

TOWARDS A DECONSTRUCTIVE ETHICS:
ANECONOMIC SACRIFICE AND THE LOGIC OF THE GIFT

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Dedication

For my father, John W. Smith, Ph.D., who listened with tireless patience to my wanderings through the maze of poststructuralist theory, and who offered careful, attentive readings of my work, without which this project would surely never have come to fruition.

Also, for my husband, Kevin Parris, to whom I owe innumerable debts of gratitude that will remain forever incalculable.

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Abbreviations
WORKS BY JACQUES DERRIDA

- AoR *Acts of Religion.*
- DN *Deconstruction in a Nutshell.*
- FL “Force of Law.”
- GoD *The Gift of Death*
- GT *Given Time: Counterfeit Money I.*
- Hos *Of Hospitality*
- LLF *Learning to Live Finally.*
- MP *Margins of Philosophy.*
- OG *Of Grammatology.*
- ON *On the Name.*
- RoD *Responsibilities of Deconstruction.*
- SP *Speech and Phenomenon.*
- WD *Writing and Difference.*

“Determined Otherwise”:

Towards a Deconstructive Ethics

“I would like to write to you so simply, so simply, so simply . . .”
(Derrida PC, 11)

Deconstructive reading, as a practice, aims at unearthing the contradictions within a text that undermine its cohesion and thereby allow it to produce meaning. Inherently suspicious of the binary logic of the logos that underwrites the grand narratives of the Western tradition, deconstruction has endured criticism, especially in its earlier days, for its apparent disregard for absolutes, which at first glance seems to foreclose on the possibility of truth. The lexicon of deconstruction, ‘trace,’ ‘différance,’ ‘archi-writing,’ underscores the iterability at work in any text, and points to the fundamental aim of deconstruction, to interrogate the foundations of knowledge: not, it should be noted, in order to negate the possibility of truth or meaning, but to foreground the conditions for its construction. Iterability, as the substitutive capacity of language to produce meanings, works against totalizing meaning in any text, challenging claims that assume a given ‘truth’ to be ‘natural’ or ‘originary.’ To this end, deconstructive reading works to expose such ‘truths’ as unconscious textual productions, i.e. ‘blindspots,’ sedimented into ‘truth’ by particular cultural assumptions and reified over time into a cultural inheritance. As such, deconstruction offers the responsible reader a way into understanding the grounds of what the text privileges.

Deconstructive reading is responsible reading, to the extent that it always demands a patient, careful attention to the particular context a work resides within. To this end, Derrida's work has been fundamentally concerned with the question of responsibility and undecidability. The question of decidability introduces the impossible complexities Derridean deconstructive readings grapple with, since one can never know, with positive certainty, what a text *intends*, or whether it fully captures what its author *means* to say. How is one to avoid violence in reading? How *not* to mistake the import of a work? This is, if there is (only) one, the central question of Derrida's work, and remains the most unanswered, indeed the most unable to be answered, question by his work. It is, above all else, an ethical question, one wherein the reader is charged with a particular duty to resist the readymade "*doxa*" quietly settled in texts of the "Western inheritance," recognizing oneself to be, as it were, written by them. "I don't want to renounce anything," Derrida insists in his last interview, "Learning to Live Finally," concluding "indeed I cannot" (29). What is required, Derrida explains, is an ethical engagement with the tradition, a patient, careful re-reading that seeks to reformulate the blind assumptions that constitute self-evident 'truths.' To do otherwise is to be irresponsible, to "capitulate," or "subjugate" oneself to the totalizing effects of uninterrogated assumptions, or worse "to die of stupidity" (LLF 30). To be responsible requires a twofold engagement: first, to understand oneself to be always-already 'written' by the text, and second, to engage responsibly with the text, to work against the blind assