within which space itself comes into being, the 'place, spacing, receptacle'[23] in which things come to be, which is neither sensible nor intelligible, not Being, non-being or even becoming, a 'something that no dialectic, participatory schema, or analogy would allow one to rearticulate together with any philosopheme whatsoever'.[24] While maintaining that much Christian apophatic theology remains within the logic of the *agathon*,[25] Derrida detects traces of the *khora* in negative theology in general and in Dionysius in particular.[26]

In 'Post-Scriptum', Derrida pursues the theme of the multiplicity of negative theology, presenting his engagement with the question of apophatic theology as a dialogue between unnamed voices, and opening with the following dialogue:

- More than one, it is necessary to be more than one to speak, several voices are necessary for that...

- Yes, and *par excellence*, let us say exemplarily, when it's a matter of God...

- Still more, if this is possible, when one claims to speak about God according to the apophatic [...] This voice multiplies itself, dividing within itself: it

---

18 'How to Avoid Speaking', 74.
19 'How to Avoid Speaking', 79.
20 'How to Avoid Speaking', 82.
21 'How to Avoid Speaking', 85.
22 'How to Avoid Speaking', 101.
23 'How to Avoid Speaking', 104.
24 'How to Avoid Speaking', 105.
25 'How to Avoid Speaking', 102.
26 'How to Avoid Speaking', 119, 130.

says one thing and its contrary.[27]

'Post-Scriptum' explores the affinity between atheism and apophatic theology, suggesting that 'apophatic boldness always consists in going further than is reasonably permitted.'[28] Again, Derrida acknowledges here the proximity of apophatic theology and deconstruction,[29] and suggests that 'All the apophatic mystics can also be read as powerful discourses on death'.[30] Moreover, he takes negative theology to be a manifestation of the contradiction at the heart of any identity – be it of metaphysics, ontotheology, Christian revelation, 'self-identity in general, the one, etc.'[31]

Yet complex and nuanced though Derrida's explicit engagement with negative theology is,[32] it is the theme of economy which is more relevant here. The question of economy and its transgression is arguably the central and constitutive concern of Derrida's work as a whole, recurring both as a theme in its own right and as the underlying structure of key Derridean notions including *différance*, violence, desire, law, gift, hospitality, futurity, otherness, and death.[33] As for Dionysius, the structuring

---

27 'Post-Scriptum', 283.
28 'Post-Scriptum', 284.
29 'Post-Scriptum', 290.
30 'Post-Scriptum', 291.
31 'Post-Scriptum', 311.
32 As Newheiser argues, Derrida's close readings of Dionysius are often more attentive to the particularity of his texts than 'specialist' patristics scholars such as Andrew Louth and Alexander Golitzin ('Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius,' in *Reading the Church Fathers*, eds. Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 29).
33 The theme of economy is everywhere in Derrida's work. To give but a few examples of the theme, it can be found in 'Différance', where Derrida says that *différance* must be thought '*simultaneously …* as the economic detour which … always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by … calculation and, on the other hand, *différance* as … the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy' (19; here Derrida invokes the Freudian notion of the death drive which, as I will argue in chapter 3, is crucial to Žižek's attempt to move beyond Derridean thought); in 'How to Avoid Speaking', Derrida discusses the 'economy' of apophatic theology (81); in 'Post-Scriptum' he describes the desire for hospitality and the passage to the other as the desire to move 'beyond economy itself' (318); in 'Cogito and the History of Madness', philosophy's 'attempt-to-say-the-hyperbole' is to be understood as 'economy' (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 62); in 'Violence and Metaphysics' (also in *Writing and Difference*), he describes language as an 'economy of violence' (117); 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' in *Writing and Difference*, 251-277 consists of a discussion of the theme of economy and its transgression in the work of Hegel and Bataille, and, as I discuss later in chapter 5, both *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)) and *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)) are centrally concerned with the question of economy and its rupture. The theme of economy is similarly ubiquitous in secondary accounts of Dionysius' work: Stephen Shakespeare relates the key Derridean themes of impossibility, absence and the gift to 'the circle of economy', of giving and receiving (*Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 161); John Caputo uses the notion of economy to set Derrida's work up in explicit opposition to Christian theology which appeals to an 'economy of salvation' and an 'economy of sacrifice', in contrast to Derrida's deconstruction which is precisely 'not the business as usual of philosophy,

role of economy gives rise to a certain set of concerns about the origins and ends of human existence, the nature of human freedom, the problems of materiality, hierarchy and universalism. Yet these concerns are crucially re-figured not only – as is generally acknowledged – by Derrida's more ambiguous relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular,[34] but also – as is less commonly recognised – by the refocusing of the theme of economy around the subject and language, that is, around the human rather than God.[35] Even Derrida himself glosses over the importance of this subtle yet fundamental change in the focus of the economic problem for his reading of apophatic theology.[36] While he acknowledges the importance of Platonism and Neoplatonism to the Christian apophatic tradition,[37] and positions his work in relationship to the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology,[38] his attempt to disrupt ontotheology by driving a wedge between language and being reads apophatic theology

---

providing foundations and making things safe' (*Prayers and Tears*, 44, 48); elsewhere he argues that for Derrida the gift entails 'a kind of never-ending struggle against economy, eventuating in certain momentary *interruptions* of economy' ('Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion' in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon eds., *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 206); Carlson says that 'for Derrida … the closed figure of the circle (especially as in the circular Being of Hegelian consciousness and language) returns over and again to establish an "economy" that would threaten to annul the gift as gift' (*Indiscretion*, 14); Mark C. Taylor discusses Derrida's account of the law as an 'economy of exchange' interrupted by '"absolute altarity"' (*Nots* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 86-87), and Hugh Rayment-Pickard closes his account of Derrida's theology with the claim that the key figure in Derrida's attempts to represent the impossible is the chiasmus, χ, which is to be understood specifically as 'the "other" of the circle' which is the figure of the completed economy (*Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 159, 136).

34 Although commentators on Dionysius are occasionally in disagreement over the extent to which his work conforms to 'orthodox' Christianity (e.g. Sarah Coakley says that 'there are some reasons for suspecting that our Greek *textus receptus* had had to be massaged towards "orthodox" acceptability … an "acceptability" in any case right at the edge of what might have been expected as doctrinally normative' ('Introduction: Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 5)), not even those critical accounts of Derrida which take his work to be fundamentally compatible with Christian theology take Derrida himself to be a Christian (e.g. Kevin Hart seeks to draw on Derrida's work in order to think a 'non-metaphysical theology' but acknowledges that 'in developing this theistic reading I am not arguing that it is the one true reading of Derrida's text' (*The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 75, 64); Newheiser, whilst arguing for a basic compatibility between the works of Dionysius and Derrida acknowledges that while Derrida 'acknowledges a sort of fidelity to a Jewish tradition (among others), his evident reluctance to belong to a particular faith inflects his discourse with a hesitation that Dionysius does not share' (*Unforeseeable God*, 76), and others – most notably Martin Hägglund, hold Derrida's work to be fundamentally incompatible with Christianity (This is the central argument of Hägglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)).

35 As will become increasingly clear over the course of this thesis, particularly in my discussion of Derrida and economy in chapter 5.

36 Though he does recognise that the focus on language represents a significant transformation of thought more generally: see, for example, his discussion of structuralism in 'Force and Signification' (in *Writing and Difference*, 3-30), in which he describes 'the structuralist invasion' as 'a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us' (3).

37 'How to Avoid Speaking', 100.

38 e.g. 'How to Avoid Speaking', 122-130.

in relation to this specific task. Throughout his engagement with negative theology he persistently returns to the theme of language: the question of how to avoid speaking always comes too late because language 'has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God'.[39] Apophatic discourse 'does not seem separable from a certain boldness of language, from a poetic or metaphoric tongue';[40] 'negative theology … is a language'.[41] Thus Derrida misses the extent to which, for earlier theology, the gap is located elsewhere: not between words and objects but between the created world and God. For earlier theological thought it is less that signifier and signified are equated than that the whole of the created world is a sign imperfectly gesturing towards God. This is not to say that Derrida is wrong to pick at the association of signs and presence, or even that his reading of negative theology is invalid, but that the questions he asks are structurally different questions than those asked by Dionysius, for whom it is not just language, the individual subject, or even the community which begins to come apart in the encounter with that which escapes or interrupts economy, but being itself, materiality, the whole of the created world.[42]

3.2.1 Freedom

The result of this shift is that the questions which arise from the classical economy of Neoplatonic Christian theology are reconfigured and transformed in complex ways. The question of human freedom, which is in some ways the unspoken converse of Dionysius' account of divine freedom, is at the forefront of Derrida's work, especially as his later thought shifts towards more explicitly ethical and political concerns.[43] For Derrida the crucial question is, as for Dionysius, one of differentiation. But where Dionysius is concerned with the question of how God creates the many from

---

39 'How to Avoid Speaking', 99.
40 'Post-Scriptum', 284.
41 'Post-Scriptum', 294.
42 There are, as a result, no visible qualms in Dionysius' work about the relationship between words and the things named by them, or even about the ability of human hierarchical structures to reflect the ordering of being itself (see above, especially the discussion in 2.2.4 about Dionysius' understanding of hierarchy); rather, it is the ability of *the entirety of the created world* to represent or embody God which is thrown into question.
43 While Derrida's early work tends to focus on close readings of texts and reflections on the nature of language and textuality, focusing on themes such as *différance,* his later work (including texts such as *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)) deals increasingly with themes such as hospitality and justice**.**

the One, Derrida's fundamental dilemma is, rather, how can human beings, faced with infinite responsibility towards the overwhelming multiplicity of the world, commit themselves to *one* action?[44] Where for Dionysius the choice is essentially between pursuing a single good and irrationally and inexplicably rejecting it, for Derrida human finitude means that every ethical action is a decision between an almost infinite multiplicity of possibilities. For Dionysius, problematically, it is only in sin that human beings are creative. For Derrida every action, every choice is an act of division that brings a new configuration of the world into being, yet which is also inextricably bound up with death, with the rejection of other possibilities.

3.2.2 Materiality

Yet although this decision is, for Derrida, both necessary and creative, there remain in his work traces of the Platonic longing for the transcendence of the material world and its limitations. Derrida persistently seeks to hold onto both particularity *and* abstraction: 'the determinate and undecidability necessarily co-exist' such that Derrida's work 'opens the prospect of inhabiting particular philosophical, political and religious traditions while acknowledging that they are disrupted from within.'[45] Furthermore, alongside this sense of being caught impossibly between the particular and the abstract in Derrida's work is a sense that it is not only the other, the universal and the perfect which remain perpetually out of reach but the body too which tends to slip away: we 'appear to be enclosed' in the circle of language which arises precisely because when 'we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present … we go through the detour of the sign.'[46]

3.2.3 Hierarchy

Toby Foshay positions Derrida's account of negative theology precisely in opposition to Dionysius' world, to 'a classical age in which the energy of synthesis and perception of unity was so necessary', which held 'a statically hierarchical vision of the world', positioning him instead in a context in which 'our autonomy is most

---

44   See below, chapter 6, for more detailed discussion of this crucial Derridean question.
45   Newheiser, *Undecidable God*, 51; cf also Shakespeare's discussion of the interplay of particularity and abstraction in Derrida's account of messianism (*Derrida*, 155-156).
46   'Différance', 12, 9.

characteristically expressed in its capacity to exceed all centrally defined and anticipatable limits and boundaries.'[47] And yet the account which Derrida himself gives of Dionysius undermines this sharp delimitation of the two thinkers. 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy' supports Foshay's account to some extent, discussing Kant's attack on the mystagogy of earlier philosophy which positions the philosopher as an 'initiatory priest', in possession of secret knowledge which sets him apart from 'the crowd' of ordinary people.[48] This mystagogy is an 'aristocratic esotericism' which derives ultimately from Plato and those aspects of his work which deal with 'mystic illumination' and 'theophanic vision'.[49] But Kant himself desires a form of illumination, an enlightenment which 'undertakes to demystify the lordly tone', which desires 'critique and truth' and yet 'keeps within itself some apocalyptic desire … in order to demystify it.'[50] The language of apocalypse is the language of veiling and unveiling, concealing and revealing, and so 'today', Derrida argues, 'each of us is the mystagogue *and* the *Aufklärer* [enlightener] of an other.'[51]

Derrida picks up this theme of veiling and unveiling specifically in relation to Dionysius in 'How to Avoid Speaking', acknowledging a parallel between the accusations of elitism and esotericism levelled at deconstruction and Dionysius' negative theology.[52] Like Agamben and Smith, Derrida identifies a political function to Dionysius' apophaticism: 'the signs and figures of the sacred discourse … are invented as "shields" against the many … the allegorical veil becomes a political shield, the solid barrier of a social division'. Yet Derrida also notes that this esoteric hierarchicalism is in tension with another mode of theological speech which is 'demonstrative, capable of being shown.' These two modes are inseparable: 'a secret must and must not allow itself to be divulged'.[53] But where for Dionysius the desire to conceal and the desire to reveal can seem to be in direct opposition to one another, for Derrida the two are mutually and explicitly implicated in one another, both characteristic and constitutive of the human relation to language, of finitude. Here again Derrida's account is shaped by his focus not on the relationship of God to the world, but on the relationship of the individual to the

---

47 'Introduction', 1.
48 In *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, trans. John P. Jr. Leavey (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 33.
49 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', 39-40.
50 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', 51.
51 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', 45.
52 'How to Avoid Speaking', 88-89.
53 'How to Avoid Speaking', 93, 94.

world. While God might be thought as originating and guaranteeing hierarchy, the perspective of human finitude offers no such guarantees: to be finite, to speak, is always to find that language 'has started without us, in us and before us.'[54]

3.2.4 Universalism

Where Dionysius takes God as the source and goal of everything that is, Derrida starts from the particularity of human existence. Yet despite this shift of perspective, Derrida's understanding of universality remains remarkably similar to Dionysius'. For Dionysius and his theological descendants it is only particularity which begins to make possible speech about God and yet particularity is a limit to be transcended, a starting point to be surpassed. Similarly, in Derrida's work the recognition of the particularity of human thought and existence coincides with a desire to access a universality which renders particularity not only unnecessary but undesirable. David Newheiser reads Derrida's work in terms of an 'eschatological affirmation' of the particularity of religious traditions, acknowledging the necessary co-constitution of determinacy and indeterminacy, the particular and the universal and so making space for a positive valuation of particular religious identities, of 'the possibility of affirmation – in hope – that holds itself open to the beyond by practicing a rigorous negativity'.[55] This is in a sense true: the tension between particular and the universal, immanence and transcendence is characteristic of Derrida's work throughout. And yet what it misses is that the inescapability of particularity is for Derrida something to be regretted, a limit against which human desire must strain. The longing which Derrida persistently expresses is for the escape from the particular.

In 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone',[56] Derrida seeks to distinguish the 'messianic' he advocates from the religiously determined 'messianism' he seeks to escape, acknowledging the particular history of the term only as a regrettable necessity, something he is 'obliged' to do.[57] As in 'How to Avoid Speaking', he sets up the notion of the *khora* in opposition to the Christian *via negativa* and its Platonic and Plotinian inheritance not because of its desire to escape

---

54 'How to avoid Speaking', 99.
55 *Unforeseeable God*, 50-53.
56 Trans. Samuel Weber, in eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).
57 'Faith and Knowledge', 18.

particularity but precisely because of the way in which its cultural and historical origins mean that 'its "idiom" is not universalisable'.[58] Christianity fails because it is not universal enough, and Derrida hopes, instead, in the possibility of 'a universalisable culture of singularities, a culture in which the abstract possibility of the impossible translation could nevertheless be announced.'[59] Although Derrida's different perspective on the economy of immanence and transcendence gives rise to a much less confident affirmation of that which constitutes and makes possible human existence, he, as much as Dionysius, affirms a desire – albeit an impossible one – to escape the particular and material for that which is universal, ahistorical and immaterial.

3.2.5 Ontology and desire

Again, as for Dionysius, all of these complex tensions in Derrida's work come together around the theme of desire. Yet where for Dionysius desire is that which makes it possible to hold together unity and distinction, freedom and necessity in God, in Derrida's work desire is thought only in relation to the human. Here it is that which breaks into economy, holding it open to the incoming of an unnamed, unknown otherness, which not only remains unsatisfied but must renounce the quest for satisfaction: 'to go towards the absolute other, isn't that the extreme tension of a desire that tries thereby to renounce its own proper movement, its own movement of appropriation?'[60] Richard Kearney describes this account of desire as eschatological rather than ontotheological: where ontotheological desire seeks 'to be and to know absolutely', eschatological desire is 'for something that eye has never seen nor ear heard.'[61] Again, this account of desire is distinct from Dionysius' primarily because of the way in which the economic question is framed, starting from the human rather than the One God. The shift from desire as the longing for economy's completion to the yearning for its rupture seems inevitable once philosophy renounces the claim to speak from the divine perspective and begins instead from the human. Yet the complex ways in which this shift interacts with theological themes has prompted a range of theological

---

58 'Faith and Knowledge', 19.
59 'Faith and Knowledge', 18.
60 'Post-Scriptum', 285. Cf also *Given Time*, where Derrida speaks of the 'desire to interrupt the circulation of the circle', the desire to break open economy (8), and Shakespeare, *Derrida*, which argues that for Derrida 'desire keeps the self open, wounded, exposed to the other, and God is known in and through this wound, through the vulnerability of the other's face' (143).
61 'Desire of God' in *God, the Gift*, 11, 113.

responses to Derrida's work; the most significant of which are, first, those of the thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy and, second, the work of John Caputo.

3.3 Dionysius, Derrida and Radical Orthodoxy

Radical Orthodoxy is not entirely monolithic, although it has become more conservative and less diverse over time as some of the figures associated with the movement earlier on have moved away and newer thinkers who have emerged have adhered to a much narrower sense of the movement's central project. The three figures within Radical Orthodoxy who have engaged in the most extensive discussion of Derrida's work also happen to be those who might be considered the movement's founding figures – John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward.[62] Of these three, however, Ward is something of an outlier. His early book *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*[63] lacks many of the distinctive characteristics of Radical Orthodoxy (which I describe below) – both in terms of the positive affirmations of particular theological positions and the strong critique of continental philosophy which tends to arise from these affirmations. His later *Cities of God*[64] marks a move towards more typical Radically Orthodox arguments but simultaneously a move away from detailed engagement with Derrida;[65] and Ward has subsequently begun to distance himself from Radical Orthodoxy. My argument, then, will focus primarily on the works of John Milbank (particularly *Theology and Social Theory*, which both appeals to Dionysius as the originator of the theological ontology which Milbank advocates and engages critically with Derrida), and Catherine Pickstock (particularly *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, the bulk of whose critical engagement with

---

62   These three were the editors of the Radical Orthodox book series which began with John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), and which represents the birth of Radical Orthodoxy as a movement or identity.
63   Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
64   London: Routledge, 2000.
65   Although, as Daniel Miller argues, this move away from Derrida is not simply a change of focus but a decisive *rejection* of those aspects of Derrida's work which Ward had previously sought to make use of in favour of the Radical Orthodoxy affirmation of the analogy of Being ('A Theo-Politics of the (Im)proper: Jacques Derrida vis-à-vis Graham Ward' in *Political Theology* 12.1 (2011), 93-4). *Cities of God* opens with an attempt to position Ward's 'analogical world-view' precisely in opposition to notions such as 'Derrida's principle of iteration' (ix). Even here, however, Ward diverges from Pickstock and Milbank in key ways including, for example, a marked rhetorical humility (*Cities of God* is, he says, '*an* attempt' [italics mine] to answer certain theological questions (ix, 1), the claim that it is possible 'to learn' even from secular thinkers (3), the acknowledgement that, whilst his work draws on theological tradition it is, nonetheless, 'new' (9) and, perhaps most importantly, the recognition that 'there is no pure theological discourse' (13).

contemporary philosophy consists of an attack on Derrida's reading of Plato).[66]

Where Dionysius' radically apophatic undermining of the certainty of all human knowledge of God and his Christian assertion of the value of particularity is often in tension with the Neoplatonic metaphysics which so deeply shapes his work, Radical Orthodoxy asserts that a Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation is not only compatible with Christianity but is in fact the only possible form which Christian metaphysics can take.[67] As a result, it reproduces many of the key tensions which mark Dionysius' work, and sets up a strong opposition between the 'peaceful ontology' of Christian theology and the contemporary continental interest in difference, otherness and uncertainty such that not only is the proximity between Derrida's work and the Christian apophatic tradition downplayed[68] but the complexity and the tensions which mark Dionysius' work are overlooked in order to articulate a curiously idealised version of Christian orthodoxy along with a strong claim to possess and represent that orthodoxy. This results in an account of the relationship between theology and philosophy which is both internally contradictory and politically problematic, functioning according to a colonising logic of domination and mastery.

---

66 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

67 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward claim that, 'the central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is "participation" as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity' ('Introduction. Suspending the material: the turn of radical orthodoxy' in eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, *Radical* Orthodoxy, 3); 'Radical Orthodoxy: Twenty-four Theses', a list of the key principles of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, states that 'Radical Orthodoxy believes that theology alone gives a true account of the real: the question of being must therefore be handled in terms of analogy and participation' and asserts that 'the special relationship of Platonism to Christianity is to be affirmed' (Thesis 3, 12, http://elizaphanian.blogspot.co.uk/2007/07/radical-orthodoxy-official-twenty-four.html). These theses were produced anonymously by members of the Radical Orthodoxy group and, whilst never officially published, have been informally acknowledged by several figures associated with the movement, and are cited as authoritative in James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 167; elsewhere Milbank states that the 'metaphysical' notions of 'transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology … and the absolute reality of "the Good" in roughly the Platonic sense … remain primary for a Christian theological ontology' (*Theology and Social Theory*, 297).

68 For example, Catherine Pickstock critiques Derrida's account of Plato (in *After Writing*, 3-46) and Milbank critiques Derrida's account of the gift (in both 'Forgiveness and Incarnation' in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 92-128 and 'The Transcendentality of the Gift: A Summary' in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 352-363), but neither addresses his close and sensitive reading of Dionysius, even though Milbank repeatedly invokes Dionysius as the originator of the Christian metaphysics which Radical Orthodoxy advocates; Graham Ward's early and nuanced reading of the relationship between Derrida's thought and the theology of Karl Barth (in *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)) is replaced (as Miller's 'Theo-Poetics of the (Im)proper' argues) by a much clearer rejection of Derrida's work in the later and more Radically Orthodox introduction (written with John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock), to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*.

The central focus of Radical Orthodoxy is on the claim that 'secular modernity' is not in fact secular but the result of a corruption of theological ideas resulting in a philosophy and a politics that is essentially nihilistic; and that the theological response to this contemporary nihilism must be a return to and a reassertion of a metaphysics of participation. Where Dionysius' work is marked by a radical gap between God and the world such that a strong account of *eros* is necessary to bridge it, the metaphysics of Radical Orthodoxy is troubled by no such break, such that one of its primary distinguishing tropes is the affirmation of an 'ontology of peace' against the 'violent' ontology of rupture which it describes in the work of 'secular' and 'postmodern' thinkers.[69]

3.3.1 Freedom

In 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', Milbank acknowledges the way in which the problem of human sin parallels the problem of creation.[70] Yet this parallel goes largely unexplored both in this article and elsewhere within his work and persists, instead, as an unacknowledged tension. For Milbank, the church 'has no *telos* properly speaking but continuously *is* the differential sequence which has the goal beyond goal of generating new relationships'.[71] This is to say that there is a sense in which the Christian community exceeds the economy of cause and effect, exodus and return. What is visible in history is 'not just arbitrary transitions, but constant contingent shifts either towards or away from what is projected as the true human *telos*, a true concrete representation of the analogical blending of difference';[72] that is, that Christian community has a single goal contained within the economy of creation and return. The problem of creation is softened, according to Milbank, by the Dionysian account of God as both *one* and *three*, that is, as already containing differentiation.[73] Thus creation can be thought by Milbank

---

69 This is, in particular, the overarching argument of Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, the founding text of Radical Orthodoxy: see, for example, xvi, xxii, 279, 302, 411, 440.

70 He argues that 'theology considers what are, to us, three absolute impossibilities. First of all, there is the impossibility that anything should exist outside God, who is replete Being … then … that creatures enjoying to their appropriate degree the absolute … might discover an illusory "of themselves" wherewith to reject the absolute in the name of something lesser [and finally] the third impossibility of redemption for a fault which, since it cuts finite being off from (infinite) reality would appear to be without redress' ('Forgiveness and Incarnation', in *Questioning God*, 110).

71 *Theology and Social Theory*, 409.

72 *Theology and Social Theory*, 279.

73 'As Dionysius the Areopagite realized, God is superabundant Being, and not a Plotinian unity beyond Being and difference, he is also nevertheless, as Dionysius also saw, a power within Being which is more than Being, an internally creative power' (*Theology and Social Theory*, 431). This account of

not as a rupture but as peaceful, as the 'free unlimited exchange of charity',[74] and by Pickstock as the '*uninterrupted* flow and exchange of gift'.[75] The divine economy is 'excessive' and 'ecstatic', yet somehow this excess remains solidly economic.[76] By contrast, Milbank persistently associates arbitrariness with violence,[77] and endorses the traditional Christian account of evil as 'the (impossible) refusal of cause.'[78] The failure to fully explore the structural homology between the Christian account of creation *ex nihilo* and the notion of evil as privation, as essentially inexplicable, is particularly apparent in the tendency of Radically Orthodox thinkers to describe those who diverge from their account of Christianity as 'nihilists' – both the connection and Radical Orthodoxy's failure to notice it are particularly evident in Milbank's claim that 'the nihilistic vision concludes … that, in the end, there is an incomprehensible springing of all from nothing'.[79]

3.3.2 Materiality

One of the central claims of Radical Orthodoxy is that 'only' their Christian-Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation makes it possible to value difference, particularity and materiality. Christianity, Milbank argues, 'makes difference ontologically ultimate and worthy of the highest valuation' such that 'it could be adequately repeated in very diverse cultural settings.'[80] For Pickstock, Christianity uniquely treats 'the spirit and the body together'.[81] Both Milbank and Pickstock give an account of Christianity as valuing non-identical repetition over recollection, and thus opening up the space for diversity.[82] Radical Orthodoxy, then, claims to give an account of the world which promotes 'creative freedom'[83] and values 'time, matter, artistic

---

Dionysius is odd, as while it is true that Dionysius places Threeness alongside Oneness at the top of the hierarchy of names, he is also very clear that God 'falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being' (*Mystical Theology*, 141), and makes no attempt to relate the multiplicity of God to the problem of creativity in order to overcome the problem of divine differentiation.

74 Milbank, 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 105.
75 Pickstock, *After Writing*, 238.
76 Pickstock, *After Writing*, 229.
77 Throughout Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* in particular, the two terms are persistently associated – see, for example, pages 6, 86, 88, 196, 301, 317.
78 Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17.
79 *Theology and Social Theory*, xvi.
80 *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.
81 *After Writing*, 273.
82 See, for example, *After Writing,* 18, 160; *Theology and Social Theory*, 309, 312.
83 *Theology and Social Theory*, 367.

making and ritual'.[84] It is, in theory, 'a more incarnate, more participatory, more aesthetic, more erotic, more socialised … Christianity' which 'refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity'.[85]

Yet not only does this account crucially gloss over the tendency of the metaphysics of participation to push Christian theology away from a valuation of the material,[86] it is also indicative of an unresolved tension within the work of Radically Orthodox thinkers themselves. For example, Milbank claims to value diversity. He speaks approvingly of Nicholas of Cusa's claim that 'human art is now a mode of creation and that the finite is a scene of real originality'[87] and of Augustine's notion that 'desire … exceeds virtue in the direction of the more individual and particular' precisely because the human will 'is linked not just to discrimination of right from wrong … but also with idiosyncratic, yet equally valid, moral and aesthetic preferences'.[88] Yet he persistently portrays the aesthetic as itself a matter of moral judgement. Secularism 'cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of "literary taste" – that Christianity offers a much better story';[89] our 'judgement of the "truth of events", according to Augustine in the *Confessions*, is essentially an aesthetic matter.'[90] Similarly, Catherine Pickstock makes several claims about the necessity of particularity and enculturation for Christian liturgical practice. 'Any drift towards the static centre', she argues, 'must automatically involve a movement away from liturgy embedded within an ecstatic temporality, and as reciprocally and substantially situated within the Church'. When this happened, historically, it 'gave rise to an impoverishment of liturgical temporality.'[91] And yet *After Writing* consistently appeals to very particular forms of Christianity as absolutely necessary: the book's central argument is that the

---

84 *Theology and Social Theory*, xix.
85 Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 'Introduction', 3.
86 See, for example, my article 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 540-551, which argues that John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock's reading of Thomistic theology (in their *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001)) is able to depict it as fundamentally valuing the material world only by ignoring the deep tensions in Thomas' work (which in turn are very clearly in continuity with the tensions in Dionysius' work) between the desire to value the material world and the sense that progress towards God must entail progress *away from* materiality.
87 *Theology and Social Theory*, xxviii.
88 *Being Reconciled*, 11.
89 *Theology and Social Theory*, 331.
90 *Theology and Social Theory*, 434. It seems reasonable here to suggest that, as the two very different uses of Augustine indicate, this internally contradictory account of aesthetics is itself in profound continuity with the consistently troubled attitude of Christian theology to matters of materiality and particularity.
91 *After Writing*, 165-166.

Roman Rite uniquely perfects the Christian grounding of meaning and necessity in the Eucharistic liturgy (it is arguably the Roman Rite which represents 'the consummation of philosophy' to which the book's title refers).[92] Transubstantiation – whose theological formulation simply *did not exist* for the first ten centuries of Christianity is 'the Condition of Possibility for All Meaning'.[93] Both Milbank and Pickstock's work is rhetorically marked by assertions that 'only' their particular account of theology will suffice.[94] Though they fail to acknowledge the complexity and the tensions of the Christian tradition which they assert as the solution to the dead-end represented by the thought of Derrida and his contemporaries, the tensions between the particular and the universal, the material and the ideal, which Dionysius bequeaths to Christian tradition resurface despite the claim that only a Christian-Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation can offer a peaceful ontology without the antagonisms of secular thought.

3.3.3 Hierarchy

As part of its appeal to the metaphysics of participation, Radical Orthodoxy explicitly endorses a Dionysian notion of hierarchy,[95] yet makes no attempt to grapple with those elements of Dionysius' account of hierarchy which have troubled others amongst his readers. Milbank's reading of Dionysius' notion of hierarchy corresponds particularly closely to Louth's account of Dionysius, in which hierarchy functions primarily to assert the necessity of human community:[96] the goal of 'hierarchic initiation is not contemplation of God but a "co-working" with God … when one starts

92 Although Pickstock does attempt to soften this elevation of the Roman Rite, describing it, for example, as 'a [rather than "the"] model for a genuine consummation of language and subjectivity' (169), it clearly functions for her as a moment of perfection following whose loss theology must seek to 'restore' the 'real language and action' which it embodied (171). And yet, as Holsinger points out, the liturgical text on which Pickstock bases her arguments is in fact a *post*-Tridentine Rite, 'a counter-Reformation liturgy that was recorded … precisely in violent and conservative reaction to the liturgical innovations of sixteenth-century Protestantism' (*Premodern Condition*, 128).

93 *After Writing*, 261.

94 See, for example, *After Writing*, xv, 43, 48, 112, 116, 118; *Theology and Social Theory*, xi, xvi, 6, 28, 324, 326. Holsinger describes this tendency of Pickstock's as an 'utter lack of rhetorical modesty' (*Premodern Condition*, 127).

95 See, for example, John Montag SJ, 'Revelation: The false legacy of Suárez' in *Radical Orthodoxy*, 44-50, which describes how Thomas Aquinas 'conforms his own understanding to the neo-Platonic hierarchical account of pseudo-Dionysius' and sets up Thomas' 'hierarchical scheme of revelation' in counterposition to Suárez' 'false legacy'; Thesis 15, which states that 'if one denies all hierarchy, all that remains is the hierarchy of money and brute force' ('Twenty-four theses'); and Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* which specifically advocates Dionysius' account of 'hierarchic initiation' as implying a sociality inherent to the human pursuit of God which is missing in Plato (408).

96 Although Milbank, unlike Louth, makes no reference to the numerous scholarly debates about the nature and function of hierarchy in Dionysius' work.

oneself to transmit the power of divine charity and the light of divine knowledge to those initiates within the churches who have not yet risen so far in the scale.'[97] Hierarchy is 'educative' rather than 'fixed', and 'every "position" it establishes is of equal importance, and of equal necessity to all the other positions, even if there remain inequalities of ability and necessary inequalities of function.'[98] It is 'a vertical sequence up which each individual can contemplatively and actively rise. At its summit lies not a static completion, but a full participation in the suspension downwards of hierarchies (the aiding of others by charity) and a greater participation in the suspension forwards of the thearchy, God's infinite self-realisation.'[99]

Yet the more troubling aspects of Dionysius' account of hierarchy, and of actually-existing ecclesiastical hierarchies are simply glossed over. Pickstock contrasts the ecclesial community with 'the pagan *polis*, in which only a full citizen could offer a liturgy … In Christian liturgical space, there are no prior determining criteria for both the subject and the community'.[100] But she ignores the question of the ordination of women, whose exclusion from the priesthood might be compatible with a hierarchy in which all are different but equal, yet not with a hierarchy which all may ascend. Similarly, Milbank argues that 'Augustine's Christian ontology … stands directly opposed' to any notion of a state in which the sovereign and the individual exist in 'direct relationship', ignoring Dionysius' assertion of the direct relationship between each individual and God and so excising the central element of Dionysius' thought which offers the possibility for the subversion and transformation of unjust rule.[101] There is, furthermore, an apparent contradiction between Milbank's ontology of peace, which gives an account of relationality as 'mutual and unending gift-exchange',[102] and his account of the necessary mastery of theology over other discourses which positions relationality as, essentially, a struggle for dominance: 'If theology no longer seeks to

---

97 *Theology and Social Theory*, 408.
98 *Theology and Social Theory*, 422. This reasoning is, of course, exactly that of Christian 'complementarians' who assert that men and women are 'equal but different'; this similarity is, I would argue, symptomatic of Radical Orthodoxy's persistent evasion of the way in which difference and hierarchy in both church and society tend not to instantiate the perpetual giving and receiving of gift but to create and perpetuate injustice and oppression.
99 *Theology and Social Theory*, 436.
100 *After Writing*, 234.
101 *Theology and Social Theory*, 410. As Anthony Paul Smith argues, this means that Milbank's account of hierarchy is 'so intimately connected with the notion of Good ... that there is no recognizable difference between the hierarchy, which is the organization of power, and the Good itself' ('The Judgment of God and the Immeasurable: Political Theology and Organizations of Power' in *Political Theology* 12.1 (2011), 76).
102 *Being Reconciled*, 154.

position, qualify or criticise other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology'.[103]

The Christian metaphysics of participation is problematic at the best of times for those who are concerned about the actual and potential abuse of hierarchical authority. But the problems of Dionysius' notion of hierarchy are exacerbated in Radical Orthodoxy, which asserts the necessity and value of hierarchy without in any way tempering this claim with an apophatic insistence on the inadequacy of all human structures to God.[104]

3.3.4 Universalism

One of the most admirable features of Radical Orthodoxy is the consistency with which it can be found at the forefront of theological engagement with contemporary continental philosophy. And yet this engagement is driven less by curiosity or a desire to learn from theology's others than by a kind of colonising desire to explore new worlds of thought simply in order to make them bow the knee to theology, whose imperial rule as the 'queen of the sciences' Radical Orthodoxy seeks to reinstate.[105] Like the theorists of British Empire who set out to civilise the savages, Radical Orthodoxy positions itself as the (white) saviour of the world.[106] John Milbank claims that 'only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery.'[107] Catherine Pickstock asserts, with breath-taking confidence, that her work 'completes and surpasses philosophy'.[108] Radical Orthodoxy simply refuses to contemplate the possibility that secular philosophy has anything to offer it: it 'defers to no experts and engages in no "dialogues", because it

---

103 *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.
104 Thesis 8, for example, claims that 'in Dionysius the *via negativa* is actually the affirmation of ungraspable plenitude', rather than a negativity which might in any way challenge or undermine the absolute certainty of theology ('Twenty-four theses').
105 *Theology and Social Theory*, 382.
106 Milbank speaks of 'a single *Western* history of "ethics"' not, apparently, to acknowledge the existence of other traditions or the particularity of his perspective, but simply to claim Greek philosophical thought unquestionably as a resource for Christianity – and not, it is tempting to infer, for Islam (*Theology and Social Theory*, 326).
107 *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.
108 *After Writing*, xii. Bruce Holsinger describes *After Writing* as 'the most … universalising appropriation of medieval theology among the Radically Orthodox' (*Premodern Condition*, 121).

does not recognise other valid points of view outside the theological.'[109] As Stephen Shakespeare argues, 'Radical Orthodoxy's God is an overflowing fullness …. [T]here is no secular space'.[110]

Yet again, as for Dionysius, it is clear that Radical Orthodoxy is, nonetheless, deeply shaped by its encounter with 'secular' thought. That which is most original, most creative and most fertile in its thought arises precisely out of its encounter with the thinkers it deems nihilistic, which (on its account of evil-as-privation) differ from Christian theology only insofar as they fail, fall short, fall away from existence and tend towards nothingness. If only negatively, 'our modern habits of thought and speech' make it impossible for theology simply to '"return" to an earlier form' but instead demand that 'we again begin to live, to speak'.[111]

3.3.5 Ontology and desire

Where Western philosophy from Descartes onwards increasingly shifts the economic question away from the relationship of God to the world and towards the relationship of the individual to the world, Radical Orthodoxy proposes, essentially, a return to the classical Christian construction of the problem of economy. But in setting up this classical Christian economy in direct opposition to Derrida and his contemporaries, Radical Orthodoxy misses the extent to which Derrida's work functions not as a straightforward critique of classical Christian theology but as a *reorientation*, a refocusing of the questions of Christian theology around the individual rather than God. Derrida's emphasis on the radical uncertainty of human knowledge is not (contra Radical Orthodoxy) totally at odds with the Christian tradition but draws out apophatic elements which characterise the Christian tradition insofar as it attempts to speak of the human relationship to God rather than the divine relationship to the world. Derrida's work radicalises this apophaticism by broadening the scope of transcendence to include not simply the divine transcendence of the created world, but also the transcendence of the world more generally in relation both to the human individual and to human language and culture. By contrast, for all of Radical Orthodoxy's claims of the centrality of transcendence to their Christian ontology of peace, what is perhaps most notable

---

109 Thesis 4, 'Twenty-four theses'.
110 *Derrida and Theology*, 186.
111 *After Writing*, 176.

about their account of their own thought is precisely the absence of any sense in which it is transcended by the divine. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein describes it, this is essentially *'the demand for transcendence, coupled with the claim to know what that transcendence looks like.* This is a problem because, to risk a tautology, transcendence is not transcendence if it doesn't transcend—if it just confirms our vision of the way the world really is'.[112] Moreover, it is a problem because it effectively erases the ontological gap between God and the world, ignoring the problems of both creation and sin which are, ultimately, questions of desire. God, for Radical Orthodoxy, is essentially immanent, completely graspable by theology. It is symptomatic, therefore, of deeper problems within this account of theology that the question of the proximity of Derrida's work to Dionysius' apophatic theology is so systematically evaded.

3.4 Dionysius, Derrida and John Caputo

While the thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy gather around a movement whose characteristic features and central claims can be fairly straightforwardly delineated, it is perhaps unsurprising that those theologians who see Derrida's work as posing an important challenge to theology lack any coherent shared identity. Numerous works have been written seeking to draw on Dionysius' reading of negative theology as a positive resource for Christianity;[113] probably the most significant of these thinkers is John D. Caputo, on whose work this section will focus.

Caputo's early work, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*,[114] examines the relationship between the work of Martin Heidegger and the Christian mystical tradition, but his later work focuses primarily on the attempt to bring Derridean deconstruction into conversation with Christian theological concepts of God. He suggests that Derrida's 'religion without religion' avoids the dangers of religious fundamentalism by refusing to articulate any definite content for the idea of God.[115] Caputo argues for a 'generalised apophatics' which adds to negative theology a negative anthropology, negative ethics and negative politics, where all that can be said of the anthropology, ethics and politics to come is that they will transgress and unsettle all

---

112 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Secularity and the Liberal Arts: Thinking Otherwise," *The Immanent Frame*, 2010. http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/12/03/thinking-otherwise.
113 E.g. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Nots*.
114 New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.
115 Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 151.

existing boundaries and concepts.[116] Later, he moves away from this emphasis on the apophatic to argue that 'Derrida's religion is more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists … moved more by prophetico-ethico-political aspiration than by aspiring to be one with the One.'[117] The prophetic is better than the apophatic, he argues, because it 'saves negative theology from closure' which 'spells exclusion, exclusiveness; closure spills blood'.[118] This move on Caputo's part can be read as an affirmation of the economic shift from the divine to the human perspective – because the individual can never access the divine perspective on the world, the crucial thing is to emphasise the limits of human knowledge and to refuse ontology and metaphysics, which presume such a perspective.

At the heart of Caputo's work is a worry about what happens ethically and politically when theological commitments are asserted too strongly and uncritically. On his account of a deconstructive Christianity, he says, 'you would neither fly aircraft into the side of tall buildings nor would you have launched this unjust war in Iraq; you would live in fear and trembling about the things that you believe and keep your fingers crossed that your beliefs will not harm anyone.'[119] Yet the particular language of Christianity houses something which is less particular and contingent. Caputo distinguishes between the particular constructions of Christian theology and the event which is located *within* these constructions: 'The name is the historically inherited form of life, what is handed down to us by the tradition. Then there is what is astir within this name, its inner energy or life, what I am calling the *event* within it.'[120] As Žižek argues, the notion of 'God' is 'deprived of any positive onto-teleological status: God is no longer the Highest Being watching over our destiny, but a name for radical openness, for the hope of change, for the always-to-come Otherness'.[121]

---

116 *Prayers and Tears*, 55-57.
117 *Prayers and Tears*, xxiv. This claim is repeated in an interview in which Caputo says that 'the apophatic theme in Derrida is displaced for me by something even more surprising, by the prophetic theme' (B. Keith Putt, 'What do I love when I love my God? An interview with John D. Caputo', in James H. Olthuis, (ed.) *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 159).
118 *Prayers and Tears*, 6.
119 Caputo, John D. and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 151.
120 *After the Death of God*, 156.
121 John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (London: MIT, 2009), 256.

3.4.1 Freedom

Where Derrida's work is caught, tragically, between the ethical necessity and the inevitable violence of decision, Caputo's work tends to fall on the side of the refusal of decision in the name of openness to an unknown other. Like Kevin Hart, he sometimes positions deconstruction as essentially neutral on questions of ethical, religious and political commitment – it is 'not authorised to decide among' different possibilities, it 'has not come into the world to tell humankind to do' but is merely a 'description of the conditions under which we act'.[122] But he more often treats deconstruction as also (at least once it has been taken up by his radical hermeneutics) an account of how individuals are to relate to the world. 'Our best bet', he argues, is 'a happy minimalism about who we think we are, or who others are, or what history or nature of sexuality is, or who God is'.[123] As soon as religion makes truth claims, it becomes 'a factional power and a force of oppression', and 'sits down to the table with the powers that be, just when it ought otherwise have been committed to their disruption.'[124] There *is* a tension between the 'tragic view', which sees suffering as an inescapable aspect of life with which we must make peace and the 'religious view' which struggles against suffering and injustice in the name of God, and yet this tension is itself undecidable such that the crucial task is 'to keep open to the mystery, to keep the play in play'.[125] Where for Derrida we must act, and yet our acting is always, inescapably, caught up with death and with violence, Caputo expresses the hope for a non-violent world in which – much as for Radical Orthodoxy – differences can peacefully co-exist, a 'democracy' in which there would be 'a profusion of differences that would be adjudicated without killing one another.'[126]

And yet, as Radical Orthodoxy argues, it is hard to see how this vision of the peaceful co-existence of difference is possible in the context of a Derridean account of the world which sees difference as always inevitably grounded upon a free, unjustifiable act of decision which cuts across possibility. The 'confrontation with one's own finitude' is, for Caputo, 'the condition under which facticity is transformed from a

---

122 Putt, 'What do I love?' in *Religion with/out Religion*, 164.
123 John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 6.
124 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 282.
125 *Radical Hermeneutics*, 288.
126 *After the Death of God*, 122.

random choice into a heritage ripe with possibility'.[127] Yet there is no attempt here to grapple with the essential aporia of Derrida's thought: that to choose *one* possibility is always to reject others, to do violence to them; that the necessity of choosing means that a 'bad conscience' is inescapable.[128] If, as Stephen Shakespeare argues, Radical Orthodoxy misses essential affirmative aspects of Derrida's work in order to read him as a nihilistic thinker of violence,[129] Caputo is at risk of focusing on Derrida's affirmation of difference at the expense of grappling with his account of death, violence and nothingness.

3.4.2 Materiality

While Caputo claims to value particularity,[130] the whole thrust of his thought is away from the particular and the material and towards the transcendent and the abstract. Deconstruction, he argues, 'is set in motion by an overarching aspiration … what would have been called, in the plodding language of the tradition … a movement of *"transcendence"*'.[131] While particularity is not bad as such, it is dangerous ever to assume that any particularity is adequate to or necessary for speaking about the transcendent.[132] 'Names are', Caputo argues, 'historical, contingent, provisional expressions in natural languages', in contrast to the event, which is 'not a *thing* but something astir in a thing.'[133] Much as for Plato, particularity is valuable only insofar as it inspires a desire for the transcendent.[134] Caputo is rigorous in his refusal to accept that the universal and transcendent is ever obtainable, ever identifiable; but this insistence functions not so much as a rejection of Platonism or essentialism but, rather, as a rigorous apophaticism which denies that the transcendent can be captured by the particular only in order to assert all the more strongly its transcendence and its immateriality. That to which the material world gestures is *'tout autre* [totally other], *the*

---

127 *Radical Hermeneutics*, 88.
128 Derrida in Richard Kearney, 'On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida' in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 69.
129 Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 186-187.
130 For example, in *More Radical Hermeneutics*, he sets his own work up in deliberate opposition to 'philosophers in general' who claim that particularity can be 'stripped of what is proper to it and lifted up into the heavens of *eidos*, essence or universality' (4).
131 *Prayers and Tears*, xix.
132 *Prayers and Tears*, 68**.**
133 *After the Death of God*, 47-48.
134 Caputo says that the 'worth and the value' of all texts lies in 'the "passions" they arouse' (*Prayers and Tears*, 110).

68

impossible, the unimaginable, un-foreseeable, un-believable ab-solute surprise'.[135] However, it is precisely this affirmation of a transcendence which exceeds materiality which Caputo criticises in apophatic theology, drawing on Derrida's anxiety about the negative theological tendency to function not to disrupt economy but to ensure that apophaticism is 'safely inscribed in a circle originating from and returning to "God"'.[136] This irony is not lost on Žižek, who comments that 'after rejecting the Christian opposition between the dead Letter and the living Spirit' in his rejection of supercessionist readings of the relation of Judaism to Christianity, 'Caputo has to mobilise this very opposition to sustain the "separability" of the event from its name.' What distinguishes Caputo from Platonism and traditional Christian apophaticism is not the value he places on materiality but, rather, his rejection of metaphysics, 'the move from substantial entities to events'.[137] This move can be read in terms of the shift from an economic account of the world built around God to one built around the – limited, fallible – individual subject, such that metaphysics can no longer claim to 'have seized the soft underbelly of Nature, or Being, or Reality'.[138] But the basic model remains intact: precisely because we are material we cannot grasp the pure notion of the immaterial event which, despite Caputo's protestations about the limitations of our knowledge, is 'unconditional'.[139]

3.4.3 Hierarchy

Where Radical Orthodoxy asserts the value of hierarchy without any of the apophaticism which tempers Dionysius' original invention of the term, Caputo draws on a strong refusal of any and all claims to have privileged access to truth in order to assert a basic equality of all people; yet his work remains 'haunted' by the Dionysian hierarchical vision.[140] On Caputo's account, when we come to realise that none of us

---

135 *Prayers and Tears*, 73.
136 *Prayers and Tears*, 39.
137 *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 257-258. Caputo's preference for the universal over the particular and the ideal over the material is also discussed by Robyn Horner ('Theology after Derrida' in *Modern Theology* 29.3 (2013), 242), who argues that Caputo's work falls short insofar as it fails to grapple with the particular experience of the church; Jeffrey M. Dudiak ('Bienvenue – just a moment' in *Prayers and Tears*, 12-13) who questions the ability of Caputo's work to ground concrete acts of justice, and Ronald A. Kuipers ('Dangerous safety, safe danger: the threat of deconstruction to the threat of determinable faith' in *Prayers and Tears*, 25) who says that Caputo's 'dry, general, abstract' messianicity seeks to avoid falling 'into any concrete *messianism*'.
138 John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23.
139 *After the Death of God*, 157.
140 Smith, 'The Judgment of God', 73.

has privileged access to the truth, that 'the secret is, there is no Secret',[141] we arrive at 'an ethics of *Gelassenheit*', of letting go, 'which is all at once an ethics of liberation, toleration, and solidarity.'[142] For Caputo, the problem with institutions and with hierarchies is a problem of individual belief, such that if 'people actually believed that they really don't know in some deep way what is true, we would have more modest and tolerant and humane institutions'.[143]

Yet to claim this is to miss the way in which existing institutions and structures are (as is clear from the discussion of Dionysius' notion of hierarchy above) themselves deeply shaped by particular sorts of beliefs, that inequalities and hierarchies are not simply the result of the *way* in which people believe but of the particular *content* of their beliefs. Caputo wants a world in which everyone believes 'that there is no one thing for everyone to believe',[144] as though this belief itself is somehow exempt from the certainty with which all other beliefs are held. Furthermore, he makes this claim specifically to oppose the more radical political critiques of Badiou and Žižek, to oppose the demand for systematic change in favour of small, local interventions.[145] Yet at the same time he asserts that 'the political correlate' of his work is 'a nonauthoritarian democracy',[146] performing an epistemological legitimation of the existing order of things which structurally parallels the aspects of Dionysius' work which, as Smith and Agamben discuss, metaphysically legitimise the existing order. His critique of hierarchy makes possible a critique of existing hierarchies on the grounds that they are too authoritarian – that is, insufficiently tempered by the realisation of the ultimate inadequacy of all forms of government – but leaves him unable to 'address the more subtle and nefarious hierarchy of capitalist economics.'[147] Moreover, where Milbank's assertion of aesthetic diversity collapses under his tendency to present all difference in terms of moral judgement, Caputo's refusal to admit any grounds for moral judgement leaves him unable to make any judgements which are *not* aesthetic. Although he recognises in Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer 'everything that's good and just and true',[148] there are no grounds within his work to prefer Bonhoeffer and King

---

141 *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.
142 *Radical Hermeneutics*, 288.
143 *After the Death of God*, 128.
144 *After the Death of God*, 129.
145 *After the Death of God*, 124.
146 *After the Death of God*, 75.
147 Smith, 'The Judgment of God', 75.
148 *After the Death of God*, 141.

over any other figures who disrupt the existing order of things, or to claim that any particular structure of society might be more conducive to liberation, toleration and solidarity than others.[149]

3.4.4 Universalism

As for Derrida, the inescapability of particularity is for Caputo a regrettable necessity which ought to be struggled against in the name of an all-embracing universalism. While the universal cannot be exclusively located in any particular tradition,[150] each particular tradition must aspire 'to be catholic (universal)' and 'committed in principle to universal liberation'.[151] Caputo worries about the tendency for death of God theologies to endorse a supersessionist schema of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and responds to this concern by articulating the ways in which his deconstructive Christianity is very deeply Jewish.[152] But in this attempt to portray all particular traditions as contingent attempts to speak about a more universal truth, Caputo is often guilty of overlooking the real antagonisms at play, the real disagreements and differences between particular thinkers and traditions. Žižek, for example, 'often serves up excellent postmodern goods' when he 'leaves off abusing postmodern theories', as though what is valuable in Žižek's project is what he shares in common with Caputo; as though his disagreements with Derrida and Caputo which (as I shall argue) are crucial to understanding his project can simply be discarded as inessential.[153]

In a way this offers a curious mirror image of Radical Orthodoxy: where the universalism of the ontology of peace seeks to erase all uncertainty, Caputo's model of perpetual deconstruction seeks to pull apart any and all certainty, to the point where it is hard to see what gives Christianity any particular value or even uniqueness. Caputo's

---

149 It is this which is at stake in one of Caputo's key disagreements with Žižek: Caputo argues that if capitalism could be reformed such that everyone had access to universal healthcare, human treatment etc., then there would be no need for Badiou and Žižek's demand for a different system (*After the Death of God*, 124-125); Žižek's response is to ask, 'What if the malfunctionings of capitalism listed by Caputo aren't merely contingent perturbations but structural necessities?' ('Trouble in Paradise' in *London Review of Books* 35.14, 18 July 2013. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n14/slavoj-zizek/trouble-in-paradise).
150 As Stephen Shakespeare argues, for Caputo, 'No single name, narrative or tradition can claim ownership of God' (*Derrida and Theology*, 297).
151 *Radical Hermeneutics*, 282.
152 *After the Death of God*, 77-83.
153 *After the Death of God*, 48.

universalism tends, in its desire to deconstruct and to transcend particularity, to dissolve everything into sameness. It is far from clear that this dissolution of specificity is any less violent than the metaphysics which Caputo so derides. Where Radical Orthodoxy explicitly endorses the colonising logic of domination and absorption, Caputo's work functions as the philosophical correlate of Third Way politics, whose message is 'simply that *there is no second way*, no actual *alternative* to global capitalism … the Third Way is simply *global capitalism with a human face*, that is, an attempt to minimize the human costs of the global capitalism machinery, whose functioning is left undisturbed.'[154] To adapt Žižek's comparison of Obama and Bush: if Radical Orthodoxy is the empire with a brutal face, Caputo represents the empire with a human face – but it is still the same empire.[155]

3.4.5 Ontology and desire

Caputo is clear that his Christian and Derridean hermeneutics exists in direct opposition to 'large and overarching theories' and to metaphysics.[156] Yet his own work functions precisely as a large and overarching theory of the nature of human knowledge, the relationship of immanence to transcendence, events to the Event, and the particular to the universal. If there is no God to ground the being of the world or to guarantee its future, then what is the nature of the event which Caputo so vigorously asserts: where does it come from and what is it? The future 'might turn into a monster. It might be awful. It might be worse than what we've got now',[157] and yet the event is that which we 'affirm unconditionally',[158] and it belongs with 'the prophetic' which stands for 'everything that's good and just and true'.[159] Caputo may be reluctant to articulate an ontology, yet his work constantly gestures towards some sort of account of the nature of being, the relationship between immanence and transcendence, the material and the immaterial. Why is every system of meaning and truth incomplete? Why does the deconstruction of these systems promise more than their construction? Alongside the question of ontology (which haunts Caputo's work throughout) is the question of desire

---

154 *Fragile Absolute*, 62-63.
155 *First as Tragedy*, 109.
156 *After the Death of God*, 49, 68.
157 *After the Death of God*, 122-123.
158 *After the Death of God*, 157.
159 *After the Death of God*, 141.

which, Caputo acknowledges, drives deconstruction and its quest for transcendence,[160] yet which is not so much accounted for by Caputo's work as taken for granted.

3.5 Conclusion

If theology is to find a way of remaining faithful to Dionysius' work in a context which differs dramatically from Dionysius' own it cannot – as Caputo suggests – evade questions of metaphysics and ontology. Yet if it is to face up to the complexity and contradictions of the Dionysian legacy it cannot – as Radical Orthodoxy suggests – simply resort to the cataphatic affirmation of Neoplatonic metaphysics stripped of the apophatic elements of rupture and inexplicability which are central to Dionysius' account of both desire and ontology and which work both to establish and disrupt the marriage he effects between Christianity and Neoplatonism. Is there a way for theology to respond to the philosophical shift from the divine to the human economy; to give an account of the homology between the problems of creation and sin; to cling both to the traditional affirmation of and the desire to transcend materiality; to confront the reality of political and ecclesiastical power whilst also providing the resources to resist them; and to acknowledge both the particularity of Christianity and the fecundity of its liaisons with its others? In the subsequent chapters, I will argue that Žižek's work, in its attempt to move beyond the impasses of Derrida's philosophical legacy and the antagonisms of Neoplatonism, seeks to bring together questions of ontology and desire around an account of economy which repeats the problematics of both Christian theology and contemporary continental philosophy differently and as such offers one possible way forward for theology.

---

160 *After the Death of God*, 118.

4. The death drive

4.1 Introduction

Where Derrida and Caputo engage in the endless task of attempting to escape ontology and Radical Orthodoxy simply asserts more forcefully a crude form of the Neoplatonic ontology which Christian theology inherits from Dionysius, Žižek seeks to move beyond these positions by repeating the conjunction of ontology and desire differently. As I will argue, Žižek's work begins by extending the Lacanian account of desire to the realm of the social and the political. He subsequently extends this model to material reality as a whole in order to articulate his own version of an erotic ontology. This chapter will examine Žižek's account of the relationship between desire and the death drive; chapter 5 will give an account of the ways in which this central Žižekian notion is ontologised, and the ways in which this model inherits and transforms certain key theological terms.

Žižek's account of the structure of human desiring underlies most of the key aspects of his thought (including his account of subjectivity and materialism and his discussion of social and political change) and is the locus for his marriage of Lacan and Hegel, the two thinkers whose ideas most profoundly shape his work. Fundamental to Žižek's understanding of desire is the psychoanalytic notion of the death drive; here I will give a brief overview of Freud and Lacan's accounts of the death drive in order to set the basic theoretical co-ordinates within which Žižek is working, followed by a discussion of Žižek's use and transformation of these concepts in order to argue that the shift from desire to drive is what makes possible not only individual but also social and political transformation. Crucially, for Žižek, the shift from desire to drive is the shift from the perpetually failed attempt to obtain the object which will provide satisfaction for the individual or social order to a satisfaction which consists precisely in this repeated failure to attain completeness.

4.2 Freud on the death drive

Several recent discussions of the Freudian death drive have noted that it is simultaneously the concept most frequently overlooked or rejected by Freudians and yet also the notion which Freud himself repeatedly claimed to be most fundamental to his work as a whole.[1] Similarly, the discomfort which Freudians have long evinced towards the notion derives from precisely those aspects of Freud's account of the death drive which make it so pertinent for Lacan, Žižek and hence for this thesis: namely, that it is a key concept of Freud's metapsychology (Freud's attempt to give an account of the fundamental structures of human subjectivity) and is thus the point at which Freud's work most closely intersects with the concerns of post-Cartesian philosophy.[2] Where for Dionysius the problem of creation is essentially that of the emergence of multiplicity from the simplicity of the divine, for Freudian psychoanalysis the problem of creation is that of the birth of the individual subject from the original union with the mother. As for Dionysius the problem of creation was inextricably entangled with the questions of desire, return and death, so for Freud the notion of the death drive came to take a central place in the metapsychological account of the subject's emergence and desire for satisfaction and completion.

The themes of life, death and sexuality were consistently at the heart of Freud's attempts to conceptualise the forces which fundamentally motivate human beings, but the concept of the death drive specifically was a relatively late development: while related themes can be found earlier in Freud's work, the death drive is found in Freud's work only from 1920's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'.[3] In his earliest work, Freud postulated that human behaviour was governed by two basic instincts: the sexual instinct, which aimed for pleasure; and the ego instinct, which aimed for self-preservation. In 1914, his observations on narcissism led him to postulate a single force,

---

1 Richard Boothby describes as a 'remarkable paradox' that metapsychology, 'the most criticized and most forcefully repudiated part of the psychoanalytic theory was precisely the part most prized by the master himself', and goes on to cite the theory of the drives as the most acute example of this paradox in *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2, 7; cf also Rob Weatherill, *The Sovereignty of Death* (London: Rebus Press, 1998), 1, and 'Editorial: "Did anyone say anything new about the drive?"' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 8.

2 Richard Boothby describes metapsychology as 'Freud's answer to metaphysics' (*Freud as Philosopher*, 2); Elizabeth Grosz situates Freud alongside Nietzsche and Marx as a key post-Cartesian thinker (*Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 1).

3 In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVIII*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 7–64.

libido, which included both sexual and ego instincts.[4] But in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud postulated a new notion, the death drive, in an attempt to make sense of his observations of repetitive behaviour on the part of his patients which seemed to deliberately repeat unpleasant experiences: the dreams of traumatised individuals which repeated the situation which had originally traumatised them; numerous cases of individuals deliberately recreating the patterns of previous unhappy relationships in new relationships with their romantic partners or psychoanalysts;[5] and the repetitive game of a young child playing with a cotton reel which seemed to repeatedly re-enact the distressing experience of his mother's departure.[6] All of these examples of compulsive repetition problematised Freud's earlier claims that people are fundamentally driven to seek pleasure. In light of these cases, Freud drew on contemporary biological ideas to argue that all living things are essentially motivated to seek out earlier states of their being; and as inanimate things existed before living things, this ultimately means that all living things are driven to seek their own death. Instincts for survival are aimed simply at preserving the organism long enough to allow it to die 'in its own fashion.'[7] The life instinct is a unifying force which pushes the organism towards self-preservation, while the death drive pushes the organism to bring an end to its own life.[8]

Various issues which were to be crucial in the subsequent reception of the notion of the death drive are clearly visible in Freud's discussions of the drive. First is the question of the relationship of the drive to language and the body. In 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', Freud describes the drive as located on 'the frontier between the mental and the somatic'.[9] The drive is clearly associated with the body, and yet as Charles Shepherdson points out, the Freudian body is never simply biological but always the result of the way in which the human organism is caught up into systems of language

---

4   Weatherill, *Sovereignty of Death*, 7.
5   Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 22-24.
6   Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14-16.
7   Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 45-47.
8   Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 64. Also important to subsequent discussions of the drive is Freud's 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 117-140), whose translated title overlooks the distinction within Freud's work between instinct (Instinkt) and drive (Trieb); it is 'drive' which is used here, the original title of the essay being *Trieb und Triebrepräsentanz*; Lacan was critical of James Strachey's translation for this reason (Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 46). In this text Freud describes the four components of a drive (pressure, aim, object and source) and the ways in which the drives can be rerouted in different ways depending on the development of the individual and the obstacles to satisfaction he encounters.
9   121-122.

and meaning.[10] Amongst the consequences of this complex relationship between the symbolic and the material is a certain ambiguity over what precisely is meant by the claim which grounds Freud's account of the death drive, that 'the aim of all life is death'.[11] For Richard Boothby it means that, on account of the intrinsic conflict between the imaginary and the symbolic registers – that is, on his account, between the visual and the linguistic aspects of human consciousness[12] – 'there is no final coherence, no overarching unity, of human life'.[13] For Joan Copjec it relates to the fact that 'our bodily being is out of whack with our physical environment. *Our bodies battle biology*', which gives rise to the creative struggle with social and physical limitations;[14] for Žižek it is not the 'life cycle of generation and corruption' which the death drive 'strives to annihilate' but 'the symbolic order … that regulates social change'.[15]

The complex relationship of the death drive to creation and destruction, the material and the symbolic, means that it also belongs in a complex relationship to women, femininity and natality. Because on Freud's account it is the separation from the mother which makes possible the subject's consciousness of his distinct identity, and the originary unity with the mother is in some sense the source of the subject's fantasy of wholeness, the death drive shares with the Neoplatonic notion of return to the originating One an ambivalence insofar as this return represents both the ultimate satisfaction and the complete dissolution of the subject's identity; and the already-gendered nature of this philosophical model is only intensified by its more thorough entanglement with actually existing women, both as mothers and as sexual partners.[16] As Grace Jantzen argues, for example, 'the drive to return to a prior, tensionless state

---

10 'The Elements of the Drive' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 133. The clearest illustration of this notion is Freud's discussion of hysterical paralysis in which he writes that 'hysteria behaves as though anatomy did not exist … It takes the organs in the ordinary, popular sense of the names they bear' ('Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralysis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume I*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 169).
11 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 38.
12 *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18.
13 *Freud as philosopher*, 284.
14 'Editorial: Montage of the Drives"' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 12.
15 'No Sexual Relationship' in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 229.
16 I have chosen to use masculine pronouns when discussing the Freudian subject, as Freud himself typically takes the subject to be male by default. However, later and elsewhere in the thesis I use feminine pronouns to discuss the Lacanian and Žižekian subject, on the grounds that Žižek's claim is that the tendency of Western thought to take the subject as male by default in fact conceals the truth of Cartesian and post-Cartesian subjectivity which is, on his reading, essentially feminine – that is, structured according to the logic of drive rather than desire (see below, section 4.6).

can be read as a longing for the womb from which one has been ejected'.[17] Similarly, Luce Irigaray takes Freud's account of the pleasure principle to be sexed as feminine and the death drive as masculine, such that women are charged with maintaining homoeostasis, with 'preserving, regenerating, and rejuvenating the organism' so as to function as the material upon which men can work for 'the sublimation and, if possible, mastery of the work of death.'[18]

The functioning of the death drive in Freud, then, is in many ways parallel to the role of *eros* in Dionysius, albeit within an economy focused around the relationship of the individual subject to the symbolic order (the systems of language and relationships within which he is born) and to his own body, rather than Dionysius' theological economy within which the symbolic and material worlds are fundamentally positioned by their relationship to God. As such, many of the tensions within Dionysius' work are visible in analogous forms in Freud's account of the death drive. In particular, where Dionysius struggles to negotiate the tension between the desire to affirm particularity with the longing for undifferentiated union with God, Adrian Johnston locates this tension within the subject, arguing that human beings are characterised precisely by the impossible contradiction between their desire for an atemporal satisfaction and the constitutive temporality of human beings which guarantees 'their repeated failure to achieve … "satisfaction"'.[19] In all of the thinkers whose readings of Freud I have discussed above, these tensions between creation and destruction, life and death, time and timelessness are taken, in different forms, to be the antagonisms which constitute the drive and the challenge of interpreting this most Freudian notion.

4.3 Lacan on the death drive

Lacan describes his own work as a 'return to Freud',[20] but the nature of this return makes very clear the impossibility of pure repetition; his fidelity to the founding father of his discipline is made possible only by a simultaneous infidelity, by reading

---

17 'Death, then, how could I yield to it? Kristeva's Mortal Visions' in Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (eds.), *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives,* (London: Routledge, 2003), 120.

18 *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 53-55.

19 *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 228.

20 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 306.

Freud 'against the grain' or 'in reverse',[21] by coupling Freudian psychoanalysis with philosophy in general and linguistics in particular to produce a reading of Freud in which 'innovation' is 'constantly harnessed to the labor of recovery', in which 'Lacan appears to race far ahead of Freud, yet claims to be merely trying to catch up with him', in an intellectual filiation within which the 'most strikingly foreign' of Lacan's innovations 'succeed in illuminating Freud's inner intention.'[22] Key to Lacan's unfaithful fidelity to Freud are his emphasis on reading Freud as a philosopher,[23] his linguistic reading of key Freudian concepts,[24] and, crucially, his focus on drive as the central notion of Freudian psychoanalysis.[25]

As Bruce Fink argues, the Lacanian subject is in some sense *identified* with the drive,[26] and so in order to explicate Lacan's reading of the Freudian notion of drive it is helpful to begin with a brief overview of the Lacanian account of the creation of the subject. Where for Dionysius creation begins at the moment of a rupture in causality, a gap in the divine economy, for Lacan the subject comes into being out of nothing, around a central and constitutive cut. This cut can be narrated in several ways. It can be understood as the split between the subject's perception of herself as a unified whole

---

21 Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), cited in Jean-Michel Rabaté's article 'Lacan's turn to Freud' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

22 Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher*, 281-282.

23 As Jean-Michel Rabaté points out, 'Lacan has often been called a "philosopher of psychoanalysis"' ('Preface' in *The Cambridge Companion*), xii; Richard Boothby's *Freud as Philosopher* claims that Lacan reads Freud 'as a philosophical thinker of the first order' (9); and Slavoj Žižek argues that 'Lacan's own "return to Freud" could be read precisely as an elevation of Freud to the dignity of a philosopher' ('Foreword: A Parallax View on Drives' in Johnston, *Time Driven*, xvii).

24 Again, as Rabaté points out, 'Lacan is often associated with a "linguistic turn" in psychoanalysis' ('Preface', xii); Boothby discusses the importance of 'the structuralist conception of language' to Lacan's account of desire *(Freud as Philosopher,* 12)*,* and in particular to his oft-cited claim that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 20). This notion of Lacan's linguistic re-reading of Freud is particularly important to Marcus Pound's theological account of Lacan – he argues, for example, that Lacan rewrites 'Freudian psychology on the basis of structural linguistics. For Lacan, it is as if everything Freud said was absolutely true, only he was really talking about language' (*Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 6); although, as Adrian Johnston points out, Lacan does not intend to imply that the unconscious is purely linguistic, and so 'to accuse Lacan of reducing the unconscious to a set of words is to have entirely missed the point' of his appropriation of structuralist accounts of language (*Time Driven*, 305).

25 Richard Boothby suggests that Lacan's key contribution lies in his re-articulation of the death drive such that the theme of death is brought into relation with 'Freud's cardinal concern: the nature and fate of unconscious desire' (*Death and Desire*, xi); Adrian Johnston describes Lacan's reading of the drive as a 'knotting' of key Lacanian concepts (*Time Driven*, 184). Even the focus on Lacan's work as primarily linguistic ties into the centrality of the drive as language, as the drive is that which links 'the body and the "soul"' (Rabaté, 'Preface', xii).

26 *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 208.

and her actual condition of dependence.[27] It can be understood as the split between what the subject asks for and what she receives from her primary caregivers.[28] It can be understood as the contradiction inherent to the subject's entry into language, which simultaneously enables her to have a conscious sense of her own identity and entangles her identity forever with words she did not create, which speak her as much as she speaks them and tie her to structures of relationship and sociality which she does not control.[29] Or it can be understood as the inevitable gap between the core of the subject's being and identity and any attempt to put this essence into words: as Žižek glosses Lacan, this gap *is* the subject: 'the subject is *nothing but* the failure point of the process of his symbolic representation.'[30]

In all of these Lacanian accounts of the structure of the self, the basic issue is the same: the subject is split, with a gap at the heart of her being.[31] This splitting of the subject is also caught up with the question of subject's *borders,* that is, the gap between the subject and others. Lacan's account of the drive is centrally concerned with this

27 As in Lacan's account of the 'mirror stage', found first in his essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in *Écrits*, 75-81. Something similar is true of Lacan's re-reading of the Oedipus stage in which the subject comes into being around the dual realisation that she is not identical to her mother (or mother-figure) and yet is reliant on her mother for her sense of self (this aspect of Lacan's account is discussed in Marie-Hélène Brousse, 'The Drive (II)' in Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus, eds., *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 110-111; in Paul Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender: From subject to drive* (New York: Other Press, 2001) which argues, based on a Lacanian reading of Freud as well as clinical experience that castration anxiety is a secondary formation which conceals the subject's more basic fear of incorporation by the mother, of losing individual identity and being reduced to a 'mere object' to fill in 'the lack of the mother' (11-14); and in Evans, *Dictionary*, which attributes this aspect of Lacan's work specifically to the influence of Melanie Klein (117)).

28 For elaborations of this aspect of Lacan's work see, for example, *Seminar XI*, 154, 168, 180; Marie-Hélène Brousse, 'The Drive (I)' in *Reading Seminar XI*, 106-107; Evans, *Dictionary*, 34-37. Žižek argues that, for Lacan, the subject's inability to fully understand what their mother wants from them is the 'limit at which every interpellation necessarily fails' (*Sublime Object*, 135).

29 For example, Brousse argues that 'the drive is a consequence of the articulation in language of the Other's demand' ('The Drive (I)', 106; Philip Dravers says that 'the drive as a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis' discusses language as that which ruptures the relationship of the individual to nature, propelling them into culture (in *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 23 (2011), 123-124). It is worth briefly noting here that, as I discuss below, the Lacanian notion of 'language' does not exclude either materiality or visual images: both tangible and visible elements are important to language as a signifying system This fact renders problematic aspects of both Bruce Fink's reading of Lacan (as discussed by Johnston, *Time Driven*, 194-195) and Richard Boothby's reading of the opposition between the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic registers primarily in terms of the opposition between the visual and the linguistic (e.g. *Death and Desire*, 18).

30 *Sublime Object*, 195 (italics mine), discussing Lacan's account of the Real and the formation of the subject in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 93.

31 What is striking about the manifestations of the unconscious, Lacan says, is 'the sense of impediment to be found in all of them. Impediment, failure, split' (*Seminar XI*, 25).

constitutive gap. Lacan's work underwent a number of important shifts over the course of his career which were, at least in part, the result of his changing understanding of the nature of desire and drive.[32] As it is in 1964's *Seminar XI* that Lacan gives the fullest account of his mature theory of the drive, the subsequent discussion will focus on this seminar.[33]

As for Dionysius, the question of the One is central to Lacan's account of the subject, which is also an account of both *eros* and ontology and, moreover, the point at which the themes of creation and newness, materiality and language, nature and culture, and mysticism converge. But where the One of the Dionysian God is a simple, self-contained unity, the One of the Lacanian subject is 'the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of rupture.' The splitting of the One is not a problem for Lacan in the same way that it is for Dionysius because the identity of the individual subject is always already ruptured, incomplete, failed, such that the notion of 'a closed *one*' is not the necessary starting point of any account of creation but a fantasy, a 'mirage'.[34] As for Dionysius, though, this rupture or failure which marks the point of creation is also a rupture or failure of causality. Lacan speaks of the initial moment of rupture which brings the subject into being as *trauma*, that is, as 'that which is *unassimilable*', which cannot be contained within the homoeostasis of the pleasure principle and which occurs '*as if by chance*', imposing upon the subject 'an apparently accidental origin'.[35]

Similarly, the problem of the splitting of the One is for Lacan also the problem of the relationship to the Other, or to others. Crucially, the split is in many ways a split *within* the subject. On Lacan's account the game of the small child with the cotton reel

---

32 Bruce Fink suggests that during the 1950s and 60s Lacan understood the goal of analysis as being to liberate the analysand's desire from the Other's desire, enabling the subject first to articulate and then to be faithful to their own desire, whereas for the later Lacan desire is understood as *constituted by* the Other's desire, by the law, such that the focus of analysis is instead on liberating drive, which pursues satisfaction with no concern for the Other's demands. Fink argues that this shift is better understood not as a change in Lacan's understanding so much as indicative of the transformation that the drive itself undergoes during the course of analysis ('Desire and the Drives' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 35-51). Daniel G. Collins argues that a key shift occurs in the early 1960s when Lacan first begins to distinguish between desire and drive ('On the Drive' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 72), and Clotilde Leguil similarly argues that the beginning of the 1960s marks a new phase of Lacan's understanding of the relationship between drive and ontology ('Lacanian uses of ontology' in *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 23 (2011), 112.). Paul Verhaeghe suggests that it is 1964's *Seminar XI* which marks a shift from an emphasis on the Symbolic to an emphasis on 'the traumatic Real, that part of the drive that cannot be represented' (*Beyond Gender*, 72).

33 *Seminar XI*. Here Lacan counts drive – but *not* desire – as one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.

34 *Seminar XI*, 26.

35 *Seminar XI*, 54-55.

is a response to the child's separation from his mother; and yet what is lost is not the mother herself but 'a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his.'[36] Yet it is precisely this split which makes possible the subject's relationship with others, which marks the point at which language enters her from outside and irrevocably shapes the structure of her being. Lacan explicitly relates this question of the splitting of the One to ontology. Speaking about the unconscious as the gap which grounds the subject, Lacan says that 'when speaking of this gap one is dealing with an ontological function'; and yet the gap of the unconscious itself is '*pre-ontological ... neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealised.*'[37] In Lacan's earlier work, this ontology of the subject is related to Sartre's account of the essential nothingness of the subject; in his later work it becomes increasingly connected to the notion of the drive which is neither psychological nor biological but ontological.[38]

In his elaboration of the drive, Lacan gives a name to the small piece of the subject which is lost and yet remains the subject: he calls it the *objet petit a*, the object which is the small-a *autre*/other of the subject to the big-A *Autre*/Other which is in Lacan's work the name for the symbolic order.[39] Lacan traces the vicissitudes of the drive: the pressure of the drive is 'a mere tendency to discharge' but is not – like the pressure of biological needs such as hunger and thirst – rhythmic and changing, but constant and unrelenting.[40] The aim of the drive is satisfaction, but this satisfaction cannot be provided by the object (which Lacan here equates with the *objet petit a*); in fact, Lacan says, quoting Freud, the object of the drive '*is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference.*' The satisfaction of the drive comes, rather, from its own movement around the object.[41] The source of the drive is in four erogenous zones of the body which are characterised by their 'rim-like structure': the lips, the anus, the eyes and the ears, all located at the points of the body where the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other are regulated.[42] The drives circulate, emerging from the body at its rim, moving around the *objet petit a*, the part of the body which is me-and-yet-not-me, and returning, their path described by Lacan with

---

36 *Seminar XI*, 62. Žižek says that this object 'gives body to' the constitutive 'failure' of the subject (*Less than Nothing*, 750).
37 *Seminar XI*, 29-30.
38 Leguil, 'Lacanian uses of ontology', 108, 112.
39 Evans, *Dictionary*, 132-133.
40 *Seminar XI*, 163-165.
41 *Seminar XI*, 168.
42 *Seminar XI*, 169. While the oral and anal drives are present in Freud's work, the scopic and invocatory drives are Lacanian innovations (as Dylan Evans points out, *Dictionary*, 47-48).

reference to paradoxical geometrical structures such as the Möbius strip whose 'outside continues its inside',[43] or the torus whose 'peripheral exteriority and … central exteriority constitute only one single region.'[44] The *objet petit a*, then, is to be thought of in terms of 'extimacy', a term coined by Lacan to describe an 'intimate exteriority',[45] and is itself paradoxical – although it is 'simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied … by any object',[46] it is particularly associated with the breasts, the faeces, the gaze and the voice, all of which are characterised by two things: first, that they 'serve no function', and second that they are associated with the negotiation of the boundaries of the subject's body and of her relationships with others.[47] The *objet petit a* is both the stand-in for the unknown desire of the Other and for the piece of the subject which was lost in the originary loss on which the subject's being is founded. It purports to be 'what the subject wants', though it is really just a contingent object which happens to fit the necessary criteria for triggering the subject's desire, which is really to return to the fictional 'lost unity'. But, as for the return to God in Neoplatonism and Dionysius, complete union is effectively indistinguishable from death and the dissolution of the individual; so the *objet petit a* is simultaneously desired and feared, 'both the object of anxiety, and the final irreducible reserve of libido'.[48]

The drive stands in complex relation to desire. While both are essentially caught up with and constituted by the symbolic order, with language and the way that it internally ruptures the individual subject, and with the *objet petit a* which is the cause of desire and the object of the drive,[49] the precise nature of the relation between desire and drive is one of the points on which Lacan's interpreters most clearly diverge. For Adrian Johnston in *Time Driven*, the lost object is something which was once possessed by the subject and this initial complete satisfaction is drive; but the intrinsic temporality of the subject's experience of the world means that this originary completeness can never be regained. Desire 'is the outcome of the temporalisation of *Trieb* … For Lacan, drive becomes desire through the loss of *das Ding*.'[50] There is, Johnston argues, a

---

43 *Seminar XI*, 156.
44 Lacan, *Écrits*, 105.
45 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: W. W. Norton, 1992), 139.
46 *Seminar XI*, 180.
47 *Seminar XI*, 242.
48 Evans, *Dictionary*, 125. Similarly, Antonio Quinet argues that, for Lacan, 'Without object *a* … there is no anxiety' ('The Gaze as an Object' in *Reading Seminar XI*, 144).
49 *Seminar XI*, 243.
50 207.

'metapsychologically determined failure internal to the dynamics of the libidinal economy',[51] and yet the pain which is caused by this failure 'is a discomfort signaling a capacity to be an autonomous subject … Humanity is free precisely insofar as its pleasures are far from perfection'.[52] Psychoanalysis, Johnston argues, 'cannot therapeutically heal' the wounds which are constitutive of human experience, but 'in the best of cases it can get its patients to stop rubbing in so much salt'.[53] Desire, as temporalized drive, can never be satisfied, but dissatisfaction is the source of human freedom. This account is very close to Derrida's reading of the drive: Derrida equates the drive with Necessity, and specifically with that within human beings which 'compels me to admit that my desire for good, for presence … not only cannot be accomplished … but should not be accomplished – because the accomplishment or the fulfilment of this desire for presence would be Death itself.'[54]

In contrast to these essentially tragic accounts of the relationship of desire and drive as necessarily failed are other Lacanians who hold to a more hopeful account. Bruce Fink suggests that from an early affirmation of desire as 'endowed with a certain utopian edge', able to move individuals beyond the various neurotic subjective positions which perpetually sabotage their own attempts to obtain the object of desire, the later Lacan moves towards the realisation that it is the drives, which 'pursue their own course without any regard for what is appropriate or approved of' which are both most fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity and also the locus of subjective transformation: the goal of analysis is '*to allow the analysand finally to be able to enjoy his or her enjoyment*' by teaching desire 'how to keep its mouth shut and let enjoyment prevail.'[55] Again, drive is the full satisfaction which exists before the subject's entanglement in language and desire means that the quest for satisfaction comes to be mediated by the symbolic order; but for Fink it *is* possible to regain this lost satisfaction. What is consistently maintained by readings of the Lacanian distinction between desire and drive, however, is that both pertain essentially to the questions of the origin of the subject, of teleology (that is, for Lacan, primarily the question of the goal of analysis), of the relationship between the individual subject and others.

As Adrian Johnston argues, Lacan has often been taken for a structuralist,

51 *Time Driven*, xxxiv.
52 *Time Driven*, 341.
53 *Time Driven*, xxviii.
54 'Necessity is the drive' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 165.
55 'Desire and the Drives', 36, 38, 41, 42.

denying the existence of the body outside language or at least the possibility of accessing it.[56] But the reality is more complex, particularly in terms of Lacan's account of the drive. The issue of materiality and human embodment pervades Lacan's work, and is particularly evident in his discussion of the drive. The drive is persistently associated (by Lacan even more so than by Freud) with the body's boundaries, the frontier between the body and the world, inside and outside. The topology of the drive as rim is, Lacan says, a re-articulation of 'the function of the cut', the way that the subject 'emerges from the structure of the signifier'; the way that the subject is 'defined as the effect of the signifier.'[57] The drives which mark the boundaries of the body are brought into being by the signifier and their rotation is determined by the subject's particular history, by the 'montage' of contingent symbolic associations which go to form the core of the subject's particular identity which 'constantly jumps, without transition, between the most heterogeneous images' related to one another 'only by means of grammatical references.'[58] Inside and outside, material and symbolic are, then, constantly intertwined in Lacan's account of human embodment and subjectivity.

4.4 Žižek on the death drive

Where Lacan seeks to be unfaithfully faithful to Freud, Žižek describes his project as seeking to 'bugger Hegel with Lacan', to bring together Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics in such a way as to produce a 'monstrous Hegel'.[59] At the heart of this coupling is Žižek's elaboration of the difference between desire and drive, and the claim that it is drive rather than desire which is the foundation

---

56 Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 122. Johnston argues that Žižek himself buys in to this version of Lacan at least partially but is wrong to do so as Lacan was a materialist throughout. However, this misreading occurs not simply because Žižek is an inadequate reader of Lacan but because (Johnston argues) to accept the earlier Lacan as a good materialist is to affirm the close interrelationship of thought and material reality. Material reality and thought *are* closely related, for Johnston and Žižek alike but, Johnston argues, to accept 'the blurring of the boundary between theoretical thinking and practical acting … risks strengthening a convenient alibi', allowing academics in particular to evade political praxis by claiming that their intellectual work alone is sufficient, and that more direct political praxis is therefore unnecessary (124-125).

57 *Seminar XI*, 206-207.

58 *Seminar XI*, 169-170.

59 Eric Rasmussen, 'Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek' in *electronic book review*, 7th January 2007. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation. The metaphor of buggering is taken from Deleuze who talks about seeing 'the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception' in which he 'saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous' ('Letter to a Harsh Critic' in Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6).

of ethical and political transformation. Although Žižek's work relies very profoundly –
as I shall argue in the rest of this chapter and the next – on particular claims about the
nature of individual desire and the structure of the material world, it is politics, the
structure of human society, to which his account of *eros* and ontology is most
fundamentally and frequently directed.[60]

The key move that Žižek's early work makes is to elaborate Lacan's account of
the structure of individuals and social relations into a critique of political ideology.[61]
Žižek identifies a structural homology between Lacan's claim that the subject *is* its own
failure, its own internal inconsistency, and Hegel's account of the progress of
knowledge and the social order according to which 'every attempt at rational
totalization fails [but] this failure is the very impetus of the "dialectical progress"'.[62]
Like Lacan's individual, Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian society comes into being around a
central antagonism at its heart, which cleaves it so decisively that it can never be whole
– harmonious, self-contained, self-identical – again. This means that 'every process of
identification conferring on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to
fail.'[63] Like the Lacanian subject, the structure of signification – meaning, law and order
– within a society is founded upon a decision which cannot be justified by the system of
meaning-making which rests upon it. The foundation stone of law is always itself illegal
– or, as Žižek glosses Chesterton, 'Law is the greatest transgression, the defender of the
Law the greatest rebel.'[64] And societies have their own form of Lacan's fundamental
fantasy, the framework which papers over the crack at their heart: this, says Žižek, is the
true nature of ideology.[65] Societies gain a sense of unity by constituting themselves
around a 'sublime object of ideology', an object like Coca-Cola, the Marlboro man,
'God', 'Country', 'Party' or 'Class' which, though meaningless in themselves, come to
be the anchoring-points for narratives of social identity and unity.[66] Yet this sublime

---

60 This is clear as early as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (as is evident from the book's title), and
    remains true in Žižek's most recent work, *Less than Nothing*, which begins with the claim that the
    stakes of Žižek's reading of Lacan are 'clearly political' (18) and ends with an appeal to 'the
    communist horizon' (1010).
61 This convergence of Lacan and ideology critique is nicely encapsulated by the first section title of
    Sublime Object, Žižek's first book written in English: 'How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?' While
    Lacan's own work is not apolitical (as will become especially clear in chapter 9), Žižek work brings
    Lacan's thought into much more sustained and detailed engagement with political theory.
62 *They Know Not*, 99.
63 *Sublime Object*, 142.
64 *Monstrosity of Christ*, 47. As I discuss further in chapters 5 and 6, this account is very close in some –
    but, crucially, not all – ways to Derrida's understanding of the founding of the social order.
65 *Sublime Object*, 45.
66 *Sublime Object*, 106.

object which stands in for social harmony also has an obverse, an abject figure which is taken as the contingent barrier to the full realisation of social harmony. Žižek's favoured example of this move is the narrative of anti-Semitism: if it weren't for the Jews, this fantasy goes, society would be harmonious and peaceful.[67] Fantasy is thus 'a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance.'[68] For Žižek, the fundamental antagonism at the heart of each and every society is always fundamentally the antagonism of class.[69] It is this irreconcilable antagonism – this perpetual *failure* to achieve wholeness – which propels historical development, as societies repeatedly reconstitute themselves in an attempt to resolve the irresolvable. Hegel's dialectical thought is, for Žižek, the key mediator between the Lacanian account of subjectivity and the Marxist account of history: Hegel depicts human history and culture as a series of attempts to overcome the gap between subject and object, a split which, on Žižek's reading, is internal to the subject.[70]

On Žižek's account, ideology functions according to the logic of desire. To be human, to be a 'being of language', is to be constitutively dissatisfied; and this constitutive dissatisfaction is transformed into '*a desire for unsatisfaction*'.[71] Like the desiring subject of both Dionysius and Derrida, the Žižekian subject longs for completion, for success, for the acquisition of the object of desire; as for both Dionysius and Derrida, this completeness, were it obtained, would represent the death of the subject, or the dissolution of the social order. Yet Žižek puts a distinctive Lacanian gloss onto this account of the longing for completeness: the object of desire is not accessible in any mystical dissolution of the self which is near-indistinguishable from death (as is the case for one reading of Dionysius exemplified by Thomas A. Carlson);[72] nor is it impossible to attain and yet incessantly anticipated, as for Derrida. Rather, it is

---

67 *Sublime Object*, 141-144.
68 *Sublime Object*, 142.
69 'For a true Marxist, "classes" are … categories of the Real of a political struggle which cuts across the entire social body, preventing its "totalisation"' (*Less than Nothing*, 899).
70 In his 2008 foreword to *They Know Not*, Žižek says that the 'basic insight' of this book is that 'Hegelian dialectics and the Lacanian "logic of the signifier" are two versions of the same matrix' (xviii), and then goes on to argue that the 'ultimate insight' of Hegelian dialectics 'is neither the all-encompassing One which contains/mediates/sublates all differences, nor the explosion of multitudes … but the split of the One into Two … a split which cleaves the One from within … the opposition between the One and the Outside is reflected back into the very identity of the One' (xxvi).
71 *They Know Not*, 143-144. This is, on Žižek's account, the basic structure of the Lacanian hysterical subject, and for Žižek 'desire "as such" is hysterical' (*Ticklish Subject*, 290).
72 In *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Carlson draws on a reading of Heidegger, Derrida and Dionysius to argue for an 'analogy' between death and the mystical encounter with God (254-260).

inaccessible because the subject or the social order deliberately seeks not to access it. The subject works out a way to 'avoid the impasse constitutive of desire by transforming the inherent *impossibility* of its satisfaction into *prohibition*'. Individuals and societies convince themselves that they would be able to attain satisfaction if only it were not for the rules of the social order in which they live or the abjected figure who represents the hindrance to social harmony.[73]

Even in his earliest work, Žižek sets up desire in opposition to the death drive.[74] Žižek talks about the death drive not only in terms of the lack at the heart of the subject but also in terms of an excess. In striking parallel to the classical Christian account of creation *ex nihilo*, the traumatic cut which brings the subject into being is inexplicable: it cannot be explained in the terms of the symbolic order which comes into being with the subject in an attempt to bring harmonious order after the initial violent splitting. As such it is not just a lack in meaning but also an excess over meaning.[75] Žižek talks about this cut in Kantian terms as the '"non-pathological" moral act'. Because it comes before the systems of law and meaning, it cannot be explained or justified in those terms, and so it has the form both of the Kantian moral act – which is done purely out of duty, without any regard for its consequences or meaning – and also of the Kantian notion of radical Evil – which again is done purely for its own sake.[76] Thus, the human world of meaning, consequences and teleology is underpinned by a meaningless act performed purely for its own sake, without regard for its consequences. The name for the teleological world of meaning, consequences and teleology, the quest for success, is desire; the name for the meaningless, compulsive, purposelessness which underlies it, the celebration of failure, is the death drive. Desire is economic; drive is that which both ruptures and founds economy, the condition of both possibility and impossibility of any system of meaning. The death drive is thus both terrible and purely ethical. This account of the constitution of reality also has consequences for Žižek's understanding of time and history: linear, teleological desire, aiming consciously at the reintegration of the lost

---

73 *They Know Not*, 266-267.

74 The possible exception being *Sublime Object* which, as Žižek later argues misses the 'ridiculous inadequacy' of the sublime object and so 'remains caught in the ethics of pure desire' (Foreword to the 2008 second edition of *They Know Not*, xvii).

75 This connection derives from Lacan, who describes the emergence of the subject in terms of creation *ex nihilo* in, for example, *Seminar VII*, 122.

76 *They Know Not*, 203-209. It is specifically this *valorisation* of the notion of radical evil, precisely as a result of its formal parallels with Christian notions of creation, which John Milbank misses when he describes Žižek as interested in Kantian notions of radical evil out of the desire to explain suffering (*Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1).

object and unconsciously at its endless deferral, is associated with time and with historical progress; circular, repetitious drive, which simply circles around the hole at the centre of being is associated with eternity.

The notion of the 'second death' plays a crucial role in Žižek's theorisation of the death drive. Žižek picks this idea up from Lacan, who in turn took it from the writings of the Marquis de Sade. For Žižek, this notion relies on the idea of two deaths: the first death is 'natural death', straightforward biological death, and the second death is 'absolute death', symbolic death, where a person 'dies' socially, the social account of their life being neatly wrapped up.[77] The two deaths do not necessarily occur simultaneously, or even in the same order. It is possible to 'die' symbolically before dying biologically: this is the case with the figure of Antigone in Sophocles' play of the same name.[78] Traditional horror-story figures such as zombies, ghosts and vampires, however, die biologically without dying symbolically. In both cases, there is an 'undead' space between the two deaths, which Žižek identifies with 'the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of the symbolic order'.[79] This space between the two deaths is, therefore, associated both with the death drive and with the possibility of social and political transformation. The occupant of this space can be either sublime (like Antigone or the Christian saint) or horrific (like the zombie).[80] It is at this point, where the traumatic core of history and culture is directly confronted, that it is possible to radically disrupt the symbolic world which attempts to conceal the trauma, the point of failure at its heart. Žižek uses the language of persistence and inertia to talk about drive in terms of a position that a person might take within the symbolic order. The Christian saint, for example 'occupies the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object', of the object which promises both the completion and the dissolution of the symbolic order, and 'enacts no ritual, he conjures nothing, he just persists in his inert presence … in her persistence, Antigone is a saint.'[81] Yet this passive insistence is precisely the point of the *act* which transforms the social order. It is 'the opposite of the symbolic order: the possibility of the 'second death', the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-

---

77 *Sublime Object*, 149-150.
78 Antigone's brother is a traitor to the state, so when he dies the law forbids him a proper burial. Antigone insists on burying him despite this law, and is punished by being walled up, whereupon she hangs herself. For Žižek, Antigone's insistence on burying her brother in the face of the law means that she excludes herself from the symbolic community, dying symbolically before she does so biologically.
79 *Sublime Object*, 149-150.
80 *Sublime Object*, 130-131, 149-150.
81 *Sublime Object*, 130.

called reality is constituted.'[82] It is historical materialism in the Benjaminian sense, able to '*arrest*, to *immobilize* historical movement and to *isolate* the detail from its historical totality',[83] suspending 'the linear "flow of time"'[84] and creating a 'point of rupture which cuts into historical continuity'.[85] It is an act of 'withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the "zero point"',[86] an act of 'annihilation, of wiping out' that undoes the symbolic order, creating a 'traumatic incision' which makes it possible to reorder the social world.[87] It is the withdrawal from the social order which makes change possible, and this shift corresponds to the process which takes place at the end of analysis, where the analysand realises that the analyst does not have the answer to his questions: 'his desire has no support in the Other … the authorisation of his desire can come only from himself.'[88] It is only when the subject ceases to look to the Other to for the answer to the question of desire, seeks to worry about what the Other wants from her, that she is able to move from desire to drive and hence to the transformation of society. This transformation is also the shift from desire as the striving for 'impossible fullness' to the drive which 'turns failure into triumph'; in the drive, Žižek argues, 'the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own.'[89]

4.5 Conclusion

In sum, then, for Žižek the social order is structured according to the same pattern as the individual consciousness, with a traumatic gap at the heart of its being. Both subject and society are structured as 'a failed Whole.'[90] Fantasy covers over this gap with a sublime representative of social harmony which promises success, and the abjection of a scapegoat which is blamed for the impossibility of harmony, for society's failure. It is the way that ideology engages the desire of its subjects which makes it so powerful and intransigent, and it is only drive – the monomaniacal, obsessive re-marking of the trauma at the heart of society – which makes it possible for individuals

82 *Sublime Object*, 147.
83 *Sublime Object*, 155.
84 *Sublime Object*, 157.
85 *Sublime Object*, 162.
86 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 50.
87 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 51, 53.
88 *Metastases*, 72-73.
89 *Less than Nothing*, 498.
90 *Metastases*, 160.

to withdraw from the social order and so to re-work it.

The move from desire to drive is the shift from the failed attempt to attain impossible Oneness, the subjective or social form of the Neoplatonic return to the One, to failure *as* the goal, to the celebration of incompleteness and imperfection. Žižek's early work suggests that liberal democracy can function according to something like this logic of drive,[91] but as the cracks in this position become increasingly evident, he turns to the more fundamental question of 'how a social order is founded in the first place' and this, in turn entails a turn to ontology.[92]

---

91 See, for example, *Sublime Object*, 165,
92 Kotsko, *Žižek*, 7.

5. Ontology and the death drive in Slavoj Žižek

5.1 Introduction

As with Lacan, various periodisations of Žižek's work have been attempted; most significant in this sense are the accounts of Matthew Sharpe and Geoff M. Boucher,[1] Adam Kotsko,[2] and Adrian Johnston.[3] Sharpe and Boucher argue that Žižek's work can be divided into two key periods which they term $Žižek_1$ and $Žižek_2$. They attribute the move between these to a two-year period 1994 and 1996 during which time, 'Žižek shut himself up in his study with the Romantic philosophy of Schelling, and uncharacteristically wrote almost nothing for two years. When he emerged … he was a changed man.'[4] This shift in Žižek's work, they argue, is political, marking the transition from 'his early, radical-democratic work' to 'his recent, revolutionary vanguardist work'; but it is also, crucially, the shift from 'the subject of desire' to 'the subject of the drives'.[5] For Sharpe and Boucher, this shift is regrettable – primarily because they consider Žižek's affirmation of democracy superior to his later radical communist politics – but also theoretically incoherent because, after Žižek's Schellingian turn, he begins to assume that politics, ethics, theology and the psychoanalytic account of the subject all '*have the same basic structures, which can all be analysed using the same terms and methodology*'.[6] While they acknowledge that Žižek's engagement with Schelling is in some sense the culmination of his growing discomfort with radical democracy, they offer no account as to why Žižek might have turned to Schelling specifically, arguing instead that it is Žižek's failure to pay proper attention to liberal political philosophy which makes possible his immature 'messianic Marxism'.[7]

Adam Kotsko divides Žižek's work into three periods – an early period in which his Lacanian critique of ideology is in tension with his support of liberal democracy; a breaking point in 1993 at which point Žižek's critique of liberalism makes it impossible

---

1   In their *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
2   In *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).
3   In *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).
4   *Žižek and Politics*, 111.
5   *Žižek and Politics*, 7.
6   *Žižek and Politics*, 27, italics original.
7   *Žižek and Politics*, 110-111.

for him to continue his support for liberal democracy, followed by a 'retreat into theory' which constitutes Žižek's middle period; and then a later period beginning in 1996, where Žižek shifts his focus from the question of how the existing order might be subverted to the more fundamental question of 'how a social order is founded in the first place'.[8] This third stage turns to theology not – as Sharpe and Boucher argue – out of a Hobbesian belief in the basic aggressivity of all human society giving rise to the need for authoritarian forms of government,[9] but as a result of Žižek's encounter with Badiou, whose work takes Christianity as a central example of 'his theory of the truth-event, which offers the possibility of grounding a politics that would be something other than "the same old thing"'. 2006's *The Parallax View* represents, according to Kotsko, 'Žižek's most thoroughgoing attempt to date at developing a complete metaphysical system'.[10]

Finally, Adrian Johnston locates in Žižek a shift 'from a transcendentalist slant in the early writings to a dialectical materialist position', with Schelling a key transitional figure mediating between these two phases of Žižek's work.[11] All three accounts, then, agree that Žižek's work undergoes a crucial transformation around the time of his engagement with Schelling, that this shift represents a move away from support for democracy and towards the desire for a more radical disruption of the existing order, and that – crucially – this political shift corresponds to a philosophical move to connect Žižek's account of the nature of human desiring, both individual and social, to an account of the nature of the material world itself. Žižek's account of desire and drive, then, leads him to articulate an account of *eros* and ontology.

In attempting to articulate an account of individual and social transformation, Žižek is ultimately driven by the logic of his own thought to address the question of the structure of material reality itself. In doing so he repeats the characteristic move of Dionysius' work, bringing together an account of human being and desiring with an account of the structure of the material world more broadly. For Dionysius, everything that is begins in the One, emerging into multiplicity and difference before ultimately returning to the God from whom it came, a process which is driven throughout by the *eros* of both God and the created world. For Žižek, however, everything that is begins in

---

8 *Žižek and Theology*, 6-7.
9 *Žižek and Politics*, 196-197.
10 *Žižek and Theology*, 7.
11 *Žižek's Ontology*, 16.

a nothingness which is not-quite-One, driven to be fruitful and multiply not by desire, the impossible longing for completeness, but by the drive which insists upon and rejoices in failure, in antagonism and incompleteness. This chapter explores Žižek's account of the ontology of the death drive, exploring the ways in which Žižek's ontology of failure allows him to reconfigure the central Dionysian problematics of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universality.

5.2 Ontology and the death drive

The Indivisible Remainder is a key text in Žižek's move towards articulating the relationship between the nature of human desire and the nature of the material world as such. But it is not only Schelling who makes his first significant appearance in Žižek's work here: as Kotsko points out (but Sharpe and Boucher miss),[12] the *Indivisible Remainder* also contains Žižek's first real engagement with quantum physics.[13] The combination of Schelling and quantum physics enables Žižek to argue that the whole of material reality shares this Lacanian-Hegelian structure of the ruptured whole.[14] Žižek says in the introduction to *The Indivisible Remainder* that the true problem of politics is 'not how can we undermine the existing order, but *how does an Order emerge out of disorder in the first place?* Which inconsistencies and splittings allow the edifice of Order to maintain itself?'[15] What Schelling and quantum physics have in common, for

---

12 Kotsko, *Žižek*, 101-102.
13 Part I of the book deals with 'F.W.J. Schelling, Or, At the Origins of Dialectical Materialism'; Part II deals with 'Related Matters' which turn out to be 'Quantum Physics with Lacan'. This initial engagement with quantum physics develops into an increasingly important interest on Žižek's part in the physical sciences more generally, culminating in *Less Than Nothing*, in which discussions of quantum physics can be found alongside engagements with contemporary biology (157-158), neuroscience (715-736), and mathematical ontologies (807-814); although he continues to stress that quantum physics is '*the* scientific discovery which needs philosophical rethinking' (912).
14 This shift is particularly visible in Žižek's account of the difference between nature and culture and humans and animals. Before *Indivisible Remainder*, he held that culture was made possible by the death drive which 'perverted, derailed nature', marking 'the radical break from natural instincts' and making possible the emergence of culture. The 'human universe' is defined as 'a break which introduces imbalance into the natural circuit' (*They Know Not*, 206, 209), although there are hints even here that this account is not quite satisfactory – Žižek appeals to Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion which claim that the notion of Paradise, of a harmonious state of 'idyllic fullness … is a retroactive projection, a way man (mis)perceives the previous, animal state' (*They Know Not*, 175). In *Indivisible Remainder*, however, Žižek explicitly repudiates the idea that the death drive is in some sense what distinguishes human beings from harmonious nature. While both Hegel and Lacan hold that 'man is "nature sick unto death", a being forever marked by traumatic misplacement … in contrast to an animal which always fits into its environment', the 'true breakthrough of quantum physics' is that it 'compels us to call into question' the myth of the absolute gap separating nature from culture. Nature itself is constitutively out of balance (218, 220).
15 *Indivisible Remainder*, 3.

Žižek, is precisely this model of a fundamentally disordered world out of which emerges 'an inconsistent, fragile balance'.[16] This is not the first time that this model has been hinted at in Žižek's work, but it is the first time it is so clearly described, and much of his subsequent work will be devoted to the elaboration of this ontology.

What material reality has in common with the individual and society is, essentially, the structuring role of the drive. In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek asserts that his bringing together of Lacan, Hegel and Schelling into what Adrian Johnston calls a 'transcendental materialism'[17] rests on the recognition of something that other versions of materialism overlook: 'a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive'. Not only is drive the key to understanding materiality, claims Žižek, it is also 'the very core of modern subjectivity', and hence to what Žižek claims as Hegel's 'underlying problem ... that of love.'[18] After an intense engagement with Schelling in *Indivisible Remainder,* it becomes clear that, for Žižek, Schelling functioned as a 'vanishing mediator', making it possible for Žižek to return to Hegel and read him differently: it is not Schelling but Hegel who represents 'the peak of the entire movement of German Idealism'; although both 'the middle Schelling and the mature Hegel' described an inconsistency in the ground of being itself,[19] only Hegel made the connection between ontology and epistemology, transposing the inherent limitation of human knowledge into an inherent limitation of materiality itself.[20] For Hegel, Žižek argues, everything comes from nothing; although 'this nothing is not the Oriental or mystical Void of eternal peace, but the nothingness of a pure gap', the rupturing of the economy of material being.[21] The central concern of Hegelian dialectics is, Žižek argues, 'to demonstrate how every phenomenon, everything that happens, fails in its own way, implies a crack, antagonism, imbalance in its very heart.'[22]

Crucial to Žižek's ontology of drive is the claim that materiality can be self-generating because effects always exceed their causes.[23] Žižek draws here on quantum physics to illustrate and support his claim, citing as an example of this principle the

---

16 *Indivisible Remainder*, 3.
17 Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, xxvi. Although this is Johnston's coinage, Žižek endorses it as a description of his work in *Less than Nothing*, 906.
18 *Less Than Nothing*, 6-7, 9.
19 *Less Than Nothing*, 13.
20 *Less Than Nothing*, 17.
21 *Less Than Nothing*, 38.
22 *Less than Nothing*, 8.
23 As Žižek argues in *Indivisible Remainder*, 29; *Ticklish Subject*, 256; and *Parallax View*, 204.

electron, whose 'mass consists only of the surplus generated by its movement, as though we're dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself'.[24] Moreover, Žižek argues, this excess of the effect over its cause leads to a strange (psychoanalytic or Benjaminian) temporality in which an effect retroactively becomes its own cause.[25] Again, here, contemporary science is invoked, particularly the work of biologists such as Lynn Margulis and Francisco Varela whose account of autopoiesis holds that biological organisms 'bootstrap' themselves into existence by, to use Hegelian language, positing their own presuppositions. It is the temporal loop involved in autopoiesis which gives entities their independent ontological existence: everything that exists is structured along the lines of the ruptured economy; everything emerges, in a Hegelian way, from the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable contradiction, the failure which lies at the heart of all being, and as each thing comes to ground itself via the paradoxical temporal loop which governs drive, it comes to exist independently.[26] In contrast to the classical philosophical assumption that unrealised potential is a mark of ontological imperfection, Žižek suggests that 'incompleteness is in a way *higher than completion*';[27] newness and emergence are not ruptures *with* but ruptures *within* the existing order. This is an ontology of failure in which 'Things "materially exist" not when they meet certain notional requirements, but when they *fail* to meet them – material reality is as such a sign of imperfection.'[28]

5.3 Freedom and the death drive

This ontology of the death drive, like Dionysius' Neoplatonic ontology of *eros*, has numerous consequences for the way that Žižek thinks about the key themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universality. Because of the language of necessity and compulsion which characterises Žižek's discussions of the drive, and because of the traditional association of Marx and Hegel with a view of history as the inevitable

---

24 *On Belief*, 22.
25 See, for example, *Parallax View* 204.
26 *Parallax View*, 204-305 and an almost identical passage in *Less Than Nothing*, 157-158.
27 *Fragile Absolute*, 147 – this occurs in a discussion of 1 Corinthians 13, where Žižek argues that 'the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God – that is, of ultimate perfection.' While this is not here intended specifically as a comment on the *ontological* value of completeness, Žižek's ontological grounding of desire suggests that the two are, in fact, inseparable.
28 *Less than Nothing*, 405.

unfolding of a necessary process, it can seem as though the notion of the drive is simply a denial of freedom. And yet the possibility of freedom is one of the reasons why Žižek's account of materiality as a ruptured economy is so important to him. Freedom, failure, and the drive are entangled with one another. For Žižek, '*Trieb* is freedom – or, at a minimum, it is the contingent material condition of possibility for the emergence of full-fledged autonomy'.[29] Much as with *eros* for Dionysius, the death drive enables Žižek to reconcile freedom and necessity by articulating 'a state in which activity and passivity, being-active and being-acted-upon, harmoniously overlap (the paradigmatic case, of course, is the mystical experience of Love).'[30]

Because the drive is a feature of the material, the individual, and the social, it functions in different ways at different levels. At all levels there is a sense that it simply *is* how things function. At the material level, physical laws and processes and entities come into being according to the logic of the drive. In *Less Than Nothing* Žižek argues that the Higgs Particle can be read as the *objet petit a*, 'the cause disturbing the symmetry of the vacuum … the cause of the passage from nothing (the vacuum, the void of pure potentialities) to something (actual different particles and forces)'.[31] At the individual level, the *objet petit a* is 'a "necessary by-product" of the instinctual body getting caught in the web of the symbolic order'[32] such that 'the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition'.[33] In contrast to desire, which is 'an intentional attitude, drive is something in which the subject is caught'.[34] Similarly, the drive can be seen to function at the level of the social: although the symbolic order comes into being as a result of the actions of individual human choices, it comes to have a logic of its own, to exist as an entity which is totally dependent on individual humans continuing to sustain it in being, yet which also has existence independent of them. Thus, for example, Žižek argues that capitalism is propelled by drive, 'the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction' such that 'the capitalist drive belongs to no definite individual.'[35]

---

29 Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 106. As Žižek puts it, 'The Freudian name for this monstrous freedom is … the death drive' (*Less than Nothing*, 338).
30 *Indivisible Remainder*, 69.
31 *Less Than Nothing*, 144.
32 *Ticklish Subject*, 296.
33 *Sublime Object*, xxvii.
34 *Ticklish Subject* 297.
35 *Parallax View*, 61.

Yet there is another crucial sense in which for Žižek the drive is not simply something which happens. Žižek opposes his account of freedom both to 'scientific naturalism (brain self-conscious, Darwinism...)' and to 'discursive historicism (Foucault, deconstruction)'.[36] Contra scientific naturalism, the material world cannot be understood as a closed system of causation within which perfect predictability would be theoretically possible. Contra discursive historicism, although it may be that every disruption to the system arises from the internal logic of that system, this does not mean that every disruption is already accounted for, already contained within the system. Existing networks of power can give birth to the cause of their own destruction, to that which will exceed, transform, or overcome them.[37] Like the subject and the symbolic order, materiality works, for Žižek, on the feminine logic of the non-all, where effects always exceed their causes.[38] It is in this non-all gap in the economy of causation that freedom is located: every effect has its causes, but it can never be entirely accounted for in terms of those causes.[39] Moreover, this logic of excessive causation does not only account for human freedom but also means that human freedom itself is excessive: Žižek's materialism means that 'we created our world, but it overwhelms us, we cannot grasp and control it.'[40] As a result, for Žižek the opposition of freedom and necessity is itself problematised. Žižek discusses the relationship of freedom and necessity in *Metastases*, where he gives an account of Hegel's notion of 'absolute necessity'. Absolute necessity is, Žižek argues, not an account of the world as nothing but necessity, but 'a process whose very necessity realised itself not *in opposition to*

---

36 *Less than Nothing*, 6.

37 Žižek argues that Foucault 'precludes the possibility that the system itself, on account of its inherent inconsistency, may give birth to a force whose excess it is no longer able to master and which thus detonates its unity, its capacity to reproduce itself. In short, Foucault does not consider the possibility of an effect escaping, outgrowing its cause, so that although it emerges as a form of resistance to power and is as such absolutely inherent to it, it can outgrow and explode it.' (*Ticklish Subject*, 256).

38 For example, Žižek discusses this in *Metastases*, arguing that the not-all of feminine enjoyment 'does not in any way entail that a part of the woman's enjoyment is *not* the effect of what a man does to her. In other words, 'not-all' designates inconsistency, not incompleteness: in a woman's reaction there is always something unforeseen, the woman never reacts in the expected way … Woman is not fully submitted to the causal link; with her, the linear order of causality breaks down' (119). In *Monstrosity*, Žižek explicitly connects this feminine logic of the not-all to the contemporary scientific account of materiality, arguing that the 'logic of modern science is ... "feminine" … in the sense that it is the "totality" of rational causal order itself which is inconsistent, "irrational", non-All. Only this non-All guarantees the proper opening of the scientific discourse to surprises, to the emergence of the "unthinkable"' (88-89).

39 *Metastases* says that dialectical materialism asserts 'the radical heteronomy of the effect with regard to the cause' (126); *Ticklish Subject* that 'the fundamental feature of the dialectical-materialist notion of "effect" [is that] the effect can "outdo" its cause; it can by ontologically "higher" than its cause' (256).

40 *Monstrosity*, 244.

contingency but *in the form of* contingency.'[41] Because of the temporal logic of Žižek's Hegelian ontology, history progresses according to the principle of '*reciprocity*, wherein the cause which determines its effect is itself determined by the effect.'[42] This in turn relates back to Žižek's discussion of the way in which material entities 'bootstrap' themselves into existence: 'the subject is', Žižek claims, 'an effect that entirely posits its own cause'[43] (and this cause is, precisely, 'the moment of cut, failure, finitude').[44]

In terms of the subject and the subject's freedom, this means that the act which brings the subject into being, whilst in one sense the free choice of the subject, is also a choice the subject makes before she is able to consciously decide for herself. This 'founding gesture of consciousness, the act of decision by means of which I "choose myself"' is a 'vanishing mediator', the traumatic point on which the subject's attempt to fully grasp herself will forever founder and fail.[45] Precisely because the act is a break with causality, with teleology, with existing systems of meaning and materiality, it is irrational, unjustifiable, both an excess over and a gap within existing economies. It is a moment of creation *ex nihilo,* and for this reason exists – as with *eros* for Dionysius – as a paradoxical conjunction of freedom and necessity. It is a forced choice, a free act which can only be undertaken when it is treated as an inevitability. The act, for Žižek, involves the 'identification of fate and freedom … assuming one's Destiny as the highest (albeit forced) free choice.'[46] The way in which the subject becomes self-grounding, the way in which she comes to retroactively posit her own presuppositions is by the free enactment of her own fate.[47] Where for Dionysius *eros* functions to hold together freedom and necessity in both divine and human natures, for Žižek it is the death drive which plays this role.

Where for Dionysius the structural similarities between God's free, inexplicable act of creation and humankind's incomprehensible decision to sin brings creation and fall into uncomfortable proximity with one another, Žižek's ontology of drive responds to this problem by asserting that in the drive, good and evil paradoxically coincide. In 'the pagan Cosmos', Žižek argues, the Good is understood in terms of homoeostasis,

---

41 *Metastases*, 35.
42 *Metastases*, 36.
43 *Metastases*, 37.
44 *Less than Nothing*, 380.
45 *Indivisible Remainder*, 33-34.
46 *Ticklish Subject*, 20.
47 *Parallax View*, 21.

'cosmic balance', a hierarchy of being within which every member has and knows their place.[48] Evil, by contrast, is the interruption of this cosmic balance, 'the excessive assertion of one Principle to the detriment of others'.[49] And it is precisely Evil in this sense which Žižek understands to be the basis of human freedom: 'the very existence of subjectivity involves the "false", "abstract" choice of Evil, of Crime – that is, an excessive 'unilateral' gesture which throws the harmonious Order of the Whole out of balance .. an arbitrary choice of something trivial and insubstantial'.[50] Žižek relates this discussion of evil to Kant's work, arguing that, contra Kant's intentions, his notions of radical evil and ethical duty are formally identical.[51] Both involve a decision made for non-pathological reasons, which means that the decision is treated as an end in itself rather than a means to an end: both run, then, on the logic of drive rather than desire. But Žižek also takes the formal parallel between the Christian doctrines of creation and fall to mean that 'Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of Being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others'.[52]

For Žižek, then, it is desire rather than drive which represents a retreat from ethics. Whilst drive *is* – it continues to circulate, regardless of subjective attitudes towards it – this does not mean that subjective attitudes are of no consequence, and much of the thrust of Žižek's thought is towards an account of what it means for human beings to shift their subjective position so as to encourage and enable transformation to occur. The paradigm for this shift is the end of analysis in the Lacanian system, which Žižek connects to Schelling's three-stage process (the vortex of drives, the act of decision, and the birth of coherent reality). The early Lacan holds that analysis ends at the point of subjectivisation, which is the moment at which the subject 'integrates into his symbolic universe … the meaningless contingency of his destiny'.[53] On this account, analysis ends when the analysand is able to offer a fully meaningful account of her life; to understand previously inexplicable phenomena such as dreams or symptoms, and to give a coherent account of herself. But for the later Lacan, analysis ends at the

---

48 This is, of course, one possible reading of the Neoplatonically-tinged accounts of created hierarchy in the works of Dionysius, Aquinas, and numerous other Christian theologians.
49 *Fragile Absolute*, 119; see also *Metastases*, 193.
50 *Ticklish Subject*, 96.
51 *Indivisible Remainder*, 92; *Violenc*e, 47**.** See also *Ticklish Subject*, where Žižek argues, 'Take Kant's rejection of the notion of "diabolical Evil" (Evil elevated into moral Duty, i.e. accomplished not out of "pathological" motivation, but just "for its own sake"): is not Kant here *rejecting a notion the conceptual space for which was opened up only by his own philosophical system* - that is to say, is he not battling with the innermost consequence, the unbearable excess, of *his own* philosophy?' (120).
52 *Parallax View*, 282.
53 *Indivisible Remainder*, 94.

point of subjective destitution: when the analysand 'has to accept that the traumatic encounters which traced out the itinerary of his life were utterly contingent and indifferent, that they bear no "deeper message".'[54] This point of subjective destitution marks the end of the analysand's guilt, because it marks the point at which she comes to realise and acknowledge that there is no big Other: there is no external agency to pass judgement on the analysand or give meaning to her life. This is a Sartrean ethics of freedom where there is nothing outside of the subject's own free choice which can be blamed either for their failure to do their duty (the subject cannot say '"I know I should do it, but … I'm simply too weak, such is my nature"'); or, on the other hand for the actions they take in order to fulfil their duty (nor can she say '"the moral law imposed that act on me as my unconditional duty!"')[55]

In all of this, the fundamental issue is that of the relationship between the subject and the Other. The problematic of drive and desire corresponds to the traditional Idealist reading of Hegel which Žižek critiques: the idea that the final goal of human development is the integration of all reality into the single subject, such that the subject realises that they *are* the object, that everything that exists is born out of their own self-relationship. Insofar as it is an ethical stance rather than an ontological feature, drive is concerned with how to resist the temptation of attempting to absorb the Other into the self. By refusing the temptation to answer the question of what the Other wants with her own fantasy, the subject who fully assumes drive refuses to make the Other into a mere projection of her own split subjectivity. Žižek says that 'it is love, the encounter of the Two, which "transubstantiates" idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper.'[56] It is precisely this process which is supposed to take place in analysis: the analysand first treats the analyst as the stand-in for the big Other only to realise that she alone is responsible for her own desire, that the analyst does not hold the secret to the meaning of her identity. In circling around the point of failure within herself, which corresponds to the failure within the Other, the analysand who successfully 'traverses the fantasy' comes to embody a form of subjectivity which allows the Other to exist as Other, as an enigma even to itself, as a split being which can never be fully integrated into the symbolic universe. In ethical terms, this means that the subject must take responsibility for her own actions, without reference to an external standard of Law, thus escaping

---

54 *Indivisible Remainder*, 94.
55 *Indivisible Remainder*, 169.
56 *Violence*, 27.

from the 'dialectic of Law and transgression' and from guilt.[57]

Unlike Dionysius, then, Žižek both recognises and fully endorses the formal parallel between God's excessive, unjustifiable act of creation and the excessive, unjustifiable human act of sin, positioning Christianity firmly on the side of excess and rupture rather than harmony and union. To be human is to be free, to be creative; and this freedom is not something at odds with the harmonious functioning of the material world but arises precisely from the intrinsically ruptured nature of materiality itself. We are free, Žižek says, 'because there is a lack in the Other, because the substance out of which we grew and on which we rely is inconsistent, barred, failed.'[58] While desire hankers after an impossible harmony, the death drive, like the Christian God, seeks division, multiplicity, and difference.

5.4 Materiality and the death drive

Žižek's materialist ontology can usefully be understood in opposition to three interconnected accounts of the ontological constitution of the world: the traditional reading of Plato, the Christian appropriation of Neoplatonism, and the ontotheology whose critique lies at the heart of much contemporary philosophical engagement with apophatic theology.

First, then, despite Žižek's recent rereading of Plato as a Žižekian materialist before his time (albeit only in the *Parmenides*),[59] Žižek's account of the emergence of materiality from nothing stands in direct opposition to the traditional Platonic idea that the material world is but a poor copy of the eternal realm of Ideas. Grace Jantzen, whilst (not unlike Žižek) maintaining that there is potential in Plato's thought for its own subversion, for drawing out an alternative account of the relationship between the material and the ideal, argues that, on balance, Plato's account of beauty as 'the ladder upon which one must climb to immortality'[60] means this his work fundamentally denies materiality, natality and human embodiment. Bodily processes of change and death are, for Plato and his culture, associated with women and seen as something to be

---

57 *Fragile Absolute*, 142.
58 *Less Than Nothing*, 263.
59 *Less Than Nothing*, 48-78.
60 Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty. Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 39.

transcended in the ascent to perfection.[61] Jantzen places the blame in part on Plato's reliance on maths, which, she argues, encourages the idea that '*generation*, this world of birth and life' is 'inimical to the "contemplation of true being"'.[62] Despite his rereading of Plato in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek acknowledges the importance of this account of materiality as a counterpoint to his own ontology, stating that 'In pre-Kantian philosophy, appearance was conceived as the illusory (defective) mode in which things appear to us, finite mortals; our task is to reach beyond these false appearances to the way things really are (from Plato's Ideas to scientific "objective reality").[63] This is in direct opposition to Žižek's own position, that 'there is more truth in the appearance than in what may be hidden beneath it.'[64]

Second, this sense of materiality as something to be escaped or transcended is all the more acute in Neoplatonism, which sees materiality not merely as a poor imitation of the eternal realm of Ideas but as something which specifically comes into being as the result of a fall from simplicity into multiplicity, through the emanation of the One into fragmentation. Again, this Neoplatonic account of the genesis and teleological destination of the material world is directly opposed to Žižek's: where Neoplatonism begins with the all-encompassing One, tending to see creation as a fall away from perfect simplicity of the One and redemption as the dissolution of differentiation and materiality back into Oneness, Žižek begins with an inconsistent Nothing, the emergence of materiality *ex nihilo*, imagining redemption – insofar as he imagines it at all – as a fragile work of *construction*.[65]

Third, ontotheology in the Heideggerian sense seeks to ground Being itself in or on the divine nature; God comes to function as metaphysical guarantee for the material world, as first mover or the ground of being. Again, this account of materiality is obviously at odds with Žižek's attempt to think materiality as something which comes to be self-grounding, which emerges out of nothing and comes to function as its own

---

61 Jantzen, *Foundations*, 175.
62 Jantzen, *Foundations*, 186.
63 *Less Than Nothing*, 10.
64 *Less Than Nothing*, 31. This quotation is taken from Žižek's description of Plato, but clearly represents Žižek's own position.
65 Žižek does, however, place Christianity ontologically on his side, citing G K Chesterton's assertion that '"All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls."' (from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, quoted in *Monstrosity*, 39.

ground. It is, as John Milbank suggests, a form of nihilism,[66] albeit one which both describes itself specifically in relation to the Christian notion of creation *ex nihilo*, and which views nothingness as intrinsically unstable and therefore productive.

The common theme in the opposition between Žižek's thought and the ontological schemata which are ranged against him is the notion of transcendence. (The traditional reading of) Platonism, Neoplatonism and ontotheology all stake out a version of transcendence in which what transcends materiality is itself relatively static, eternal, and is to some extent knowable as such. In place of these ontologies which position materiality and transcendence as separate but interacting, Žižek offers an ontology in which materiality transcends itself on account of its own internal rupture, an entirely immanent account of transcendence. Žižek explains this emphasis on immanence in his discussion of Fichte, pointing out that 'when I directly posit/define myself as a finite being, existing in the world among other beings … I adopt the infinite position from which I can observe reality and locate myself in it. Consequently, the only way for me to truly assert my finitude is to accept that my world is infinite, since I cannot locate its limit *within* it.' In place of an account of the subject which contrasts the finitude of the material world with the infinity of that which transcends it, Žižek offers an account of materiality in which 'the condition of the possibility of identity is, at the same time, its condition of impossibility; the assertion of self-identity is based on its opposite, on an irreducible remainder that truncates every identity.'[67] In contrast to more static, extrinsic accounts of transcendence, Žižek's model for thinking the relationship between the real and the ideal places greater emphasis on time, seeing the development of the material world as the locus of the emergence of genuine newness, real freedom, and meaningful contingency. Everything is at stake in the progression of the ruptured economy of materiality. The world is also positioned as something which allows genuinely distinct beings to emerge, and, at least potentially, to continue to diversify, in contrast to the tendency of Platonism, Neoplatonism and ontotheology to see everything as tending towards sameness and identity. Things come to be their own origin, their own foundation in a way which, for Žižek, is creative and liberating. This offers the opportunity to think love in terms of the drive, as a relating to otherness in terms of what it is in itself rather than the role it plays in our own narcissistic self-relation. This account of the nature of materiality also means that, for Žižek, nature is intrinsically

---

66 *Monstrosity*, 137-139.
67 *Less Than Nothing*, 152-153.

revolutionary, inherently messianic in its structure, necessarily unfinished, incomplete.[68]

Žižek's account of human embodiment similarly sets itself up against the traditional Christian tendency to see the body as less real or less important than the intellect. Žižek's account of the body is perhaps best understood in the context of debates about the nature of the relationship between human biology and symbolically-formed subjectivity. Readings of Lacan tend to fall into two camps on this issue: one which affirms the essential harmoniousness of life before the entry of the signifier, seeing the symbolic order as something which breaks into the peacefulness of mere biological life, forever unsettling it; and one which takes the complex interrelation of body and language in the human subject to exemplify the basic structure of reality itself. Bruce Fink, Dylan Evans, and some of Adrian Johnston's works take the former line; Žižek, and Johnston's more Žižekian work, the latter.

Bruce Fink comes closest to arguing that Lacan asserts the existence of a primordial state of gratification. He describes castration in terms of the parents imposing upon the child the sacrifice of 'immediate gratification of the need to eat and excrete.'[69] Fink glosses Lacan's distinctions between need, desire and demand in terms of the child's relationship to the mother. When the mother expresses *in language* a desire for something other than the child, this enables the child to perceive the mother as lacking, which in turn creates a distance from the mother which allows the child to understand herself as existing outside of the mother's demand. Until the mother's desire is named, for Fink, 'there is no lack; the child is submerged in the mOther as demand and cannot adopt a stance of his own.'[70] As Fink is interested in Lacan primarily as a resource for clinical praxis, the persistent assumption in his work is that there is some sort of pre-linguistic state of being which is disrupted by the child's entry into language.

Dylan Evans' position is more subtle. For Evans, Lacan's notion of 'need' is 'a purely biological concept opposed to the realm of the drive', arguing that, while the infant's basic biological needs could be entirely met by 'the specific action corresponding to the particular need in question' (so, for example, hunger could be

---

68 Here Frederiek Depoortere slightly misreads Žižek when he argues that the drive is 'no longer nature but is also not yet culture'; for Žižek it is *nature itself* which is 'completely *unnatural*', structured according to the logic of the drive (*Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Žižek* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 103).

69 Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 66.

70 *Fink, Clinical Introduction,* 177.

satisfied by food), it is the fact that needs must be mediated via language which introduces 'a split between need and demand'. It is language which means that the demand for the satisfaction of the infant's need is also the demand for love, which can never be fully met. As a result, between need and demand there lies 'an insatiable leftover, which is desire itself.' Evans is clear that there is, for humans, no such thing as pure need outside of language, but argues that the myth of pure need is 'useful to Lacan for maintaining his theses about the radical divergence between human desire and all natural or biological categories.'[71]

Adrian Johnston's rather pessimistic account of the psychoanalytic notion of the death drive is very clear that 'there is no such thing as full, pure enjoyment.'[72] But Johnston's discussion of the idea of full enjoyment is more fraught than that of either Fink or Evans, and this complexity arises precisely from his understanding of the drive as that which exists on the boundary between the body and the mind, nature and culture.[73] At the heart of Johnston's discussion of the drive is the distinction he makes between what he calls the 'axis of iteration' and the 'axis of alteration'. The 'axis of iteration' is the element of the drive which is eternal and fixed, demanding repetition; it consists of the drive-source and the drive-pressure. The 'axis of alteration' is the element of the drive which is temporal in nature; it consists of the drive-aim and the drive-object.[74] Moreover, the axis of iteration is strongly associated with the body, whereas the axis of alteration is associated with language.[75] The source of the drive is 'quasi-somatic';[76] associated with the id, which (Johnston argues) Lacan connects to the body. Although Johnston claims that, for Lacan, the dividing line between the unconscious and the id (which roughly correlates to the distinction between mind and body) is also the dividing line between that of which psychoanalysis can and cannot

71 *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 122.
72 Johnston, *Time Driven*, xxix.
73 For Johnston, 'the Freudian *Trieb* is the pound of flesh caught up in a matrix of elements irreducible to this bodily cause' (*Time Driven*, 161).
74 Johnston, *Time Driven*, xxxi-xxxii.
75 Johnston contrasts 'the somatic side of the sexual drive' with 'its objects of satisfaction – the nonsomatic, mental realm of ideational representations' (*Time Driven*, 164)*,* and says that the axis of iteration 'bears a resemblance to the recurrent, nonhistoricised version of instinct', derailed only by its conflict with the axis of alteration which forces 'the loss of a biological, teleological trajectory' (167); and then goes on to describe the drive as the locus of 'the interaction between 'soma' (Real) and 'psyche' (Imaginary and Symbolic)' (168). Later, he says that Lacan takes the drive-source to be 'a vital, somatic aspect of drive structure'; by contrast, the drive-objects, while linked to 'the anatomical organisation of the human body' are symbolic insofar as they relate not to the Real body but to erotogenic zones of the body which are somatic 'only after the fact of their Symbolic inauguration' (257).
76 *Time Driven*, 162.

speak,[77] the association between the axis of iteration, the Real, and the body continues to surface throughout *Time Driven*. Similarly, the axis of alteration is clearly associated with language and the symbolic order; Johnston links the idea of the axis of alteration to Lacan's claim that '"the word murders the thing"', and describes its functioning as 'signifier-like'.[78] But the axes of iteration and alteration cannot be straightforwardly mapped onto the body and language in such a way that it is straightforwardly language which prevents the body obtaining satisfaction. The two axes are part of the same system of the drives, and Johnston vigorously rejects the suggestion that what hinders the drive can ever be thought of as straightforwardly external to it.[79]

Because Johnston is so clear that the drive necessarily entails both alteration and iteration and never exists at all without both axes being present, he asserts (drawing, in part, on Žižek's reading of Lacan), that no state of satisfaction is really possible, either in the present or in the past: 'the nonrepressed, fully satisfied *Trieb* ... is a retroactively projected illusion' and '"expected *jouissance*" ... is an illusory lure.'[80] Yet Johnston does, nevertheless, repeatedly refer to an experience of full satisfaction in terms which suggests that it really does exist, albeit only at the very beginning of the subject's existence. What the drive seeks is, precisely, 'an unaltered repetition of an initial satisfaction – a satisfaction whose first experience catalyzes the cathexes inaugurating the very existence of a drive per se.' As for Kierkegaard, for Johnston the passage of time inevitably make it impossible to recapture this original experience of satisfaction, yet Johnston repeatedly asserts the reality of 'the initial version of the object as experience prior to the gestation of the inner-outer, me versus not-me dichotomy'.[81] The 'lost object' really has been lost.

There are two claims here which seem at first to be incompatible: that there was, if only for the briefest moment imaginable, at the subject's inception, an experience of satisfaction; and that the drive is intrinsically hindered and satisfaction necessarily an

---

77 *Time Driven*, 268-269.

78 *Time Driven,* 322.

79 So, for example, Johnston rejects what he considers to be the tendency within both Freud and Marx's thought to view that which impedes human satisfaction as social rather than individual and hence an external rather than an internal impediment. Freud and Marx's analyses are, therefore, expressions of 'the compulsion of the split *Trieb* to project its own internal antagonism onto external reality in the form of barriers to enjoyment.' (*Time Driven*, 255). Elsewhere, Johnston says, 'it must be understood that "symbolic castration" is a consequence of the internal dynamics of *Trieb*, not simply an effect of the external imposition of a sociolinguistic matrix upon the libidinal individual' (323). Drives are, then, 'constitutively dysfunctional' (243).

80 *Time Driven*, 243.

81 *Time Driven*, 151.

illusion. The key to reconciling the two comes at the very end of *Time Driven*, where Johnston argues that the hindered drive is intrinsically human, that 'if the drives were fully functional … humans would be animalistic automatons, namely, creatures of nature … Humanity is free precisely insofar as its pleasures are far from perfection, insofar as its enjoyment is never absolute.'[82] Johnston seems, here, to reinstate the nature/culture distinction, although he remains agnostic as to the status of non-human nature, asserting that to speak about biology is outside of the scope of psychoanalysis and yet that psychoanalysis cannot give up all speech about the body for fear of lapsing into an idealist solipsism. The question of whether the drive begins in biology must, Johnston argues, be 'put aside' rather than resolved.[83] Yet this agnosticism results in a tendency within Johnston work to suggest that materiality, nature, really do exist outside of human experience and that they, unlike subjectivity, do not function according to the logic of the drive. Outside of human freedom, Johnston implies, is a natural order where satisfaction is possible, although freedom is not. Without the internal hindrance of the drive, 'drive per se would not exist, reverting back to mere instinct.'[84] Despite his stronger emphasis on the phantasmic status of *jouissance*, then, Johnston ends up somewhere between Fink and Evans: *jouissance* might (sort of) exist insofar as nature itself exists as harmonious, with the accompanying assumption that insofar as human desires are purely bodily they are capable of satisfaction, and that it is only insofar as they are caught up into language, consciousness and history that they become fractured. Johnston does not, it is true, depict natural harmony as desirable: it is clear that he considers it better to be free and unhappy than reduced to a mere cog in the ahistorical natural order of cause and effect, of eternal and successful repetition; but, nonetheless, he implies that there really is harmony and that human beings really have lost it.

By contrast, Žižek's universalisation of the structure of the drive to everything that exists means that he has none of Johnston's qualms about the limitations of psychoanalysis as a discipline in terms of its ability to speak about the body. Where Johnston claims that, for psychoanalysis at least, it is the realm of the signifier, of language, which is knowable, and that the body may be only inferred or dimly grasped through the gaps or conflicts within the symbolic, for Žižek the structure of subjectivity reflects the structure of the world as such, and body and mind function as part of the

---

82 *Time Driven*, 341.
83 *Time Driven*, 216-217.
84 *Time Driven*, 329.

same ruptured economy. Žižek does at times draw on the language of the symbolic order as that which disrupts the body. In a reading of Lacan's graphs of sexuation in *Sublime Object*, Žižek says that 'the pre-symbolic "substance", the body as materialised, incarnated enjoyment, becomes enmeshed in the signifier's network … the body survives as dismembered, mortified.'[85] But Žižek also suggests, in the same passage, that it is *language* which is disrupted by the body: 'as soon as the field of the signifier is penetrated by enjoyment it becomes inconsistent, porous, perforated – the enjoyment is what cannot be symbolised, its presence in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies in this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of the lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency.'[86] Elsewhere, Žižek argues that the symbolic order is that which relates to the body as its own excess, 'a repulsive tic/protuberance that sticks out from the (human) body, disfiguring its unity'.[87] Body and language are thus related within the subject as 'the difference between the human and the inhuman excess that is inherent to being-human.'[88]The subject comes into being at the intersection of the body and language, and is both internally inconsistent and located at the point of the internal inconsistency of the body itself and of language itself. The disruption of the body by the symbolic order is figured as the cut of castration which, Žižek argues, takes a different form in different societies and their associated forms of subjectivity. In pagan tribal societies and in Judaism there is a literal cut – circumcision, tattooing, piercing etc. – which marks the body in such a way as to gain access to the symbolic order; in postmodern society, with its increasing virtualisation, Žižek argues that 'the postmodern "neo-tribal" cut in the body' functions not to gain access to the symbolic order but to gain access to *the body itself*, 'to designate the body's resistance against submission to the socio-symbolic Law.'[89] This paradoxical relationship of body and language as one another's point of excess/lack is, of course, signified by the phallus, which 'designates the juncture at which the radical externality of the body as independent of our will … joins the pure interiority of our thought … and, in contrast, the point at which the innermost "thought"

---

85   *Sublime Object*, 136.
86   *Sublime Object*, 137. It is this complex interrelation of language and biology which Ola Sigurdson misses in his reading of Žižek on the death drive ('Slavoj Žižek, the death drive, and zombies: a theological account' in *Modern Theology* 29.3 (2013), 366).
87   *Parallax View*, 84.
88   *Parallax View*, 123.
89   *Ticklish Subject*, 371-372.

assumes features of some strange entity, escaping our "free will".'[90]

At the same time, Žižek argues that what is radical about Lacan is not his assertion of the subject's inherent impossibility but his claim that 'the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed out, by a fundamental impossibility'. Crucially, it is the inconsistency of the Other which allows the subject to relate to the Other without total absorption into the Other: the lack creates 'a breathing space' for the subject.[91] And Žižek's account of the body as ruptured by language is saved from what he would consider to be the phantasmic notion of a pre-linguistic, harmonious body by his assertion that the subject arises precisely out of an inherent impossibility within materiality itself. The subject, then, *is* the body insofar as the body is dismembered by language, and it *is* language insofar as language is disrupted by the body. The subject emerges at the point where both language and the body break down. The two are the paradoxical opposites of one another, related by a parallax shift or as the two sides of the Möbius strip,[92] and interact in ways which problematise any attempt to keep them apart. As for Lacan,[93] the materiality of language is crucial; where Lacan emphasises the way that the materiality of words themselves functions to subvert the intentions of the subject, Žižek repeatedly emphasises both the material *consequences* of language[94] and also the embodied nature of symbolic identity and beliefs: the subject's innermost beliefs are not merely internal, linguistic, symbolic, but are '"out there", embodied in practices which reach up the immediate materiality of my body', visible in the things a person does, or wears, or in the way they smell.[95] The trauma which inaugurates the subject is *not*, Žižek argues, genetic, straightforwardly material, but 'triggered by an external traumatic encounter, by the encounter of the Other's desire in its impenetrability', and it is only this external shock which pushes the subject into

---

90 *Sublime Object*, 254.
91 *Sublime Object*, 137.
92 In *Lost Causes*, in fact, Žižek implies (via Badiou's distinction between 'democratic materialism' and 'materialist dialectics') that both the body and language are included under the category of the material, structured according to the logic of the non-all: where democratic materialism holds that '"*There is nothing but bodies and languages*"', materialist dialectics concurs, but 'adds "*...with the exception of truths.*"' (381).
93 As Adrian Johnston says, for Lacan language is 'internally self-subverting. Its own materiality is responsible for continually diverting and disrupting the conscious, meaning-oriented intentions-to-signify routed through it.' (*Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 123).
94 See, for example, his discussion of the relationship between symbolic violence and subjective violence in *Violence*, 1-2.
95 *Violence*, 141.

language.[96] Yet at the same time, Žižek insists, 'a pathological psychic process always refers to the real of some organic disturbance, which functions as the proverbial grain of sand triggering the process of the crystallization of the symptom.'[97]

For Žižek, then, there is no question of escaping the material world or desiring to escape it; everything that *is*, is material (although materiality itself is non-all, inherently incomplete, failed). Completeness and perfect union are neither possible nor desirable, except at the level of fantasy (to which, on this account, the most Neoplatonic elements of Dionysius' work would be relegated).

5.5 Hierarchy and the death drive

In Dionysius' work, there is a persistent tension between the notion of hierarchy as the way in which truth and illumination are passed down the great chain of being and the affirmation of the direct relationship between all beings and God. Where Caputo rejects hierarchicalism in favour of an account of the world in which all beings are equal in their ignorance and imperfection and Radical Orthodoxy tends towards a straightforward affirmation of hierarchy as a good, Žižek makes two moves. First, he explicitly endorses disruptive 'Protestant' logic in which access to the truth is unmediated by hierarchical systems of power and order. Second, he *inverts* hierarchy such that those who have privileged access to the truth of the system as a whole are precisely those who are excluded from positions of power.

First, then, in *Monstrosity*, Žižek offers a categorisation of the 'three main versions of Christianity': Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. He argues that Eastern Orthodoxy affirms 'the substantial unity of the text and the body of believers', Catholicism 'stands for radical alienation: the entity which mediates between the founding sacred text and the body of believers, the Church, the religious Institution, regains its full autonomy', whereas for Protestantism 'the only authority is the text itself, and the wager is on every believer's direct contact with the Word of God as delivered in the text … enabling the believer to adopt the position of a "universal Singular," the individual in direct contact with the divine Universality, bypassing the mediating role of the particular Institution.'[98] Whilst this account is highly questionable

---

96 *On Belief*, 47.
97 *Ticklish Subject*, 308.
98 *Monstrosity*, 28.

as a categorisation of actually-existing Christianity,[99] it is revealing of Žižek's attitudes towards hierarchy, as he aligns himself with the 'Protestant-Hegelian' notion of 'a Whole kept together by the process of internal antagonisms' against the 'Catholic' vision of 'harmony' and 'organic hierarchy'.[100]

Second, Žižek offers an inversion of hierarchy. For Žižek, the opposition of harmony and disruption also corresponds to the opposition of desire and drive. Hegemony, power and hierarchy function according to the logic of desire, seeking to incorporate otherness and difference into harmonious oneness, in contrast to the excluded, oppressed and abjected who, by virtue of their position, are much closer to the truth of the situation. This is particularly clear in terms of Žižek's discussion of masculinity and femininity. For Žižek, gender is the central antagonism around which human subjectivity forms. Following Lacan's re-reading of the Aristophanic myth of love,[101] Žižek argues that human sexual difference is the contingent grafting of individual subjective incompleteness onto biological sexual difference. The sexual relationship is the primary locus for the individual quest for wholeness, and yet, as Lacan argues, 'there's no such thing as a sexual relationship';[102] '"Man" and "woman" together do not form a Whole, since *each of them is already in itself a failed Whole*.'[103] For Žižek, the masculine and feminine positions are two different ways of relating to this failure; the masculine position is essentially the position of desire, reducing women to the position of the *objet petit a,* the missing piece; whereas the feminine position is the position of the drive, functioning according to the logic of the non-all which recognises that completion is impossible as the result of an *internal* obstacle.[104] The feminine position, then, is essentially the position of truth: woman is '*more subject than man*';[105] woman 'is the subject *par excellence*.'[106] It is not quite the case that women are necessarily more ethical than men, but the way in which they are positioned by the

---

99 Žižek claims, for example, that in Catholicism 'it is ... considered a sin for an ordinary believer to read the text directly, bypassing the priest's guidance' (*Monstrosity*, 28), and he seems to draw exclusively on the far-from-neutral work of Vladimir Lossky for his account of Eastern Orthodoxy – see, for example, the list of references in *Monstrosity*, 101-102.
100 *Monstrosity*, 252-253.
101 Lacan says that, contra Aristophanes' myth which suggests that, in love, it is 'the other, one's sexual other half' which is sought, 'analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever' (*Seminar XI*, 205).
102 *Seminar XX*, 34.
103 *Metastases*, 159-160.
104 *Fragile Absolute*, 146-147.
105 *Indivisible Remainder*, 114.
106 *Metastases*, 122.

patriarchal social order means that it is harder for them to adopt the hegemonic perspective, and so easier for them to access the truth of the situation, to recognise that completeness is impossible.

If the sexual relationship is an externalisation of the antagonism to individual subjects, then at the social level it is class struggle which, for Žižek, is the 'antagonism inherent in the social structure', and which is externalised as, for example, 'the struggle between Aryans and Jews'.[107] Yet at this level, for Žižek, it is not the group who functions as the fantasised obstacle to harmony which occupies the position of truth (e.g. Jewish people) but the group who represent the *real* antagonism at play, that is, the proletariat, who occupy the position of 'privileged political agent', a privilege which is 'grounded in the "objective social position"' of this group.[108] Again, though Žižek recognises that a position of powerlessness does not *necessarily* imply insight into the truth of the situation: there is a difference between the social group as such, 'the "working class"' and the social group as subjective position, 'the "proletariat"', yet the two are also closely related.[109]

For Žižek, then, the corollary of the phantasmic nature of most individual subjects and societies is that it is precisely those who are excluded from power who are closest to the truth of the situation. This is, unsurprisingly a Marxist social ontology of class struggle; as such it represents a genuine break with the affirmation of hierarchy which Caputo is unable entirely to escape, and a thorough affirmation of the subversive aspects of Dionysius' account of the structure of human relations against his notion of hierarchy as the mediation of illumination.

5.6 Universalism and the death drive

Where the notion of divine simplicity means that Dionysius envisages everything that is both beginning from and returning to union with God, the emphasis of Žižek's work is not on union but on separation. Even nothingness is not at one with itself but inconsistent and antagonistic, and every identity is riven by internal conflict, by failure. The drive is the logic of borders, of separation between things, of that which

---

107 *Lost Causes*, 261.
108 *Lost Causes*, 277.
109 *Lost Causes*, 285. In some ways this parallels liberation theology's notion of God's preferential option for the poor: that those in a position of powerlessness rather than power are the locus of truth.

shatters and disrupts economy. And yet, repeatedly, Žižek argues that this logic of separation and disruption is precisely the logic of Christianity itself, citing in support of this claim G. K. Chesterton's discussion of the logic of the Christian doctrine of creation:

> Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces … This is the intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity; that for the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian it is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. The world-soul of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it . . . All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls.[110]

This Chestertonian account of creation is, effectively, a strong form of the traditional Christian (and Dionysian) claim that the problem of creation is effectively the problem of division, of separation and multiplicity.

Similarly, what constitutes universality for Žižek is not the universal participation of all things in the single, simple source of all Being but precisely the rupturing of all things, the fact that every identity is constituted by an internal inconsistency. What is universal is failure. And yet this does not lead Žižek to the sort of resignation which Caputo evinces. What is universal is the problem, the conflict, which constitutes the struggle at the heart of every identity.[111] Each cultural iteration of the difference between men and women is a particular attempt to grapple with the universal problem of sexual difference, which in turn is ultimately the universal problem of the incompleteness of every individual. Every society is a particular attempt to resolve the class struggle which constitutes society. For Žižek, this means two things. First that, as above, what is universal to every particular identity is what is excluded.[112] Second, that what is at stake is the meaning of the universal. Žižek speaks about the 'concrete universality' which is the totality of every attempt to grapple with a particular

---

110 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Fontana Books, 1961), 130-131, cited in *Monstrosity*, 39.

111 'The Universal names the site of a Problem-Deadlock, of a burning Question, and the Particulars are the attempted but failed Answers to this Problem. The concept of State, for instance, names a certain problem: how to contain the class antagonism of a society?' (*Parallax View*, 35).

112 So, for example, 'Christian universality is … a struggling universality, the site of a constant battle [it] *is formulated from the position of those excluded*, of those for whom there is no specific place within the existing order' (*Parallax View*, 35).

problem.[113] The concrete universality of class struggle is the totality of human history; the concrete universality of the Bible is 'the totality of its historically determined readings'. And because what happens later can change the meaning of what comes before, this means that *everything is at stake* in the struggle for the way in which the universal problem will be imperfectly articulated in this particular instance.[114] To struggle to read the Bible in a particular way *now*, for example, is to have a stake in what it will come to mean universally, eternally. The universal, then, is neither safe (as for Milbank) nor hopelessly unattainable (as for Caputo). Nor, crucially, is it a colonizing universal: '"concrete universality"', Žižek says, 'does not concern the relationship of a particular to the wider Whole … but rather *the way it relates to itself*, the way its very particular identity is split from within.'[115] What is universal, ultimately, is failure; but what matters more than anything is *how* we fail.

5.7 Conclusion

In contrast to Dionysius' Neoplatonic account of *eros* and ontology, Žižek's materialist ontology of failure is one in which both desire and being are irreducibly particular and contingent. It is precisely out of the cracks in being which make unity impossible, out of the failure of every identity, that newness is generated. Division is a good in itself, not merely something to be undone in order to return to union with God; and the desire for union is itself a false and unrealisable dream. Materiality is not the dead weight which threatens to drag down human culture, but the ruptured and therefore fertile ground which opens up the possibility of relationship and gives birth to language, to culture, and to abstract thought. There are numerous ways in which this account promises to be more fruitful than other contemporary readings of apophatic theology; the following chapter will explore Žižek's materialist ontology of desire in relation to Derrida's work and to recent theological debates over the nature of 'the gift' in order to explicate some of the ways in which this is the case.

---

113 *Less than Nothing*, 359.

114 For example, 'Each solution not only reacts to "its" problem, but retroactively redefines it, formulating it from within its own specific horizon' (*Less than Nothing*, 214)'; the Absolute 'is not the all-encompassing container … within which particular moments are at war with each other – it itself is caught up in the struggle' (*Less than Nothing*, 290).

115 *Less than Nothing*, 362.

6. The Gift

6.1 Introduction

As I have argued, both ancient and contemporary discussions about the nature of desire and ontology (and the relationship between the two) have been driven by concerns which are primarily *economic*. Both the relationship between God and the world and that between the individual and the world have been conceived in economic terms, along with the questions of freedom, evil, creation and teleology (to name but a few). The centrality of the economic question to discussion of ontology and desire is particularly apparent in the debates which have taken place around the nature of 'the gift'. These attempts to grapple with the idea of the gift are closely related to discussions of Dionysius and his legacy both structurally and thematically,[1] but also insofar as the thinkers who have been concerned to discuss the gift both as a problem of philosophy and of theology are, by and large, also those for whom apophatic theology has been a recurring theme.[2]

The problem of the gift is even more explicitly a problem of economy than the problem of apophatic theology and consists, essentially, of the problem of its gratuity. For a gift to be truly a gift, the argument goes, it must be given for no reason, with no expectation of return, and it must be received as something unexpected, unearned, with

---

1   Thomas A. Carlson says that 'two key themes … come to dominate contemporary discussion of the apophatic traditions: that of "the gift" and that of "the impossible"' (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Arthur Bradley describes the gift as one of four key questions around which the debate between Derrida and Marion – the two key figures in the debate – takes shape, the other three being the status of Dionysius' *hyperousios*, the status of prayer, and the question of whether negative theology is rightly understood as metaphysical or non-metaphysical (*Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 95).

2   In particular, the debate around the gift emerges from the debate between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. Derrida's key discussions of the gift are found in *The Gift of Death,* trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Marion's key contributions are found in his trilogy, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998); *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), which engages at some length with Derrida's *Given Time*; and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). While all three are ostensibly purely phenomenological studies, they draw heavily on theological themes and are, as Marion acknowledges (*Being Given*, x) in profound continuity with Marion's earlier, explicitly theological, *God without Being: Hors-Texte* (trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)), particularly in terms of their focus on givenness. Finally, the edited volume *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (eds. John D. Caputo, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999)) contains discussions on both Derrida and Marion as well as conversations between the two on the topic of the gift, and further reflections from figures who will be familiar from the discussion of apophatic theology in chapter 3, including John Milbank, Richard Kearney and Mark C. Taylor.

no obligation to repay.[3] The gift must therefore escape two sorts of circular logic: the logic of economy (of credit and debt) and the logic of causality (of cause and effect).[4] The logic of economy is circular because it operates as a system of exchange, of payment in full. If one person gives a loaf of bread to another, she must repay the giver in full, either by giving a loaf of bread in return at some later date or by giving something else equivalent in value. The accounts must be balanced; everything must be paid for. It is far from obvious that any gift can escape this circle of economy. If one person gives a loaf of bread to another, this gift is likely to impose a sense of obligation on the recipient. Either she will feel obliged to return the favour at some point in the future, or she will respond to the gift with gratitude, which is in itself a sort of payment, an acknowledgement of a debt incurred. The logic of causality is similar but subtly different: if one person is to give to another a gift that is truly free, it cannot be that she is giving it for a particular *reason*, because it is owed to the recipient or because the donor wants the recipient to be indebted to her. There has to be something unnecessary, inexplicable or excessive about the gift in order for it to be gift; it must be gratuitous. These questions of economy and causality in turn arise only when the gift is present, recognised as a gift: it is not possible for someone to feel a sense of obligation until she recognises that she has been given a gift.

The economic problem of causality in particular is thus structurally homologous to the theological problems of creation and of human freedom, as discussed above.[5] The problem of creation is the problem of how to understand the divine decision to create as excessive and free; the problem of human freedom is the problem of how to understand the human decision to sin as unjustifiable and ungrounded. So the debate about the gift revolves – like the debate about apophatic theology – around questions of circularity, economy, causality, presence, excess and lack, success and failure. It is a question which

---

3   For example, Robyn Horner says that 'The purest of gifts is the one that is given without motive, without reason, without any foundation other than the desire to give … a gift cannot be something earned, something automatically due, any more than it can be something passed on merely out of obligation' (*Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1).

4   Marion parses this as the suspension of 'exchange', and the breaking with 'the principles of sufficient reason identity, no less than with the four forms of causality, in its metaphysical regime, follows' (*Being Given*, 76). What is ruptured is *both* identity *and* metaphysics.

5   It is interesting to note that the problem of economy as the circulation of credit and debt is entirely absent from Dionysius' discussions of the problem of human freedom. It is tempting to infer that this particular formulation of the economic problem arises from the specific characteristics of contemporary economic systems – 'economy' having itself come increasingly to refer primarily to a financial system rather than the more general notion of the management of household resources from which it originates.

is deeply entangled with theology both in terms of its origins and its implications.[6]

This chapter explores the problem of the gift in the work of two key figures, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, arguing that it is Derrida's account of the gift which is most plausible and also, despite superficial appearances, most alert to the complexities of the legacy of apophatic theology. But Derrida's work is not without its tensions and it is against these tensions, in part, that Žižek defines his own project. The second half of the chapter, then, explores the relationship of Žižek's work to the problematic of the gift, and in particular his critique of Derrida's work. Žižek describes his own work as very close to Derrida's, the difference between the two consisting of the crucial but almost-imperceptible shift from desire to drive. Where for Derrida the gift is that which disrupts identity, making its closure impossible, for Žižek's ontology of drive, the gift is the antagonism which *constitutes* identity. For Derrida, failure is inevitable but regrettable; for Žižek it is constitutive and generative.

6.2 The Gift in Derrida and Marion

In its contemporary form, the problem of the gift emerges primarily from Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion's reflections on Heidegger and Husserl's phenomenological discussions of 'givenness'. The dialogue between the two on the connected themes of phenomenology, negative theology and the gift culminated in the discussions they had over the course of a 1997 conference at Villanova University, organised by John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, on 'Religion and Postmodernism', subsequently published as *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*.

6.2.1 Derrida and the gift

For Derrida the gift is, like deconstruction or death, one of the many names for

---

6   The theological responses to Derrida and Marion's debate around the gift mirror (and frequently overlap with) the responses to the parallel debate about apophatic theology. Robyn Horner argues that the gift must be thought in terms of desire and faith. To relate to the gift is always to desire it, as it cannot be possessed without being destroyed. Because the gift can never be straightforwardly identified, it always involves an act of faith. Horner argues that both of these elements are present in negative theology, and that 'we can never know whether God gives, or what God gives; we can only believe that there (is) gift' (Horner, *Rethinking,* 247). John Caputo pits Marion and Derrida against each other: for Marion the gift is *too present*, it is dazzling; for Derrida the gift is *never present*, it is blindness (Caputo, 'Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion' in *God, the Gift*, 206), and a theological reading of the gift must side with Derrida over Marion. If the gift is dazzling, Caputo asks, how is it possible to know whether it is excess or defect (in Richard Kearney, 'On the Gift: A Discussion Between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion' in *God, the Gift*, 78)? Milbank, as discussed below, accuses Derrida of nihilism and argues that his account of the gift lacks a metaphysics of participation.

the point at which economy is ruptured.[7] The gift is that which interrupts and enables the circle, it is lack and excess, the condition of possibility and impossibility. As such it has to do with the subject's birth and death, with her belonging within language and community. Whilst the theme of the gift recurs on a number of occasions throughout Derrida's work, the two texts in which he gives the fullest account of the gift are *Given Time: Counterfeit Money* and *The Gift of Death*.

In *Given Time*, Derrida draws a connection between time and the gift. Both time and the gift are structured by a certain circularity, an economy in which the element of *nomos* (law – here associated with 'partition', division) and *oikos* (home and property) are both crucial.[8] The gift is 'that which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry … The very figure of the impossible.'[9] Every gift involves three elements: a giver, a gift, and a recipient. But in order for a gift to take place there can be no reciprocity. The gift can very easily become poison, putting the other in debt. In order for it to succeed as a gift, for it to be free from obligation or return, it cannot be recognised *as* a gift, it cannot be made present: if it appears it will be caught up into economy. It must be forgotten, and this links it to the forgetting that Heidegger names as the condition of Being. Being is not a being, and time is not temporal, both are nothings, not-things, and so we say not 'time is' or 'Being is', but *es gibt Sein* ('it gives Being'), and *es gibt Zeit* ('it gives Time').[10] Derrida also discusses Marcel Mauss's anthropological treatise *The Gift*, a study of the place of the gift in various tribal societies. Derrida suggests that Mauss misses the real problem of the gift, describing what are, by and large, systems not of gratuity but of exchange. It is impossible for the gift to be present, Derrida says, and yet it is equally impossible to think economy without assuming an originary gift, an initial groundless giving which sets the process of exchange in motion. The second part of the book discusses Baudelaire's short story 'La fausse monnaie' ('Counterfeit Money'). The gift is the condition of both possibility

---

7   In 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), for example, Derrida connects the notion of the gift to 'the undecidable, the incommensurable or the uncalculable … singularity, difference and heterogeneity'. These in turn are connected to justice, to deconstruction and also – of note for the subsequent chapter – to violence (7). In 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices' (trans. John P. Leavey Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992)), Derrida compares Angelus Silesius' account of becoming Nothing as becoming God to the gift, along with 'deconstruction … the "yes", the "come", decision, etc.' (290).

8   Derrida, *Given Time*, 6-7.

9   Derrida, *Given Time*, 8.

10 Derrida, *Given Time*, 20.

and impossibility of economy and so also of narrative. Narratives are provoked by events, and both event and gift 'interrupt the continuum of a narrative that nevertheless they call for, they must perturb the order of causalities … They must, in an instant, at a single blow, bring into relation luck, chance, the aleatory … if the event of the gift must remain unexplainable by a system of efficient causes, it is the effect of nothing'.[11] This chanciness of the gift is caught up with the wonder, the *thaumazein* which for Plato is at the origin of philosophy, the pleasure of encountering the other. Yet this pleasure in the encounter with the other is *taken* from the other without his willing it, 'he is delivered over to the mercy, to the *merci* of the giver.'[12]

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida draws on Heidegger's discussion of human life as essentially Being-towards-death. For Heidegger, it is death above all which constitutes the subject as an individual with individual responsibility for her own life. No one can die my death for me; no one can take my death away from me. As the figure for that which is uniquely mine, death becomes for Derrida a figure for my own responsibility before the other and hence for the problem of ethics. Concern for dying is, Derrida argues, 'a relation to self and an assembling of self'. The self comes into being around the concern about death, and this concern for death 'is another name for freedom' and is thus related to 'responsibility'.[13] Derrida structures his account of the gift of death around Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah*, Abraham's binding of Isaac. Abraham responds to God's call by his willingness to put his son to death, and Kierkegaard argues that his responsibility to God here means that he is absolutely irresponsible with respect to anyone else. Abraham's decision is a teleological suspension of the ethical; Abraham's act of obedience to God puts him outside of the sphere of the ethical, the universal realm within which it is possible to make oneself understood to others. Abraham *'cannot* speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything', he is 'an emigrant from the sphere of the universal'.**[14]** And yet, Derrida argues, this ethical dilemma is one in which each one of us finds ourselves at all moments: 'what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation to *every other*'.[15] In choosing to act ethically to some, we choose to abandon others to death: in

---

11 Derrida, *Given Time*, 123.
12 Derrida, *Given Time*, 147.
13 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 13-15.
14 Søren Kierkegaard, 'Fear and Trembling' in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 115.
15 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 78.

choosing to feed some, we choose not to feed others such that 'I am responsible to any one … only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others'. Furthermore, Derrida argues, 'I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other.'[16] Because of the individuality and unjustifiability of our ethical acts, there is no guarantee that they will be rewarded: we must give with no guarantee of reward, like Abraham who 'is in a relation of nonexchange with God.'[17]

6.2.2 Marion and the gift

Marion's earliest discussions of the gift are found in his reading of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, found in his early work, *The Idol and Distance*. Here Marion describes the emanation of creation and its return to God in terms of the transmission of the gift. In creating, God creates the distance between Godself and the created order which makes the gift possible: God retreats in order to make way for the passage of the gift from God to creation.[18] Each member of the hierarchy receives the gift insofar as they pass it on to those below them. Receipt of the gift is limited not by the generosity of the gift but by the capacity of each member of the hierarchy to themselves become a gift to others.[19] The names with which created humans name God are themselves a gift from God, given by God in the *logia* (the words, by which Marion means the words of scripture but more generally the 'deeds and gestures' of the Word of God, Christ) in which the *Logos* of God gives himself to the church.[20] Marion argues that, for Dionysius, Christian identity consists of the acceptance of the Christian scriptures as the sole foundation for discourse about God.[21]

Marion's later work claims to be phenomenological rather than theological, although there has been controversy over the extent to which theology continues to order his phenomenological work.[22] Marion draws on Husserl's reduction to the object

---

16 *Gift of Death*, 71.
17 *Gift of Death*, 96.
18 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 113.
19 Marion, *Idol,* 168.
20 Marion, *Idol*, 180.
21 Marion, *Idol,* 181.
22 As Marion himself acknowledges in *Being Given*, where he resists the argument that his appeal to Christian notions such as Revelation is 'a blatant and perfectly unseemly theological turn'. Rather, he claims, he is discussing Revelation not 'in its theological pretension to truth, something faith alone can dare to do' but simply 'as a possibility' (4, 5). As I have argued in my review of the more recent *The Erotic Phenomenon*, this approach ultimately works to conceal rather than to escape the influence

(the attempt to think about objects as they actually appear to us rather than as mediated by the ways in which we have learned to think about them) and Heidegger's reduction to Being (the attempt to think about being as it appears to us, rather than as mediated by the various ontologies which normally form our experience of the world). These reductions, Marion argues, should be supplemented by a third reduction, the reduction to givenness, which precedes both object and being.[23] This third reduction, Marion argues, 'permitted one to put on stage phenomena as such, precisely because it led them back to their pure given status, according to radically nonmetaphysical determinations.'[24] The reduction to givenness 'brackets transcendence, in all its senses – God too of course' and 'delivers the given from any demand for a cause by letting it deliver itself, give itself.'[25] To speak of the gift, therefore, can 'provide at least the outline of a noncausal, nonefficient and finally nonmetaphysical mode of givenness'.[26]

There are three key aspects to Marion's phenomenological work on the gift: first (as I have already described) his attempt to link the gift with phenomenological givenness; second, his idea of the 'saturated phenomenon'; and third, his argument that it is possible for the gift to appear phenomenologically if one (or more) of its three elements are bracketed out. The second of these elements, Marion's concept of the saturated phenomenon, hinges on the claim that it is possible to have intuitions which are impossible to articulate not because of their absence but because of their overwhelming, excessive presence. This argument is closely related to Marion's disagreement with Derrida about the nature of the *hyperousios* in Dionysius' theology. To say that God is *hyperousios*, above or beyond being, is not, Marion argues, to inscribe God within the horizon of ontotheology, to subject the divine to the metaphysics of presence. Rather, it 'inscribes us, according to a radically new praxis, in the horizon of God'.[27] Marion uses the example of Christian baptism, where the baptised are *named by* God, rather than *naming* God,[28] and draws on this experience of baptism and the mystical 'third way' (neither naming nor unnaming, but praise), to

---

of theology on Marion's work (Marika Rose, review of *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) in *Theology and Sexuality* 18.2 (2013), 158-160).

23 For more detailed discussion of the three reductions, see Marion's *Being Given*, especially *§3*, 'Objectness and Beingness' (27-38) and *§4*, 'The Reduction to the Given' (39-52).

24 Marion, *Being Given*, 3.

25 Marion, *Being Given*, 72.

26 Marion, *Being Given*, 74.

27 Marion, 'In the Name', 37.

28 Marion, 'In the Name', 38-39.

argue for phenomenological recognition that 'intention can never reach adequation with the intuition not because the latter is lacking, but because it exceeds what the concept can receive, expose and comprehend: the saturated phenomenon.'[29] Knowledge is undone not by lack, but by excess; God is 'incomprehensible, not imperceptible.'[30] The experience of the saturated phenomenon is one of passivity: the subject who experiences the saturated phenomenon is overwhelmed by the experience which undoes her ability to comprehend the experience, and 'deconstructs the transcendental ambition of the ego.'[31]

In regard to the third point, the bracketing of elements of the gift, Marion agrees with Derrida that the moment the giver, the gift and the recipient are made present the gift evaporates, disappears into economy. But he argues that it is possible to describe the gift phenomenologically by bracketing out one or two of these three elements. Thus, for example, it is possible to give a gift without implying a recipient: by giving to an enemy, who will not accept the gift, or to an anonymous recipient via a large charity. It is also possible to receive a gift without awareness of the giver, such as in an inheritance from a now-dead or unknown relative. And it is possible for a gift to be given in such a way that it is impossible to identify the nature of the gift itself: what is given, for example, in the ceremony which inaugurates a President?[32] Marion claims that this bracketing of one or more of the three points of presence within the giving of a gift makes it possible to describe the gift without falling prey to Derrida's critique.

6.3 Interrogating the gift in Derrida and Marion

The debates around the gift draw together several key questions: first, the question of who or what it is that interrupts economy (and which economy it is that is interrupted); second, the question of the possibility or impossibility of the gift; third, the question of the relationship of birth and death to economy and the gift; fourth, the question of whether the gift is that which exceeds or is lacking from economy; and fifth, the question of the relationship between the gift and metaphysics. This section will explore each of these points in turn, arguing that Marion and Derrida formulate the problem of the gift both in terms of the question of *which* economy it is that is ruptured

---

29 Marion, 'In the Name', 39.
30 Marion, 'In the Name', 40.
31 Marion in Kearney, 'On the Gift', 70.
32 Marion in Kearney, 'On the Gift', 63.

and in terms of the *nature* of the gift. However, it is Derrida whose account is more able to grapple both with the complex questions of power which arise from the question of the gift and with the complexities of the originally theological concerns from which the question of the gift arises.

6.3.1 Who gives the gift?

One of the unacknowledged points of disagreement between Derrida and Marion is the nature of that which escapes or disrupts the circle of economy. For Marion, the economy which the gift disrupts is primarily the economy of human mastery: the human attempt to comprehend the world, to grasp it.[33] But what exceeds and disrupts this human economy is the *divine* economy, figured as a Neoplatonic economy of emanation and return wherein what circulates is the gift. Instead of mastering, the subject must acknowledge that she is mastered. Instead of naming, she must acquiesce to being named. The narcissistic economy of the individual subject is disrupted by her inscription into a broader economy within which she has a part to play, a duty to fulfil, a debt to repay.[34] And yet the consequence of this figuring of the gift is that Marion is unable to conceive of the gift, of the rupturing of economy, as anything but benign. That this is problematic becomes especially clear in Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon*, in which love is figured as mutual 'penetration',[35] and the bodies of the lovers are made loving precisely by their 'nonresistance' to the other's approach,[36] and yet (as I have argued elsewhere),[37] Marion at best glosses over the danger of such an erotic encounter becoming a locus for violence or abuse, and at worst seems to actively facilitate such violence. He chooses Christ, 'whose face [is] definitely living, irresistible for having known *not* to resist anything, even the worst death' as the ideal figure of the sort of erotic receptivity he advocates.[38] This problematic assertion of receptivity to the gift as submission to authority takes a particularly Dionysian turn in Marion's *God without Being*, which argues that the Eucharist and theology are inseparably related to one another such that, because the authority for Eucharistic celebration resides ultimately in

---

33 As I discuss above, and as Thomas Carlson argues in a discussion of Marion's theology ('The idol is defined by the primacy of the human subject's intentional consciousness, while the icon would radically disrupt or reverse that primacy' (*Indiscretion*, 194)).
34 Caputo, 'Apostles', 212-213.
35 *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 125.
36 *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 124.
37 In my review of *The Erotic Phenomenon* in *Theology and Sexuality*.
38 *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 127.

the bishop, so too does the authority for theological reflection. Just as the Eucharist may (in the Roman Catholic Church to which Marion belongs) be celebrated only by those who remain in communion with the bishop, so too 'a teacher who speaks … without, even against, his bishop, absolutely can no longer carry on his discourse in an authentically *theo*logical site.'[39] For Marion the affirmation of the gift as that which disrupts the narcissism of the individual is ultimately the affirmation of hierarchy.

For Derrida, however, the primary problem is not narcissism but freedom; not the desire for mastery but the evasion of the responsibility which comes with finitude. The cut which accompanies birth is the cut which opens the subject up to others and hence to language. As Shakespeare argues, the gift 'is inseparable from the idea of *différance* and the breaking open of origins', and so is in turn related to Derrida's ideas of the trace and the text.[40] In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida riffs on the phrase '*tout autre est tout autre*', which can be translated both as 'every other is absolutely other' and also as 'every other is every other'. The otherness of God and the otherness of other subjects are closely related to the point of indeterminacy. Both of these forms of otherness are in turn related to the subject's own self-otherness, to 'the secret' at the heart of the subject, which is both the blind spot in her own subjectivity, her innermost core, and also the place where she finds herself called by the other, by God.[41] The responsibility to which the subject is called is no less ambiguous and paradoxical. We are responsible to 'the other who calls to us, places demands on us, without ever becoming immediately visible or knowable'.[42] But the ethical decisions the subject makes must be made to some degree in isolation from the other. Because the other is ultimately unknowable, the subject cannot be entirely sure what the other demands of her, in what her responsibility to the other consists; and she can never fully foresee the consequences of her own ethical actions. It is precisely this element of unknowability, however, which opens up the possibility of responsibility: only the subject can bear ultimate responsibility for her

---

39 *God Without Being*, 153.

40 Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 161.

41 There are obvious and significant parallels here between Derrida's account of subjectivity and Žižek's notion of the core of the subject as 'that which is in them more than themselves', as the blind spot in reality.

42 Shakespeare, *Derrida*, 133. Milbank objects to Derrida's thinking of ethics with respect to this idea of the other's unknowability, arguing that Derrida assumes the absolute alienation of subjects from one another rather than their participation in a mutual economy of exchange and interconnectedness (*Being Reconciled*, 154). Yet Milbank himself pays lip-service to the 'surprisingness and unpredictability of gift and counter-gift' (156). As with his reading of apophatic theology, it seems that he is unable to sustain any meaningful affirmation of uncertainty or – as with Marion – to recognise the possibility of failure and violence.

actions. This is, Derrida argues, the aporia which constitutes responsibility as such: 'responsibility demands on the one hand an answering-for-oneself with respect to the general, hence the idea of substitution, and on the other hand uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, silence and secrecy.'[43] The gift of death is the assumption of responsibility for the other which both remains inextricably connected with the other, with economy, and yet also transcends it. For Derrida, then, the danger is not so much that the individual will attempt mastery of the world in which she lives as that she will evade responsibility for her own decisions. This is why, as Caputo points out, for Marion debt 'enters into the very definition of the gift, while for Derrida debt is poison to the gift'.[44]

6.3.2 Can the gift be given?

Caputo and Scanlon describe the debate between Derrida and Marion as 'an apology for the impossible',[45] yet the impossibility of the gift is another point on which the two thinkers differ. For Derrida, the gift is never present: it is known only as already past, as a trace; or as impossibly futural.[46] This is in part a structural necessity: the gift is 'not impossible, but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible.'[47] As that which ruptures the economy of time, it cannot be made present; as that which breaks apart economy it cannot be integrated into economy; as the figure for death, the limit of the subject, it forever escapes the subject's grasp.[48] Just as *différance* opens up the space for language, so the impossible gift opens up the space for ethics. The gift cannot be given if it is guaranteed to be returned; for Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to be a gift, there can be no assurance that it will be rewarded: 'all communication between them has to be suspended'. What Abraham gives can only be returned to him on the condition that he has 'renounced calculation' and given with no expectation of return.[49] There is still an economy – Isaac is returned and Abraham is rewarded for his sacrifice – but this economy can exist only as ruptured, with a crucial moment of undecidability which

---

43 Derrida, *Gift of Death,60.*
44 Caputo, 'Apostles', 212.
45 In 'Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism' in *God, the Gift*, 3.
46 As Caputo points out in 'Apostles', 218-219.
47 *Given Time*, 7.
48 It is worth noting that Derrida's connection of the gift, economy and language with time rather undermines Catherine Pickstock's claim that Derrida's 'postmodernism' entails 'the abolition of time by space' (*After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), xiii).
49 Derrida, 'The Gift of Death', 96.

requires faith, risk, absolute expenditure. Thus, for Derrida, the gift is impossible to pin down, it cannot be made present, and yet, somehow, human speech and being and temporality all depend on the impossible gift. Here John Caputo's preference for the language of messianicity seems to miss something harder to articulate in Derrida. It is not simply that 'The impossible is like a Messiah whose very structure is never to appear in the present and who, by thus deferring his appearance, keeps the future open, a Messiah whose condition of possibility is the very impossibility of his ever showing up'.[50] The gift is not simply a figure for an unknown future but is the condition of possibility *as well as* impossibility of the present. Derrida says,

> I tried to precisely displace the problematic of the gift, to take it out of the circle of economy, of exchange, but *not* to conclude, from the impossibility for the gift to appear as such and to be determined as such, to its absolute impossibility … it is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such. But I never concluded that there is no gift. I went on to say that if there is a gift, through this impossibility, it must be the experience of this impossibility, and it should appear as impossible.[51]

Marion's account of the impossibility of the gift is more straightforward. The gift occurs, it is possible, it can be encountered as the gift. Derrida's conditions of impossibility 'simply prove that what was studied did *not* deserve the title *gift*'.[52] Instead, the gift is simply an excessive experience which overwhelms our abilities to comprehend it, an experience of 'bedazzlement, of astonishment … an event that we cannot comprehend but nevertheless we have to see.' This experience may not be graspable but it occurs frequently and mundanely in 'death, birth, love, poverty, illness, joy, pleasure, and so on. We see them but we know our inability to see them in a clear manner'.[53] Again, where Derrida's concern with the impossible is a concern about the possibility of human freedom, Marion's emphasis is on the impossibility of human mastery.

6.3.3 The gift of death or the gift of life?

Because of the phenomenological roots of the problem of the gift, Derrida in particular persistently associates it with death.[54] Death stalks the gift: to give to one

---

50 Caputo and Scanlon, 'Introduction: Apology', 8.
51 Derrida in Kearney, 'On the Gift', 59.
52 Marion, *Being Given*, 81.
53 Marion in Kearney, 'On the Gift', 75.
54 For example, Derrida discusses Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death repeatedly throughout *The Gift of Death* (see especially 14-16, 42-47).

person is to deal death to others; to love others is to 'hate and betray' them, to 'offer them the gift of death'.[55] To give a gift is to put the other at the mercy of the giver, 'he is … poisoned by the very fact that something happens to him in the face of which he remains … defenseless, open, exposed … Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift'.[56] And yet this problematic of the gift and death also carries within it, at least implicitly, the idea of birth, of creation. It is only birth which opens us up to the possibility of death, and it is birth (which we do not ask for and cannot control) which places us in the midst of the situations within which we must take responsibility. Birth throws us into a family and a society which shapes which others we encounter and which we do not; in which we are, by virtue of our relationships of interdependency with others, already giving death before we are even able to assume the responsibility for doing so. This theme of birth, of creation, is present only implicitly in Derrida's discussion of the gift, but is more thoroughly explicated elsewhere in Derrida's work. His work is, he acknowledges, 'always a question of the originary complication of the origin of an inaugural divergence that no analysis could *present, make present'*.[57] Like the gift, like death, birth determines the subject's identity, yet the subject can never master it. Derrida also talks about the birth of the subject in terms of circumcision, 'the cut that happened to him before he can remember, which opened his identity to an otherness before all memory and knowledge'.[58] This cut of circumcision is in turn related to the foundation of the law, whose foundation (much like the foundation of the law in Žižek) is 'neither legal nor illegal', but a 'violence without ground'.[59] The gift is, for Derrida, thoroughly bound up with both birth and with death (which turn out to closely resemble one another).

By contrast, Marion affirms the hope of eternal life and so remains superficially untroubled by death, just as he is unconcerned by the notion of the gift's impossibility. Yet violence and death lurk just below the surface of his account of love: love begins in self-hatred,[60] progresses to 'hatred of the other';[61] comes to encounter the face of the

---

55   *Gift of Death*, 65.
56   *Given Time*, 147.
57   From *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xv. Although Derrida is referring here to Husserl, the passage nonetheless also describes Derrida's own central concerns (as Steven Shakespeare points out in *Derrida*, 21).
58   Shakespeare, *Derrida*, 15. It is interesting here that the cut which brings Derrida into being as a subject is the cut of circumcision rather than the cutting of the umbilical cord.
59   Force of Law, as cited in Shakespeare, *Derrida,* 130-131.
60   'No one can love himself … because every man for himself finds, more original than the alleged self-love, self-hatred in himself' (*Erotic Phenomenon*, 53).

other which is marked out as a human face precisely because 'it alone calls for murder and makes murder possible';[62] and climaxes in a total receptivity to the other's erotic advance which is exemplified by Christ, whose face is 'irresistible for having known *not* to resist anything, even the worst death.'[63] The apparently peaceful economy of desire and the gift which Marion describes in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, whose vision (as Marion himself argues) marks all of his phenomenological work, is thoroughly entangled with violence and death.[64] Yet, unlike Derrida, Marion either evades the question of the complex entanglement of the gift with violence or is led by his understanding of the gift and reciprocity to arguments which are as implausible as they are disturbing, such as his claim that seduction is worse than rape because 'it tears from the other even [...] consent'.[65]

6.3.4 Is the gift present?

As well as its complex relationship with life and death, with otherness and singularity, the gift is also bound up with the problematic of excess and lack. On the one hand, the gift is something which necessarily exceeds the economy of ordinary human interactions, the individual's attempts to comprehend the world. It is gratuitous; it is undeserved and impossible to repay. It exceeds 'mastery and knowledge', and 'history', Derrida says, 'depends on such an excessive beginning'.[66] The gift is not only excessive on the part of the giver; it is also excessive in that it 'puts me in relation with the transcendence of the other'. What is given is that which is in excess of the subject, and it is given to the other who exceeds the subject's comprehension.

Yet the gift is also crucially related to lack. The excess which surpasses the circle of economy is not a positive entity, but a gap, a rupture, a lack: 'it is impossible for the

---

61 *Erotic Phenomenon*, 38.
62 *Erotic Phenomenon*, 100.
63 *Erotic Phenomenon*, 127.
64 In his introduction to *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion says that the book 'has obsessed me since the publication of *The Idol and Distance* in 1977. All the books I have published since then bear the mark, explicit or hidden, of this concern' (10). This violent vision of the gift seems rather to trouble John Milbank's critique of Derrida, that it is '*secularity*' rather than theology which 'encourages a kind of masochism' (John Milbank in Richard Kearney, 'On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida' in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 65).
65 *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 153.
66 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 6.

gift to exist and appear as such'.[67] As this quotation suggests, the tension between excess and lack in the figure of the gift is related to the tension between possibility and impossibility which recurs throughout Derrida's work. In 'Post-Scriptum', Derrida's dialogue with himself on the question of his relationship to apophatic theology, Derrida acknowledges that 'deconstruction has often been defined as the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible, a condition that deconstruction shares with the gift, the "yes," the "come," decision, etc.' and goes on to link this impossible possibility with the theme of deification in mystical theology, with interruption, with death and with friendship.[68] Hugh Rayment-Pickard links the gift with the chi, χ, which is one of the central tropes of Derrida's thought, the figure of the paradoxical conjunction of excess and lack which characterises the gift, 'the signifier of the absent presence … that which attempts to "signify nothing" ... crossing-through of death and erasure', yet 'also the very opposite of negation, the sign which shows the *presence* of something, where something *is*.'[69]

This question of the gift's relationship to excess and lack is a key point of disagreement between Derrida and Marion. Caputo describes the difference between the two precisely in terms of the difference between excess and lack. For Marion, the gift is *too present*, it is dazzling; for Derrida, the gift is *never present*, it is blindness.[70] This difference is in large part a difference of *appearance*, of phenomenology. In conversation with Marion, Derrida says that 'it is not that the gift is impossible but that it is impossible for it to appear as such'. By contrast, Marion argues that 'we can have experiences in excess of words'. The two positions are close and yet not the same. Derrida says that 'if deconstruction is interested in the excess … it is not an excess of intuition … What I am interested in … is precisely this experience of *the* impossible. This is not simply a non-experience'.[71] The difference here is the difference between *agape* and *khora,* and yet is also a difference between Derrida and Marion's understanding of the relation between the economy of the subject and the economy of language. For Marion, that which escapes language can nonetheless be experienced by

---

67 Derrida, quoted in Shakespeare, *Derrida*, 160-161.
68 290.
69 Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 161-162.
70 Caputo, 'Apostles', 206. For Caputo a theological reading of the gift must side with Derrida over Marion. If the gift is dazzling, he asks, how is it possible to know whether it is excess or defect? (Kearney, 'On the Gift', 78). These two claims seem to be at odds with one another, though: is Derrida on the side of lack, or on the side of the indeterminacy of whatever it is that ruptures economy?
71 Kearney, 'On the Gift', 71-72.

the subject, the subject *is in excess of* language. By contrast, for Derrida, that which escapes language also escapes the subject such that when language is ruptured it is the subject's experience, the subject itself which is ruptured. If there is that within the subject which escapes the constraints of language then that excess remains nonetheless ungraspable, unknowable by the subject.

6.3.5 *What* is *the gift?*

Both Marion and Derrida discuss the gift in relation to metaphysics. For both, metaphysics is inescapably bound up with the figure of the circle. Derrida says that 'the representation of time as a circle' is 'one of the most powerful and ineluctable representations … in the history of metaphysics'.[72] To speak of the gift is to attempt 'to avoid speaking of Being',[73] it is to be encircled, besieged by the circle whilst constantly attempting to escape it. To 'desire the gift' is to 'desire to interrupt the circulation of the circle'.[74] Yet for Derrida this perpetual attempt to escape the circle of metaphysics via the gift is the best we can hope for – 'there is no way in which we can simply wash our hands of metaphysics'[75] – what lies beneath the circulation of economy is not 'the Idea of the Good', 'true Capital' or 'the true Father' but 'a copy of a copy', a 'phantasm'.[76] The gift can be neither natural nor artificial.[77] Perhaps, Derrida says, we should suspend 'the old opposition between nature and institution … nature and convention, knowledge and credit (faith), nature and all its others.'[78]

Marion is similarly concerned with the escaping metaphysics. Phenomenology is valuable precisely insofar as it offers a way out of metaphysics, insofar as the reduction to givenness makes possible 'the suspension of exchange … no less than with the four forms of causality that economy, in its metaphysical regime, follows'.[79] The gift is 'the Present Without Presence'; it is 'not present' but in such a way that it can be inferred that 'it neither has to be nor has to subsist in presence in order to give itself'.[80] Yet what Marion claims to uncover in this reduction to givenness is both the subject, understood

---

72 *Given Time*, 8.
73 'How to Avoid Speaking', 124.
74 *Given Time*, 8.
75 Shakespeare*, Derrida*, 51.
76 *Given Time*, 161.
77 *Given Time*, 162.
78 *Given Time*, 170.
79 *Being Given*, 76.
80 *Being Given*, 79.

as 'a gifted, he whose function consists in receiving what is immeasurably given to him'; and also a form of 'intergivenness'[81] which (it transpires in *The Erotic Phenomenon*) is best described as 'love': a love which 'lacks neither reason nor logic; quite simply, it does not admit reason or logic other than its own'.[82] This 'reason and logic' of love basically means that to love and be loved, one person must love another person relentlessly and without reason and also accept unresistingly the advance of the other. As Marion's phenomenology inevitably ends in the appeal either to God or to the possibility of God, it is hard not to feel that this is simply a re-inscription of economy such that love is *owed* to God on account of God's having first loved and created everything and everyone. If anything, Marion's desire to escape economy means that (as I have also argued above) he persistently evades troubling questions of power and obligation.

6.3.6 The gift: in summary

While Derrida and Marion's accounts of the gift remain in many ways close, the two thinkers diverge on two key issues. First, where for Marion the human economy is disrupted by the divine economy in which the gift circulates, such that the central ethical task is for the subject to relinquish mastery, for Derrida it is precisely this desire to relinquish control and hence responsibility which is most dangerous. The subject can never entirely know herself, let alone the needs or desires of those around her, and yet it is precisely this necessary incompleteness of understanding which demands the radical assumption of responsibility. To some extent this difference reflects Derrida and Marion's different philosophical backgrounds. Marion remains, to some degree, caught in the classical Christian metaphysics where it is the relationship of God and the world which provides the basic problematic of human understanding and action, while Derrida begins with the relationship of the subject and the world. Yet when it comes to the question of ethics it is Derrida who is more able to confront the difficult questions of violence and power at play in the question of the gift.

The second difference between the two is on the question of presence. While Marion seeks to give an account of the gift as overwhelmingly present, invisible only insofar as it is *too much* for human finitude, Derrida's account is more complex. It is not

---

81 *Being Given*, 322, 323.
82 *Erotic Phenomenon*, 217.

simply that the gift is yet-to-come, that it is present as a lack whose fulfilment is to be longed-for but eternally postponed. It is also, like the paradoxical figure of the *khora*, not quite the ground of being, but the space within which being comes to ground itself. It is the condition of possibility and impossibility of language and existence, neither straightforwardly excess and lack nor both. Again, here, it is Derrida's account which seems to come closest to the complexity of the problem of the gift. Marion claims that the aporias of the Derridean problematic simply imply that the problem of the gift is incorrectly formulated. Yet his own account of the gift outside of the horizons of Being and objectness functions to re-instantiate the gift at another level of discourse whilst robbing Marion of the ability to confront the potential violence of the encounter between gifted subjects. Moreover, what Marion misses in his dismissal of the Derridean formulation of the problematic of the gift is precisely its proximity to the classical theological formulation of the problems of both creation and fall. Here again, it is Derrida who most fully acknowledges the tensions of the theological accounts of economy which his work both inherits and transforms.

6.4 John Milbank and the gift

It is worth pausing briefly here to discuss John Milbank's critiques of both Marion and Derrida. Arguing that the gift is in some ways *the* theological category, he connects traditional theological with contemporary philosophical notions of the gift. Traditional theological accounts of human existence as a gift from God which consists precisely in receiving, reciprocating and transmitting that gift are relatively straightforwardly transposed into the context of contemporary debates about the gift.[83] Milbank objects to what he sees as the opposition between the gift as unilateral and reciprocal (i.e. aneconomic and economic) in Derrida and Marion's discussions of the gift. He argues that unilaterality and reciprocity are not necessarily opposed, and were never seen as such until the late Middle Ages, where divine and human activity came to be seen as opposed rather than complementary.[84] Milbank argues that the gift belongs not to a closed circle of economy, but to a spiral, a circle which is opened up for two reasons: first, its connection to transcendence (because the created order is always

---

83 See, for example, Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.
84 John Milbank, 'The Transcendentality of the Gift: A Summary' in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 361.

related to God), and second, the element of risk and surprise in gift-exchange, where what is returned to the giver is not something exactly equivalent to the gift given, but is surprising, unpredictable, a '*non-identical repetition*'.[85] This notion of gift as asymmetrical reciprocity sees gift as involved in but not reducible to economy. It remains 'semi-ineffable':[86] gift takes place in a world which is inaugurated by the 'absolute divine gift', and restored by the incarnation, which exceeds even that initial donation.[87] The medieval account of forgiveness was, consequently, 'a paradoxical attempt to economise the aneconomic.'[88] Moreover, the giving of gifts is intrinsically risky: there is no guarantee that a gift will be appropriate, that it will be received in the spirit in which it was given. The reasons for giving the gift to one and not another can never be fully justified in public language, and to give is to expose oneself to the other, to fortune, to risk.[89]

Whilst Milbank's account of the gift is not without value, there are numerous ways in which his reading of both Marion and Derrida fall short, as becomes clear from a consideration of two key issues: first, the question of the relationship between gift and economy; and second, the question of the relationship between the gift and questions of power and hierarchy.

First, then, Milbank questions whether it is really possible to think the gift outside of economy. 'If, as Marion says, the typical phenomenon is "saturated" in terms of an appearing that exceeds our full conceptual grasp,' he asks, 'then does this not mean (beyond Marion) that we receive such an appearing also with the supplement of our poetic, constructive speculation concerning the hidden'?[90] This is in fact, as I have argued above, precisely what Marion does. His claim to escape the horizons of Being and objectness allow him to smuggle back in a set of theological assumptions which go all the more unquestioned for being unacknowledged. Here, then, Marion and Milbank are very close to each other, although Milbank is more honest about the place of theological assumptions in his work. But, Milbank goes on, the only alternative to understanding transcendence in terms of already-existing theological assumptions, is Derrida's identification of what is outside of economy as 'an uncharacterizable hyper-

---

85 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 156.
86 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 170.
87 John Milbank, 'Forgiveness and Incarnation' in *Questioning God*, 114.
88 Milbank, 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 95.
89 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 147.
90 *Future of Love*, 355.

presence' which could be 'menace as much as it is gift'.[91] Transcendence is either the God of traditional theology or completely unknowable, and possibly malignant. Milbank presents this statement concerning the riskiness of the gift in Derrida as though it is, in itself, an effective challenge to Derrida's work. Yet this uncertainty is *exactly what Derrida acknowledges*. That which ruptures economy might be poison or it might be gift; it could also be both. This is not to say that there is no room to critique this aspect of Derrida's thought; but simply to assert what Derrida fully acknowledges is not to perform an effective criticism of his understanding of the relation between the gift and economy.

Milbank's own account of the gift relies on an appeal to transcendence and a metaphysics of participation. And yet again, as I have argued above (in chapter 3), it is hard to see in what way this transcendence *transcends*. Milbank seems to imagine participation in terms of a straightforward continuity between the created world and God, such that in order to maintain that the act of creation is not 'a new thing'[92] for God, he must envisage 'gift exchange as *fusion*'.[93] Milbank does acknowledge both the force of the question of the gift and its thorough entanglement with the economic problems of creation, fall and redemption.[94] Yet by endorsing an account of forgiveness as 'positive exchange'[95] – as economic – he claims, ultimately, that the only way to endorse 'the impossibility of creation' is to understand finitude as 'self-canceling'. This means that 'the finite creature fully conscious of its finitude must aspire to return to God and to comprehend his finitude in the vision of his maker'.[96] Like Marion, then, Milbank's attempt to solve the problem of the gift with the affirmation of the goodness of God ends in death. By contrast, Derrida describes his own work specifically in contrast to Milbank's, asserting that immanence and transcendence cannot be easily identified or separated, that 'I do not want to choose between the two'.[97] For Derrida, the question of what escapes and troubles economy is neither straightforwardly inside or outside of the economic circle, can never be unproblematically named or appropriated

---

91 *Future of Love*, 355.
92 Milbank, 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 118.
93 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 117.
94 'For theology considers what are, to us, three absolute impossibilities. First of all, there is the impossibility that anything should exist outside of God … then on top of this impossibility of creation, theology overlays the second impossibility of sin [which] does indeed appear to be a surd, ungrounded, "radical evil." Finally, on top of this impossibility, theology overlays the third impossibility of redemption' ('Forgiveness and Incarnation', 110).
95 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 111.
96 'Forgiveness and Incarnation', 121.
97 In Kearney, 'On Forgiveness', 67.

as the basis for a universal and universalising account of the world. As I have argued in chapter 3, above, it is hard not to feel that it is Derrida, rather than Milbank, who is closer to the apophatic elements of Christian tradition. Yet, curiously, it is also Derrida's nuanced and cautious account of the riskiness and uncertainty which characterises the relationship of the gift to economy which seems best to suit Milbank's own account of the gift as characterised by 'surprisingness and unpredictability'.[98]

Finally, Milbank suggests that both Derrida and Marion's discussions of the gift run aground because both 'assume that a situation of equality between social parties is the norm', whereas in fact there is 'rather usually hierarchy' in which the person who talks 'unilaterally gives the space of future reciprocity'.[99] As a critique of Marion, this claim has some purchase: it is in part Marion's failure to engage with questions of power which give rise to his problematic evasion of questions of sexual politics and abuse. As a reading of Derrida, however, this assertion is simply false. Baudelaire's short story, one of the central points of reference for Derrida's discussion, narrates an act of charity from a rich man to a poor man, and the ways in which this act is caught up in complex relationships of power and esteem. The act is made possible by the *'social condition'* of the actors, the ability of some to 'afford the luxury of giving alms' and the need of others to receive them.[100] It is precisely such social and economic differences which mark, for Derrida, the difference between sacrifice and gift.[101] Yet where Milbank speaks approvingly of such hierarchical gift exchange, appealing to the Middle Ages as an exemplary culture within which 'symbolic, ritual good works' establish 'mutual bonds of human friendship',[102] Derrida is intensely alive to the possibility that such unequal exchange might be, rather, *'misfortune'* for both parties,[103] to the ways in which the pleasure of the gift is *taken* from the other who is 'delivered over to the mercy, to the *merci* of the giver'.[104] The problem is not Derrida's failure to recognise the way in which hierarchy structures the gift but Milbank's failure to recognise that such hierarchies make possible not only generosity but also abuse.

---

98 *Being Reconciled*, 156.
99 'The Gift', 358.
100 *Given Time*, 126.
101 For Derrida, the sort of structured alms-giving which prevailed in the Middle Ages, and which Milbank lauds as a prime example of a gift economy 'fulfils a regulated and regulating function; it is no longer a gratuitous or gracious gift' (*Given Time*, 137).
102 Milbank, 'The Gift', 362.
103 *Given Time*, 142.
104 *Given Time*, 147.

Milbank's reading of the problematic of the gift suffers from two main problems. First, he fails to recognise what is at stake in both Derrida and Marion's work, so he misses both the ways in which Derrida anticipates his critiques and the ways in which Marion's work is very close to his own. Second, his own solution to the problem of the gift suffers from the same weaknesses as Marion's. By appealing to theological assumptions 'outside' of metaphysics he simply defers, rather than addressing, the problem of the gift as the rupture of economy; by appealing to a peaceful ontology of participation he fails to take seriously the problems of power and violence.

Yet one aspect of Milbank's reading of the gift is of value for our discussion. Central to Milbank's argument is the claim that aneconomic unilaterality and economic reciprocity are able to 'operate simultaneously'.[105] The circulation of gifts is not purely reducible to the economic. This economy contains, at least potentially, a moment of 'surprise' which is inherently risky, which may be the source of joy or 'could even be a violent intrusion.'[106] Milbank fails to sustain this moment of the acknowledgement of the riskiness of the gift. Yet, although his account of the unilateral action of God collapses ultimately into economy and death, here he comes briefly but tantalisingly close to Žižek's account of causality as an inherently ruptured structure, containing within it always a moment of undecidability, of excess. What, then, does Žižek have to say about the gift?

6.5 Žižek, Derrida and the gift

Žižek engages occasionally, albeit significantly, with the question of the gift, associating it specifically with Derrida (whose account of the gift is, as I have argued above, more compelling than Marion's). Moreover, Derrida functions throughout Žižek's work as a reference point for Žižek's account of the ways in which his work is in both continuity and discontinuity with continental philosophy more generally. To discuss Žižek's understanding of the gift, then, it is helpful to consider both his specific interventions on the topic of the gift and the relationship between his work and Derrida's in more general terms. Here I will set out briefly the way Žižek positions his own work in relation to Derrida, before exploring the ways in which his erotic ontology

---

105 'The Gift', 358.
106 'The Gift', 356. As I have discussed above, this makes it all the more odd that Milbank so strongly rejects Derrida's affirmation of the uncertainty associated with the gift.

of failure represents a transformation of Derrida's problematic of the gift.

Whilst Žižek can be scathing about 'deconstructionists',[107] he takes Derrida's work seriously, frequently acknowledging the proximity of their accounts whilst maintaining, nonetheless, that a crucial difference divides them. This difference is, essentially, the difference between desire and drive.[108] Žižek makes reference to the 'Derridean problematic of the gift' on several occasions,[109] but it is *Metastases* which contains his most extensive account of the gift and which, moreover, exemplifies both the similarities and the differences between the two thinkers. First, Žižek suggests that 'Derrida's criticism of Lacan is a case of prodigious misreading', and yet that if 'we set aside major confrontations and tackle the problematic nature of their relationship … a series of unexpected connections opens up.'[110] The Lacanian symbolic order is founded on an 'excessive act', a '*first move*' that is '*by definition, superfluous*'.[111] As a result, it is always haunted by the spectres which indicate that the system itself is founded on 'a debt that can never be honoured', which 'bear witness … to the fact that this order exists "on credit"; that, by definition, its accounts are never fully settled.'[112] It is this structure of the symbolic order which makes it possible 'to establish the link between Lacan and the problematic articulated by Derrida in *Given Time*'.[113] Yet, rather than recognising this parallel, Derrida sets up an opposition between the gift and the Lacanian symbolic order, which he reads as a closed economy. As a result, Žižek argues, he is unable to see the way in which, in his own work, the gift represents a heterogeneous element. In contrast to the infinite deferral of *différance*, the gift is, rather, 'presence itself in its ultimate inaccessibility'. The 'ultimate excess is that of the

---

107 Or, as he refers to them in *Parallax View*, 'the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects' (11).

108 Whilst Žižek engages frequently with Derrida's work, he pays next to no attention to Marion, and evidently considers the problem of the gift a specifically Derridean question. The exception to this general principle is *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (Boris Gunjević and Slavoj Žižek, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), where Žižek uses Marion's unpublished essay 'Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice' (itself based on his 'Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift,' trans. John Conley SJ, and Danielle Poe, in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought* ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), 122-143) as a way into a discussion of sacrificial logic, dismissing Marion's reading of the crucifixion in terms of gift as 'convoluted and rather unconvincing' (54).

109 For example, *Indivisible Remainder*, 48, and *Ticklish Subject*, 58.

110 Žižek makes similar claims about Derrida's reading of Hegel, arguing, for example, that his work 'systematically overlooks the Hegelian character of its own basic operation' (*They Know Not*, 32).

111 *Metastases*, 193.

112 *Metastases*, 193, 194.

113 *Metastases*, 194.

event of presence itself.'[114] While Derrida 'demonstrates triumphantly that there is no ontology without the spectral', he fails to see that there is also 'no spectre without the ontological'.[115] This difference between Žižek and Derrida is only a '"minimal difference"',[116] the almost imperceptible difference of the parallax shift. And yet, for Žižek, it is the difference between the melancholic quest for impossible satisfaction and the playful affirmation of impossibility; the shift from the masculine logic of the exception which grounds the Law to the feminine logic of the non-all, the '"feminine ontology"' of newness and possibility.[117] It is the shift from desire to drive.[118]

6.5.1 Who gives the gift?

For Žižek, every economy is ruptured – in fact, is *constituted* by its own failure – but although the rupture between the individual subject and the society, systems of language and others to whom she relates is important, what is most important is the rupture *internal* to the subject, so it is the subject's own self-relation which is the primary locus for the problem of the gift.[119] Something similar is true with both the material world and the social order: what ruptures economy is not something *outside* of economy but economy itself, which comes into being around a central antagonism. Thus for Žižek, contra Derrida, the point of Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* is that Abraham is forced to choose not 'between his duty to God and his duty to humanity' but 'between the two facets of duty to God, and thereby the two facets of God Himself.'[120] Ethical decision is not between the competing demands of the people (or cats) around us, but arises from the conflict *internal* to the demand itself.

Žižek also suggests that the problem with Derrida's work is that, despite his appeals to radical responsibility, he continues to assume some external standard of

---

114 *Metastases*, 195.
115 *Metastases*, 197.
116 *Parallax View*, 11.
117 *Parallax View*, 199. In *Less than Nothing*, Žižek describes Derrida's thought as '"masculine"' because of 'the persistence, throughout his work, of totalization-without-exception' (742).
118 As Žižek says in *Less than Nothing*, 'it is not only that every identity is always thwarted, fragile, fictitious (as the postmodern "deconstructionist" mantra goes): *identity itself* is stricto sensu the mark of its opposite, of its own lack, of the fact that the entity asserted as self-identical *lacks* full identity' (386). Whilst this is in some ways akin to Milbank's claim that exchange always contains an element of surprise, the two do not exactly agree here; rather, they are divided along the lines of what Žižek describes as 'the only two consistent explanations' as to why newness emerges: 'either... teleology, or … "feminine ontology"' (*Parallax View*, 199).
119 This is in contrast to Milbank's attempt to think the gift in terms of the subject's self-relation before the ethical relation to others, which relies on the appeal to 'a vertical donor' (*Future of Love*, 356).
120 *Ticklish Subject*, 321.

ethical behaviour: 'Derrida's notion of "deconstruction as justice" [seems] to rely on some utopian hope that sustains the specter of "infinite justice", forever postponed, always to come, but nonetheless here as the ultimate horizon of our activity'.[121] Derrida remains within economy, albeit an economy whose closure is perpetually deferred. By contrast, the demand of Lacanian ethics is that any such reference to an economy of right and wrong must be abandoned: 'renouncing the guarantee of some big Other is the very condition of a truly autonomous ethics.'[122] Crucially, for Žižek, it is the structure of the material world itself which makes possible such a radically responsible aneconomic action: 'acts are possible on account of the ontological non-closure, inconsistency, gaps, in a situation.'[123]

6.5.2 Can the gift be given?

The parallax shift by which Žižek's account distinguishes itself from Derrida's is exemplified by Žižek's reading of Derrida's notion of identity. For Hegel, Žižek argues, 'Identity is the surplus which cannot be captured by predicates – more precisely … identity-with-itself is *nothing but* this impossibility of predicates.'[124] And it is precisely here that Hegel and Žižek differ from Derrida: '*this* is the step that the Derridean "deconstruction" seems unable to accomplish … Derrida incessantly varies the motif of how full identity-with-itself is impossible … Yet what eludes him is the Hegelian inversion of *identity qua impossible* into *identity itself as a name for a certain radical impossibility*.'[125] Again, the distinction between Derrida and Žižek is that between desire and drive, between the longing for an impossible completion and the affirmation of impossibility, failure, as itself generative.

This subtly but crucially different conception of identity means that where, for Derrida, the gift is never present, the impossible never quite takes place (even as it remains in some sense the original condition of possibility itself); for Žižek '*miracles do happen*',[126] 'the impossible *does* happen'.[127] This is for Žižek the necessary correlate of

---

121 'Author's Afterword: Why Hegel is a Lacanian' in Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005), 331.
122 Žižek repeats this argument almost verbatim in *Less than Nothing*, 127.
123 *Lost Causes*, 309.
124 *They Know Not*, 36.
125 *They Know Not*, 37. This inversion parallels Žižek's argument that the *jouissance*, excessive enjoyment, which desire hankers after is not the unattainable object which 'always eludes our grasp'; the problem is, rather, that '*one can never get rid of it*' (*Indivisible Remainder*, 93, italics original).
126 *Ticklish Subject*, 135. Žižek contrasts this claim to Derrida's belief that 'the principal ethico-political

the claim that no system is ever entirely complete. The impossible is that which cannot happen within the existing contours of the system, but the act which is made possible by the death drive functions precisely to *redefine* 'the rules and contours of the existing order.'[128]

6.5.3 The gift of death or the gift of life?

As for Derrida, so too for Žižek death and life are not always easy to distinguish. The impossible act which is Žižek's equivalent of the gift is enacted from the place between the two deaths, the place of both the undead and of immortality. The undead zombie comes for Žižek to represent economy itself – it is, Žižek argues, an exemplary figure of the Hegelian notion of habit, the element of human being which consists of 'mindless routine', the unconscious reliable functioning of human life which is the basis for the more radical disruption which constitutes human freedom.[129] It is this notion of habit which Žižek explicitly compares to 'the logic of what Derrida called *pharmakon*, the ambiguous supplement which is simultaneously a force of death and a force of life'.[130] As for Derrida, so for Žižek: death and life run up against each other so closely as to seem at times almost indistinguishable, although (as I argue in chapter 8) there is room to critique Žižek on the grounds of his preference for the language of death over the language of natality and life.

6.5.4 Is the gift present?

Žižek takes Derrida's reading of Husserl to be exemplary of 'post-structuralist deconstruction, with its emphasis on gaps, ruptures, differences, and deferrals, etc.'[131] What is characteristic of any 'differential order' is the fact that 'the absence of a feature is itself a positive feature'.[132] And yet any such order is also characterised by a feature which is a pure surplus, an excess such that, for example, 'every name is ultimately

---

duty is … never fully to succumb to the enthusiasm of a hasty identification of a positive Event with the redemptive Promise that is always "to come"' (134).

127 *Iraq*, 81. This is, again, in contrast to the Derridean 'unconditional ethical injunction', which is 'impossible to fulfil' (80).

128 *Iraq*, 81.

129 *Less than Nothing*, 341.

130 *Less than Nothing*, 342.

131 *Less than Nothing*, 581.

132 *Less than Nothing*, 582.

tautological: a "rose" designates an object with a series of properties, but what holds all these properties together, what makes them the properties of the same One, is ultimately the name itself.'[133] For all Derrida's complex evocation of the thematics of excess and lack, presence and absence, what distinguishes his work from Žižek's is that 'Lacan reunites in one and the same concept what Derrida keeps apart'. Where Derrida sets up the supplement in opposition to identity, as undermining its centre, for Lacan and so for Žižek (this is, Žižek argues, 'Lacan's implicit "Hegelian" move') the two are identical.[134]

6.5.5 What is the gift?

Žižek praises the way that Derrida critiques philosophical attempts to escape metaphysics by showing how they remain within the very metaphysical presuppositions they are seeking to escape – this is, he says, 'Derrida at his best'.[135] But Žižek also offers two critiques of Derrida's understanding of metaphysics. First, he says of Derrida's account of metaphysics essentially the same thing that he says of Derrida's understanding of excess and lack. Where Derrida critiques Foucault's claim that the *cogito* is founded on the exclusion of madness by arguing that madness, an excessive moment of decision, is precisely what *founds* the subject,[136] setting up a persistent tension between this moment of madness and the reasonable metaphysical systems to which it gives birth, for Žižek this opposition needs to be transformed.[137] The conflict between madness and reason is an antagonism *internal* to reason itself. The act of domesticating excess into ordered and reasonable systems *is itself* the moment of madness. Žižek appeals here to a question asked by Brecht: '"What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?"'[138] Reason and unreason, metaphysics and its outside, are dialectically identical.

---

133 *Less than Nothing*, 586-587.
134 *Indivisible Remainder*, 99.
135 *Less than Nothing*, 327.
136 This is the argument of Derrida's 'Cogito and the History of Madness' (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 31-63), in which Derrida discusses Foucault's brief account (in Jean Khalfa ed., *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006), 44-47) of the place of madness in Descartes' work. The subject became a major point of contention between the two thinkers, as discussed by Benoît Peeters' *Derrida: A Biography* trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), especially 238-240.
137 Žižek's most significant discussion of the debate between Derrida and Foucault is in *Less than Nothing*, especially 327-333.
138 *Less than Nothing*, 327.

Secondly, Žižek argues that Derrida is not always able to remain faithful to his own assertion that there is no accessible outside of metaphysics. Whilst maintaining, on the one hand, 'that the very attempt to directly break out of the circle of logocentrism has to rely on a metaphysical conceptual frame; on the other hand, he sometimes treats writing and difference as a kind of general ontological category'.[139] Again, Žižek offers a dialectical twist to the Derridean problematic. Instead of keeping the economy of metaphysics open by appeal to an endlessly deferred completion, Žižek suggests that

> One *defines metaphysics itself as the desire to exit a field of containment*, so that, paradoxically, the only way to truly exit metaphysics is to renounce this desire, to fully endorse one's containment. How then are we to get out of this impasse? A reference to Kierkegaard is pertinent here: the New is Repetition, one can only retrieve the first Beginning by way of a new one which brings out the lost potential of the first.[140]

6.6 Conclusion

The problem of the gift is essentially the problem of both creation and fall as the rupturing of economy, a problem which is responsible for many of the deep tensions within Dionysius' work and the theology which inherits his Neoplatonic metaphysics of desire. Žižek's argument that identity is constituted by its irreconcilable central antagonism is fundamentally an attempt to understand identity in terms of the constitution and rupturing of economy. As such, his work can be read in terms of the problematic of the gift, both in terms of its overarching themes and also in terms of the specific ways in which Žižek sees his project as an attempt to overcome the impasses of Derrida's thought.

Žižek's materialist ontology of drive (which is, crucially, an ontology of failure) enables him to understand the gift as always-already internal to economy, as constitutive of economy. In this sense, then, he is also able to do what Milbank attempts but fails: to think the gift as a genuinely risky form of non-identical repetition. Whilst Milbank occasionally gestures towards an account of the gift as rupture, these gestures are undermined by the prevalence in his work of an idealised form of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation, stripped of the tensions found within this model in Dionysius and most of his successors. Consequently, a consideration of the gift once

---

139 *Less than Nothing*, 642.
140 *Less than Nothing*, 897.

again emphasises the importance and potential fruitfulness of Žižek's transformation of the problematic of ontology and desire for theology.

However, although Žižek does occasionally make explicit reference to the gift, it is far from his favoured term for the nature of that which ruptures economy. Žižek's privileged name for this agent or event of rupturing is, rather, violence; and it is around this notion that some of Žižek's key ideas come into sharpest relief. It is to violence, then, that the subsequent chapter turns.

7. Violence

7.1 Introduction

Whilst the term 'violence' does a lot of – perhaps too much – work in Žižek's writings, its most important function is as a term for the gift. Violence, for Žižek, is the traumatic rupturing, the failure of economy which brings into being the entirely new. It belongs to the death drive, to freedom, to grace. It is a name for creation *ex nihilo* as the rupture of both meaning and causality. Yet violence is also, for Žižek, a way of describing the destruction and damage which is wrought by the failed attempt to close the economic circle, to control and contain the excess which threatens to transform the world. Just as the difference between desire and drive, narcissism and love, is distinguished by the merest parallax shift, Žižek's violence belongs at the boundary of oppression and liberation.

Violence is an infrequent but important theme in contemporary discussions of the gift. For Derrida the two are connected in part by way of the relationship of the gift to death. For the one who receives the gift, the gift *is* violence: 'he is … poisoned by the very fact that something happens to him in the face of which he remains … defenseless, open, exposed … Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift'.[1] Both the gift and violence have a relationship to Derrida's central figure of the ruptured circle, deconstruction. In his essay on Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence',[2] Derrida takes as his central concern the question, 'What difference is there between, *on the one hand*, the force that can be just, or in any case deemed legitimate … and *on the other hand* the violence that one always deems unjust?' He argues, furthermore, that 'discourses on double affirmation, the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable … are also, through and through, at least obliquely discourses on justice.'[3] This association of gift and violence is one of the grounds on which Milbank critiques Derrida in particular and 'secular' thought more generally, arguing (in what sounds like a deliberate echo of Derrida's language) that 'from the outset the secular is complicit

---

1   Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 147.

2   In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*, eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-252.

3   Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), 6, 7.

with an "ontology of violence", a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force'.[4] To argue, as Derrida does, that '"difference" has now become the sole "transcendental"' is, for Milbank, to claim that ontological difference 'must itself be characterised by a rupture … a kind of primordial violence'.[5] This violent ontology is in contrast to Dionysius' Christian ontology of participation in which 'goodness is fundamentally a gift or an emanation'.[6]

In Žižek's work violence functions as (amongst other things) a privileged figure for that which ruptures economy. While Žižek's work is preoccupied with the figure of economy in a way which often parallels the structure of recent discussions about the gift, the notion of the gift itself is of relatively marginal importance for Žižek's work. The violence of Žižek's rhetoric is one of the aspects of his work which is most frequently criticised, by both his secular and his theological readers. For John Gray, Žižek's thought simply *is* violent: 'A celebration of violence is one of the most prominent strands in Žižek's work'.[7] For Simon Critchley, Žižek's work has at its core 'an obsessional fantasy. On the one hand, the only authentic stance to take in dark times is to do nothing …. On the other hand, Žižek dreams of a divine violence, a cataclysmic, purifying violence of the sovereign ethical deed'.[8] For John Milbank the problem is Žižek's failure to adopt the Christian and Dionysian notion of evil as privation and his insistence on understanding it as a 'positively willed denial of the good.'[9] This renders him unable to understand the subtleties of the relationship between evil and violence,[10] and in turn the difference between gift and violence.[11] For Marcus

---

4   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 6.
5   *Theology and Social Theory*, 301-302.
6   *Theology and Social Theory*, 365. As David Newheiser argues, for Milbank it is precisely the fact that gifts *do* occur within economy which makes it possible for them to avoid 'the violence threatened by aneconomic love' ('Eckhart, Derrida and the Gift of Love' in *The Heythrop Journal.* Published electronically 21 March, 2012. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2265.2012.00754.x, 8).
7   'The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek' in *The New York Review of Books,* 12 July 2012 http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jul/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek.
8   'Violent Thoughts About Slavoj Žižek' in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from This Widening Gyre*, ed. Nathan Eckstrand and Christopher Yates (London: Continuum, 2011), 63. This essay was written in response to Žižek's critical review of Critchley's book, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007) - 'Resistance is Surrender', London Review of Books, November 2007. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/slavoj-zizek/resistance-is-surrender) and his subsequent elaboration of this critique in *Lost Causes* (337-350). Although violence was only a minor theme in Žižek's critique, Critchley writes that he intends to 'use this debate as a lever for trying to think about the difficult question of the nature and plausibility of a politics of nonviolence' ('Violent Thoughts', 61).
9   John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
10 *Being Reconciled*, 26. On Milbank's account this is because 'the theory of radical evil … tends to view peace as mere absence of disturbance' and so cannot understand human interactions as anything other than violence; it is unable to comprehend the differences between 'the crack of the whip' as 'a

Pound, the problem is that Žižek's 'sanctification of violence undermines what is truly revolutionary ... within Christianity: its outright refusal of violence'.[12] He argues that, as a result of his assertion that every identity is grounded on a violent cut, on 'the sacrifice/expulsion of the imaginary thing … for Žižek there can be no symbolic action that has not been paid for by "murder"'.[13]

As I will argue over the course of this chapter, all of these critiques of the place of violence in Žižek's work fall short in different ways insofar as each relies on a particular misreading of Žižek. Yet Žižek himself bears some responsibility for these misreadings of his own work, which are caused in part by two key problems with his violent rhetoric: the multiplicity of analytically distinct notions which he terms 'violence', and his problematic preference for the language of violence and death over the language of newness and birth.

7.2 Classifying Violence

As discussed earlier, for Žižek (as for both Derrida and Dionysius), creation necessarily involves an act of distinction. Both the individual subject and society as a whole are brought into being by the creation of a boundary: a cut which is both an internal fissure and a division between the self and others. In the case of the individual, it is only as the subject is separated from her mother and begins to speak that she is able to have a conscious sense of selfhood and individual identity. Yet the language which enables her sense of a distinct identity itself comes from outside, entangling her sense of self with others and with the symbolic order, with the social, with words she did not create, which speak her as much as she speaks them. In the case of the symbolic order, the cut is the establishment of the law, which is, of necessity, itself unjustifiable from within the system of meaning it establishes. In the case of both the subject and the symbolic order, Žižek figures this creative cut as violent because it escapes the control of the being which it founds and forever disrupts simple self-relation. It is within this

---

spur, a dishonouring, a rebuke or a caress'.

11 *Being Reconciled*, 156. See also *Monstrosity*, where Milbank sets up a three-way opposition between his paradoxical account of difference, Derrida's 'nihilistic' account of difference in which difference is 'as much violent intrusion as offer of a free loving gift' and Žižek's dialectics (146).

12 Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 23. This assertion would, of course, be rather surprising to many if not most Christians throughout history.

13 *Žižek,* 45.

narrative of creation as the disruption of economy that Žižek's account of violence must be located.

Fittingly, it is in his book *Violence* that Žižek most thoroughly articulates his notion of violence. Here, Žižek offers two typologies of violence which focus, respectively, on the ways in which violence is manifested, and on the economic function of violence. His first typology (of the manifestation of violence) identifies a division between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is the violence which can be straightforwardly attributed to a particular agent: the woman who hits a policeman, the child who throws a stone at a soldier, the workers who smash up a factory. But Žižek argues that this subjective violence can only be understood within the context which enables and encourages it, the context of objective violence. Objective violence in turn breaks down into two categories, symbolic and systemic violence. Systemic violence is the violence caused by the ordinary functioning of existing political and economic systems: the violence of perpetually rising house prices in London which uproots families or renders them homeless, or the dismantling of the coal mining and shipbuilding industries which has destroyed whole communities in the North East of England. Symbolic violence is the violence which inheres in the boundaries created and marked out by the symbolic order: for example, the ways in which men and women are marked out as different from one another, which render invisible or excluded those whose gender identity or sexuality does not fall neatly into existing categories of maleness or femaleness. But symbolic violence is also related to the very fact of language itself: when a particular act is assessed as violent, this judgement is always made against the background of a particular account of what everyday, 'normal', non-violence is. It is the imposition of this standard which is, Žižek argues, the most violent act of all. Violence is *manifested* then as subjective and objective; and objective violence in turn can be either systemic or symbolic.[14]

But Žižek also discusses the ways in which violence relates to economy; specifically to the economy of the symbolic order. In order to do this he draws, like Derrida, on Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'. Benjamin identifies three varieties of violence: law-founding violence, law-maintaining violence, and 'pure revolutionary' or 'divine' violence. To these three, Žižek adds a fourth: 'simple' criminal

---

14 *Violence*, 1-2.

violence.[15] This taxonomy of violence breaks down into two pairs: law-maintaining violence and simple criminality both belong within the existing social economy; law-founding violence and revolutionary violence are aneconomic, disruptive, and creative.

7.2.1 Law-founding violence

Law-founding violence is the act of founding the law itself, the cut which both creates and divides, which creates by dividing. For Žižek, this structure is shared by both society as a whole and the individual subject. The cut is both creative and violent in the sense that it is arbitrary, dividing the social field, throwing it forever out of balance and making completeness forever impossible. Because there is something essentially arbitrary in the dividing of the world up symbolically in one way rather than another any given order is, according to Žižek, 'a violent imposition which throws the universe out of joint'.[16] For Žižek, this account of a founding, excessive, groundless cut which founds the world and renders it forever incomplete is shared by (amongst others) Derrida, Schelling, Heidegger, Hegel and Carl Schmitt.[17] But 'the Freudian name' for that which can never be fully integrated into the universe of meaning to which it gives birth is '*trauma*'.[18] It is the act of creation *ex nihilo*, a moment of the rupturing of economy: it is freedom.

7.4.2 Law-maintaining violence

Once the symbolic order has been established, law-maintaining violence is the coercion employed by the existing order to maintain its own authority and stability. It

---

15 *Iraq*, 158-160.
16 *Ticklish Subject*, 76.
17 See, for example, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 118, where Žižek says that for Derrida in his later writings 'every discursive field is founded on some "violent" ethicopolitical decision' (a claim which is borne out by Derrida's own reading of Benjamin, in which he argues that since 'the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground' ('Force of Law', 14)); *Indivisible Remainder,* 76, where Žižek says that for Schelling, 'Order is a violent imposition which throws the universe out of joint'; *Ticklish Subject*, 16-17 where Žižek says that, for Heidegger, human life is constitutively out of joint because the human world is 'chosen in an excessive gesture of groundless decision'; *Ticklish Subject*, 94-95 where Žižek argues that 'Hegel becomes Hegel only when he gives up the idea of an organic social totality and starts to see reconciliation as reconciliation *with* as well as *of* the split at the heart of the social order'; and *Ticklish Subject*, where Žižek dubs Schmitt the true political heir of Hegel for his 'decisionist claim that the rule of law ultimately hinges on an abyssal act of violence (violent imposition) grounded only in itself' (113).
18 *Fragile Absolute*, 98.

consists of both the explicit coercion of a society's legal system, and the implicit coercion of the social stigma attached to those who challenge or subvert the existing order of things. Law-maintaining violence takes three forms. First, it is the ordinary functioning of the coercive elements of the state apparatus: the police or the judiciary.[19] Second, it is the exceptional coercion employed by the state when a state of emergency is declared and powers which are ordinarily illegal are granted to the forces of state coercion in order to restore the ordinary functioning of the law when revolutionary violence threatens to overthrow or undermine it. Žižek argues that this is what is at work in 'all rightist *coups d'état*', but also, citing Benjamin in the context of the post-9/11 'war on terror', that this exceptional exercise of law-maintaining violence is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the normal rule of law.[20] Third, Žižek implicitly includes in this category of law-maintaining violence what he dubs the 'way of the superego'[21] or the obscene supplement/underside of the law. Essentially, Žižek's claim is that the founding violence of the law lives on in officially illegal but unofficially tolerated sets of behaviour. Examples include Nazi atrocities which '"everybody knew, yet did not want to speak about aloud"';[22] or, in the Catholic Church, the 'counterculture' which made possible the widespread sexual abuse of children by priests.[23] In the army, Žižek says that this obscene underside can be seen in the way that explicit homophobia is supplemented by a set of implicit homosexual practices.[24] In American society, it can be seen in the lynching of black people by the Ku Klux Klan,[25] or in the brutal or humiliating practices of hazing at American colleges and high schools (which Žižek sees mirrored in the abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib).[26] The community bound together by shared submission to the Law is also, more deeply, bound together by

---

19 *Lost Causes*, 476. Benjamin's discussion of this law-maintaining violence suggests that he is referring primarily to what Žižek calls 'subjective violence', but Žižek's tripartite account of violence as subject, objective and symbolic suggests a much wider extension of violence into something like a Foucauldian 'micro-physics of power', where violence is exerted at every level of social interaction in order to form and maintain subjects in accordance with the law. Žižek's main critique of Benjamin's text is that where, for Benjamin, it is in language that the possibility of non-violence is to be located, in fact it is 'precisely *because* they can speak' that 'humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence' (*Less than Nothing*, 870).

20 *Iraq*, 158.

21 *Desert of the Real*, 142.

22 *Metastases*, 55.

23 *Desert of the Real*, 29; *Violence*, 142-143.

24 *Violence*, 145. Žižek is not suggesting here that homosexuality is violent per se, but that it violates and therefore sustains the explicit 'law' of homophobia within the army.

25 *Metastases*, 55.

26 *Violence*, 147.

shared complicity in its inherent transgression.[27] For this reason, the obscene supplement to the law represents one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in the process of social change.[28] Hence, Žižek suggests, sometimes the most effective (violent) political tactic is to suspend this obscene underside of the law. As an example, he cites St Paul's claim that Christians should value one another not according to their social status but in terms of their role within the community of the church. This is not a complete rejection of the symbolic order, as is clear from Paul's exhortations to Christians to obey the law, but rather obedience to the letter of the law coupled with the hard work of resisting the abjection of those who are socially outcast which the law implicitly demands. Žižek argues, therefore, that '*the proper Christian uncoupling suspends not so much the explicit laws but, rather, their implicit spectral obscene supplement.*'[29]

7.2.3 Simple criminal violence

Simple criminal violence belongs within this context of the symbolic order which is founded and maintained by violence. It is the violence to which law-maintaining violence reacts but which never poses a really radical threat to the law itself.[30] This category includes not only ordinary criminality, but also the sort of aimless violent protest which Žižek sometimes designates *passages à l'acte*: the violence which expresses impotent frustration rather than posing any meaningful threat to the system as a whole.[31] The *passage à l'acte* can take various forms. It can be seen in the ideological displacement of anger away from its true object onto a proxy or a scapegoat. This is the case, Žižek argues, with the atrocities of Nazi Germany, which '*did not go far enough*': although impelled by a hatred of bourgeois society, Nazi anger was displaced instead

---

27 *Metastases*, 55; *How to Read Lacan*, 88.
28 *Violence*, 143.
29 *The Fragile Absolute*, 130.
30 As Chesterton says in *The Man Who Was Thursday*: 'Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it' (Žižek quotes this in *Monstrosity*, 44).
31 *Passage à l'acte* is a term which originates from the French psychoanalysis, where it was used originally for acts which result from psychosis, and which 'mark the point when the subject proceeds from a violent idea or intention to the corresponding act'. Whilst the term was often conflated with the Freudian notion of 'acting out' (*Agieren*), Lacan insisted on a distinction between the two notions (Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 136). The term crops up on numerous occasions in Žižek's work, and most commonly refers to a self-destructive outburst which emerges from frustration at one's own impotence, in contrast to the act proper which expresses the impotence of the big Other (see, for example, *Violence*, 170: 'All that changes between divine violence and blind *passage a l'acte* is the *site* of impotence').

onto the Jews as scapegoats, missing its true target and so descending into law-maintaining violence, re-asserting rather than challenging the existing order of things.[32] Or it can be seen in aimless violence which expresses impotent frustration. This is, Žižek argues, what happened in the Paris riots of 2005[33] and the London riots of 2011[34] which made no real demands and posed no real threat to the established order of things. Moreover, although there are clear differences between these aimless riots and fundamentalist terrorist acts of violence, Žižek argues that terrorism remains within the framework of *passage à l'acte*, essentially an expression of self-destructive impotence rather than a real challenge to the existing order of things.[35]

7.2.4 Revolutionary or divine violence

Finally, Žižek talks about revolutionary violence. It is revolutionary violence which he is most interested in understanding, because only revolutionary violence can radically disrupt the existing order of things in such a way as to make space for a new order to emerge.[36] Revolutionary violence is crucially related to the death drive and to freedom. It is deeply theological, relating to the themes of death, creation, love, grace, and to the notion of the act which finds its archetype in the radical reordering of the world which took place in early Christianity.[37]

Walter Benjamin also describes this revolutionary violence as 'divine violence', setting it up in opposition to the 'mythic violence' which founds the law.[38] Mythic violence founds the law, creates guilt, threatens, and is bloody. Divine violence destroys the law, expiates guilt, strikes, and is lethal but bloodless. Divine violence purifies those upon whom it is visited not only of guilt but also of law. It can destroy, Benjamin argues, 'goods, right, life, and suchlike', but never 'the soul of the living', suggesting that it places those upon whom it is enacted in what Žižek would describe as the space

---

32 *Lost Causes*, 123, 151.
33 *Violence*, 68.
34 Slavoj Žižek, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite' in *London Review of Books*, August 2011. http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite.
35 *Violence*, 68-69, 'Shoplifters'.
36 Revolutionary violence is the '"impossible" act' which 'takes place in every authentic revolutionary process' (*Desert of the Real*, 27-28).
37 Revolutionary violence is, for Žižek, the violence of the Pauline '"uncoupling"' from the existing order, the violence 'of the *death drive*, of the radical "wiping the slate clean" as the condition of the New Beginning' which is 'the direct expression of love' (*Fragile Absolute*, 127); it is the feature of 'violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates' (*They Know Not*, xlvii).
38 Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 249.

between the first and the second deaths. The biblical injunction 'Thou shalt not kill' is not, then, absolute, but an injunction which can only be contravened by those who are prepared to assume the responsibility for doing so themselves. Divine violence cannot be justified in terms of its impact on the victim, but only in terms of its impact upon God and on the violent person herself. Because it is extra-legal, it is difficult if not impossible to pass judgement on the question of whether particular acts of violence are divine or mythic.[39] Divine violence interrupts the economy of the law: it cannot be justified from within the co-ordinates of the existing situation, and it opens up the possibility for new things to emerge.

7.3 Divine Violence

Žižek takes the concept of revolutionary/divine violence from Benjamin and weaves it into the web of his ideas about that which interrupts economy. There are two respects in which his account of divine violence differs from Benjamin's. First, in terms of its relationship to mythic or law-founding violence: as will become clear, for Žižek the two are less straightforwardly opposed to one another than is the case in Benjamin's thought. Second, Benjamin discusses violence as a particular sort of *tactic* – as one means among many by which social order is maintained and disrupted. However, in order to address the question of whether political violence can ever be justified, Žižek connects Benjamin's typology of violence as a tactic with his own typology of violence as complexly entangled with the subjective, objective, systemic and symbolic constitution of social relations, and with his Lacanian-Hegelian ontology of failure such that *everything* comes to be in some sense violent. In reading Benjamin in this way, Žižek is to some extent following Derrida's lead. It was Derrida who first took Benjamin's notion of violence and extended its meaning such that it no longer applied merely to physical force (or the threat of physical force) but to language itself.[40] Yet where Derrida limits the notion of the justice which is founded, maintained and disrupted by violence to the realm of the human (that is, to the realm of language

---

39 Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 252.
40 Where for Benjamin, language is 'a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence' ('Critique of Violence', 245), for Derrida the discussion of violence, of force, is from the beginning bound up with language – Derrida delivered his paper in English 'because it has been imposed on me as a sort of obligation or condition by a sort of symbolic force or law in a situation I do not control' ('Force of Law', 4).

specifically),[41] Žižek's connection of the structure of language with the structure of the material world as such means that violence becomes, for him, a feature of ontological reality as such.[42] This raises important questions about the extent to which such a generalised notion of violence can have any analytical purchase whatsoever. I will discuss this issue later, merely noting for now that the account of divine violence that Žižek takes from Benjamin is modified only in these two respects: its relationship to law-founding violence, and its scope.

7.3.1 Divine violence as drive

How, then, does Žižek relate Benjamin's notion of divine violence to his work as a whole? First, and most crucially, Žižek makes a connection between revolutionary violence and the drive. Like the death drive, revolutionary violence is the point of the disruption of economy, the moment when one dies to the law.[43] It is not a means to an end, but a 'liberating end in itself'.[44] It is the assumption of absolute responsibility outside of the authorisation of the big Other.[45] As in both Benjamin's discussion of revolutionary violence and Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard, divine violence as drive involves the assumption of absolute responsibility by the person who acts, beyond any possibility of justification by the symbolic order. Divine violence is also the moment of new creation: the existing symbolic order is wiped out, and a new order is initiated which changes not only the future but also (and here Žižek cites Benjamin once again) the past. Žižek specifically refers to this revolutionary emergence of newness as

---

41 Derrida argues that 'one would not speak of injustice or violence toward an animal, even less towards a vegetable or a stone' ('Force of Law', 18). While he concedes that it might be possible to speak of violence, of injustice towards 'what we still so confusedly call animals', this would, he argues, require that we 'reconsider in its totality the metaphysico-anthropocentric axiomatic that dominates, in the West, the thought of just and unjust' ('Force of Law', 19).

42 This issue is, however, complex. While on the one hand Žižek argues that 'the true breakthrough of quantum physics' is that it 'compels us to call into question the … myth … of the absolute gap that separates nature from man' by demonstrating that those features which are deemed uniquely human, 'the constitutive imbalance, the "out-of-joint", on account of which man is an "unnatural" creature … must somehow already be at work in nature itself' (*Indivisible Remainder*, 218-220), at the same time he insists that there is something uniquely violent about language such that 'humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely *because* they can speak' (*Less than Nothing*, 870). This insistence on the uniqueness of language, however, does not imply an absolute difference of structure between language and material being; it is, rather, that in human beings the violence or failure which is constitutive of nature as such is found at a higher 'power (in the mathematical sense of the term)' - language is an intensification of rather than a unique diversion from the basic organisation of the material world (*Indivisible Remainder*, 220).

43 *Fragile Absolute*, 127.

44 *Parallax View*, 380.

45 *Violence*, 172.

'creation *ex nihilo*', arguing that his is a 'creationist materialism' where teleology is not given from the beginning but conferred only retroactively.[46] Concurrently, divine violence cannot be wrought with a specific goal in mind: it must, like both the divine decision to create and the human decision to sin in traditional theology, be purely for its own sake, a 'liberating end-in-itself'.[47] Divine violence '*doesn't serve anything, which is why it is divine*'.[48]

As for Christian theology in general and Dionysius in particular, creation for Žižek involves division. Divine violence breaks open two economies: the economy of the symbolic order and the economy of the imaginary order. The symbolic order is disrupted in three different ways. First, the individual who enacts divine violence is separated from the symbolic order; second, the individuals *upon whom* divine violence is enacted are separated from the symbolic order; and third, the symbolic order itself is divided up along new lines.

First, then, the revolutionary act is made possible by the individual's withdrawal from the symbolic order. On several occasions, Žižek describes this withdrawal in explicitly theological language. In *Fragile Absolute*, the individual's withdrawal is a Pauline death to the law.[49] In *Monstrosity*, Žižek describes the crucifixion in terms of Christ's withdrawal from the symbolic order. On the cross, Žižek argues, Christ moves from relating to others to a self-relation in which he 'turns the act of violence back on himself, sacrificing himself (thus breaking the endless vicious cycle of reaction and revenge, of the "eye for an eye"). In this way he already enacts universality: he becomes universal in his very singularity, acquiring a distance from his particularity as a person among others, interacting with them.'[50] It is in this sense that violence is 'divine': because it is action without justification from the big Other, from any external standard (much like the decision of Abraham which Derrida discusses in his account of the gift).[51] Where the *passage à l'acte* is the expression of the individual's impotence in the face of the big Other, divine violence is the expression of the big Other's impotence in

---

46 *Sublime Object*, 161. Žižek makes roughly the same argument in *Fragile Absolute*, 127.
47 Žižek, '*Concesso non Dato*' in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, in eds. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 253. Žižek specifies here that 'a different (higher, eventually) standard of living is a by-product of a revolutionary process, not its goal)'.
48 *Lost Causes*, 485 (italics original).
49 *Fragile Absolute*, 127.
50 *Monstrosity*, 267-268.
51 *Parallax View*, 162.

the face of the individual.[52]

But, second, the act of divine violence also seeks to alter others' relationship to the symbolic order. It 'purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law',[53] forcing them out of the grasp of the symbolic order. Moreover, divine violence as drive involves a relationship to a particular object, person, or cause which has been put in the place of the lost object around which the drive perpetually circles. This means that whatever is chosen to stand in the place of the lost Thing is itself violently separated from its previous position in the symbolic order.[54]

Third, all of these disruptions within the symbolic order lead to the disruption of the symbolic order itself. Because the act of divine violence necessarily resists incorporation into the symbolic order, its enactment forces a reworking of existing frameworks of meaning. Precisely because it is done for itself rather than for some particular standard of good or to produce some particular meaning, it results in a re-ordering of existing standards of good or of meaning.[55] The particular is elevated to the universal, restructuring the world around itself: so the Christian elevation of Christ to the universal means that the world is no longer divided into Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free but instead into Christian and non-Christian. This is the basis of Žižek's objection to 'identity politics'. For Žižek, this too often descends into the mere attempt to broaden the horizons of the existing order to include those who are currently excluded from it, whereas a genuinely revolutionary movement would claim instead that the oppression of a particular group represented a universal truth about the existing order and would seek, as a result, to totally restructure the existing order of things around that group.[56] As a result, one criterion for assessing whether or not a particular movement is revolutionary is whether it 'undermines the coordinates of the very system from which it abstracts itself.'[57]

---

52 *Violence*, 170.
53 *Violence*, 168.
54 *They Know Not,* xlviii.
55 *Parallax View*, 380.
56 *Ticklish Subject*, 208-211; *Tragedy*, 44-45; *Desert of the Real*, 66. It is never clear exactly whom Žižek means to target with his pejorative use of this term. But it is hard to see on what grounds he would object to the term as described by those who originally coined it in the *Combahee River Collective Statement*: 'We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity … We realise that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy' (1977) http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html. This is hardly a demand for inclusion in the system as it currently exists.
57 *Lost Causes*, 409.

But it is not only the symbolic order which is disrupted by divine violence. The revolutionary act also has implications for the imaginary order. Where the symbolic order is the external economy within which the subject is positioned by others, by the Other, the imaginary is the subjective economy which positions everything else in relation to the subject's own narcissistic self-relation.[58] Crucial to the act of divine violence is, for Žižek, the rupturing of the imaginary relationship between the subject and the world around her, which catches up everything that exists into the economy of her own self-relating. To relate to others beyond the law is to 'love our neighbour not merely in his imaginary dimension (as our *semblant*, mirror-image, on behalf of the notion of Good that we impose on him) but as the Other in the very abyss of its Real'.[59] To act according to the death drive is to resist the temptation to project one's own imaginations onto the other, and instead to recognise them as genuinely other, unknowable, and flawed.[60] It is only the rupture, the absolutely unbridgeable gap between the subject and the other which makes ethics, the act, possible at all.

All of these disruptions, it must be noted, are possible because the symbolic and imaginary orders are already divided. The revolutionary act is made possible because no economy is ever complete in itself. Divine violence does not aim at perfect harmony (which would mean death) but at the recognition of the gap, the antagonism, the failure at the heart of every society and every individual. Žižek criticises Levinasian ethics on this basis: it is not enough, he says, to aim for an encounter with the Other which will expose our shared humanity and so make it possible to live harmoniously with them. This account of ethics fails to recognise the *inhumanity* at the core of every subject's being, the gap within the subject which forever resists meaning and harmonisation.[61] Freedom is, Žižek argues, 'not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance'. To be reconciled with the Other is not to obliterate the difference between us but to fully acknowledge the irreducible gap not only between myself and the other but within my own being.[62]

---

58 *Lost Causes*, 89; *They Know Not,* 11.
59 *Fragile Absolute*, 111-112.
60 *Violence*, 164; *Fragile Absolute*, 127-130.
61 *Parallax View*, 111-114.
62 *Parallax View*, 282.

7.3.2 Manifestations of divine violence

Žižek argues that it is crucial to identify particular events as manifestations of divine violence: to fail to do so is, he argues, to succumb to 'obscurantist mystification.'[63] What does divine violence look like, then? Žižek gives numerous examples; perhaps the most frequently cited is that of the character of Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.* In the story, the narrator describes a scrivener whom he hires, who slowly stops performing his duties, replying to any request simply by stating 'I would prefer not to.' Bartleby is used by Žižek as an example of violent resistance to the symbolic order, which radically undermines the existing order of things by way of a passive refusal to participate.[64] Similarly, Žižek cites Gandhi's civil disobedience and boycotts as an example of a passive challenge to the existing order of things,[65] along with Job's refusal to accept his friends' attempts to make meaning out of his suffering,[66] and a Polish Holocaust survivor's refusal to leave for the West, instead returning repeatedly to Auschwitz and continuing to talk about it as a means of repeatedly marking the unassimilable trauma.[67] But Žižek also gives more active examples of divine violence: Nicole Kidman's character Grace in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* is abused by the residents of the town where she takes up residence, but finally abandons her stance of passive suffering in order to kill them. For Žižek, it is only when Grace abandons her patronising position of understanding and forgiving her neighbours and takes revenge upon them that she truly respects them as her equals and sees them as they are: interestingly, in this case 'divine' violence is precisely the decision to abandon the God-like stance of being able to forgive the sins of others.[68] Although divine violence may take the form of passive resistance it is, Žižek argues, fundamentally active: 'it imposes, enforces a vision, while outbursts of impotent violence [i.e. *passages à l'acte*] are fundamentally *reactive*.'[69]

Perhaps the prime example of the act of revolutionary violence which reorders the world is the crucifixion of Christ which, for Žižek, marks the birth of Christianity.

---

63 *Lost Causes*, 162 and *Violence*, 197.
64 *Parallax View*, 342, 382-383; *Lost Causes* 353.
65 *Lost Causes*, 475; a fact which John Caputo misses when he objects to Žižek's endorsement of Bartleby-politics, arguing that, unlike his weak theology, Žižek 'hardly has Gandhi's non-violent resistance in mind' (*The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 161). Whilst Caputo is right to point out that Žižek is not always the most careful reader of his own work (e.g. *Insistence of God*, 147), it is clear that this inattention runs both ways.
66 *Violence*, 152-153.
67 *They Know Not*, 272.
68 *Violence*, 192-193.
69 *Violence*, 179.

This centrality of the cross is due in part to the influence of Hegel and Badiou on Žižek's work, but relates also to his insistence that it is in Christianity that a true universality which cuts across all divisions of gender, race or social status first emerges.[70] For Žižek, the incarnation and crucifixion are not only exemplary instances of the Event, but *the* paradigm of the Event, of the death of God (i.e. the big Other) which characterises the act of divine violence.[71]

7.3.3 Divine violence as love

It is also Christianity which provides the model for the ethical attitude which goes along with divine violence, an attitude which Žižek variously characterises as love, *agape* and grace. Žižek's account of love resembles Derrida's advocacy of giving in such a way that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.[72] Having elsewhere drawn a parallel between psychoanalysis and the Christian notion of love beyond the law,[73] Žižek argues that, in the context of the psychoanalytic relation, the money paid by the analysand to the analyst must be understood as money for nothing, pure gift. Only then does the analysand receive back

> that for which there is no price – the *objet petit a*, the cause of desire, that which can emerge only as a pure excess of Grace. The vicious circle of thrift is thus doubly broken: the patient does something totally meaningless within the horizon of the capitalist logic of consumption/accumulation, and receives in exchange the pure surplus itself.[74]

This love beyond the law requires a disconnection from the social order: hence Christ's assertion in Luke 14:26 that to follow him is to hate one's own family. To love beyond

---

70   This is why, as in *Fragile Absolute*'s subtitle, 'the Christian legacy' is 'worth fighting for'. Adam Kotsko argues that Žižek's books on Christianity can all be understood as attempts to grapple with the claim in *Ticklish Subject* that 'what we need today is the gesture that would undermine capitalist globalization from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire' (211, cited in Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology*, (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 83). This is not to say, of course, that Christianity has necessarily been faithful to the Pauline claim that there 'is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

71   *Monstrosity*, 96. Žižek does not exactly 'miss' the resurrection, as Marcus Pound suggests (*Žižek*, 52); rather, he argues, the early Christians 'drew from Christ's nonreturn after his death the correct conclusion: they were awaiting the wrong thing, Christ had already returned as the Holy Spirit of the community' (*Monstrosity*, 283). This is, Žižek argues, a materialist reading of the resurrection: 'the two events, death and resurrection, are strictly contemporaneous. Christ is resurrected in us, the collective of believers, and his tortured dead body remains forever as its material remainder (*Monstrosity*, 287).

72   In *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 101.

73   In *Ticklish Subject*, 153.

74   *They Know Not*, xxxix.

the law is to hate the symbolic order and so to hate others insofar as they remain within that order: for this reason, real love may resemble cruelty.[75] Love is that which disrupts economy, which threatens harmony.[76] Love is a rupture; it is the nothing which makes everything else incomplete.[77]

Elsewhere, Žižek talks about Christian *agape* in more positive terms, as the move from the contraction of withdrawal from the symbolic order to 'boundless *expansion*', freedom and self-realisation in relating to others beyond the symbolic order and hence beyond the law, accepting others in all their imperfections and saying 'Yes! to life in its mysterious synchronic multitude'.[78] But this freedom is hard work: 'Christian charity is rare and fragile, something to be fought for and regained again and again'.[79] There is no big Other to guarantee stability or ensure success. Such communities do exist, Žižek argues, but usually not for long. As examples, he adduces the settlements run by Sendero Luminoso, a Peruvian Maoist guerrilla group in the 1990s (which were destroyed by external forces);[80] and Stalinist communism[81] and Christianity which both (Žižek argues) betrayed their own revolutionary potential. To live in the new community of love is to live in 'the emergency state of a permanent revolution'.[82]

7.4 The Violence of Love

It should be clear by this point that Žižek's writing resists any simplistic critique on the grounds that it is 'too violent.' The notion of violence does a lot of work within Žižek's thought, and in using the language of violence Žižek has two somewhat incompatible aims. First, he is trying to highlight the connection between individual acts of violence and the structure of society and culture as such. But secondly, he is using violence as a way to think about how the social order changes, how economies can be broken open by the emergence of something new. To do this he seeks to shift attention away from whether or not particular acts are violent to the question of what

---

75 *Fragile Absolute*, 126-127; *Lost Causes*, 486-488.
76 *Fragile Absolute*, 121.
77 *Fragile Absolute*, 119, 146-147.
78 *Fragile Absolute*, 101-103. It is worth noting that this affirmation of the unknowable other sounds rather Derridean.
79 *Fragile Absolute*, 118.
80 *Iraq*, 82-83.
81 *Parallax View*, 285-286.
82 *Monstrosity*, 283.

their impact is on the existing order.

There is clearly a danger here that Žižek is expanding the scope of violence so widely that it becomes analytically useless. Yet in many ways that is exactly what Žižek *wants*. His discussion of violence is, in part at least, a ground-clearing exercise: an attempt to side-line the question of whether or not political tactics are violent (and therefore unethical) in favour of the question of what sort of action really disrupts the existing order so as to enable the emergence of newness. And so both of the aneconomic pair of law-founding and revolutionary violence (which is where Žižek locates the possibility of newness and transformation) *may* involve death, injury or destruction, but do not *necessarily* do so. Rather, these forms of genuinely disruptive violence are 'violent' for three reasons. First, because they are unjustifiable from within the existing economy of meaning and law; second, because they disrupt the existing order of things; and third, because they escape the control of those upon whom they are exercised. Both law-maintaining violence and simple criminal violence belong to the order of economy, of desire; both law-founding violence and revolutionary violence belong to the order of the aneconomic, the gift, and the drive. Just as, on Žižek's reading, the Christian doctrine of creation functions as the 'Evil' which disrupts the harmonious functioning of economy, so too in Christianity 'it is love itself that enjoins us to "unplug" from the organic community into which we were born'. Christianity '*is*', for Žižek, 'the violent intrusion of Difference'.[83]

With this in mind, it is possible to see the ways in which those who criticise Žižek's violence variously miss the mark. John Gray's attack is easiest to dispense with, based as it is on what Žižek rightly describes as a 'crude misreading of my position.'[84] What Gray fails to grasp in Žižek's work is that, far from extolling violence in the sense of 'mass murder' or 'mass killing and torture on a colossal scale',[85] the violence which Žižek's work ultimately endorses is, rather, 'the violence in which no blood has to be shed', the disruption of the existing order whose transformation in no way depends on – and can well be hindered by – bloodshed.[86]

---

83 *Fragile Absolute*, 121.
84 'Not Less Than Nothing, But Simply Nothing', on the Verso Books blog, 2 July 2012 http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1046-not-less-than-nothing-but-simply-nothing.
85 Gray, 'Violent Visions'.
86 'Not Less than Nothing'.

Simon Critchley's critique of Žižek is more deserving of attention.[87] Critchley correctly points out that Žižek intends to argue that 'our subjective outrage at the facts of violence … blinds us to the objective violence of the world'.[88] But his central critique, that Žižek 'leaves us in a fearful and fateful deadlock' such that 'the only thing to do is to do nothing' is more problematic. Critchley criticises Žižek's reading of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', arguing that what 'Žižek misses, and I suspect he misses deliberately' is the fact that Benjamin appeals to language as the locus of a possible non-violent resolution of conflict.[89] Unlike Žižek, Benjamin does not understand human life as utterly entangled with violence, and Critchley sides with Benjamin against Žižek, arguing that the reason Žižek neglects this Benjaminian affirmation of the possibility of non-violence is that he wants 'Bartlebian inertia, on the one hand, and the sexy excitement of the prospect of a dose of ultra-violence, on the other'.[90] Critchley goes on to explain that, in contrast to Žižek, he advocates non-violence whilst recognising that the quest for this non-violence might on occasion necessitate violence. He quotes Levinas in support of his claim that 'to open oneself to the experience of transcendence, to the pacific itself, is violence.'[91] What Critchley misses about Žižek's reading of Benjamin is the way in which Benjamin's text is taken up into the broader concerns of Žižek's project. Whilst Žižek does explicitly address the question of language as a potential locus of non-violence in *Less Than Nothing*,[92] several years after his disagreement with Critchley, it is clear even at this point in his work that for Žižek (in part following Derrida's reading of Benjamin) language, the symbolic order, *is* violence. Critchley himself argues something like this when he cites Levinas. Critchley simply misunderstands the way in which Žižek uses the term 'violence', as well as the fact that Žižek's use of Benjamin is not intended as simple exposition but as an attempt to incorporate certain of Benjamin's ideas into his own system of thought.

The problems with Milbank's critique of Žižek ought by now to be familiar. In criticising Žižek's violence in the name of an ontology of peace, Milbank misses the

---

87 Although Žižek describes it as 'one of the lowest points in today's intellectual debate' (*Less than Nothing*, 472), I would argue that Critchley's misreading is at least partly due to the lack of clarity in Žižek's own work.
88 'Violent Thoughts', 61.
89 'Violent Thoughts', 64.
90 'Violent Thoughts', 65.
91 'Violent Thoughts', 70.
92 870 – see my discussion above, n44.

explicit connections Žižek makes between the Christian notions of both creation *ex nihilo* and love. As I have argued, these connections are not arbitrary or unjustified but have deep roots in the Christian tradition itself, particularly in the ambiguity which arises from the structural analogy between God's initial act of creation and the initial human act of sin which constituted the fall. For Žižek it is precisely the notion of the Good as a harmonious balance, an ontology of peace, which Christianity radically challenges.

Marcus Pound's critique demands more serious consideration. Pound acknowledges that Žižek's account of divine violence attempts to break out of the economic logic of sacrifice, citing Žižek's argument in *Totalitarianism* that the point of the crucifixion, along with many of Christ's ethical teachings, is to 'disturb – or, rather, simply *suspend* – the circular logic of revenge or punishment'.[93] Pound argues that, for Žižek, it is the '"religion of the cut"', associated with trauma and the death drive which, precisely by destroying, becomes 'the moment of – or possibility for – creation'.[94] However, Pound argues, Žižek 'remains locked in the very retributive system he is part of'[95] insofar as (on Pound's reading) the cut which inaugurates the subject is a sacrifice made to stave off the 'uncontrollable violence' of the Real.[96] This is 'what leads Žižek to defend divine violence rather than make the metacritical shift and resist violence in toto.'[97] Pound assumes here that violence is always sacrificial, always economic; whereas for Žižek the point is precisely that both economy and the gift are violent in different ways. In refuting Marion's account of the gift, Žižek argues that it is precisely Christianity's rejection of sacrifice which opens up the possibility of divine violence. Divine violence is not, as Pound suggests, 'the Old Testament wrath of God';[98] it is what arises precisely when 'the stabilizing role of scapegoating' is removed, opening up 'the space for a violence not contained by any mythic limit.'[99]

93 *Totalitarianism*, 49, cited in Pound, *Žižek*, 37.
94 Pound, *Žižek*, 38-39.
95 Pound, *Žižek*, 41.
96 Pound, *Žižek*, 46.
97 Pound, *Žižek*, 47.
98 Pound, *Žižek*, 48.
99 *Less than Nothing*, 975.

7.5 Conclusion

Whilst the critiques levelled at Žižek on account of the violence of his rhetoric miss the subtleties of Žižek's account and thus fail to understand the nature and function of the notion of violence in Žižek's work, some of the blame for these misreadings must be attributed to Žižek himself. Žižek's use of the notion of 'violence' to speak about social transformation is in part deliberate provocation, although the obvious outrageousness of claims that Hitler was not violent enough or that Gandhi was more violent than Hitler ought to tip his readers off that there is something more complex at stake than might initially be apparent.[100] Yet provocation is not enough to explain the two real difficulties with Žižek's account of violence. The first is the way in which Žižek's (rather Derridean) combination of a discussion of the violence of the symbolic order with Benjamin's classification of subjective violence in relation to economy risks generalising the notion of violence to the point of uselessness, obscuring the specificity of the aneconomic violence which Žižek wants to advocate. The second is Žižek's consistent preference for the language of violence over the more positive notions of creativity and newness which occur only infrequently in Žižek's work. The following chapter will discuss these two stumbling points in greater detail.

---

100 As he acknowledges, for example, when he writes that 'crazy, tasteless even, as it may sound, the problem with Hitler was that *he was "not violent enough"* (*Less than Nothing,* 902). John Gray's lazy dismissal of such provocations as indicating merely that Žižek wants both to 'praise violence and at the same time claim that he is speaking of violence in a special, recondite sense' is indicative here of his unwillingness to make any serious attempt to understand the function of violence in Žižek's work ('Violent Visions').

<u>8. Trauma, natality, and theology as failure</u>

<u>8.1 Introduction</u>

Žižek's violent ontology of failure raises two key issues: first, how to specify the difference between 'good', aneconomic violence and 'bad' economic violence; and, second, a broader question about his preference for violent imagery to describe the eruption of revolutionary newness. This chapter will address both issues in turn. First, I will argue that the psychoanalytic notion of trauma is a more helpful way of speaking about the divine violence Žižek advocates, drawing on Marcus Pound's discussion of trauma and the Eucharist to reflect on the implications of this claim for theological accounts of Christian identity. Second, I will draw on several thinkers to highlight the specifically gendered nature of Žižek's violent rhetoric and to draw out certain latent aspects of his work. Grace Jantzen's work highlights the importance of natality to Žižek's account of traumatic violence. Luce Irigaray, Catherine Malabou and Mary-Jane Rubenstein offer illuminating discussions of wonder as traumatic. Kristeva's account of the abject enables a consideration of the place of disgust and horror in drive. Finally, I will turn to the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid to argue that a theology of failure would be a queer materialist theology which understands its own identity and that of the church as grounded on Christ as both cornerstone and stumbling block, the inherent antagonism which is its condition of possibility and impossibility, which means that theology exists not *despite* but *as* failure.

<u>8.2 Violence and trauma</u>

Whilst Žižek draws his language of violence from Walter Benjamin and the analysis of structural and linguistic violence found in the work of Derrida and his peers, his gleeful *affirmation* of violence in its transformative aspects is of a piece with the general tendency of his work towards 'scandalous provocation to received theoretical pieties'.[1] For Žižek, the contemporary Left is defeated precisely insofar as it has 'accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy', renouncing 'all serious radical engagement' in the face of political philosophy which warns that any such attempt at

---

1 Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, 'Introduction: Traversing the Fantasy' in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, eds. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), xii.

political transformation leads inevitably to the 'horrors of the Gulag or Holocaust'.[2] The solution, Žižek argues, is 'fearlessly to violate these liberal taboos: *So what* if one is accused of being "anti-democratic", "totalitarian" …' or, we might add, violent.[3] Žižek's rhetorical deployment of the language of violence serves two distinct purposes. First, it enables him to translate his Lacanian-Hegelianism into an account of political action, drawing on Benjamin's taxonomy of violence to explain what sort of political intervention he advocates. Second, it allows him to respond to those who would dismiss political movements such as Stalinism or the French revolution on the grounds of their violence, by demonstrating the violence of apparently peaceful systems or political movements.[4] But because Žižek seeks *both* to generalise the notion of violence to the point where it can no longer be used as a means of dismissing particular political actions and *also* to use the term 'violence' to designate a very specific sort of political intervention, the subtleties of his argument are often lost on his readers. I will suggest that Žižek's account of violence can be clarified by a return to the more Lacanian language of trauma to specify the nature of the political act which corresponds both to drive and to genuine political transformation.[5] This move also makes possible a consideration of the theological implications of Žižek's work via a discussion of Marcus Pound's *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, which proposes a theological reading of the Lacanian notion of trauma.

8.2.1 Trauma

The psychoanalytic notion of trauma originates with Freud, who describes as traumatic 'any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield'.[6] Trauma is, as Laplanche and Pontalis point out, an economic concept: trauma is that which disrupts the subject because it is *too much,* too excessive

---

2 *Totalitarianism*, 4.
3 *Totalitarianism*, 3.
4 This applies equally to examples of which Žižek disapproves, such as capitalism (where the argument goes something like 'how can you dismiss Stalinism because of its violence when capitalism is *much more violent* than Stalinism ever was?') and those of which he approves (where the argument goes something like, 'you say there's no need for violent revolution because Gandhi effected social change via peaceful means, but in fact Gandhi's peaceful political approach was itself *deeply violent*').
5 Although Žižek does draw on Benjamin's taxonomy of violence, advocating *divine* violence rather than any other sort of violence, he is not consistent in his attempts to specify the *sort* of violence about which he is speaking.
6 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XVIII*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 29.

to be contained by the subject's internal economy. Trauma functions as a shock to the subject, a violent cut or wound. Over the course of his work, Freud comes to understand trauma first as essentially sexual in nature, and second as something which is not merely an external attack upon the subject but which exists precisely as the *conjunction* of internal and external forces.[7] Freud explicitly connects this subjective experience of trauma to broader social processes: just as trauma can be repressed, only to re-emerge at a later date, so too can world-changing ideas such as Darwin's theory of evolution undergo a period of latency before exerting their full transformative effect on society.[8] Trauma is, for Freud, explicitly connected to the death drive, which is precisely the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in defiance of the pleasure principle.[9]

For Lacan, trauma plays a crucial role in both the birth of the subject and the analytic cure, because it forces open the economy of the subject, making possible radical change, or new birth. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, trauma is fundamental to the psychoanalytic cure which seeks, as Marcus Pound argues, 'to re-traumatise the patient' in order to open up the possibility of a reordering of the subject's identity.[10]

8.2.2 Žižek on trauma

Žižek does occasionally refer to revolutionary violence as traumatic,[11] although he tends to favour the more general, less analytically precise notion of violence or the language of the 'act'. What is gained from the notion of trauma as opposed to violence, though, is a much clearer emphasis on the aneconomic function of revolutionary violence. Trauma is that which *interrupts* the ordinary course of things, it derails the homoeostasis of the pleasure principle.[12] It is radically contingent, which is to say that it is not caught up in the economy of necessity (the mechanical interaction of cause and effect) and that it does not make sense – it cannot be integrated into the economy of the

---

7   Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 465-468.

8   Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), 66.

9   Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 24.

10 Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 21.

11 For example, Žižek talks about the 'traumatic origins' of the Law (*Fragile Absolute*, 100); 'the normal run of things' being 'traumatically interrupted' (*First as Tragedy*, 17); 'the confrontation with the Real of brutal, traumatic violence' (*Lost Causes*, 64, particularly worthy of note because of the explicit connection Žižek makes between his notions of violence and trauma); and 'the "unthinkable" traumatic core of pure love' (*Less than Nothing*, 81).

12 *Sublime Object*, 89; *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 48.

symbolic order, of meaning-making.[13] It cannot be explained or justified; it cannot be predicted or controlled either in its emergence or in its consequences. Trauma is the impossible which takes place. Trauma is radically ambivalent, both fascinating and horrifying. Žižek associates trauma with the place 'between the two deaths'; this gap at the heart of being 'can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters'.[14] Trauma functions according to the logic of the parallax or the Möbius strip, existing only as a gap, an empty space whose contours can be determined only from its impact on the symbolic order around it;[15] yet it is also the unchanging 'hard kernel' at the core of social and individual reality.[16]

Because trauma is, in psychoanalysis, that which founds the subject, the language of trauma emphasises the relationship between the act and the contradiction or failure which is *already present* in the existing order of things. Although there is a sense, for Žižek, in which the act comes as if from outside the existing order (this is one reason why the language of 'divine violence' makes sense here), his ontological commitments mean that what transcends the existing order is the existing order itself. What occurs in the act is the confrontation of the symbolic order with its own internal contradiction, which is at the same time its own condition of possibility. For this reason, trauma is also strongly associated, for Žižek, with the notion of truth. What happens in trauma is, in part, the disruption or dissolution of the fantasy which papers over the cracks in the economy of the subject or the symbolic order. If, for example, the anti-Semitic fantasy-figure of the 'Jew' as the cause of social antagonism were to collapse, the society which is structured around this fantasy would follow suit, as the existing order was forced to confront the truth that antagonism was *internal* to it.[17] Truth, Žižek says, is not a static transcendence to which we seek to gain access. Rather, it is that which we *encounter* in trauma.[18]

Žižek also draws a connection between the Benjaminian retroactivity of revolutionary historicity and the Freudian notion of 'deferred action', the idea that the

---

13 *Sublime Object*, 35, 192; *Indivisible Remainder*, 94.
14 *Sublime Object*, 150.
15 *Sublime Object*, 192, 191-193; *Metastases*, 31.
16 *Sublime Object*, 43, 147; *They Know Not*, 102; *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 87; *Metastases*, 90, 173.
17 *Sublime Object*, 193; *They Know Not*, 196. 'The ultimate traumatic Thing the Self encounters is the Self itself' (*Parallax View*, 90).
18 *Sublime Object*, 216; *They Know Not*, 196. Žižek also says that 'it is difficult, properly traumatic, for a human animal to accept that his or her life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and pleasure-seeking, but that it is in the service of a Truth' (*Desert of the Real*, 69-70).

traumatic event becomes properly traumatic only after the fact, in light of the new symbolic order which it brings into being.[19] This means that, unlike violence, trauma is not strongly associated with any particular sort of action. In the same way that the Freudian model of dream interpretation relies not on the possibility of a universal schema for translating dream-symbols into dream interpretations but on the attempt to understand the significance of images and words within each subject's particular symbolic economy, so an account of trauma relies on an understanding of the meaning of a particular action or event within its particular context. An event which is traumatic in one symbolic economy might be entirely insignificant in another, and so the notion of trauma emphasises that it is the *economic* function of a political intervention which is important. This idea is implicit in Žižek's account of violence but is often lost because of the multiple ways Žižek tries to rework the notion and the tendency of his commentators to jump too quickly to the assumption that Žižek's idea of violence is the same as their own.[20]

Furthermore, because trauma is about a confrontation with an antagonism which is *already present* in the economy of the subject or of the social order, and because it receives its significance only after the fact, trauma is not in itself necessarily redemptive. Trauma confronts the individual or the symbolic order with the truth about themselves, the unbearable antagonism or failure at the heart of their identity. At this point everything is at stake, contingent upon the way that the existing economy responds to this trauma. Once the existing economy is disrupted, the question is whether the new order which emerges will function according to the logic of desire (re-establishing a fantasy which will paper over the cracks at the heart of being) or drive (fully assuming its own inconsistency and embarking upon the arduous work of love).

---

19 *They Know Not*, 221-222; *How to Read Lacan*, 73-74. This notion of 'deferred action' comes via Lacan from Freud's account of *Nachträglichkeit* or 'Afterwardsness', and particularly from the discussions in Lacan (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 213) of the 'Wolf Man', whose memory of seeing his parents having sex only became traumatic when connected with his later development of childish theories about sexuality. As with the Freudian account of sexuality as discussed by Copjec, trauma is not straightforwardly located either in the original experience or the subsequent experience which causes it to be seen as traumatic but 'as the active link *between* the instants or scenes' (Joan Copjec, 'The Sexual Compact' in *Angelaki* 17.2 (2012), 31–48).

20 This confusion is exemplified by Simon Critchley's critique of Žižek which, as Žižek points out, portrays Žižek as caught in a contradiction between Bartlebian passivity and divine violence whereas in fact 'the Bartlebian gesture of "preferring not to" do anything and the "divine violence" of which, as [Critchley] puts it, I "dream," are themselves sometimes *one and the same thing*' (*Lost Causes*, 474, quoting Critchley's 'Violent Thoughts About Slavoj Žižek' in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from This Widening Gyre*, eds. Nathan Eckstrand and Christopher Yates (London: Continuum, 2011), 63).

So trauma is a moment of truth and of freedom but, for Žižek, it is most essentially about opening up the *possibility* of transformation and new creation. It does not guarantee the emergence of goodness.[21]

The notion of trauma is a useful tweak of Žižek's account of violence, enabling a distinction to be made between the acts of violence which merely perpetuate existing economies and the acts of creation which disrupt, transform and exceed them. It also preserves what Žižek adds to Derrida's thought of the gift: a sense of the possibility of real political transformation, albeit with a clear awareness of the riskiness of such transformation. Both Žižek and Derrida have been criticised, particularly by John Milbank, for being obsessed with death, violence and impossibility. What I have tried to demonstrate here and in the previous chapters is that these themes in their work, though crucial, are only one aspect of their common concern with the disruption of economy, which is also the theme of how newness, birth and creativity enter the world: an attempt to think creation *ex nihilo*. The theme of ontological peace risks falling into a Neoplatonic account of redemption which sees all things dissolved back into One from which they came. By contrast, the notion of creation as trauma evokes the God who creates out of nothing, dividing between day and night in order to create them; it evokes the body of Christ as he is depicted in medieval art, giving birth to the church out of the wound in his side; it evokes the creation which 'groans as in the pains of childbirth', awaiting the moment when it is broken open and transformed by the birth of the new creation.[22]

There are reasons to be wary of this language of trauma as a way of speaking about the desired transformation of the world. In particular there is a real risk of trivialising the suffering of those whose experiences of trauma have been anything but occasions for the emergence of the new. There are important questions about how this Žižekian notion of trauma might be brought into conversation with recent theological accounts of trauma as that which is to be grappled with as a problem not of creation but of destruction. Whilst it is not possible to explore these issues in great detail here, it is worth briefly noting that, whilst books such as Serene Jones' *Trauma and Grace:*

---

21 Writing shortly after the events of 9/11, Žižek argued that 'we are living in the unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact … we do not yet know how the events will be symbolised … what acts they will be evoked to justify' (*Desert of the Real*, 45).
22 Romans 8:22.

Theology in a Ruptured World[23] and Shelly Rambo's *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*[24] associate trauma specifically with the fallenness of the world,[25] both simultaneously trouble the association of trauma *only* with damage, and do so in strikingly Žižekian language. Jones draws on Luce Irigaray's account of 'the subject position of the "feminine" in Western culture as a site of violence, a traumatic self', arriving at an account of grace as that which 'disturbs us, traverses our boundaries, and dwells disruptively within us as it gives testimony to the previously unspoken sins/traumas that occupy us'.[26] Rambo argues that trauma 'disrupts' the clear separation of life and death such that the account of redemption which emerges from a serious engagement with trauma 'cannot' interpret 'death and life in opposition to each other. Instead, theology must account for the excess, or remainder, of death in life that is central to trauma.'[27] Just as in Dionysius' work creation and fall come into troubling proximity with one another, so it seems that trauma and redemption remain uncomfortably and ambiguously related to one another. Yet something like this discomfort is precisely what Žižek intends: the decision to act is taken, for Žižek 'on the edge of fear and trembling.'[28]

Trauma, then, is the notion which I am proposing as a way out of the first problem with Žižek's account of violence: its tendency to lose analytical precision as a result of Žižek's double systematisation of violence into subjective and objective violence and into Benjamin's categories of law-founding, law-maintaining and divine violence. The notion of trauma makes it possible to retain Žižek's challenge to those who object to revolutionary acts on the grounds of their violence (namely, that the distinction between violence and non-violence is neither simple nor obvious) whilst maintaining a distinctive language for the sort of violence Žižek wants: traumatic violence, the act which confronts the individual or social order with their inherent failure in order to disrupt their smooth economic functioning and open up the possibility of transformation. Violence is everywhere, for Žižek. Trauma is ever-present as the

---

23 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
24 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).
25 For example, Jones describes trauma as one aspect of what it means to 'love in a world profoundly broken by violence and marred by harms we inflict upon each other (*Trauma and Grace*, ix); for Rambo the 'enigma of traumatic suffering' is the question of how 'you account for an experience that was not fully integrated and, thus, returns? How can you heal from trauma?' (*Spirit and Trauma*, 2).
26 *Trauma and Grace*, xv.
27 *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.
28 'Why Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics on the Edge of Fear and Trembling' in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1.0 (2007).

disavowed foundation of being, the possibility at the heart of any economy, but is encountered only rarely, in the fleeting moments when an action (or inaction) effectively suspends the normal functioning of economy.

8.2.3 Trauma and theology

Marcus Pound's reading of Lacan in *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* serves as a useful reference point by which to consider the implications of Žižek's notion of trauma for Christian theology. Pound argues that the psychoanalytic notion of trauma itself ultimately derives (via Kierkegaard and Heidegger) from theological accounts of the incarnation, and that the Eucharist can therefore fruitfully be conceived in terms of trauma. He suggests that the Eucharist traumatises its participants both by inviting them to identify as the perpetrators of Christ's violent death and also by identifying the mundane, contingent particulars of bread and wine with the absolute, with God, opening up the way for a re-ordering of the symbolic world.[29] The Eucharistic liturgy is thus a 'theological therapeutic',[30] and the ecclesial community formed around the Eucharist is, for Pound, 'uniquely' able to do what Freud always intended for psychoanalysis to do: 'to bring together the social and the private in the community.'[31] Pound's work offers some valuable indications of the possible implications of Žižek's account of trauma for theology. Four things, though, are worth remarking on here: first, the relationship between trauma and transformation; second, the place of transference in this theological reading of trauma; third, the question of the relationship between the Eucharist and the church as an institution and a body; and fourth, the question of trauma as social.

First, then, it is clear from both Lacan and Žižek's accounts that no action or situation is guaranteed to force a transformative, creative traumatic encounter. While trauma is present at the heart of any symbolic order or individual subjectivity, both thinkers are clear that the process of being brought face to face with this trauma does not necessarily imply the re-traumatisation of the subject. Žižek lists 'three possible reactions of the subject to the intrusion of psychic traumatism: its assumption into the psychic apparatus, the disintegration of the apparatus, [or] the refusal of the apparatus to

---

29 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 22.
30 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 171.
31 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 170.

take into account the traumatic occurrence.'[32] Only the second of these options corresponds to the reordering of the symbolic world which Pound considers the desirable result of trauma. The encounter with a traumatic antagonism cannot guarantee transformation: the best that analysis or political action can do is to create a situation in which such an encounter *might* take place. There is an element of risk inherent to the notion of traumatic re-ordering which Pound never fully addresses. 'The Eucharist only works', he argues, 'if God breaks (*trauma*) into time, *every* time, and it is not simply celebrated as an act of remembrance'.[33] But it is hard to imagine what it would mean for the individual's subjective economy to be radically reordered on a weekly basis, or even once a year in line with the Eucharistic obligations imposed by the Catholic Church.[34]

A Žižekian account of trauma, then, would suggest that the church be understood as a community built around the central antagonism which is made present in the Eucharist. The task of liturgy (and of church life more broadly) would be, then, to create the conditions which *make possible* the confrontation with this foundational trauma.[35] Here too the *ambivalence* of Žižek's notion of trauma is crucial, and is, by and large, glossed over by Pound. Trauma is *violent*, it is destructive, it is death as well as life. For all that a theological account of the Eucharist as trauma might understand the Eucharist as the (or even *a*) locus for the emergence of newness and life, this possibility cannot be separated out from the recognition that the Eucharist can function and *has* functioned not only as divine but also as law-maintaining violence. Pound cites William Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ*[36] as evidence that 'the Mass *is* political';[37] Cavanaugh argues, via a discussion of Pinochet's Chile, that the 'Eucharist is the church's response to torture, and the hope for Christian

---

32 *They Know Not*, 154.
33 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, xiv.
34 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 319. Žižek on occasion equates trauma with grace, such that it is not too much of a stretch to argue that his account of trauma provides resources for rethinking the relationship of nature and grace in the Eucharist. Žižek's ontology is suggesting of a model of nature and grace as mutually constitutive, of grace as internal to nature, its point of rupture.
35 Pound does acknowledge something of the contingency of the traumatising effect of the sacrament, citing Aquinas' assertion that 'the effect of the sacrament can be secured if it is received by desire,and not in fact' (*Summa Theologiae* III.80.1) as his authority for the claim that 'the disposition of the subject is absolutely central to the sacrament' (*Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 157), but never addresses the question of how this claim might be reconciled with the affirmation that every instance of the Eucharist is traumatic; a Žižekian account of trauma as constitutively present yet only contingently confronted would go some way towards resolving this difficulty.
36 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
37 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 170.

resistance to the violent disciplines of the world.'[38] Where torture functions as a means whereby the state disciplines the bodies (social and individual) of its subjects, effecting, as it does so, 'the very creation of individuals',[39] Eucharistic practices 'gather the church into the true body of Christ, and thus constitute the scripture of bodies into an economy of pain and the body which stands directly counter to that of torture.'[40] Yet, although Cavanaugh declares himself aware of the imperfections of the actually-existing church,[41] *Torture and Eucharist* is marked by a persistent evasion of the historical *association* of torture and Eucharist. His claim that 'torture is essentially an anti-liturgy' to which 'the Eucharist provides a direct and startling contrast'[42] glosses over the historical symbiosis of torture and Eucharist – not only in the practices of the Spanish Inquisition[43] and the long and brutal history of European anti-Semitism,[44] but also in the recent history of Latin America within which Cavanaugh situates his discussion. Cavanaugh's narrative of the Eucharistic practices which functioned to resist the torture of Chileans looks rather different read alongside, for example, the connections Marcella Althaus-Reid draws between the formation of individuals according to particular gender norms by the bodily practices of the Eucharist in Argentina and the gender discipline at work in the torture practices of the military Junta.[45] In contrast to Cavanaugh's claim that the Eucharist is formative of a 'true social order',[46] Althaus-Reid argues that,

---

38 *Torture and Eucharist*, 2.
39 *Torture and Eucharist*, 2.
40 *Torture and Eucharist*, 17.
41 He asserts, for example, that his argument 'by no means assumes a heroic or perfectionist ethic; the church is always constituted by foolish and sinful people' (14).
42 *Torture and Eucharist*, 279.
43 Helen Rawlings' *The Spanish Inquisition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) makes it clear how entangled the Eucharist was with the practices of the Inquisition. She describes the importance of Eucharistic belief and practice to the Inquisition's attempts to root out heretics, including Muslims (77-78) and Lutherans (102); the importance of the *Edicto da fe*, a list of heresies, which was read out after Mass, urging congregants to denounce their friends and neighbours for heresy (30-31), and the day-long ritual of the *auto da fe* which 'began with the celebration of Mass in the local parish church adjacent to the square where the ceremony would take place' (39).
44 As Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane's *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Plymouth: Roman and Littlefield, 2011) discusses, rumours of Jewish 'theft and desecration of the Eucharistic host' were the ugly converse of the flourishing of 'devotion to the Eucharist and the sacred power of the host' in the 13th century, a significant factor in the birthing of 'the bitter legacy of anti-Semitism' (20, 119).
45 Althaus-Reid persistently describes both the liturgical formation of Latin American Catholicism and the political formation of Latin American political orders in terms of patriarchy, heterosexism and the repression of 'indecent' or transgressive theologies and sexualities; see in particular her discussion of kneeling and the Eucharist in *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7-22 and of torture and the military Junta in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 186-188. Whilst Cavanaugh recognises that, at least on some accounts 'most of both tortured and torturers were Christians', he nonetheless sees torture as essentially alien to the character of the church, a threat to 'the integrity of the body of Christ' (*Torture and Eucharist*, 256-257).
46 *Torture and Eucharist*, 10.

although there is a 'subversive version' within the practice of the Eucharist there 'is no solidarity in holy communion … At its best, the sacramental ceremonies in the churches work as acts of exemplary colonial orderings'.[47] As with the Žižekian act, then, perhaps the best we can say of the Eucharist is that it *might* function as trauma; it *might* be the occasion for the birth of the new, and that, moreover, if we are to speak about the Eucharist as the locus for the encounter with Christ we must also speak about its infidelity, about its failure.

This brings us, secondly, to the question of transference. For both Lacan and Žižek, the analytic situation relies not merely on the attempt to confront the subject with the traumatic antagonism at the heart of their identity but also on engaging the subject's desire with the analyst via the process of transference. What would this mean in an ecclesial context? If the Eucharist and the church are to be understood as a traumatic community, this raises several questions about the relationship between desire, drive and the Eucharist, the nature of the relationship between individual Christians and the church, and the question of how key analytic concepts might relate to the ecclesial context.[48]

Related to this issue is, thirdly, the location of trauma within the church. Pound's equation of the Eucharist with trauma relies on the theological equation of the Eucharist with Christ.[49] But it is not the Eucharist alone which Christian theology speaks of in these terms. In both scripture and tradition, the whole church is also understood as the body of Christ.[50] Nor is the Eucharist the only sacrament or the only liturgical practice associated with the incarnation.[51] Žižek says that 'what we believers eat in the Eucharist, Christ's flesh (bread) and blood (wine) … goes on to organise itself as a community of believers.'[52] If trauma is to be theologically understood in terms of the incarnation, then to speak theologically about trauma would seem to demand a broader account of the place of trauma within the life of the church.

Finally, Pound's work raises the question of who or what is traumatised in the

---

47 *Indecent Theology*, 92.
48 Some of these questions are explored in the subsequent chapter, which re-reads Dionysius via the 'four discourses', Lacan's account of the possible configurations of social relations.
49 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 159.
50 Including by Pound, who argues that individuals should be understood primarily in terms of their status 'as a member of the enacted body of Christ', 23.
51 Pound draws an analogy, for example, between his reading of the Eucharist as trauma and Christian accounts of the nativity (xiii-xiv).
52 *Monstrosity*, 289. I am not quite sure what to make of Žižek's use of 'we' here.

Eucharistic encounter. Although Pound claims that Christianity is 'uniquely able' to bring together the social and the individual, and that 'the ecclesial context of the Eucharist ensures a communal setting prior to the individual', he continues to talk as though it is primarily the individual economy which is reordered through participation in the liturgy: it is 'the self' which is a 'never-ending task'.[53] This is understandable as a reading of Kierkegaard and Lacan, both of whom focus on individual transformation. However, for Žižek it is not only individuals but also societies and communities which are essentially historical and revolutionary, constantly transformed through the encounter with the traumatic antagonism or failure which constitutes their identity. A Žižekian understanding of trauma would pave the way for an understanding of the church itself as an economy brought into being around the constitutive antagonism that is Christ.

On several occasions, Žižek refers to the central trauma of Christianity as a *skandalon*, the Greek word meaning 'stumbling block' or 'offence' which is repeatedly used by Christ in the gospel narratives to refer to himself: 'Blessed is he who is not offended [*skandalisthē*] at me'.[54] Žižek describes the Christ of his account as 'the traumatic *skandalon* of the Christian experience', to whom he is ultimately more faithful than Christian orthodoxy in general and John Milbank in particular.[55] What if, Žižek asks along with Altizer, 'the entire history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions, is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection?'[56] But it is clear that, however systematically it is evaded, however much the church has historically sought to

---

53 *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 170.
54 Matthew 11:6 and the parallel passage in Luke 7.23. It is not clear where Žižek takes this term from, but it is possible that it derives ultimately from Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) consists of an extended meditation on the use of the term *skandalon* in the Gospels. Kierkegaard's account has numerous intriguing parallels with Žižek's understanding of the *skandalon* of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, as for both Pound and Žižek, the offence of Christ is to do with the incarnation, with the juxtaposition of the divine and the human in Christ (*Practise in Christianity*, 94, 102). As for Žižek (though in contrast to Pound), Kierkegaard argues that Christendom systematically evades the traumatic confrontation with the offensive person of Christ (e.g. 'Christendom has abolished Christ' (107); 'In established Christendom … every ... possibility of offence is basically abolished' (111)). Although both Pound and Žižek rely on Kierkegaard at various points in their respective treatments of Christianity, neither explicitly engages with this particular text.
55 *Monstrosity*, 248. Here Žižek also seeks to reclaim Kierkegaard from Milbank's reading, arguing that the coincidence of opposites in God is not a peaceful reconciliation of difference in absolute transcendence but 'the breathtakingly traumatic fact that we, human mortals, are trapped in a "sickness unto death," … that our existence is radically torn – and, even more, as Chesterton pointed out, that strife is integral to the very heart of God himself' (253).
56 *Monstrosity*, 260.

pacify it, this central trauma of the person of Christ is also that on which Christianity's identity depends. 1 Peter 2 brings together the imagery of Christ as stumbling block, a stone of offence, with the image of Christ as cornerstone of the church:

> As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:
>
>> "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."
>
> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,
>
>> "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"
>
> and
>
>> "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall [*skandalou*]."[57]

If Christ is the trauma which grounds Christian identity, this implies that Christ is the condition of the possibility and impossibility of the individual Christian, the community of the church, and the discourse of theology; that Christian identity is formed not so much by a particular set of answers, a particular vision of harmony, but by the constant attempt to grapple with Christ as a difficulty, a question, a traumatic antagonism. Furthermore, if this is the case, then the possibility of offence relates not only to the juxtaposition of the transcendent God with the particular individual that lived in Galilee 2,000 years ago but to the claim that, to paraphrase Žižek, the divine is that which 'shines through the church, this miserable creature'. Christ cannot be encountered outside of the failure of the church.

8.3 Violence and creation

Some of the difficulties of Žižek's language of violence for speaking about transformation can be resolved, then, by resorting instead to the psychoanalytic language of trauma to specify the violence which Žižek advocates, the Benjaminian divine violence which radically unsettles the existing order of things, opening up the possibility of transformation and the emergence of the new. But there remain questions about the relationship between violence and creation in Žižek's thought, and there are

---

57   1 Peter 2:4-8.

reasons to be troubled by Žižek's violent rhetoric. Mandy Morgan is not alone in being 'troubled as a feminist reader about [Žižek's claim] that there is always something shocking, something violent, in any declaration of love'.[58] Indeed, the emphasis in Žižek's work on the language of violence and horror raises a series of concerns which are specifically *gendered.* This is true even on Žižek's own terms, as the distinction between desire and drive is for Žižek the distinction between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' subjective positions. This section brings Žižek's account of the violent emergence of the new together with several thinkers who foreground questions of gender and newness. Grace Jantzen's opposition between the deathly symbolics of Western philosophy and the natal philosophy she seeks to bring to birth is ultimately unsustainable, yet brings out the strains of newness which are often latent in Žižek's work. Julia Kristeva's account of the abject enables a reconsideration of Žižek's emphasis on 'vulgarity, horror and impurity'.[59] Luce Irigaray, Catherine Malabou and Mary-Jane Rubenstein's discussions of wonder may be productively coupled with Žižek's understanding of trauma. Finally, Marcella Althaus-Reid's materialist queer theology gestures towards the theological implications of Žižek's ontology of failure.

8.3.1 Grace Jantzen: natality and trauma

Grace Jantzen seeks precisely to challenge the rhetoric of violence in Western philosophical thought, drawing as she does so on many of the same thinkers as both Dionysius and Žižek. Where for Žižek, violence and creation are inextricably connected, Jantzen focuses precisely on disentangling the two. A recurring argument of her work, which she began to elucidate systematically in her last work, *Foundations of Violence*, is that the Western symbolic is obsessed with violence, death and masculinity at the expense of beauty, natality, femininity and creativity. She argues that Western thought is preoccupied with death, and that 'this preoccupation with death shows itself in destruction and violence, in a focus on other worlds and in the degradation and refusal of beauty in this one, in fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience, and sexuality.'[60] Jantzen traces the opposition of natality and death throughout the history of

---

58 'Sado-masochism and feminist desire: the other measure of true love bleeds' in *Theory and Psychology* 21.4 (2011), 523.
59 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 36.
60 Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty. Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), vii.

Western thought, arguing for a rejection of the symbolics of death in favour of the symbolics of natality. I will follow her argument through her engagement with Greek philosophy (particularly as represented by the opposition of Sappho and Plato), Hegel, psychoanalysis (as represented by Freud and Kristeva), and contemporary theorists of the problem of violence and distinction (Hent de Vries, Regina Schwartz and René Girard), exploring the ways in which her work intersects with and diverges from Žižek's, and the way her distinction between creativity and natality ultimately undoes itself.

Jantzen's *Foundations of Violence* locates the origins of the obsession with death which Jantzen critiques in classical Greco-Roman thought, attributing to Plato and Plotinus key roles in the genealogy of death and violence. For Jantzen, natality is on the side of embodiment, gender, sociality and possibility, whereas mortality is associated with disembodied, genderless rationality, atomistic individuality and destruction.[61] She locates these oppositions within what should, by this point in the thesis, be a familiar set of problems: ontology, desire, freedom, economy and embodiment. Jantzen's critique of Plato and Plotinus is strongly reminiscent of the Lacanian problematic of desire, drive and the narcissistic economy of the individual, and of what Žižek refers to as 'the standard reading of Hegel as an "absolute idealist"'.[62] Because, Jantzen argues, for Plato and Plotinus the ultimate goal of human life is unity with the One, progress for the individual means the progressive transcendence of particularity and embodiment.[63] Yet it is Plato's connection of human progress with beauty which undermines his account of the ascent to the One, Jantzen argues, as it is inescapably caught up as it is with the themes of beauty and femininity.[64] This ambiguity in Plato's thought is most clearly visible, for Jantzen, in his complex engagement with the thought of Sappho. Jantzen argues that where Plato is the thinker of beauty and of love as the absorption of all things into the One, as progress towards sameness, generality and the erasure of difference, Sappho is the thinker of love in terms of multiplicity, difference and particularity. In Plato's *Symposium*, desire begins with the beautiful beloved only to move upwards in a process of progressive abstraction, away from embodiment and particularity into the eternal, universal Form of Beauty. As a result, Jantzen argues,

---

61 Jantzen, *Foundations*, 37-38.
62 *Less than Nothing*, 286.
63 *Foundations*, 39. There are clear parallels here with my own reading of Dionysius' Neoplatonism in chapter 2.
64 *Foundations*, 184.

Plato 'founds love on beauty, and thus must hold that beautiful bodies are interchangeable'. By contrast, 'Sappho founds beauty on love', holding that love for the particularity of the beloved person leads to the recognition of her beauty.[65] Beauty in the beloved is not a pale imitation of a universal principle of beauty but is always inextricably bound up with individuality and hence with materiality and change. This more Sapphic account of beauty is visible, Jantzen argues, in Plato's later work, *Phaedrus*, where *eros* is described as 'passionate desire for a fragile particular person' and there is 'no suggestion … that this passionate love for a particular person … the individual, not the ideal form, is the object of love.'[66] Jantzen's opposition between mortality and natality, violence and beauty, thus relies on the same distinction that Žižek draws between desire and drive: the contrast between reducing the beloved to a means towards unification, wholeness and completion, and loving the beloved in and as incomplete and particular. Like Žižek she grounds this distinction in the same conjunction of themes which occur in mystical theology: ontology, materiality and desire.

Jantzen also discusses Plotinus and his influence on the Christian mystical tradition. Where Plato, for Jantzen, is caught to some extent ambiguously between natality and mortality, Plotinus belongs straightforwardly on the side of mortality, a position which Jantzen attributes to his retreat from political concerns in the face of the collapse of the Roman Empire.[67] Plotinus' account of the ideal human life is one which deliberately retreats from concern for other people in favour of contemplation of the unchanging intelligible world.[68] This account of beauty and goodness is directly opposed, Jantzen argues, to embodiment, femininity, politics, and ethics. But despite its apparent conflict with the Christian theology of Plotinus' time, this deathly account of human progress was nonetheless hugely influential on the Christian mystical tradition.[69]

Although Jantzen's initial distinction between violence and creation would seem to function as a *critique* of Žižek, on a closer reading of Jantzen's work it becomes clear that the two share some crucial concerns relating to questions of ontology, desire and materiality. Moreover, there are parallels between Jantzen's fundamental distinction

---

65 *Foundations*, 197.
66 *Foundations*, 209-210.
67 *Foundations*, 342.
68 *Foundations*, 350.
69 As I have argued in my article, 'The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* (94.1053 (2013), 540-551).

between violence and beauty and Žižek's distinction between desire and drive. Jantzen and Žižek's points of convergence and divergence are brought into sharper relief during Jantzen's discussions of Hegel and of psychoanalysis. She argues that Hegel's account of the struggle-to-the-death between master and slave 'encapsulates his whole system'; yet this violent imagery, this reliance on the metaphors of struggle, warfare and death, goes unexamined in his work.[70] This is in contrast to Žižek's reading of Hegel, according to which (as discussed earlier), although there is a violent struggle at the heart of Hegel's notion of dialectics, this violence is *traumatic*, and as such is bound up as much with birth as with death.

Jantzen also engages with psychoanalysis, which she draws on as a resource for her account of the Western philosophical relationship to death and violence and also critiques as part of that same account.[71] For Jantzen, Freud sees human nature as intrinsically bound up with aggression, violence and death. Freud's account of the birth of the subject as predicated on loss of union with the mother is figured as matricide. The subject, once separated from her mother, longs to be reunited with her mother, yet also fears this union because it would mean the end of her individual existence and hence her death or descent into psychosis.[72] Again, this notion of the Platonic return to the One is figured in terms of death and destruction, and this means that, for Freud, death is central to birth and to life itself. In particular, Jantzen singles out Freud's notion of human subjectivity as constituted by the relationship of *eros* and the death drive for criticism. She argues that Freud's death drive, described as the desire to return to a state of homoeostasis, is inextricably bound up with the desire for the mother, and the womb fundamentally associated with the tomb[73] (obviously on Žižek's Lacanian reading of Freud this would constitute a critique of desire rather than drive). For Freud, then, Western civilisation relies on the repression of the mother, of birth, of the body, and this repression gives rise to a violence and aggression which Freud sees as inescapable.[74] But, Jantzen argues, this figuring of birth and death is the result of the Western fixation on death rather than a necessary association: '*not all separations are deaths; and not all*

70 *Foundations*, 15.
71 Jeremy Carette suggests that for Jantzen, psychoanalysis is 'therapist and patient, liberator and oppressor' ('"In the Name of Life!": Psychoanalysis and Grace Jantzen's Critique of Philosophy' in *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, ed. Elaine Graham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 70).
72 Grace Jantzen, 'Death, then, how could I yield to it? Kristeva's Mortal Visions,' in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 122.
73 *Foundations*, 17-18.
74 *Foundations*, 24-25.

deaths are murders.'[75] She argues that separation can be figured as creative rather than as violent. Separation is not death, but the giving and receiving of new life, the emergence of multiplicity and particularity. For Jantzen, the solution to Freud's troubling association of femininity, beauty and birth with aggression, violence and death is to clearly distinguish between life and death, birth and destruction, beauty and horror; to reject death, destruction and horror in favour of embodiment, natality and beauty.

Jantzen also engages with Julia Kristeva, recognising in her notion of the 'abject' a troubling of the Freudian association of birth with death. Yet Kristeva is, for Jantzen, still entangled problematically with 'an unexamined masculinist Symbolic',[76] both celebrating the 'abject' – that which is associated with the blurring of the boundary between the self and the other and hence with the maternal – and expressing disgust for it. Jantzen argues that a philosophy of natality necessitates a revaluation of the abject, such as when Kristeva herself speaks of the fluids which accompany the birth of her baby as nectar and honey.[77] For Jantzen, Kristeva begins to undermine the deathly symbolics of psychoanalysis but is unable to push the notion of the abject far enough, to rescue it from ambiguity and horror and reclaim it more thoroughly for a symbolic of natality, beauty and potentiality. She is still too caught up in the Western symbolics' masculinist tendency to define objects in terms of 'medium-sized dry goods'.[78] Jantzen appeals, in part, to Luce Irigaray's celebration of fluidity as a way of rescuing Kristeva's account of the sticky and the slimy from this problematic ambiguity, appealing to her feminist philosophy of distinction as means to rescue the porosity of borders from the moral ambiguity of the abject and claiming it unambiguously for beauty and natality.[79]

In her essay 'New Creations', Jantzen seeks to clarify this distinction between violence and beauty by engaging with the accounts of violence offered by Hent de Vries, Regina Schwartz and René Girard.[80] She rejects de Vries' account, which takes violence to be simply any exertion of force on another: for Jantzen it is crucial to be able to distinguish between violence and non-violence, to avoid the sort of generalisation-to-the-point-of-uselessness which Žižek adopts on occasion as a

75 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 124.
76 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 125.
77 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 129.
78 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 127.
79 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 128-129.
80 Grace Jantzen, 'New Creations: Eros, Beauty, and the Passion for Transformation,' in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, eds. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 271–290.

deliberate tactic.[81] She also rejects Regina Schwartz's argument that '"imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others … is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit."' In Schwartz's account, Jantzen argues, 'even to define a term is already a violent act'.[82] As in her critique of Kristeva, Jantzen seeks here to make it possible to speak about creation and birth as distinct from violence and death.[83] Jantzen also discusses René Girard's account of violence. Girard argues that we learn to desire by imitating the desires of others, which can give rise to jealousy and violent conflict. Again, Jantzen is dissatisfied with this account, arguing that it positions violence as fundamental such that even when Girard acknowledges the possibility of desire as good, as creative, this is 'not true of normal human beings', that it 'cannot be part of human nature but can only occur if "there is some kind of divine grace present"'.[84] Girard fails to draw the clear distinction between violence and creativity which Jantzen sees as fundamental to escaping the deathly Western symbolic. She argues that, rather than being intrinsically bound up with violence, desire can be driven by a love of beauty, by fullness, as well as by lack and jealousy, and that it is this creative desire which allows for the possibility of distinction as a source of beauty and

---

81 'New Creations', 274. Jantzen refers here to the definition of violence which opens de Vries's *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002): 'Violence … entails any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing (event or instance, group or person and, perhaps, word and object), on another' (1). She does not, however, examine in any great detail the (Kantian and Derridean) reasons de Vries chooses this particular definition, or engage with his extensive discussion of the questions Jantzen raises about the limits of such an expansive definition of violence (*Religion and Violence*, 123-210). Moreover, as I discuss below, Jantzen herself fails to offer the 'tools for discrimination between violence and nonviolence' which she considers to be so 'vitally important' (275).

82 'New Creations', 275, citing Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

83 Jantzen points out that if identity as such is violent, then 'the only path to nonviolence would be by collapsing everything into a Sameness' ('New Creations', 275). This does not quite hold up as a reading of Schwartz, whose account of violence is more muddled than Jantzen acknowledges: for example, just after the passage Jantzen cites, which concludes with the assertion that Schwartz's book 'argues that acts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence', Schwartz suggests that although identity formation is 'often' violent, this 'could be otherwise' (*Curse of Cain*, 5, 9). Interestingly, in the conclusion to her book she draws on the Freudian distinction between desire and the death drive to suggest that the crucial difference is between 'fictions of closure' associated with the death drive and 'perpetual desire' which enables proliferation without violent closure (174); but here too she simultaneously asserts that 'we may not be able to completely escape biblical myths' and also that 'the old "monotheistic" Book must be closed' (176).

84 'New Creations', 285, citing René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 65. In fact Girard's account of desire, even in the interview Jantzen cites, is more subtle than Jantzen implies: not long after describing Christianity as going back 'to the sacrificial origin' of desire (*Girard Reader*, 63), he asserts that 'mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that … it's the opening out of oneself' (64).

newness which represents the alternative and the solution to violence.[85]

However, despite the foundational role of the distinction between violence and beauty in Jantzen's work, her rejection of others' accounts of violence on the grounds that they are too general or fail to draw a sufficiently clear boundary between violence and non-violence, and her assertion that 'it is vitally important to have tools for discrimination between violence and nonviolence',[86] Jantzen never offers a definition of violence. Instead, she relies heavily on defining it in opposition to what it is not: violence is about lack rather than plenitude, about imitation rather than newness.[87] It is on the side of death rather than life, destruction rather than creativity; it shows itself in 'a focus on other worlds and in the degradation and refusal of beauty in this one, in fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience, and sexuality'. Jantzen explains this absence of a clear definition of violence in her work by the acknowledgement that 'all of these terms – death, beauty, violence, creativity – have long and complicated histories and cannot be used as though they have unambiguous meaning'.[88] While this is in itself a reasonable claim, it does raise questions about the plausibility of a philosophical polemic which relies on an opposition which it simultaneously confesses to be shifting, impossible to pin down with precision; not to mention the unexamined metaphysical assumptions of an account of good and evil (this is, at heart, the basic and unacknowledged opposition on which all of Jantzen's dualisms rely) which sees the two terms as comprehensible only by their opposition to one another.

Moreover, even as Jantzen defines violence solely in terms of its opposition to creativity, there are numerous places in her work where this essential distinction is problematised. This is most clearly the case in the discussion of Christian martyrdom which comes towards the end of *Foundations of Violence*. Jantzen argues that the early Christian martyrs offered a natal alternative to the deathly symbolic of Rome. 'Ironically', Jantzen says, 'it was in order to bring newness into the world that they had to die.'[89] She argues that in the midst of the gladiatorial spectacles, whose purpose was to demonstrate the virile authority of the Roman Empire, the martyrs undermined this show of power by their disregard for death, destabilising as they did so the gendered account of Roman power as active by re-figuring their passive suffering as active

---

85 'New Creations', 286-287.
86 'New Creations', 274.
87 'New Creations', 286.
88 *Foundations*, viii.
89 *Foundations*, 329.

resistance. The martyrs 'claimed victory', Jantzen argues, 'not by escape from death but by triumph *within* death'.[90] Their 'identification with Christ's suffering and death' was intimately bound up with 'their hopes for eternal life.'[91] Here especially, Jantzen's attempt to maintain both the mutability of notions of life and death and the stark opposition between the two becomes hopelessly unsustainable.

Jantzen and Žižek's work converge and diverge, then, in numerous and sometimes surprising ways. For all that she finds value in Kristeva's account of the abject, Jantzen is fundamentally a thinker of distinction, of duality: she seeks to draw a clear line between violence and natality in order to valorise natality and condemn violence. Žižek, by contrast, refuses to accept this neat separation of the beautiful and the ugly, the natal and the deathly. Central to his account of transformation is the idea that divine violence, the source of newness and liberation, comes from the place of abjection: from those who are excluded and made less than human; from those who occupy a place 'between the two deaths', the place of monstrosity, sublimity and spectrality. For Žižek, this place between the two deaths is the place of both excess and lack; of birth and death; of the drive which is both the Freudian death drive and also the figure of eternal life within his thought.

In Žižek's thought, birth and death, excess and lack, creativity and destruction are often distinguished by nothing more than a parallax shift. Yet Žižek is also crucially interested in the drawing of distinctions. Divine violence is made possible precisely by a decisive withdrawal from the connections of its agent with society, by an assumption of absolute responsibility in recognition of the fact that no one and nothing within the existing order can be appealed to as justification or grounds for the disruption of the social order. This assumption of absolute responsibility is a refusal of narcissism, the refusal to relegate the other to a role in one's own fantasies of wholeness or control. The only way to respect the otherness of the other is, paradoxically, to act entirely without regard for her. Only in the recognition of the other's radical distinctness which occurs in the shift from desire to drive does it become possible to love her. Žižek's work challenges Jantzen's thought by problematising her distinction between natality and the symbolics of death, suggesting that violence and creation cannot be straightforwardly separated; and by challenging Jantzen's valorisation of the abject: the place where new

---

90 *Foundations*, 334.
91 *Foundations*, 336.

185

birth occurs can also be the location of violent attempts to control and to reabsorb difference. Žižek's work suggests that, if natality is possible, it is not a straightforward alternative but a difficult, delicate task.

Žižek displays on several occasions a troubling sense of discomfort with embodiment – both his own and that of others, especially women. This sense of revulsion towards others, the abject, and the feminine is perhaps clearest in interviews where, although the obviously performative nature of Žižek's self-presentation means that what he says about himself cannot be taken entirely at face value, a sense of disgust pervades his discussions of sexuality and embodiment.[92] In one interview he says that his most embarrassing moment was 'standing naked in front of a woman before making love', and that, following a minor heart attack 'I started to hate my body: it refused to do its duty to serve me.'[93] He describes his conviction that his sexual partners must share his sense of disgust at his own bodily fluids.[94] Of seeing himself on screen, he says 'I have a sense of shame here. I am afraid of seeing myself.'[95] And he speaks contemptuously of his former wives: the mother of his child is 'the bitch who claims to have been my wife';[96] when he married Analie Hounie he was 'not happy … not really here'; their marriage was 'all a nightmare and so on and so on'.[97]

Yet, although Jantzen positions herself clearly on the side of the body, the natal, the feminine, and Žižek displays, on several occasions, a troubling sense of revulsion towards embodiment, it is difficult not to conclude that it is Žižek's work, in its complexity and ambiguity, its refusal to allow the separation of violence and creation, death and birth, which takes materiality most seriously. This complex interaction of violence and creation is perhaps most visible precisely in the experience of giving birth,

---

92 In one interview, Žižek says of Astra Taylor's documentary about him that 'I was very careful that all the clues about my personality are misleading' (Katie Englehart, 'Slavoj Žižek: I am not the world's hippest philosopher' in *Salon*, 29 December 2012. http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher); of his psychoanalysis with Jacques-Alain Miller, Žižek reports that he lied about everything in order to stave off the possibility of gaining insight into himself or being transformed by the analytic process (Robert S. Boynton, 'Enjoy Your Žižek: An excitable Slovenian philosopher examines the obscene practices of everyday life including his own' in *Linguafranca*, 26 March 2001. http://www.lacan.com/zizek-enjoy.htm.
93 Rosanna Greenstreet, 'Q&A: Slavoj Žižek, professor and writer,' *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008. http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/09/slavoj.zizek.
94 Decca Aitkenhead, 'Slavoj Žižek: "Humanity Is OK, but 99% of People Are Boring Idiots",' *The Guardian*, 15 November 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/jun/10/slavoj-zizek-humanity-ok-people-boring.
95 Englehart, 'Slavoj Žižek'.
96 Aitkenhead, 'Slavoj Žižek'.
97 Englehart, 'Slavoj Žižek'.

to which Jantzen appeals as paradigmatic of her natal philosophy. Birth is, as Jantzen argues, a moment where the new enters the world; where separation signifies creation, possibility, hope. But to speak about birth solely in these terms is to romanticise it, to overlook the ways in which pregnancy, birth and motherhood are, for mothers and children alike, bound up with violence and death in ways which cannot be ascribed solely to the patriarchal fear of embodiment and femininity. Pregnancy is dangerous; birth carries with it the risk of death for mothers and children alike; even a 'healthy' birth is likely to tear the mother's flesh. Jantzen says, in her rejection of the ambiguity of Kristeva's notion of the abject, that 'we do not die in this individuation and we do not kill our mothers'.[98] This is, all too often, untrue.

All of this is not to say, however, that Žižek is simply right in his delight in the language of violence and his queasy disgust towards other people and their bodies. Reading Žižek's work in the light of Jantzen's critique of the violent symbolics of Western masculinist philosophy highlights (in some ways precisely *because* of her tendency to oversimplify) the difficulties with Žižek's often brutal rhetoric. If beauty and horror, life and death, creativity and destruction are complexly related, Žižek's language almost always falls on the side of negativity and violence. There are exceptions to this general rule: on occasion, Žižek speaks of divine violence as a work of love or *agape,* as a source of liberation, and as the condition of possibility for a new community beyond the cycle of prohibition and transgression.[99] But his overwhelming tendency is towards the language of horror, death, destruction and violence. Jantzen's work suggests the potential value of reading Žižek's thought in the light of natality, and highlights the centrality of the issues of embodiment and femininity to parsing the relationship between violence and creation, hatred and love, monstrosity and sublimity within his work.

8.3.2 Luce Irigaray, Catherine Malabou and Mary-Jane Rubenstein: trauma, natality and wonder

Similarly, latent aspects of Žižek's account of drive, trauma and transformation are brought out by reading his account of the beautiful and the horrific alongside discussions of wonder found in the works of Luce Irigaray, Catherine Malabou and

---

98 'Kristeva's Mortal Visions', 124.
99 For example, *Fragile Absolute* 100, 128, 146-147; *Monstrosity* 246; *Ticklish Subject* 153.

Mary-Jane Rubenstein. Irigaray deals with wonder in her commentary on Descartes' *The Passions of the Soul*.[100] Wonder is the first of the six basic passions identified by Descartes; he describes it as the experience of encountering an object which 'surprises us' in such a way that 'we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be'.[101] On Irigaray's account, wonder therefore shares numerous features in common with the experience of trauma. Like trauma, it is 'both active and passive', the 'ground … of creation';[102] it is an 'excess' which resists our attempts at 'assimilation or reduction to sameness'.[103] It is (of course) associated with sexual difference,[104] and it occurs at the juncture of time and eternity.[105] It is 'without nostalgia for the first dwelling', a 'birth into a transcendence … the place of incidence and junction of body and spirit … the passion of the encounter between the most material and the most metaphysical … the forgotten ground of our condition between mortal and immortal.'[106] Irigaray asserts, with Descartes, that wonder has no opposite because it precedes judgement about the goodness or badness of the other which is the occasion of wonder.[107] On the one hand, this recalls Žižek's account of the 'Kantian/Lacanian Monstrous' which, in contrast to Heidegger's account of the monstrous as co-dependent with beauty associates the monstrous with 'a pre-ontological universe of the "night of the world" in which partial objects wander in a state preceding any synthesis'[108] and of the act as that which escapes the law, the standard of good and evil. On the other hand, it is suggestive of an altogether more positive affect associated with this moment of indeterminacy which is born out of the encounter with otherness. While Žižek's discussion of monstrosity suggests a richer account of the reasons why trauma so rarely gives rise to newness or love, Irigaray's account of wonder draws out the latent elements of natality and beauty in Žižek's account of the traumatic moment.

Catherine Malabou's discussion of Irigaray in *Changing Difference* draws out

---

100 Trans. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989); discussed in Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 72-82.
101 *Passions of the Soul*, 52.
102 Irigaray, *Ethics*,73.
103 *Ethics*, 74.
104 *Ethics*, 79. For a discussion of the relationship between Irigaray and Žižek's accounts of sexual difference, see my forthcoming article 'The mystical and the material: Slavoj Žižek and the French reception of mysticism' (in *Sophia*, 2014).
105 *Ethics,* 80.
106 *Ethics*, 82.
107 *Ethics*, 13.
108 *Ticklish Subject*, 49.

the ambivalence of wonder.[109] Malabou explores the way that although wonder is bound up with sexual difference in Irigaray's work it is also 'structurally linked to the feminine insofar as it reveals the ontological opening as a *maternity* … because all subjects are able to wonder, all subjects are feminine.'[110] Derrida links Irigaray's account of wonder specifically to the morphology of women, to the 'space of withdrawal and separation' which is 'the space of the *lips*', both of the mouth and of the vulva.[111] Malabou argues that Irigaray, Derrida and Levinas all (for similar reasons) give ethical primacy to the feminine, elevating women to a position of ethical superiority. Yet in doing so they re-inscribe women into patriarchal roles.[112] She argues that the way out of this bind is to give an account of femininity which is capable of 'elucidating the relation of difference to transvestism, that is, to change.'[113] Her solution is the notion of plasticity, the defining concept of her philosophical work, which she takes originally from Hegel but subsequently relates to neuroscience, providing, as she does so, an interesting parallel to Žižek's Hegelian reading of quantum physics. Plasticity in Malabou's work refers both to 'the capacity to *receive form* … and the capacity to *give form*', but also to 'the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create'.[114] Again, this notion bears obvious parallels to Žižek's account of trauma. Irigaray's notion of wonder cannot, Malabou argues, be separated from the problem of violence, from the struggle of woman against 'the structural impossibility she experiences of not being violated', from the 'tremendous violence' which is the cost of opening philosophy to women, 'the violence that philosophy constantly does to me and the violence I inflict on it in return.'[115]

Wonder is also the key term in Mary-Jane Rubenstein's theological account of transcendence as a rupture within immanence. Rubenstein draws out wonder's etymological connections with 'wound',[116] and also with the Kantian sublime, the Kristevan abject and the Lacanian Real. Wonder, for Rubenstein, names that which is both fascinating and repulsive, both creative and ruinous, both hierophantic and

---

109 Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
110 *Changing Difference*, 13.
111 *Changing Difference*, 15-16.
112 *Changing Difference*, 26-29.
113 *Changing Difference*, 37.
114 Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.
115 *Changing Difference*, 140-141.
116 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Chicago University Press, 2008), 9.

monstrous.[117] It is dangerous but, as with birth, without this element of danger there is no possibility of the new: 'thinking is condemned to an identical repetition of the safe, the possible and the Same.'[118]

As with many of the other dualisms we have discussed, then, Žižek understands the relationship between violence and creativity, the sublime and the abject, birth and death in such a way as to make straightforwardly dualistic oppositions of these terms impossible. It is not possible simply to pick sides; or, rather, the two sides are separated only by the parallax shift, the crucial yet minimal change of perspective which marks the distinction of desire and drive. Reading these oppositions according to a Žižekian ontology suggests that, where beauty, newness and wonder are approached from the perspective of desire, they crumble all too easily into horror, death and monstrosity. But from the perspective of drive, to fearlessly confront horror, death and monstrosity, to commit to the arduous work of love in full acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the beloved, is to glimpse, however fleetingly and fragilely, beauty, joy, and new life.

8.3.3 Julia Kristeva: trauma and the abject

To further elucidate these too often latent elements of beauty, natality and creativity in Žižek's work it is valuable also to explore it alongside that of Julia Kristeva, whose work on the notion of the abject discusses the complex interrelationship of beauty and horror, newness and death at the intersection of the subject and the other. Like Jantzen, Kristeva foregrounds issues of sexual difference and embodiment in her work, taking, as Žižek does, the question of sexual difference to be fundamental to broader questions of difference in general, of materiality and embodiment, and of the particular and the universal. Roughly speaking, where Jantzen seeks to clearly distinguish between natality and necrophilia in order to valorise natality and attack necrophilia, Kristeva focuses her attention on the points at which distinctions break down, on ambiguity and fluidity as the points at which identity may be remade and transformed. Žižek differs from both of these thinkers insofar as, where Jantzen and Kristeva focus their attention in different ways on the differences between the self and the other, mother and child, he prioritises an ontological monism within which it is the subject's difference *from itself,* its internal rupture, which precedes any differences

---

117 *Strange Wonder*, 11.
118 *Strange Wonder*, 193.

between the self and others. Yet because what happens in Žižek's work is not a denial of difference but a transposition of difference inwards into each individual, this opens up the possibility that the discussions of difference, of violence and creation, which occur in Jantzen and Kristeva can themselves be transposed into a Žižekian register, allowing their attempts to think difference and its relationship to violence and creation to illuminate and challenge Žižek's work.

Žižek engages Kristeva in ways which indicate that he recognises both the differences between his ontology of distinction and hers, and also, despite this, that Kristeva's work offers concepts and language which can be put to work within his own philosophical framework. On a couple of occasions, Žižek mentions Kristeva along with Luce Irigaray, treating the two together as thinkers who assert the reality of a feminine essence or substance outside of 'masculine', phallic discourse and who seek to speak from this excluded position.[119] On these occasions, Žižek is clear that his own account of sexuation stands in opposition to both Irigaray and Kristeva, asserting that femininity is merely a different relation to the same fundamental antagonism which is constitutive of masculinity. Similarly, Žižek rejects Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic precisely because of the way that this opposition is sexed and the way that the semiotic is taken to have existence independent of the symbolic, rather than functioning as the inherent excess of the symbolic.[120] Yet he often makes use of Kristeva's notion of the abject, which he strongly associates with the moment of confrontation with the inherent antagonism at the heart of identity.

For Kristeva, the abject is that which is expelled from the subject or from society in order to constitute identity. It returns in the excremental (the threat to identity which comes from outside the subject) and the menstrual (the threat to identity which comes

---

119 *Metastases*, 151; *Indivisible Remainder*, 159-160. As I discuss in 'The mystical and the material', this is a somewhat problematic reading of Irigaray in particular.

120 Kristeva understands the 'semiotic' as a non-symbolic form of expression that 'does not coincide with linguistic communication' ('Stabat Mater' trans. Arthur Goldhammer in *Poetics Today*, 6.1/2 (1985), 143), the 'affective, material dimension of language that contributes to meaning but does not signify in the same way as signs' (S. K. Keltner, *Kristeva: Threshholds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011). As Žižek's account of the symbolic includes the material dimensions of language, it not surprising that he differs from Kristeva here. For example, in *Indivisible Remainder* he rejects an analogy between Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic distinction and (Žižek's own reading of) Lacan's distinction between language and *lalangue* (that which escapes, grounds or unsettles the 'formal-differential structure of the symbolic big Other … the excess of homonyms, wordplays etc.), even while acknowledging the similarities between the two distinctions, on the grounds that language/*lalangue* is, for Lacan, 'strictly *not* sexualised' (183). In *Less than Nothing* Žižek opposes his own account of madness as inherent to reason to Kristeva's account of the semiotic and symbolic as two independent and irreconcilable poles (331).

from within).[121] Žižek describes the political tactic of 'identifying with the symptom', of naming that which is excluded from the symbolic order as the truth of the order as a whole, as identification with the abject.[122] The abject is the obverse of the sublime fantasy which fills out the gap in the existing order of things, what the sublime turns into once it is directly confronted.[123] Therefore 'properly Christian love' is love for the person who has been reduced to the abject;[124] and the end of analysis in the later thought of Lacan is described in strikingly Kristevan terms as the 'confrontation with the "Black Sun" of the Real Thing.'[125]

So how does the question of the relationship between life and death, beauty and monstrosity play out in Žižek's work? For Žižek, the sublime and the abject, life and death, beauty and horror are all inextricably linked to the traumatic antagonism, the point of failure at the heart of identity. Hence both are related to desire and drive (the two basic subjective relationships to that antagonism) and to fantasy and the *objet petit a* which are both located at the point of failure within the economy of the subject or the symbolic order. Žižek's account of the sublime is taken from Lacan, who combines Freudian sublimation with the Kantian Sublime, arguing that the sublime is the result of the process of shifting the libido from the impossible void at the heart of being to some 'concrete, material object of need'[126] which 'materialises the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other … designated, in Lacan, by the German word *Das Ding*, the Thing'.[127]

This account differs in two ways from Kristeva's. First, as already discussed, where Kristeva prioritises the distinction between the self and the other, Žižek prioritises the inconsistency at the heart of the self; beauty and ugliness are to do with the question of the subject's identity with or difference from itself rather than its identity with or difference from others. Second, in Žižek this problematic point of distinction is much more clearly historical than is the case in Kristeva's work. Because, for Žižek the rupture at the heart of the subject is also a rupture in the economy of cause and effect,

---

121 Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 94-95.
122 *Ticklish Subject*, 224.
123 *Fragile Absolute*, 32-38.
124 *Parallax View*, 111.
125 *Less than Nothing*, 511. This seems likely to be a reference to Kristeva's book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
126 *Fragile Absolute*, 170.
127 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 9-10.

the primary fissure around which the themes of the sublime and the abject converge is not that between the subject and the mother, but the gap which constitutes the subject's freedom. The 'true monstrosity', Žižek says, 'is the abyss of freedom'.[128]

There are two ways, then, that Žižek seeks to think the relationship between the sublime and the abject: according to desire and according to drive. In desire, the sublime is that which represents the dream of perfect enjoyment for the subject, while the abject (also the obscene, the monstrous, the horrific) is that which blamed for the absence of perfect enjoyment.[129] Both the sublime and the abject are located within the gap at the heart of identity, which is also the place 'between the two deaths'. Žižek says that 'this gap can be filled in various ways; it can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters.'[130]

But it is not simply that the crack at the heart of being can be papered over either with the beautiful or with the monstrous. What is good and beautiful very easily becomes what is awful and horrific. Because that which occupies the place of the sublime is obviously inadequate, once it is too closely approached it reverts into the horrific. Žižek explains this by way of reference to Courbet's painting '*L'origine du monde*' which, he argues, brings to an end the attempt of traditional realist painting to elevate the female body to the position of the sublime object. The painting (which was owned by Lacan) focuses on the exposed genitalia of a female torso whose face is left out of the picture.[131] By '*directly depicting* what previous realistic art merely hinted at as its withdrawn point of reference', Courbet accomplishes '(to put it in Kristevan terms) the reversal of the sublime object into the abject, into an abhorrent, nauseating excremental piece of slime.'[132] There is nothing that can fulfil the promise of the fantasy, that can offer wholeness to the subject unless it is the dissolution of the subject itself.

---

128 *Ticklish Subject*, 61.
129 Examples of the abject include the Lacanian figure of the 'obscene, monstrous, rapist father' which 'is itself a fantasy-formation, the ultimate guarantee that somewhere there is full, unconstrained enjoyment' (*Fragile Absolute*, 75); and the figure of the Jew in anti-Semitism, who 'is experienced as the embodiment of negativity, as the force disrupting stable social identity' (*Sublime Object*, 199).
130 *Sublime Object*, 150.
131 According to Elisabeth Roudinesco, the painting was kept behind a wooden screen in the office of Lacan's country home (*Jacques Lacan & Co.: a history of psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986)*,* 294).
132 *Fragile Absolute*, 36. It is hard not to see this hyperbolic language as indicative of Žižek's own attitude to feminine embodiment rather than as a simple description of Courbet's painting, which is unflinching but hardly lurid.

From the perspective of desire, the horrific is more fundamental than the beautiful because, from the perspective of the symbolic order, trauma is a radical threat: the threat of death, of dissolution. Desire rests on the belief that the sublime object really is sublime, is adequate to the place it fills.[133] Desire strives for completeness but is secretly terrified by the possibility of attaining it, of finally acquiring the lost object. The completeness that desire strives for is deeply bound up with the dream of *self-possession*: the fantasy of being able to perfectly grasp oneself, of incorporating everything that is into the smooth running of the economy of cause and effect. What takes place in the constitutive gap at the heart of identity is precisely the disruption of this self-possession. One aspect of this disruptive horror is human freedom. 'The true monstrosity', Žižek says, is 'the abyss of human freedom',[134] the basic incompleteness of the world which makes free acts possible, the opening which makes space for human agency. It is this freedom which makes human beings themselves monstrous, 'marked by a terrifying excess which … is inherent to being-human'.[135] The disgust we feel for the horrific, the monstrous, the abject is, for Žižek, 'disgust at *drive* at its purest.'[136] What is interesting here, in light of Jantzen's argument, is that in some senses it is precisely the evasion of death which makes the confrontation with trauma so horrific. The sublime body, as thought according to desire, is 'indestructible', 'excepted from the vital cycle'.[137] Death is perhaps the ultimate instance of that which we cannot control, which disrupts the smooth flow of things, the violent intrusion into the homoeostasis of ordinary life.[138] Because death is evaded, it comes back as a spectre, a monster, to haunt and to terrorise us.

Although Žižek's first English language publication argues that 'beyond fantasy', where the drive belongs, there is 'no yearning or any kindred sublime phenomenon',[139] he later describes himself as being at this point 'caught in the ethics of pure desire'.[140] His subsequent work clearly articulates the relationship of drive to the sublime. The sublimity of the drive emerges, for Žižek, precisely in and through the

133 In a 2008 foreword to *They Know Not*, Žižek says of 1989's *Sublime Object* that it 'misses' the 'ridiculous inadequacy of the object' and so 'remains caught in the ethics of pure desire' (xvii).
134 *Ticklish Subject*, 61.
135 *Parallax View*, 22.
136 *Parallax View*, 118.
137 *Sublime Object*, 149.
138 And as for Jantzen, the price to be paid for elevating the beloved object into the position of the sublime is the loss of its 'pathological' particularity (e.g. in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 'his object choice, the woman, loses her "pathological" character and becomes a sublime Thing' (188)).
139 *Sublime Object*, 139.
140 In his 2008 foreword to *They Know Not*, xvii.

194

confrontation with the abject, through the acknowledgement of the radical incompleteness and failure which is constitutive of identity. He describes the shift from desire to drive as the shift from *idealisation* to *sublimation*. Idealisation 'blinds itself to the other's weaknesses … to the other *as such*, using the beloved as a blank screen on to which it projects its own phantasmagorical constructions. By contrast, true love accepts the beloved the way she or he is, merely putting her/him into the place of the Thing, the unconditional Object.' The sublime understood according to drive does not escape the possibility of death and destruction, but is 'the *work* of love', occurring in 'miraculous but *extremely fragile* moments' in which 'another dimension transpires through our reality.'[141] It is 'always partial, an island of fragile order.'[142] Drive does not deny the place of history and change but occurs precisely at the point of transformation, of the unsettling of the existing order of things. It is 'the hard and arduous work of repeated "uncoupling"'.[143]

As for Kristeva (and *contra* Jantzen) the beautiful arises precisely out of the horror of new birth, out of the sticky, slimy fluids which slip between our fingers even as we try to cling to them, to bring them into order. To love our neighbour is to love her not in the imaginary (imposing on her our own idea of what is best for her) or in the symbolic (as 'the abstract symbolic subject of Rights') but in the Real, as 'radically evil, capricious, revolting, disgusting … in short, beyond the Good.'[144] Yet Žižek's work also hints that, from the perspective of drive, the disgusting ceases to be disgusting and becomes instead merely ordinary. In *On Belief*, Žižek says that the sublime is not the idealised figure which, upon too close an approach, becomes 'a repulsive hag' but occurs when the sublime 'transpires through the utmost common details of everyday shared life … in common everyday acts like washing the dishes or cleaning the apartment';[145] it is the '"ordinary" object elevated into the "dignity of the Thing"'.[146] Drive is comic, Žižek argues, insofar as it asserts the identity of 'the sublime and the everyday object'.[147] He connects this to the doctrine of the incarnation, arguing that in this doctrine Christianity rejects the idea of a perfect, transcendent God beyond the world in favour of a notion of the divine as that which 'shines through Christ, this

---

141 *Fragile Absolute*, 128.
142 *Monstrosity*, 265.
143 *Fragile Absolute*, 128.
144 *Fragile Absolute*, 111-112.
145 41.
146 *Monstrosity*, 279.
147 *On Belief*, 92.

miserable creature.'[148] It is only when the fantasy of perfection is abandoned that real love is possible.[149]

This moment of abandoning the fantasy is directly equated by Žižek with death. Love beyond the law, the sublime according to the drive is opened up as a possibility by the confrontation with 'Death', by which Žižek means 'not merely the passing of earthly life' but the severing of ties with the symbolic order which occurs in the act, the wiping clean of the slate to make space for new possibilities.[150] New life is deeply bound up with death. Because Žižek's ethics requires a withdrawal into self precisely in order to make room for the other person outside of our own subjective fantasies, the ethical relation requires *both* the confrontation with the abject which is, for Kristeva, so central to the transformation of the subject (although the abject is primarily the antagonism *within* ourselves rather than the boundary between the self and the other) *and* the establishment of difference which is so crucial for Irigaray.

For Žižek, then, to love according to desire is to believe in a false vision of purity and perfection, under which inevitably lurks the obscene underside, the horror of the abject, the disavowed monstrosity which is the truth of fantasy. Contra Jantzen, the more that life and death, beauty and monstrosity are separated, the more insistently the repressed returns and the more that which is beautiful reverts into ugliness. To love according to drive is to confront imperfection and incompleteness in all of their grotesque materiality, in their *particularity*, and to recognise the moments of beauty and grace which arise from and within them. In drive (Žižek implies but does not explicitly state), horror and obscenity are deprived of their power and become less important than the sublime which can be glimpsed in their midst.

Finally, it is worth noting here that the abject and the grotesque, the horrific and the monstrous which belong with it are specifically *gendered* terms.[151] Žižek expresses disgust for specifically feminine embodiment on more than one occasion (describing

---

148 *On Belief*, 89.
149 *Metastases*, 104.
150 *Ticklish Subject*, 153-154.
151 As is argued by, amongst others, Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995), which understands the grotesque as a specifically feminine characteristic, and one which is associated with the 'doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive and abject' and which is not 'identified with materiality as such' but emerges in the division *between* the 'discursive fictions of the biological body and the Law' (9); and Sarah Alison Miller's *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 2010), which discusses the medieval association of monstrosity and the bodies of women 'marked as unstable, permeable and overflowing' (2).

tulips as 'some kind of … vagina dentata' … 'inherently disgusting'[152] and telling a Guardian interviewer that his earliest memory was of 'My mother naked. Disgusting.'[153]), and it is far from clear that he himself is free from misogyny. Yet his work relentlessly returns to the themes of the monstrous, the grotesque and the obscene – as well as to femininity – as crucial to truth and transformation. As Sarah Kay suggests, feminists 'probably can't claim' Žižek, or at least not without some real trepidation, 'but they may nonetheless be able to use him'.[154] This is, in part, the intention of this thesis. As I will argue, Žižek's work can be read as a project parallel to the queer theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid's '(God) in the name of vulgarity, horror and impurity',[155] an attempt to begin thinking about the existing order from the assumption that what it excludes and abjects is its innermost truth.

8.3.4 Marcella Althaus-Reid: trauma and theology

Where does this leave us theologically? What would it look like for theology to take seriously the claim that beauty is inseparable from the possibility of ugliness, life from the possibility of death, faith from the possibility of offence; to think Christian identity as essentially traumatic?

Like Žižek, Marcella Althaus-Reid describes her work as a 'materialist theology'.[156] Where Žižek seeks to reconfigure the entire Western philosophical tradition around his materialist account of ontology and desire, the target of Althaus-Reid's critique is nothing less than the entire body of Western systematic theology. She argues that the logics of heterosexuality, systematic theology and colonisation are inextricably bound up with one another insofar as they all rely on the exclusion of the Other in the name of the rejection of 'vulgarity, horror and impurity'.[157] Although liberation theology asserts that God can only (or at least primarily) be known through the divine revelation in history it shies away, she argues, from acknowledging that this claim demands a willingness to perceive God's revelation even in that which escapes

---

152 Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, dir. Sophie Fiennes (Mischief Films and Amoeba Film, 2006).

153 Greenstreet, 'Q&A', in *The Guardian.*

154 *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 76.

155 *Queer God*, 36.

156 *Indecent Theology*, 6; cf Žižek's description of his own work as 'a materialist theology' in *Monstrosity*, 82.

157 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 36.

the safe bounds of traditional systematic theology, particularly in transgressive forms of sexuality: 'the revelation that occurs in intimate acts, in the perceived chaotic history of intimate human relationships in history, has been systematically marginalised and silenced by a highly idealistic sexually hegemonic theological project, heavily dependent on a colonial model.' Although liberation theology has, for Althaus-Reid, largely been co-opted by Western systematic theology and (not coincidentally) by capitalism, she argues that it can redeem itself through a 'kenotic Queer model' according to which (in a strikingly Žižekian turn of phrase), 'God's divinity depends on God's own presence amidst the sexual turbulences of human beings' intimate relationships, whose knowledge is the knowledge of the excluded queerness in Christianity.'[158] Althaus-Reid argues that it is precisely the desire of systematic theology to preserve the notion of salvation as the place of '"the safe and sound, the unscathed … the immune"'[159]which gives rise to what Žižek would call an obscene underside, 'the trace of fetishism … of bondage.' Transgressive sexual practices, Althaus-Reid argues, reveal the truth of the fantasised image of purity and perfection to which systematic theology clings.[160]

Instead of this problematic attempt to maintain clear boundaries and to cling to purity and a notion of an uncontaminated Christianity, Althaus-Reid advocates materialist theologies (the plural being crucial to her argument here) which begin not with generalities but with the specificities and contradictions of Christianity as it is lived by individual people and communities, which 'have their starting points in people's actions, or sexual acts without polarising the social from the symbolic',[161] which understand the kingdom of God as 'multiple and changing', composed (not unlike Lacan's account of the 'montage' of heterogeneous elements which constitute the core of the subject) of 'a juxtaposition of elements which do not belong'.[162] In particular, she seeks to rewrite theology 'from the margins of society, the church and systematic theologies'[163] by paying attention both to the lives of those who are excluded from theology's account of Christian identity and to the obscene underside of official church

---

158 *The Queer God*, 38.
159 This is a quotation taken from Derrida's 'Faith and knowledge: the two sources of religion at the limits of reason alone' in *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 2.
160 *Indecent Theology*, 152.
161 *Indecent Theology*, 146.
162 *Indecent Theology*, 147.
163 *Indecent Theology*, 4.

teaching. As for Žižek, it is amongst the excluded, the abjected and the disavowed that the truth of the church's identity is to be found, from here that the community of the church can be radically transformed to allow for the emergence of the new.

Like Žižek, Althaus-Reid draws on the biblical imagery of offence, of the stone which causes stumbling: her queer theology aims 'to scandalise, that is, to be a stone on the road to force theologians to stop, fall down, while pausing in their pain and thinking during the pause'.[164] Jesus 'as mediator between humanity and God … is *punctum*, disturbance, scandal'. Althaus-Reid discusses Bataille's *Madame Edwarda*, written under the pseudonym Pierre Angelique, in which the narrator mystically encounters God in the genitals of a prostitute.[165] Steven Shakespeare points out that Pierre means rock, and suggests that, in the work of Althaus-Reid, 'the stone, Pierre, becomes a stone of stumbling, not a rock on which to build the church'.[166] I want to suggest, rather, that the two possibilities are not opposed but in fact necessarily implicated, two perspectives separated merely by a parallax shift. Shakespeare, reading Althaus-Reid alongside Thomas Aquinas, argues that the Eucharist is constituted by 'a rupture, a rupture that is internal to its very constitution as a sign', that 'scattering and decay' are 'not just the accidental trappings of an unsullied word, but the condition of its possibility' and so also 'the condition of its impossibility'.[167] For God to be made flesh in the Eucharistic elements is to be exposed to the possibility of all of the many corruptions of those elements which are listed in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*: the consecrating priest may die or go mad; the Eucharist may be poisoned either accidentally or on purpose; the cup may be spilled; the sacraments vomited up after consumption; or the elements may be left too long and become lost, be eaten by mice, or begin to decay. 'All sacraments', says Shakespeare, 'are diseased sacraments'.[168] On my reading of Žižek's account of the pure and the impure according to desire and to drive, then, Marcus Pound's account of the Eucharist as trauma seems to remain stuck in the logic of desire, while Shakespeare's kenotic queer reading of the Eucharist functions according to the logic of drive. 'All sacraments are diseased sacraments' and yet it is precisely in and through this corruption, this failure, that grace is encountered.

---

164 *The Queer God*, 35.
165 Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1995).
166 In his unpublished paper 'Into the Vomitarium: Diseased Sacraments in Black Metal and Queer Theology', presented at the conference *Thinking the Absolute*, Liverpool Hope University, 2012.
167 'Into the Vomitarium'.
168 'Into the Vomitarium'.

As with the notion of trauma, this logic cannot be confined to the Eucharist alone: the church too, this body in which the Eucharist organises itself 'as a community of believers'[169] is inescapably implicated. The church is no more immune than are the Eucharistic elements to 'defections, infections, poisoning, forgetting, dropping, spoiling, corrupting and vomiting'.[170] Just as, for Rubenstein, transcendence cannot be grasped except in and through the ruptures of the material world, so for Christian theology Christ cannot be grasped except in and through the ruptures, the failures of the church.

8.4 Conclusion

Understanding Žižek's account of the transformative act which emerges from drive (rather than desire) in terms of trauma, then, helps to clarify his account of the difference between good (aneconomic) and bad (economic) forms of violence. Recognising that this Žižekian trauma can also be understood in terms of natality, wonder, and the abject opens the space to understand Žižek's work in specifically feminist terms, and draws out certain aspects of Žižek's account of political transformation which are often marginal or latent in his own work. Together, these moves make it possible to consider the theological implications of Žižek's understanding of ontology, desire, and political transformation. This opens up the possibility of an account of Christian identity which is founded on Christ as both cornerstone and stone of stumbling; the sublime object and the little piece of the real which both grounds theological discourse and means that the failure of theology is not only inevitable but a positive condition of its existence and fertility. To explore further what this account of theology *as* failure might mean, the following chapter returns to Dionysius in an attempt to imagine how the *Mystical Theology* might be repeated differently.

---

169 *Monstrosity*, 289.
170 Shakespeare, 'Into the Vomitarium'.

9. Mystical Theology and the Four Discourses

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will suggest that a re-reading of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* through Lacan's four discourses illustrates how a Žižekian ontology makes possible a materialist reading of apophatic theology and Christian commitment to the church. Žižek's work offers the possibility of repeating Dionysius differently, under the aegis of a Žižekian materialism within which apophatic theology is the condition of both the possibility and impossibility of cataphatic theology. In such a materialist theology, Christian identity can be understood according to the logic of drive: that is, not as a commitment to a particular set of answers or a particular vision of harmony, but precisely as the commitment to a particular problem, the problem of what it means to be faithful to Christ. This problem is never an abstract theoretical question but is always incarnated in the body of Christ, the church. Such an account has the potential to liberate theology from its desire to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, and to set it free to love the world around it in all of its sublimity and abjection.

This chapter will begin with a recap of the key elements of Dionysius' Neoplatonic Christianity, and in particular of the structure of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. It will discuss, briefly, the structural parallels between Dionysius and Žižek's ontology in order to explain why a Žižekian rereading of Dionysius is both possible and potentially valuable. Žižek's most extensive discussions of the structure of both possible and existing communities rely heavily on the Lacanian schema of the four discourses, which offer an account of the way that desire functions in the context of language and community. The bulk of this chapter will consist of a rereading of the *Mystical Theology* through the lens of these four discourses. For Dionysius, there is a very deep connection between the epistemological and the ontological claims of theological language. This parallels Žižek's materialist reading of Lacan, which strongly asserts the interrelationship of the structure of material reality and the nature of human language.

For both Dionysius and Žižek, questions of completeness, unity, immanence and transcendence are utterly fundamental. Moreover, there are striking parallels between the four Lacanian discourses which (particularly on a Žižekian reading of Lacan) set out the ways in which these key terms are configured and the four forms of theological

language present in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. As such, they offer a useful way into imagining how theology might be transformed by an encounter with Žižekian materialist ontology and illuminated by his central distinction between desire and drive.

9.2 Mystical Theology

As discussed in chapter 2, much of the originality and significance of Dionysius' work lies in his bold synthesis of Christian theology and Neoplatonism, drawing connections between the structure of human desire, the nature of language, and the being of the created world. Just as creation emanates from and returns to God, thoroughly dependent for its being on the divine; so too with human language, which begins not with human particularity or agency but with the divine gift of Scripture. It is desire which binds the ecclesial community to this divine economy. As I have suggested, this Neoplatonic inheritance has been, at best, ambiguous for Christian theology, which has struggled to offer an account of materiality which is faithful to the affirmation of the created world implied by central Christian doctrines such as the original goodness of creation and the incarnation of God. The influence of Neoplatonism means that theology tends to function according to a logic of incorporation, where everything that exists is comprehended by and reabsorbed into God, a closed economy which assures the mastery of the divine over difference and multiplicity. These tendencies to value the ideal over the material, the universal over the particular and the hierarchical over the disruptive are very deeply connected to the frequent misogyny, racism and colonialism of the Western Christian tradition, not to mention its repeated failure to side with the poor against the rich, or the weak against the strong. All of these tendencies are visible in Dionysius' own work, for example in his refusal to countenance the possibility of a challenge to authority from those in positions of lesser authority.[1] Many remain visible in the contemporary theology which engages with apophatic theology via continental thinkers such as Derrida.

Two things are suggestive of the possibility of repeating Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* via a Žižekian materialism. First, there are deep conflicts within Dionysius' texts between his commitment to the existing consensus of Christian theology and the

---

[1] See, for example, *Letter 8*, 269-280, and my discussion of Dionysius' problematic approach to hierarchy in chapter 2 above.

metaphysics of Neoplatonism.[2] These suggest the potential for reconfiguring Dionysius' work according to an alternative metaphysics. Second, there are clear structural parallels between Žižek's synthesis of Lacan and German idealism and the Neoplatonic Christianity of the Dionysian corpus. These suggest that Žižek's work might provide fruitful resources for such a reconfiguration.

For all the far-ranging and profound influence that Dionysius' synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism has had on Christian theology, the system which emerges is not without its internal tensions. Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* offers an account of the erotic transformation of both theological language and the individual person towards God, which bears clear parallels with much Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. But where the erotic education of Plato's *Symposium* (for example) begins at the most material point, the body of a beautiful young boy, and works upwards and away from both particularity and materiality, for Dionysius the starting point is with God, with 'the most appropriate' and therefore least material names, so that theological education takes in both emanation and return.[3] Moreover, while the divine names which correspond for Dionysius to each stage of the emanation of theological language largely fit within the standard Neoplatonic schema according to which things become more particular, more material, and more various the further they emanate from the One, Dionysius places the trinity and the incarnation alongside the most abstract names of God. The first of the divine names include not just oneness and threeness, but the Fatherhood and Sonship of God, the doctrine of the Spirit, and the claim that Jesus was God.[4]

The ambiguous relationship between Neoplatonic ontology and Christian theology in Dionysius' work is clearly exemplified by recent discussions of the relationship between Dionysius' apophatic theology and contemporary continental philosophy. In light of Dionysius' pivotal role in the conjunction of Neoplatonic ontology with the Christian tradition, there is an irony in the fact that it is precisely the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology which results in the recent return to Dionysius. And yet, as David Newheiser argues, there is enough complexity and ambiguity in

---

2   While Dionysius' position in relation to the Monophysite controversy is contentious, his exact relationship to that controversy is sufficiently unclear (and the rewriting of history after doctrinal consensus has been reached so common) that it seems unreasonable to dismiss him as deliberately heterodox. On more settled issues of Christian doctrine Dionysius seems clearly to align himself with existing orthodoxies.
3   *Mystical Theology*, 138. This difference means that Dionysius' work has a complex relationship to questions of agency and community which are explored later in this chapter.
4   *Mystical Theology*, 138-139.

Dionysius' work for it to be susceptible to these re-readings.[5]

This brings us nicely to my second claim: that the structural homology between Dionysius and Žižek's work makes possible a repetition of the former via the latter. Denys Turner argues that the language of *eros* is valuable to Dionysius because it addresses two of the key tensions within his attempt to reconcile Christianity and Neoplatonism: the problem of creation as a free act and the problem of how God can act 'outside' of Godself.[6] Both of these problems are essentially problems of economy: how can the cycle of cause and effect be ruptured; how can a given economy give rise to that which is genuinely new? For Dionysius, the language of *eros* makes it possible to resolve, or at least sustain, these tensions between freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation.[7] In love, Turner argues, we are both free and compelled, united and differentiated. Dionysius' erotic theology is, he argues, 'the dialectics of the divine *eros*'.[8] For Turner, *eros* allows us to 'transcend the last differentiation of all: *the difference itself between unity and difference*'.[9] It is probably clear already how close this position is to that of Žižek's materialist ontology of desire, particularly in the extent to which it escapes the Neoplatonic ontology of participation by asserting that the difference between unity and difference is itself a distinction which is internal to language, to the created world. The problems of creation, freedom and distinction, and their relationship both to the limits of language and to the nature of the material world itself are utterly fundamental to both Dionysius and Žižek's projects. Both turn to philosophical accounts of the nature and structure of desire in order to address them. The difference between (Turner's reading of) Dionysius and Žižek is *precisely* the difference between the 'standard' reading of Hegel's work – where dialectics means the reconciliation of contradiction in a higher unity – and Žižek's reading of Hegelian dialectics – which sees contradiction not resolved so much as internalised so that, say, freedom is the internal contradiction of antagonism; difference the internal contradiction of unity.[10]

---

5   David Newheiser, 'Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius', in *Reading the Church Fathers*, ed. Scott Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 30.
6   Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 50.
7   *Eros and Allegory*, 58.
8   *Eros and Allegory*, 62.
9   *Eros and Allegory*, 63.
10 Although elsewhere Turner places more emphasis on the disruptive function of Dionysius'

In some ways, then, Žižek's project is actually closer to Dionysius' than is the work of Derrida and his interlocutors. Where Derrida, Marion and Caputo draw on Dionysius' work in the hope of escaping ontotheology, Žižek seeks to address the ontotheological problem by articulating a *better* ontology. Where Derrida problematises ontotheology by driving a wedge between language and being, Žižek argues that the impossibility of language *is* the impossibility of being. He more radically rules out the possibility of 'God' functioning as the ground of being by locating immanence and transcendence *within* being itself. God cannot be that which grounds or ungrounds being; if we are to speak of God at all it can only be as that which we love *in* a particular community: for theology, in the church. What we give ourselves up to is not God as the ground of our being but the work of love in and through Christ-as-the-church.

9.2.1 Dionysius' Mystical Theology

There are four stages in Dionysius' account of the mystical progress towards God. Dionysius begins with 'the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology':[11] God is three and one; God is Father, Son and Spirit; God became incarnate in Christ. Subsequently, theological language broadens out in order to speak about God using every possible name, proliferating itself in such a way as to reflect the diversity and multiplicity of the created world: theology speaks of the 'forms, figures, and instruments proper to [God] … of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses.'[12]

But eventually a turning point is reached; theological language overreaches itself and in its excess begins to seem implausible. And so the denials begin: God is not air or stone, drunk or angry; God is not life or goodness, threeness or oneness, Father or Son. And then, finally, the denials themselves are denied and language begins to collapse in on itself, as Dionysius draws on the language of paradox, contradiction and impossibility. God is neither being nor non-being; neither error nor truth; God is beyond assertion or denial. So there are four stages: naming, proliferation, denials and then the

---

apophaticism, arguing that the negation of negations in Dionysius means that 'the whole of creation is incomplete, "self-subverting", centred upon an unknowable reality' (*Darkness of God*, 271), bringing Dionysius yet closer to Žižek.

11 *Mystical Theology*, 138.
12 *Mystical Theology*, 139.

collapse of denial itself.[13] It is this fourfold schema which I will bring into dialogue with Žižek's Lacanian schema of the four discourses.

9.3 The Lacanian subject

The four discourses have been described as 'the closest [Lacan] comes to charting the nature of ideology.'[14] In Žižek's hands, this potential is more fully exploited. The four discourses 'constitute one of the primary systematic elements of his thought',[15] and function not only as the basis for 'a new typology of the different modern regimes',[16] but also as, more importantly, the model for the ultimate goal of his political work: a 'sociality based in *drive* rather than desire',[17] in which 'the subjective, engaged stance' offers 'the key to a true, autonomous politics without any support in the big Other'.[18]

In the discourses, which are structured diagrammatically using mathemes (the algebraic symbols which Lacan uses to describe the overarching structures of the subject and the relationships between subjects), Lacan seeks to lay out the four basic structures according which human social relations are arranged. Despite the language of 'discourse', Lacan is clear that what is crucial here is not primarily the particular language and speech which each discourse contains but the basic configuration of the relationships between subjects.[19] These discourses are, unsurprisingly, of great interest to Žižek and surface repeatedly throughout his work.[20] Although they emerge relatively late in Lacan's work (being first discussed at length in Lacan's 1969-70 *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*),[21] they draw together many key elements of Lacan's

---

13 As I will discuss later, this final stage is somewhat ambiguous; at times it seems to be characterised primarily by silence and speechlessness, at others by the language of paradox.

14 Thomas Lynch, 'Making the Quarter Turn: Liberation Theology after Lacan' in Creston Davis and Marcus Pound eds., *Theology after Lacan* (Wipf and Stock, forthcoming), 60. On Paul Verhaeghe's account they also represent 'the summary and … the summit of Lacan's theory' (*Beyond Gender: From Subject to Drive* (New York: Other Press, 2001), 20).

15 Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 62.

16 This typology is, for Sharpe and Boucher, 'some of his most genuinely novel work' (Matthew Sharpe and Geoff M. Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 89).

17 Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 83.

18 Ola Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 99.

19 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton, 2007), 12.

20 For example, the discourses are discussed in *Sublime Object*, 217; *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 118; *Iraq*, 68-70; *Ticklish Subject*, 376-277; *Parallax View*, 298-308; and *Less than Nothing*, 794-795.

21 Although an earlier version can be found in Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce

earlier work. The discourses are essentially constituted by a single framework occupied by four terms, which rotate around the framework in order to generate the four discourses. I will begin by setting out the four terms which take their place in the basic framework of the discourses, before explaining the framework itself and subsequently examining each of the discourses in turn, and in relation to Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.

9.3.1 S_1, S_2, $ and a

In one sense at least, Neoplatonism, the biblical account of creation, and Lacanian psychoanalysis coincide: for all three, things are brought into being by a moment of division. The One becomes the Many; the formless void becomes dark and light, land and sea; the subject is named, catches sight of itself in the mirror, and is forever after unable to be a simple self-identical unity. For Lacan, creation occurs by virtue of an inexplicable moment of decision: a baby is named and the subject comes into being; a man is declared king and the state is born. The Lacanian name for this instance which grounds a new order is the master signifier, which is designated by the symbol S_1. Lacan's favoured example of such a master signifier is the Name of the Father, the self-grounding claim made by God to Moses the first time that he ascends the mountain (which is, of course, *the* fundamental narrative motif of mystical theology): 'I am who I am.'[22]

Because, for Lacan, both the individual subject and the social order are primarily beings of language, what is generated by the initial act of creation is more language. The individual and the social order begin to speak about themselves, to generate discourses about who and what they are; a little like the plants of Genesis which, once brought into being begin to produce seed 'according to their kinds'.[23] These chains of language which come into being are designated by the Lacanian symbol S_2, which stands for knowledge. But what comes into being does so as the result of a division, and so remains internally divided. The systems of meaning and knowledge which are generated can never be entirely comprehensive, perfectly self-contained, because they are founded on a moment of non-sense, the master signifier.


Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 645–668.
22 Exodus 3:14.
23 Genesis 1:12.

Thus the Lacanian symbol for this subject is a crossed out S ($), the divided subject which never fully coincides with itself, which is never simply self-contained. What divides the subject is both a lack – something missing from the subject – and an excess – something which always escapes the subject's grasp. This gap is filled in with objects of fantasy: both desired objects which the subject thinks will complete it and reviled objects which the subject perceives as the barriers to its completion. This is the role of the *objet petit a*, the *a*.

9.3.2 The Four Discourses

There are four terms, then, in the Lacanian account of the constitution of language and the subject: the master signifier, knowledge, the divided subject, and the *objet petit a*. Lacan sets out four possible configurations of these four elements of identity; these four configurations are the four discourses. Each discourse consists of the four terms – S1, S2, $ and *a* – occupying four positions: agent, other, product and truth:
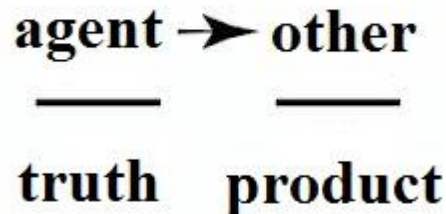
The basic social relation constituted by the discourse is the relationship between the agent and the other, and this upper half of the discourse represents the conscious aspect of the relationship. The lower half of the discourse is the relationship's unconscious aspects, and consists of the truth of the discourse – the unconscious but fundamental factor which motivates the agent – and the product of the discourse – that which is the actual (though not the intended) outcome of the relationship between the agent and the other. The relationship between the agent and the other is motivated by the desire for wholeness but always fails, because to achieve wholeness would be to obliterate distinction and therefore to undo creation itself.

The Lacanian schema generates four discourses. Beginning with the master's

discourse and rotating this structure by 90º at a time (what Lacan calls a 'quarter turn')[24] it generates, successively, the university discourse, the hysteric's discourse and the analyst's discourse, which, Lacan says, correspond to four different social phenomena: 'governing, educating, protesting and revolutionizing'.[25] These discourses are bound up with desire, with lack,[26] but also, importantly, with drive, which is, according to Lacan, 'here, where something is taking place between you and what I am saying.'[27] Of these four discourses, the master's, the hysteric's and the university discourse are all structured according to the logic of desire: all believe in the possibility of an impossible wholeness and cling to the fantasy of completion. Only the analyst's discourse represents drive, the traversing of the fantasy, the acknowledgement of the inevitable failure of both the individual and the social order. Only the analyst's discourse is the discourse of love.[28]

In Žižek's work, the four discourses undergo two transformations. First, in the context of Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian materialism the structure of human subjectivity and society is grounded in the structure of the material world itself. It is not only human being which is intrinsically ruptured but all being: everything that is emerges out of the intrinsic incompleteness, the failure of nothingness itself. In this sense Žižek's reading of Lacan brings the four discourses closer to Dionysius' account of the relationship of human desire and language, which is intrinsically bound up with the Neoplatonic ontology of the nature of the created world, emerging into multiplicity from divine simplicity. Second, the political implications of the four discourses are drawn out. Žižek elaborates Lacan's four discourses, and his relatively sparse gestures towards particular political configurations, into a complex account of ideology and the ways in which human desire is caught up into the political functioning of different societies.

---

24 *Seminar XVII*, 14 (Lacan also discusses this quarter turn earlier in his work "Kant with Sade," in Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 645–668.
25 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Other Side of Psychoanalysis Bk. XVII* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 166.
26 *Seminar XVII*, 19.
27 *Seminar XVII*, 16.
28 *Seminar XX*, 16.

9.4 The Four Discourses and Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*

In what follows, I will discuss the structure and functioning of each of the four discourses. I will argue that, by mapping Lacan's four discourses (and their Žižekian elaborations) onto the four forms of theological language in Dionysius' mystical theology, it is possible to repeat Dionysius differently, and in so doing to think theology according to a Žižekian materialism rather than the Neoplatonism which dominates so much systematic theology. The circle described by the four discourses or the four forms of theological language is one which both Dionysius and Žižek acknowledge can be repeated over and over again: for Dionysius in the ecclesiastical repetition of the Eucharistic liturgy which can be seen in the background of the *Mystical Theology*'s structure; for Žižek in the process of the forming and reforming of both individual subjectivity and social identity around their constitutive antagonisms. For both thinkers it is the final stage which is crucial, representing an eschatological hope not for static or straightforward completion, but for a radical shift in the relationship between the subject, their community, and the function of language.

Although I will elucidate the relationship between Lacan's mathemes and the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return in greater detail throughout my discussion of the four discourses, it is worth briefly describing the key contours of the relationship between the two here. While both Neoplatonism and Platonism tend to reduce difference to the same, to abstract the general from the particular, to absorb everything into the One, psychoanalysis is, as Paul Verhaeghe argues, 'the science of the particular.'[29] Verhaeghe argues that by shifting from the Freudian use of Greek myths, art and literature to explain his theories to more abstract, bloodless symbols and diagrams, Lacan is increasing the degree of abstraction involved in psychoanalytic metapsychology precisely in order to increase its ability to reckon with the complexity and particularity of individuals and cultures. What Lacan is interested in is the 'formal structures' into which the particularities of the world become organised. These metapsychological structures offer a framework for engaging with the particularity of the individual subject or the particular social context, but by no means imply that, as for Neoplatonism, these particularities will eventually be subsumed into universality. For psychoanalysis, the particularities which define the individual will always be specific to that individual. What is at stake is, rather, the way that they are structured, the way that

---

29 *Beyond Gender*, 17.

the individual relates to her own irreducible incompleteness. As Žižek argues, Lacan's later work shifts from 'the unity of conceptual thinking (in)to the duality of *matheme* and *lalangue* … mathematical or logical formulae and schemes [and] the explosion of word-play and other forms of poetic discourse.'[30] There are few linguistic features as particular as wordplay, as evidenced by the copious translators' notes which litter the translations of Lacan's seminars into English, painstakingly explaining the untranslatable puns upon which his discourse hinges.

Whilst both the Neoplatonic pattern of emanation and return which underlies Dionysius' work and the progressive rotation of mathemes which generates the Lacanian discourses suggest a set and perhaps inevitable progression, neither model is in fact quite so prescriptive. For Dionysius, the hierarchy up which individuals ascend towards God is impossible to circumvent and must, for the good of all concerned, be strictly maintained. And yet while the scale of being is rigidly fixed, the direction in which individuals travel is less so: in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius speaks about 'the possessed, that is, those who have turned away from a life conforming to divine examples and have adopted instead the ideas and character of abominable demons' and of those who have simply 'abandoned a sacred way of life'.[31] Although the overarching schema of Dionysius' hierarchies suggest that progress is somehow inevitable, this is clearly not (at least in the short term) always the case.

The ordering of the Lacanian discourses is yet more complex. Lacan himself says that the structure of the discourses themselves does not necessarily require that they be discussed in any particular order although 'historical reasons' give the master's discourse a certain priority.[32] The analyst's discourse in particular emerges in some way every time there is a shift from one discourse to another.[33] This ambiguity is taken up in different ways by Lacan's interpreters. Verhaeghe locates the master's discourse first in terms of the genesis of the subject 'because it founds the symbolic order as such, presenting us with a formal expression of the Oedipal complex and the constitution of the subject'.[34] It is also the first discourse of the analytic relationship, not because every

---

30 *Less than Nothing*, 463.
31 216-217.
32 *Seminar XVII*, 20.
33 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972-1973.*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 16.
34 *Beyond Gender*, 26.

analysand arrives in analysis and immediately engages in the master's discourse,[35] but because once transference begins, it is the master's discourse which necessarily comes first, subsequently progressing to the analyst's discourse or regressing to the university discourse.[36] By contrast, Mark Bracher places the university discourse first,[37] though he also speaks about the discourses as circular rather than progressive as, for him, the analyst's discourse simply generates a new master signifier, albeit one which is 'a little less oppressive'.[38]

Žižek affirms the priority of the master's discourse, but, although he refers to earlier manifestations of the discourses, suggests that the four discourses originate with modernity.[39] His account of the relationship between the four discourses varies somewhat throughout his work. At one point he suggests that the hysteric's and the university discourse are the two possible results of the master's discourse, each undermining it in different ways, and that the analyst's discourse represents the hope of a genuine transformation out of the destructive logic of capitalism.[40] Elsewhere, he suggests that the master's, hysteric's and university discourse are three varieties of dysfunctional response to the 'analyst's act', three ways of disavowing it.[41] But throughout, he consistently affirms the master's discourse as in some sense the first discourse and the analyst's discourse as the hoped-for goal of social and political transformation.

---

35 Verhaeghe suggests, in fact, that the analysand may initially present their symptoms in either of the master's, the hysteric's, or the university discourse (*Beyond Gender*, 33).
36 *Beyond Gender*, 42.
37 Mark Bracher, 'On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses,' in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 115.
38 Bracher, 'On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language', 123-124.
39 *Parallax View*, 298.
40 *Parallax View*, 298-299.
41 *Ticklish Subject*, 377.

9.4.1 The Master's Discourse

$$\frac{S_1}{\not{S}} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology. I have shown the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be one and then triune, how Fatherhood and Sonship are predicated of it, the meaning of the theology of the Spirit, how these core lights of goodness grew from the incorporeal and indivisible good, and how in this sprouting they have remained inseparable from their co-eternal foundation in it, in themselves and in each other. I have spoken of how Jesus, who is above individual being, became a being with a true human nature. [42]

The first of the four discourses is the master's discourse. The agent of the master's discourse is the master signifier, the person or concept who founds the existing order for no other reason than the position they occupy.[43] The master's discourse can be seen at work in the relationship between master and slave,[44] in the sort of analytic relationship where the analyst is assumed to know all of the answers to the analysand's problems, and in the sort of theological or ecclesial contexts which place great store by notions of infallibility.[45] It is the relationship in which the parent demands obedience of the child purely 'because I say so'. It is the discourse of the law, of the God who says 'I am what I am', 'It is so because I say it is so',[46] the discourse of 'I am the Lord your God … you shall have no other gods before me.'[47] For Žižek it is exemplified by absolute monarchy, 'the first figure of modernity that effectively undermined the distinct network of feudal relations and interdependences … the "Sun King" Louis XIV, with his, "*l'état c'est moi*";[48] by fascism, which is a reactionary 'return to the figure of the Master-Leader';[49] and also by much Christian theology.[50] The master's discourse is

---

42 *Mystical Theology*, 138-139.

43 For example, Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 131.

44 *Seminar XVII*, 21. There are clearly echoes of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic here, but Lacan also makes explicit reference to Plato's *Meno*, arguing that the basic operation of philosophy is 'this extraction, I would almost say this betrayal, of the slave's knowledge, in order to obtain its transmutation into the master's knowledge' (22).

45 Including, for example, both Catholic magisterial theology and certain forms of evangelical theology.

46 *Ticklish Subject*, 318.

47 Exodus 20:2-3.

48 *Parallax View*, 298; see also Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, 91-92.

49 *Tarrying*, 210; see also Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, 94, and Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 61-62.

50 As Sharpe and Boucher point out (*Žižek and Politics*, 201-202), although their claim that Žižek's *preference* is for this sort of conservative theology is rather implausible, as I discuss elsewhere (Marika Rose, review of Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010)', in *Political Theology* 13.2 (2012), 264-

driven by desire, by the idea that 'knowledge can make a whole.'[51]

The master's discourse describes the structure of the Oedipus complex and hence of castration, which is why it is associated with the birth of the subject. As discussed above, Žižek sides with those readers of Lacan who affirm the priority of the master's discourse, describing it as 'the first, "founding" discourse in the Lacanian matrix'. He draws a comparison between this claim that all discourse is initially structured according to the master's discourse, as '"authoritarian"' and Derrida's claim that 'every discursive field is founded on some "violent" ethicopolitical decision.'[52]

The first of Dionysius' forms of theological speech, which begins by speaking about God as Father, Son and Spirit, of God made flesh in Jesus,[53] can also be read in terms of the master's discourse. The central terms of Christian doctrine are, in many senses, simply given to us. They come to us from outside, as Dionysius emphasises when he asserts that *all* of the names with which it is acceptable to name God are given in scripture.[54] Here Dionysius' Christianity is in interesting tension with his Neoplatonism: while the Neoplatonic schema of being would suggests that the notions which are 'most appropriate' to speaking about God are those which are most abstract, most immaterial, Dionysius' appeal to the importance of Scripture and the Incarnation pushes against this tendency.[55] What could be more particular than the flesh of Christ, the assertion that God 'became a being with a true human nature', a single individual in a specific historical and geographical context?[56] What is more particularly Christian than the appeal to the authority of the Bible? What could be less abstract, less unified, than this collection of disparate texts, a multiplicity of forms, the strange product of very particular cultures, of singular individual writers and communities? What gives Christianity its unity, what grounds the identity of the church is not the generic act of creation, the groundless commandment, 'Let there be light'; nor even the monotheistic assertion, 'I am who I am'; but the claim that God became human in the person of Jesus. It is on this utterly specific claim that Christianity grounds itself, that theological speech

---

266).

51 *Seminar XVII*, 31.
52 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 118.
53 *Mystical Theology*, 138-139.
54 *Divine Names*, 49. Something similar is indicated by Thomas Aquinas' argument that theology 'takes its principles directly from God through revelation, not from other sciences' (*Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) Ia I.5).
55 *Mystical Theology*, 138.
56 *Mystical Theology*, 139.

begins.

But two things are concealed by the discourse of the master. First, what is concealed is the truth of the discourse, which is the divided subject. The master is himself (and the master is usually male) incomplete. Your father does not have all of the answers; the analyst does not know the truth of your desire; Christians do not have a perfect copy of the biblical text, or access to a theological tradition without contradictions. Even the Eucharist cannot escape – and is in fact dependent for its very possibility upon – the threat of impurity.[57] As Žižek points out,[58] Lacan specifically equates the master's discourse with the philosophical discourse of ontology,[59] which Lacan seeks to disavow in his own work, arguing that 'nothing is less certain than the existence of a world.'[60] But what is problematic here is not the attempt to speak about being per se but the appeal to 'a prediscursive reality', the failure on the part of the speaker to recognise the way that their own speech creates the reality of which they speak:[61] in Žižek's words, how 'ontology is constituted by the misrecognition of how its enunciation brings about its propositional content.'[62] But where Lacan tends to deny that there is any place for ontology within his psychoanalytic project, suggesting that both God and 'being' are effects of language, Žižek's response to this failure of philosophy is to propose a reading of Lacan in tandem with German idealist philosophy in order to articulate an account of the structure of language as intrinsically bound up with the structure of material reality. The concealed truth of philosophical ontology is the divided subject, the philosopher, who creates the world which they seek to master. What is needed, for Žižek, is not a total rejection of ontology but an ontology which has gone through the fantasy and come to recognise its own essential incompleteness.

The second thing concealed by the master's discourse is excess enjoyment: the transgression which is generated by attempts to maintain the fantasy of wholeness. For Žižek it is no surprise that those who assert most vigorously the purity of the church and the adequacy of its teachings are so often those who both delight in the abjection of

---

57 Steven Shakespeare, 'Into the Vomitarium: Diseased Sacraments in Black Metal and Queer Theology', 2012, 2.
58 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 113-114.
59 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX: Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 31. Lacan plays with the French homophones *Maître* (Master) and *m'être* ('to be myself').
60 *Seminar XX*, 30.
61 *Seminar XX*, 32.
62 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 114.

those who challenge this narrative of perfection and simultaneously fall short of it themselves.[63] Even in Dionysius' work, his rigidly hierarchical understanding of theological language is inseparable from a hierarchical ecclesiology which relies on the abjection of those outside of the church. Although Dionysius explicitly espouses an account of evil as privation, arguing that it 'destroys and debases' but cannot produce 'being or birth', that it 'neither is nor confers being',[64] in his discussion of the structure of the ecclesial community, the language which he uses to speak about 'the possessed' belies this model. The possessed, for example, are: 'held fast by opposing charms … exposed to the very worst power.'[65]

9.4.2 The University Discourse

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\text{\$}}$$

I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God. And I feel sure that you have noticed how these latter come more abundantly than what went before.[66]

When the master's discourse begins to fail, one route out of its internal contradictions is the university discourse.[67] Instead of authority grounded only in itself, the agent of the university discourse is knowledge itself. This is the discourse of the 'neutral expert', of the schoolteacher, the bureaucrat and the management consultant.

---

63 It seems reasonable to suggest that two of the ecclesiastical forms which most closely approximate the master's discourse are evangelicalism (particularly in its fundamentalist forms) and the Roman Curia (Lynch makes the connection between the master's discourse and the infallible proclamations which issue from the Vatican in 'Making the Quarter Turn', 6). It is no coincidence that both are associated in the popular imagination with both punitive forms of discipline and with hypocrisy and scandal. Žižek is fond of referring to 'Saint Paul's famous passage on the interconnection between Law and sin – on how the Law itself generates sinful desires' (*Fragile Absolute*, 113) i.e. Romans 7:7 in which Paul writes 'I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law'.

64 *Divine Names*, 86.

65 *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 216.

66 *Mystical Theology*, 139.

67 Žižek describes the university discourse as 'the hegemonic discourse of modernity' but also suggests that the university and hysterical discourse represent 'two outcomes of the vacillation of the direct reign of the Master' (*Parallax View*, 297, 298).

The person who occupies the place of knowledge does so on the understanding that their own particular subjectivity never intervenes, that they function simply as the neutral representative of objective truths.[68] Knowledge pursues the elusive *a*, that which eludes it, convinced that it will eventually be able to complete itself. It is the pursuit of ever more information in the belief that once knowledge is complete it will be possible to attain perfect efficiency, total control, and absolute certainty. Mark Bracher argues that the university discourse is in some sense our basic experience as beings of language: we are subjected to an external system of knowledge and belief and compelled to make sense of ourselves within it. For Lacan, the discourse of the university is particularly associated with higher education under capitalism: students function for the university both as the means of production and as the surplus value it generates.[69] For Žižek, it is particularly characteristic both of the 'bureaucratic "totalitarianism"' of Stalinism[70] and of contemporary capitalism, 'the expert rule of bureaucracy' in which, for example, the 'market expert' can advocate 'strong budgetary measures (cutting welfare expenses, etc.) as a necessity imposed by his neutral expertise devoid of any ideological biases'.[71]

Dionysius' second form of theological speech – the proliferation of language so that every name of every created thing is used to speak about God – can be understood in terms of the university discourse. *The Divine Names* is the text which most closely correlates to this stage of Dionysius' progression of theological language, and it is no coincidence that it is also the text of his which most closely resembles a systematic theology. Theology begins from a set of basic texts and terms, from certain particular commitments, and produces knowledge in response to them: commentary, exegesis, systematic theology.[72] This is the mode in which theology is spoken about as the 'Queen

---

68 Žižek suggests that, where the authority of lawyers and doctors is structured according to the discourse of the master due to the power which is bound up with their knowledge, the university discourse is about a particular sort of '"powerless" Knowledge' and can be seen at work in the faculties of law and medicine, as well as in the theological faculty (*They Know Not*, 57).
69 Bracher, 'On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language', 115-116. Fabio Vighi argues that the shift from the master's discourse to the university discourse implies 'not merely the worker's spoilation of money (Marx), but most importantly of knowledge (Lacan)' (*On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 48), suggesting a link between the university discourse and the rise of the 'knowledge economy'.
70 *Iraq*, 156. Žižek argues that Stalinism 'was the symptom of capitalism' and that this is why it failed.
71 Žižek in Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005), 142.
72 Or, as Aquinas puts it, 'Christian theology advances from the articles of faith' (ST 1a 1.2). Lynch connects the university discourse to 'the dominant practice of theology', by which he means academic theology insofar as it operates 'in accordance with the decrees of the ecclesial authorities' ('Making the Quarter Turn', 66), more strongly connecting doctrinal and ecclesial authority; he also

of the sciences', as it seeks to see bring all human knowledge under its rule. In Dionysius' *The Divine Names* even evil itself is contained and domesticated within the structure of theological discourse.

It is perhaps here too that the allegorical hermeneutic which Kevin Hart considers a key aspect of the 'mystical economy' is to be located.[73] The allegorical reading of Scripture, with its scrupulous attention to the tiniest details of the texts and its persistent attempts to draw them into the narrative of the church community seeks 'mastery of textual differences',[74] and so, at least on Hart's Derridean reading, is deeply bound to the metaphysics of traditional Christian theology. In this attention to the materiality of the text, the allegorical hermeneutic bears comparison with the psychoanalytic practice of interpretation which gives weight to slips of the tongue and to pauses. But Hart also argues that, from the perspective of deconstruction, both the Philonic allegorical hermeneutics which predominates in mystical theology and Hegel's dialectical hermeneutic of history are 'examples of "metaphysics"'.[75] Both operate on a totalising narrative which seeks to absorb all difference into sameness.

Again, two things are concealed here. Firstly the truth of the discourse – the master signifier, the irrational, totalitarian demand – is disavowed. Knowledge, the agent of the university discourse, believes itself to be a power grounded in a rationality which is universally accessible, but the truth is that it is the slave of an irrational master. The university discourse, with its explicit reliance on 'so-called objectivity', is exemplified by the scientific tradition inaugurated by Descartes, who is able to guarantee the foundations of his intellectual system only by appealing to God[76] (although Lacan also acknowledges the possibility of a better sort of science which corresponds to the hysteric's discourse).[77] Lacan speaks about the university as the slave of the demands of capitalism, and Žižek argues that Lacan's *Seminar XVII* on the four discourses must be read in the light of the revolutionary events of 1968, which he takes to represent the shift from capitalism in the form of the master's discourse to a

---

singles out Radical Orthodoxy's ontology of peace as particularly characteristic of this form of discourse (68). Žižek, however, suggests that this form of theology no longer dominates: paradoxically, he argues, it is science which is 'university discourse at its purest', providing 'the security which was once guaranteed by religion' whereas 'religion is one of the possible places from which one can develop critical doubts about contemporary society' (*Lost Causes*, 446).

73 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 175.
74 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 114.
75 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 60.
76 Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 31.
77 Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 132.

218

capitalism legitimised by the university discourse.[78] This is a shift from explicit ideological struggle to the reign of 'post-political administration'.[79]

The second thing which is concealed in the university discourse is the product of the discourse: the divided and alienated subject. The more that knowledge proliferates, the more it seeks to comprehend and capture its subjects, the more the subject is alienated. The university discourse produces the cynical citizens of bureaucratic socialism, or the frustrated and resentful subjects of the Research Excellence Framework. But this frustration and alienation are not, unsurprisingly, revolutionary. As Renata Salecl argues in her discussion of the Communist education system, 'irony and distance enable preservation of absolute power and prevent a real revolt'.[80] The university discourse props up the master's discourse; theological production can work against, rather than for, transformation. 'The more you know, the more you will hesitate'.[81]

But the university discourse is unstable. As Hart points out, amongst the great Christian patristic writers, 'it was only those who followed the allegorical hermeneutic who developed negative theologies'.[82] For Dionysius it is precisely the proliferation of theological language which begins to expose the flaws inherent to any and all speech about God: while 'high-flown shapes could well mislead someone into thinking that the heavenly beings are golden or gleaming men' ... 'the crassness of the signs' which emerge as theological language proliferates 'is a goad so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things.'[83]

---

78 *On Belief*, 30.
79 *Lost Causes*, 267.
80 Renata Salecl, 'Deference to the Great Other: The Discourse of Education', in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society,* ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 173.
81 Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 143.
82 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 179.
83 *Celestial Hierarchy*, 150.

9.4.3 The Hysteric's Discourse

$$\frac{\math$\rlap{/}S$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible ... It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time.[84]

The real possibility of transformation begins to emerge with the hysteric's discourse. This is the discourse of protest, of refusal, of the divided subject who refuses the existing narrative, or the present order of things.[85] It is bound up with the acknowledgement of the impossibility of the sexual relationship.[86] Žižek argues that the Kantian transcendental turn, in its prohibition on the philosophical claim to have access to the thing-in-itself, marks a shift in the structure of philosophical discourse from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the hysteric,[87] and argues that, while the master's and the university discourse operate according to the logic of the masculine exception, the hysteric's discourse is feminine in its refusal of any narratives of harmony and completion, in its relentless assertion of the non-all.[88]

As the feminine discourse of protest, the hysteric's discourse remains caught up in the logic of desire: although it is characterised by a refusal of the way things are, it still relies on the hope of fulfilment. In the student revolutions of 1968, Lacan notoriously said to his protesting students 'You demand a new master; and you will get one'. The hysteric recognises that there is something wrong with the way that things are, but has not yet given up on the fantasy of wholeness. The divided subject still directs her demands at the master signifier, hoping for answers.[89] What the hysteric wants is a new master, and what is produced is not real transformation, but only more knowledge.

84 *Mystical Theology*, 141.
85 Lynch argues that liberation theology tends to function according to the hysteric's discourse, protesting against ecclesial and theological authority without ever managing to escape it, preserving 'the fantasy of both a past and a future characterised by wholeness. This wholeness is the knowledge of Christianity, the promise that it will one day be as it was.' ('Making the Quarter Turn', 74).
86 *Seminar XVII*, 33.
87 *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 167.
88 *Less than Nothing*, 795.
89 Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 29.

Žižek repeatedly associates the hysteric's discourse with the contemporary logic of capitalism insofar as it is constantly remaking itself, incorporating potentially transformational excess into its regular functioning.[90]

The hysteric's discourse correlates to the first movement of Dionysius' negative theology, in which all the richness of theological exposition and discussion is rejected: no, says the hysteric, this is not who God is, these words are not adequate. This is where apophatic theology begins, and it is worth noting here Kevin Hart's discussion of the relationship between various terms associated with apophatic theology. First, Hart distinguishes between 'the *via negativa,* a religious programme of practices by which the soul progressively denies all that is not God in order to become one with God, and negative theology, the discourse which reflects upon positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God.' Next, he connects negative theology, apophasis, with both *aphairesis* (which means 'abstraction') and *analysis*, which Hart defines as 'the way of successive abstractions'.[91] This fits comfortably with the notion that the ascent to God is one of progressive sameness and unification, a move away from the grotesque particularity of the material world to the pure perfection of the Platonic forms. Yet, as Žižek points out, analysis is not the process of abstraction, of things coming increasingly to conform with what is universal, but precisely the process of breaking a whole down into its component parts.[92] Analysis is separation, and so it is possible here to read Dionysius against himself. What if it is positive rather than negative theology which moves towards unification? What if it is the proliferation of theological language which seeks to incorporate everything into theological discourse, into God; and apophatic theology which refuses this logic of absorption in favour of the affirmation of difference? What is negative theology if not precisely the separation of the world from God such that both the world and God can be seen as ends in themselves, things in themselves; the liberation of God from the world and the world from God? Hysteria refuses to accept anything which occupies the place of the *objet petit a* as the thing which will complete me, and so it opens up the way for the position of drive, which begins to value other things for what they are in themselves, outside of their function within my own narcissism.

The concealed truth of the hysteric's discourse is the surplus, that which escapes

---

90 e.g. *Tarrying*, 209; *Fragile Absolute*, 40; *Parallax View*, 297.
91 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 176.
92 *Parallax View*, 299.

the master signifier. The hysteric is driven by the recognition that something is wrong, that something does not fit. The *a* is what stands in the place of the real, which is both the excess and the lack within the symbolic order, the point of antagonism internal to any system. At its best, Lacan suggests, 'good' science functions in service of this truth.[93] The hysteric's discourse produces more knowledge: while huge amounts of data are produced in service of the university discourse, it is the hysteric's discourse which expands the bounds of knowledge, which generates new ways of speaking about the world. Again, what is produced here is not sameness or unification but diversity.

The hysteric's discourse represents a series of crucial shifts within the overarching structure of the four discourses. First, it represents the shift from the masculine logic of the exception which grounds the existing order (which is, as Pound points out, the logic of ontotheology),[94] to the feminine discourse of the not-all. In *Less than Nothing*, Žižek proposes a unified theory of the four discourses and the Lacanian account of sexuality, equating the master's and the university discourse with masculinity and the hysteric's and the analyst's discourse with the non-all. While in the master's and the university discourse the master signifier is present as agent or truth, in the hysteric's discourse the master signifier takes the place of the other. The agent of the hysteric's discourse *demands* that the other play the role of master signifier, but this relationship is one of impossibility, and so the discourse remains forever incomplete. Likewise, in Dionysius' schema, it is at this point that the adequacy of language begins to be seriously questioned. It is here that the denials, the negations begin.

The hysteric's discourse also marks a shift in the relationship between individual and community. It is the only discourse in which, in the analytic context, it is the analysand who takes the position of the agent or, in a pedagogical context, where the role of the teacher and the student switches so that it is the student who interrogates the teacher. There are two interesting parallels here with Dionysius' work. Firstly, insofar as Dionysius' schema is shaped by the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return, the beginning of negation marks the point in the *Mystical Theology* at which emanation shifts into return and hence the point at which 'creation' ceases and creaturely agency begins. Secondly, given Dionysius' emphasis on the sufficiency of biblical language for theological speech, this is also the point at which theological language ceases to be

---

93 Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 134-135.
94 Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 109-110.

something purely given. The series of denials which Dionysius enumerates are a refusal precisely of the adequacy of what is given to the individual from outside, by God. To say that God is not one or triune, good, wisdom or power is to refuse the names which have been given to the theologian *by God*, and so if there is any space for human agency in Dionysius' thought, it begins here, with resistance. It is possible, then, to read Dionysius' injunction to Timothy to ensure that the *Mystical Theology* is withheld from those who are unworthy of it not as merely an instantiation of Dionysius' troubling emphasis on the unquestionability of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but as a recognition that, while what is *passed down* is dependent on hierarchy, the ascent to God itself requires a more radical acceptance of responsibility on the part of the one who would ascend.[95]

Lynch argues that the hysteric's discourse is often visible in liberation theology. Liberation theology, then, would be the point at which those who have been dominated by the colonising narratives of systematic theology in its collusion with Western power begin to resist. And yet, as Lynch argues, this initial refusal of existing narratives is not sufficient in itself. It remains caught in the desire for the master signifier;[96] as Žižek would put it, it risks remaining at the level of 'identity politics', demanding not the transformation of the system which oppresses it but merely recognition from and incorporation into that system. This is essentially the argument of Marcella Althaus-Reid, when she argues that liberation theology failed insofar as it remained in the logic of systematic theology and became incorporated into the logic of capitalism.[97] For Žižek, Lacan and Dionysius alike, then, the hysteric's discourse is not sufficient. While it opens up the space for newness by resisting to accept the adequacy of the world as it is, this simple refusal is not enough.

---

95 *Mystical Theology*, 135. Dionysius speaks about withholding mystical theology from 'those caught up with the things of the world' and those 'who claim [God] is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made'; this seems tantalisingly open to the possibility of a Žižekian re-reading which sees the problem as one of the narcissistic absorption of the world into the individual's desire for meaning and completion.

96 Lynch, 'Making the Quarter Turn', 69-71.

97 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25-27.

9.4.4 The Analyst's Discourse

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\cancel{S}}{S_1}$$

Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.[98]

For Žižek the analyst's discourse alone represents genuine transformation; not exactly completeness or success, but a shift to engaging in the world in a way which is neither phantasmic nor narcissistic. The analyst's discourse is the discourse in which the fantasy of wholeness is abandoned. Its subject is the *a*: the missing object which is also an excess, which disrupts any dream of completion or perfect control. It is the point at which the social relation shifts from desire to drive. The agent here is not the teacher who has all the answers but the one who forces the other to acknowledge and confront her failure, her incompleteness. The one who occupies the place of the analyst is, Lacan says, 'destined to become a loss, to be eliminated from the process.'[99] Žižek points out that, in the analyst's discourse, the social link itself relies not on the master signifier but on the 'creaturely excess'. It is not a community founded upon solidarity with a pitied and pathetic figure of the victim, because insofar as a person or group is considered the victim they are not outside of the existing order of things but precisely and definitely incorporated into it, defined by their subservience to power. Rather, it is organised around the terrifying and sublime excess which *escapes* the social order as it is: the woman, the psychoanalyst, or Christ on the cross, precisely insofar as they are inhuman, excessive figures of sublime horror. As an example of what this analytic community might look like, Žižek cites the church insofar as it is a Eucharistic community, gathered around the body of Christ, 'the undead substance which redeems us and guarantees that we are raised above mortality.'[100] The analyst's discourse is also the discourse of desire outside of the law, free from the superego injunction to 'Enjoy!'[101]

---

98 *Mystical Theology*, 141.
99 Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 38.
100 *Parallax View*, 121-122.
101 *Parallax View*, 306.

Over time, Žižek becomes progressively more insistent on the centrality of the analyst's discourse to political transformation. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* he talks about the analytic discourse as 'a state of undecidability, previous to the "quilting" of the discursive field by a Master Signifier',[102] a description which is suggestive of potentiality but implies that in order for this potential to be realised there must be a shift back to the master's discourse. In *Tarrying*, Žižek suggests that it is possible for 'the critical intellectual' to remain in the analyst's discourse even while the rest of the world shifts back into a new master's discourse. He argues that the shift from one discourse to another (which Lacan says always opens up the possibility of the analyst's discourse) is the moment at which the intellectual can step out of the existing order of things and into a relationship to the master signifier which recognises 'its "produced", artificial, contingent character'.[103] But this distance from the master signifier, the act which founds a new order, is neither the cynical distance of the subject of the university discourse nor the negative refusal to accept the adequacy of the existing order coupled with the demand for a solution which characterises the agent of the hysteric's discourse. Rather, this position is the insistence of drive on the necessity and *productivity* of antagonism and incompleteness. It is from the failure of identity – the failure which *is* identity – that newness emerges.[104]

Although the analyst's discourse is structurally the inverse of the master's discourse, the two are in many ways very similar. Žižek claims that every new order is founded by a master's discourse, the imposition of a master signifier. He asserts repeatedly that transformation begins with transference. There must be some figure around which the sense that there is something wrong with the existing order coalesces so as to transform local objections into a universal and devastating critique of the present system.[105] And yet the act which arises from this transferential relationship is the *analyst's* act, the traumatic divine violence that is separated from the law-founding violence of the master's discourse only by a hair's breadth. The difference, Žižek says, is the difference between the analyst and the pervert. Both the analyst and the pervert play the role of the *objet petit a*; what distinguishes them is simply that 'the pervert

---

102 121.
103 *Tarrying*, 2.
104 *Ticklish Subject*, 165.
105 e.g. *Parallax View*, 378 and the recent, notorious 'The Simple Courage of Decision: a Leftist Tribute to Thatcher', New Statesman, 17 April 17 2013.
http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/04/simple-courage-decision-leftist-tribute-thatcher.

knows what the other really wants' whereas the analyst 'while occupying this place of supposed knowledge, keeps it *empty.*'[106] This is the difference between desire and drive: between elevating the beloved to the place of the sublime object, maintaining the fantasy that she really can fill it out, and acknowledging in full her imperfections and inadequacy of the beloved yet putting her in the place of the sublime object regardless.

The truth of the analyst's discourse is knowledge: both her knowledge of the structure of desire in general, and her knowledge of the divided subject, the other, in particular. The agent cannot use this knowledge directly, but it can help her understand how best to encourage the other to confront the fact that she does not have the answers.[107] The analyst can function as the stumbling block for the analysand only by paying close attention to the particularity of the situation, just as all Žižek's discussions of the means by which the existing order might be disrupted are meaningless without attention to the specific structure of *this* particular order. Knowledge functions here not as a means of control, incorporation or unification, but to facilitate the separation of the analyst from the analysand, the transition of the analytic relationship from one of desire to one of drive. In contrast to the hysteric's discourse, what takes place in the analyst's discourse is not simply a separation between the agent and the other but a new sort of relationship. The analyst remains crucial to the analysand not because they fulfil or fail to fulfil a role in the analysand's narcissistic fantasy but precisely because, by refusing to be incorporated into the fantasy of wholeness, they force the analysand to recognise them as genuinely other and therefore to recognise their own incompleteness.

What is produced in the analyst's discourse is a new master signifier, one for which the divided subject acknowledges responsibility. What makes this discourse different from the others is that it represents the full acknowledgement of the incompleteness of both knowledge and the subject. Lacan says that the 'analytic discourse completes the 90º displacement by which the three others are structured' but, for all that, 'it doesn't resolve anything.'[108] It is all too easy to slip back into the master's discourse so that the cycle of discourses begins again. But there is a small, fragile hope that it might be possible to found a community which functions according to this mode of discourse, recognising its own incompleteness and failure. Lynch argues that, despite Žižek's critiques of 'the master signifiers of our age … his work never

106 *Parallax View*, 380.
107 *Seminar XVII*, 35
108 *Seminar XVII*, 54.

makes the turn beyond this interrogation', that he never quite manages to move from the hysteric's to the analyst's discourse.[109] Žižek effectively acknowledges the truth of this claim, conceding that psychoanalysis itself has failed, repeatedly, to build a community which functions according to the analyst's discourse. But, nonetheless, he insists that 'the fight is worth pursuing', and cites the Pauline church as an example of what this analytic community might look like, living in a permanent state of emergency, suspending all of their social ties.[110] Žižek claims that the central task of *Less than Nothing*, his most significant recent work, is the attempt to 'articulate the space for a revolt which will not be recaptured by one or another version of the discourse of the Master.'[111]

According to Žižek, Alain Badiou proposes an alternative to Lacan's typology of the four discourses which replaces the analyst's discourse with the discourse of the mystic.[112] The mystic's discourse is the point where we are confronted with an unnameable Event which can only be betrayed by being spoken about. Both Badiou's discourse of the mystic and Lacan's discourse of the analyst correspond, therefore, to the final stage of the trajectory of Dionysius' mystical theology. The difference between them expresses a tension which is present both within Dionysius' own account, and within the Christian mystical theological tradition more generally. Žižek argues that what distinguishes the Lacanian analyst's discourse from Badiou's discourse of the mystic is that where, for Badiou, the fourth discourse is 'the isolated position of the psychotic immersed in her/her *jouissance* and, as such, not a discourse (a social link) at all … the consistency of Lacan's entire edifice hinges on the fact that a fourth *discursive* position is possible', which relates to the central impossibility of all identity not simply as a failure but as 'positive and productive', generative and creative.[113]

What becomes visible in contrasting these two accounts of the desired goal of human transformation are the tensions within the Christian mystical tradition (and within traditional Christian theology more generally), which struggles to conceive of desire as occurring *within* a community, which cannot but see the progression towards God as a progression away from materiality and praxis; which tends, however hard it tries, to see the love of God and love of neighbour in competition with one another. As

109 Lynch, 'Making the Quarter Turn', 81.
110 *Parallax View*, 306.
111 *Less than Nothing*, 19.
112 *Ticklish Subject*, 164: Žižek cites an 'unpublished course of 1997/98'.
113 *Ticklish Subject*, 165.

Dionysius says, the ultimate hope of the individual in pursuit of God is that eventually language 'will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.'[114] Yet Dionysius' account does not end simply in the absorption of the individual into God – although some of his work suggests this model – but with a shift from upwards ascent to an endless circling around God.[115] Similarly, the analyst's discourse is not simply silence but a form of speech which is 'structured by impossibility'. Here, I think, it opens up the possibility of understanding theology in terms of a mystical community structured around the impossibility of naming that upon which it is founded. There are parallels here with Rubenstein's argument that the *Mystical Theology* 'shatters the myth of individualism', arguing that access to God is possible only through the abandonment of 'that self which "knowledge" constitutes, and the way to abandon the self-as-knowing is to make knowledge *fail*, and since the structural integrity of the self is dependent upon the "God" it knows, apophatic discourse proceeds by mobilising (and thereby destroying) all conceptions of the divine.'[116] Similarly, Rubenstein discusses the work of Meister Eckhart, arguing that for him 'the persistent mobility of desire' unhinging 'the stasis of "knowledge"' which prevents 'the re-formation of the epistemological "self" and "God"', a description which strikingly resembles Žižek's account of trauma.[117] To love, then, is to be an obstacle for one another. It is to be, like Christ is to the church, a stumbling block, an offence; and yet also a foundation stone. This is not simply to condemn theology to uncertainty, to hesitation, or to silence. Žižek claims that the key feature of 'the great works of *materialist* thought' is that they are '*unfinished*'. They seem, he says, to 'tackle the same nodal problem again and again ... although they ultimately fail, their very failure is theoretically extremely productive'.[118] There are parallels here with the way that the Christian apophatic insistence on the ultimate failure of all systematic theology co-exists with the cataphatic delight, nonetheless, in its fruitfulness, its proliferation. To think theologically according to the logic of drive, of failure, is, after all, to suggest that the created world runs not on the logic of the fall, of law, debt, justice and economy, but

---

114 *Mystical Theology*, 139.
115 See, for example, *Divine Names*, 78, 106; *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 162, 165.
116 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, 'Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology After Ontotheology', in *Modern Theology* 19.3 (2003): 397. http://mrubenstein.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files//web2apps/webapps/wordpress/html/wp-content/blogs.dir/286/files//2008/11/unknown-thyself.pdf.
117 Rubenstein, 'Unknow Thyself', 400.
118 *Indivisible Remainder*, 6-7.

on the logic of creation, of freedom, of the excess of grace which breaks economy open not despite but *as* failure.

9.5 Conclusion

  To re-imagine Christian theology according to a Žižekian ontology, then, would be to understand it as failure. To love the church cannot be to appeal to a notion of transcendence as an idealised realm which can ground a theological logic of colonisation, purification and incorporation. A theology of drive would be a theology which works with a notion of transcendence as that which bursts through the boundaries of what is; which is, like birth, traumatic, risky, the meeting place of life and death, the sublime and the horrific. If the church is the body of Christ then it is, like all bodies, inherently incomplete, founded on an impossible antagonism at its core. To love it must be to love beyond the Law, to love it in its imperfection, its incompleteness, its ordinariness and its monstrosity; and yet to love it, to claim that, even here, the sublime can be glimpsed, that, despite its ugliness it is beautiful.

  If theology can relinquish the desire to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, then perhaps it can be freed to love everything, to love the world around it in all of its grotesque materiality, in its beauty and its horror, to acknowledge the independent value and the coherence of philosophy and to allow itself to be unsettled, challenged, and transformed by its encounters with philosophical thought. Here, in what Dionysius calls the 'brilliant darkness', is where theology founders, dies, and might, just might, be born again.

10. Conclusion: Theology as failure

I have argued that Dionysius' coupling of Neoplatonism and Christian theology gives birth to an account of ontology and desire whose internal contradictions are as important to his theological heirs as the constructive arguments that he makes. Particularly problematic for Dionysius' descendants are the structural homology of creation and fall (which in turn implies the structural homology of redemption and death); the simultaneous affirmation and denigration of the material world; a problematic association of power and goodness; and a tendency to see truth as straightforwardly converging onto Christianity such that it becomes difficult to acknowledge the indebtedness of Christian theology to that which is foreign to it. These antagonisms are crucially implicated in Christianity's long history of – amongst other things – colonialism, racism, and misogyny.

Whilst the central concern of 'postmodern' thinkers in general and Derrida in particular is the economy of the relationship between the individual and the world – rather than, as for Dionysius, God and the world – these tensions remain, transposed into a different economic register, and are reflected in recent theological engagements with continental philosophy. Discussions of the relationship between Derrida's work and apophatic theology highlight the ways in which Derrida continues to grapple with the problems of freedom, materiality, hierarchy and universalism. In failing to recognise the ways in which Derrida's work is both faithful to many of the central concerns of apophatic theology and also a creative reworking of key theological concepts, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to repudiate Derrida with what is, effectively, a form of theology stripped of many of the subtleties of earlier theological accounts of transcendence, arguing instead for a strong form of an ontology of participation which exacerbates many of the problems inherent in Dionysius' Neoplatonic-Christian synthesis. Conversely, John Caputo seeks to follow Derrida's attempt to give an account of desire without ontology, and yet in doing so finds himself without the resources to reconfigure the ontological problems he has inherited.

By contrast, Žižek's work represents an attempt to move beyond both Dionysius and Derrida precisely by a *return* to ontology. In bringing together the Lacanian account of desire with Hegel, Schelling, and quantum physics, Žižek repeats Dionysius' original

marriage of desire and ontology according to a materialism which emphasises incompleteness, contingency and generativity. On Žižek's account, the Neoplatonic model in which human desire is teleologically directed towards the re-absorption of distinction into oneness is to be understood as an impossible fantasy, in contrast to the difficult work of love which correlates to the Freudian death drive, rejecting the narcissistic desire to absorb everything into oneself in favour of the affirmation of difference and division.

The ways in which Žižek's work offers resources for a reconfiguration of theological accounts of ontology and desire are made visible by a reading of two economic problems – the gift and violence – via Žižek's materialist ontology. Žižek's account of the gift is separated from Derrida's only by the parallax shift which marks the distinction between desire and drive. Where Derrida's discussion of the gift expresses a longing for a completeness which will never arrive, Žižek seeks instead to celebrate incompleteness as the condition of existence as such. Fully affirming the structural homology between creation and fall, Žižek positions Christianity on the side of the evil, of rupture and violence against the good of harmony and peace. Love, creation and transformation all belong, for Žižek, on the side of violence.

Yet whilst many critiques of Žižek's violent rhetoric miss the mark, his account of violence is genuinely problematic: firstly insofar as it lacks precision, and secondly insofar as it occludes the place of natality and newness in his work. The first of these issues may be resolved by an appeal to the psychoanalytic notion of trauma, which allows both for a clearer account of the way in which Žižek understands transformation and for a consideration of the implications of Žižek's work for theology. The second can be addressed by reading Žižek alongside feminist accounts of the relationship between natality and trauma, the relationship between trauma and wonder, and the notion of the abject, where horror and beauty, death and life relate to one another as desire to drive. Finally, the notion of identity *as* failure, as constitutively impure, incomplete and internally inconsistent which emerges from this reading makes it possible to imagine a materialist theology whose identity is constituted by Christ as both cornerstone and stumbling block, that on which the church is founded and that upon which it founders and fails.

This account of ontology and desire, of identity *as* failure, makes possible a materialist reading of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* according to the Lacanian four

discourses, as an account of the transformation of ecclesial life from desire to drive. Žižek refuses the attempts of postmodern philosophers and theologians to escape metaphysics and instead deals with the question of ontotheology by developing an ontology which refuses the necessity of an originating principle from which the created world emanates and returns, locating transcendence *within* immanence so that God can no longer be thought as the ground of being but as that which is loved within the constitutive failure of the Church to be faithful to Christ. This failure is potentially but not necessarily generative: it opens up the *possibility* of transformation, of newness.

This account of ontology, desire and Christian theology suggests not only that completeness is impossible but also that purity is impossible. The internal rupture which both constitutes and disrupts every individual economic identity is also the rupture between the social economy of the relationship between the individual and others, language and the body, theology and philosophy, God and the world. Theology can no more remain immune from the world than it can completely encompass it. Once there was no secular; and yet the genealogy of the church, of Christian theology, is constantly interrupted, contaminated and enriched by the profane, the abject, and the horrific. Theology *is* failure; the task, then, is to fail better, to liberate the world in order to begin the difficult work of learning how to love it.

Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).

'Editorial: "Did anyone say anything new about the drive?"' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 7-8.

'Radical Orthodoxy: Twenty-four Theses'. http://elizaphanian.blogspot.co.uk/2007/07/radical-orthodoxy-official-twenty-four.html.

Agamben, Giorgio, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Aitkenhead, Decca, 'Slavoj Žižek: "Humanity Is OK, but 99% of People Are Boring Idiots"', *The Guardian*, 15 November, 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/jun/10/slavoj-zizek-humanity-ok-people-boring.

Althaus-Reid, Marcella, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

——, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Arthur, Rosemary A., *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* Vol. 2, *Studies in theological style: clerical styles*, translated by Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh and Brian McNeil, edited by John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).

Barber, Daniel Colucciello, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011).

Barclay, John M. G., 'Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event' in *New Blackfriars* 91.1032 (2010): 171-184.

Bataille, Georges, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1995).

Beckett, Samuel, 'Worstword Ho' in *Nohow On* (London: John Calder, 1989), 98-128.

Benjamin, Walter, 'Critique of Violence' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*, edited by Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-252.

Boothby, Richard, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2001).

——, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Boucher, Geoff, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe, eds., *Traversing the Fantasy:*

Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

Boucher, Geoff and Matthew Sharpe, 'Introduction: Traversing the Fantasy' in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, edited by Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), xi-xviii.

Boynton, Robert S., 'Enjoy Your Žižek: An excitable Slovenian philosopher examines the obscene practices of everyday life including his own' in *Linguafranca*, 26 March 2001. http://www.lacan.com/zizek-enjoy.htm.

Bracher, Mark, 'On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses' in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, edited by Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 107-128.

Bradley, Arthur, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Brousse, Marie-Hélène, 'The Drive (I)' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 99-107.

——, 'The Drive (II)' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 109-117.

Budick, Sanford and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Bulhof, Ilse N. and Laurens ten Kate, 'Echoes of an Embarrassment: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology – An Introduction' in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 1-57.

Bulhof, Ilse N. and Laurens ten Kate, eds., *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

Burrus, Virginia and Catherine Keller, eds., *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

Butler, Rex, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Caputo, John D., and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

——, 'Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism' in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1-19.

Caputo, John D., Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Caputo, John D. and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Caputo, John D., *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

——, 'Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion' in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 185-222.

——, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

——, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

——, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013).

——, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

——, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Carette, Jeremy. "'In the Name of Life!": Psychoanalysis and Grace Jantzen's Critique of Philosophy,' in *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, edited by Elaine Graham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 69-88.

Carlson, Thomas A. 'Converting the Given into the Seen: Introductory Remarks on Theological and Phenomenological Vision' in Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), xi-xxxi.

——, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Cavanaugh, William, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Chesterton, G. K., *Orthodoxy* (London: Fontana Books, 1961).

Clément, Catherine and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

Coakley, Sarah and Charles M. Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009*).*

Coakley, Sarah, 'Introduction: Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopogite' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1-10.

Collins, Daniel G., 'On the Drive' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 67-79.

Combahee River Collective, *Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977). http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html.

Copjec, Joan, 'Editorial: Montage of the Drives"' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 11-13.

——, 'The Sexual Compact' in *Angelaki* 17.2 (2012), 31-48.

Cornell, Drucilla, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Coward, Harold and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York:

State University of New York Press, 1992).

Critchley, Simon, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

——, 'Violent Thoughts About Slavoj Žižek' in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from This Widening Gyre*, edited by Nathan Eckstrand and Christopher Yates (London: Continuum, 2011), 61-77.

Crockett, Clayton, *Interstices of the Sublime: Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Davies, Oliver and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Davies, Oliver and Denys Turner 'Introduction' in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-10.

Dean, Jodi, *Žižek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Deane, Jennifer Kolpacoff, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Plymouth: Roman and Littlefield, 2011).

Deleuze, Gilles, 'Letter to a Harsh Critic' in Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 3-12.

Depoortere, Frederiek, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Žižek* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

Derrida, Jacques, 'Cogito and the History of Madness' in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 31-63.

——, 'Différance' in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-28.

——, 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone' translated by Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1-78.

——, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.

——, 'From Restricted to General Economy' in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 251-277.

——, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

——, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', translated by Ken Frieden in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

——, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

——, 'Necessity is the drive' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 165.

——, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy' in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, translated by John P. Jr. Leavey (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 25-71.

——, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, translated by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

——, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', translated by John P. Leavey Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 283-323.

——, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

——, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, translated by Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

——, 'Violence and Metaphysics' in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 79-153.

——, *Writing and Difference,* translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

Descartes, René, 'Discourse on the Method' in *Key Philosophical Writings* translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997), 71-122.

——, *The Passions of the Soul*, translated by Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989).

de Vries, Hent, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

——, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

Dillon, John and Sarah Klitenic Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

Dravers, Philip 'The drive as a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis' in *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 23 (2011), 117-149.

Dudiak, Jeffrey M., '*Bienvenue* – just a moment' in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002), 7-19.

Eckstrand, Nathan and Christopher S. Yates, eds., *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from this Widening Gyre* (London: Continuum, 2011).

Englehart, Katie, 'Slavoj Žižek: I am not the world's hippest philosopher' in *Salon*, 29 December 2012. http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher.

Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Feldstein, Richard, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus, eds., *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's*

Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

Fink, Bruce, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

——, 'Desire and the Drives' in *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997), 35-51.

——, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Foshay, Toby, 'Introduction: Denegation and Resentment' in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1-24.

Freud, Sigmund, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVIII*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 7-64.

——, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIV,* translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 117-140.

——, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974).

——, 'Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralysis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume I*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 160-172.

Gavrilyuk, Paul L., 'The Reception of Dionysius in Twentieth-Century Eastern Orthodoxy' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)*,* 177-193.

Girard, René, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

Golitzin, Alexander, *Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Thessalonika: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikôn Meletôn, 1994).

Graham, Elaine ed., *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

Gray, John, 'The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek' in *The New York Review of Books,* 12 July 2012. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jul/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek.

Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses,* translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

Greenstreet, Rosanna, 'Q&A: Slavoj Žižek, professor and writer' in *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008. http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/09/slavoj.zizek.

Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990).

Gunjević, Boris, and Slavoj Žižek, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse,* translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012).

Hadot, Pierre, *Plotinus, or, The Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

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

Hart, Kevin, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Hathaway, Ronald, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1969).

Hegel, G.W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Hollywood, Amy, 'Beauvoir, Irigaray and the Mystical' in *Hypatia* 9.4 (1994), 158-185.

——, 'Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément' in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 145-161.

——, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002).

Holsinger, Bruce, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Horner, Robyn, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

——, 'Theology after Derrida' in *Modern Theology* 29.3 (2013), 230-247.

Humbert of Romans, 'Opus Tripartitum', cited in Louise and Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: Idea and Reality, 1095-1274* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 103-117.

Insole, Christopher J., 'Kant's transcendental Idealism, Freedom and the Divine Mind' in *Modern Theology* 27.4 (2011), 608-638.

Irigaray, Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

——, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Janicaud, Dominique et al., *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

Jantzen, Grace, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty. Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004).

——, 'Death, then, how could I yield to it? Kristeva's Mortal Visions' in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives,* edited by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 117-130.

——, 'Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics' in *Hypatia* 9.4 (1994), 186-206.

——, 'New Creations: Eros, Beauty, and the Passion for transformation' in *Toward a Theology of Eros: transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, edited by Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 271-290.

──, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Johnston, Adrian, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

──, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

──, Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

Jones, Serene, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville,: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

Jones, Tamsin, 'Dionysius in Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion' in *Modern Theology* 24.4 (2008), 743-754.

Joy, Morny, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon, eds., *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives,* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Kay, Sarah, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

Kearney, Richard, 'Desire of God' in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 112-145.

──, 'On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida' in *Questioning God*, edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 52-72.

──, 'On the Gift: A Discussion Between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion' in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54-78.

Keltner, S. K., *Kristeva: Threshholds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

Kierkegaard, Søren, 'Fear and Trembling' in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1-125.

──, *Practice in Christianity*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Kosky, Jeffrey L. 'Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology: The Case of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1.3 (2000). http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/index.html?page=kosky.shtml.

Kotsko, Adam, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

Kristeva, Julia, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

──, 'Stabat Mater' translated by Arthur Goldhammer in *Poetics Today*, 6.1/2 (1985), 133-152.

Kuipers, Ronald A., 'Dangerous safety, safe danger: the threat of deconstruction to the threat of determinable faith' in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002), 20-33.

Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

——, *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

——, "Kant with Sade" in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 645-668.

——, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960,* edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter (London: W. W. Norton, 1992).

——, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

——, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton, 2007).

——, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972-1973*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998).

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973).

Leguil, Clotilde, 'Lacanian uses of ontology' in *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 23 (2011), 107-116.

Louth, Andrew*, Denys the Areopagite* (London: Chapman, 1989).

Malabou, Catherine, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, translated by Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

——, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, translated by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Marion, Jean Luc, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

——, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

——, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

——, 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology",' in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-42.

——, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

——, 'Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift,' translated by John Conley, SJ, and Danielle Poe, in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, edited by Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 122-143.

——, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, translated by Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⸻, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies,* translated by Thomas A Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift*, translated by Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen and West, 1966).

McAleer, G. J., *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Antitotalitarian Theory of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

McCaffrey, Enda, *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

McGinn, Bernard, *The presence of God: a history of Western Christian mysticism. Vol. 1, The foundations of mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

McIntosh, Mark A., *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Milbank, John and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Milbank, John, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, 'Introduction. Suspending the material: the turn of radical orthodoxy' in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-20.

Milbank, John, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Milbank, John and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (London: MIT, 2009).

Milbank, John, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⸻, 'Forgiveness and Incarnation' in *Questioning God*, edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 92-128.

⸻, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009).

⸻, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⸻, 'The Transcendentality of the Gift: A Summary' in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 352-363.

Miles, Margaret R., *Plotinus on Body and Beauty: Society, Philosophy and Religion in Third-century Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

Miller, Daniel, 'A Theo-Politics of the (Im)proper: Jacques Derrida vis-à-vis Graham Ward' in *Political Theology* 12.1 (2011), 87-117.

Miller, Sarah Alison, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Montag, John SJ, 'Revelation: The false legacy of Suárez' in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 38-63.

Morgan, Mandy, 'Sado-masochism and feminist desire: the other measure of true love bleeds' in *Theory and Psychology* 21.4 (2011), 517-531.

Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Newheiser, David, 'Eckhart, Derrida and the Gift of Love' in *The Heythrop Journal,* Published electronically 21 March, 2012. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2265.2012.00754.x.

——, *Hope in the Unforeseeable God* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2012).

——, 'Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius,' in *Reading the Church Fathers*, edited by Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 23-43.

Olthuis, James H., ed., *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002).

O'Meara, Dominic, ed., *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

Parker, Ian, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées* (Paris: Seuil, 1962).

Peeters, Benoît, *Derrida: A Biography*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

Perl, Eric D., *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Pickstock, Catherine, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Plato, *Protagoras and Meno* trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin, 1956).

——, *The Symposium*, edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, translated by M. C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Plotinus, *The Enneads* vol. 1, translated by A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

Pound, Marcus, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

——, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

Putt, B. Keith, 'What do I love when I love my God? An interview with John D. Caputo' in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002), 150-179.

Quinet, Antonio, 'The Gaze as an Object' in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 139-147.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel, 'Lacan's turn to Freud' in *The Cambridge Companion to* Lacan, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-24.

——, 'Preface' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xi-xv.

——, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Rambo, Shelly, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

Rasmussen, Eric, 'Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek' in *electronic book review*, 7 January 2007. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation.

Rawlings, Helen, *The Spanish Inquisition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

Rayment-Pickard, Hugh, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Riley-Smith, Louise and Jonathan, *The Crusades: Idea and Reality, 1095-1274* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981).

Rorem, Paul, 'Foreword' in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1-3.

——, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Rose, Marika, review of Jean Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon* translated by Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) in *Theology and Sexuality* 18.2 (2013), 158-160.

——, review of Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), in *Political Theology* 13.2 (2012), 264-266.

——, 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 540-551.

——, 'The mystical and the material: Slavoj Žižek and the reception of French mysticism' in *Sophia* (forthcoming, 2014. DOI: 10.1007/s11841-014-0407-3).

Roudinesco, Elisabeth, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: a history of psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

Rubenstein, Mary-Jane, 'A Certain Disavowal: The Pathos and Politics of Wonder' in *The Princeton Theological Review* 12.2 (2006), 11-17. http://mrubenstein.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files//web2apps/webapps/wordpress/html/wp-content/blogs.dir/286/files//2008/11/a-certain-disavowal.pdf.

——, 'Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of "Ontotheology"' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 195-211.

——, 'Secularity and the Liberal Arts: Thinking Otherwise', *The Immanent Frame*, 2010. http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/12/03/thinking-otherwise.

——, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

——, 'Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction and Theology after Ontotheology' in *Modern Theology* 19.3 (2003), 387-417.

Russo, Mary, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Saffrey, Henri-Domnique. 'New Objective Links Between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus,' in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, edited by Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 64–74.

Salecl, Renata and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

——, 'Deference to the Great Other: The Discourse of Education' in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, edited by Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 163-175.

Schäfer, Christian, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction to the Structure and Content of the Treatise on the Divine Names* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

Schwartz, Regina M., *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Shakespeare, Steven, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

——, 'Into the Vomitarium: Diseased Sacraments in Black Metal and Queer Theology', unpublished paper presented at the conference *Thinking the Absolute*, Liverpool Hope University, 2012.

Sharpe, Matthew and Geoff M. Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

Sigurdson, Ola, 'Slavoj Žižek, the death drive, and zombies: a theological account' in *Modern Theology* 29.3 (2013), 361-380.

——, *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Smith, Anthony Paul and Daniel Whistler, eds., *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in the Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

Smith, Anthony Paul and Daniel Whistler, 'Editor's Introduction: What Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?' in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in the Continental Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 1-24.

Smith, Anthony Paul, 'Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition: Weaponised Apophaticism and Gnostic Refusal' in *Angelaki* (forthcoming, 2014).

——, 'The Judgment of God and the Immeasurable: Political Theology and Organizations of Power' in *Political Theology* 12.1 (2011), 69-86.

Smith, James K. A., *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

Stang, Charles M., *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No Longer I'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

——, 'Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym' in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11-25.

Taylor, Mark C., *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

——, *Nots* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Turner, Denys, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-34.

——, 'How to read the pseudo-Denys today?' in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.4 (2005), 428-440.

——, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

——, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

Verhaeghe, Paul, *Beyond Gender: From subject to drive* (New York: Other Press, 2001).

Vighi, Fabio, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Ward, Graham, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

——, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Watson, Gerard, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1994).

Weatherill, Rob, *The Sovereignty of Death* (London, Rebus Press, 1998).

Žižek, Slavoj, 'Author's Afterword: Why Hegel is a Lacanian' in Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005), 328-355.

——, '*Concesso non Dato*' in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, edited by Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 219-255.

——, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (London: Routledge, 2008).

——, *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso, 2009).

——, 'Foreword: A Parallax View on Drives' in Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), xiii-xvii.

——, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008).

——, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006).

——, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).

——, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005).

——, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004).

——, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London:

Verso, 2012).

——, 'Not Less Than Nothing, But Simply Nothing', on the Verso Books blog, 2 July 2012. http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1046-not-less-than-nothing-but-simply-nothing.

——, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001).

——, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite' in *London Review of Books*, August 2011. http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite.

——, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

——, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).

——, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

——, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005).

——, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

——, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, dir. Sophie Fiennes (Mischief Films and Amoeba Film, 2006).

——, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

——, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000).

——, 'Trouble in Paradise' in *London Review of Books* 35.14, 18 July 2013. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n14/slavoj-zizek/trouble-in-paradise.

——, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009).

——, 'Why Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics on the Edge of Fear and Trembling' in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1.0 (2007).

——, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002).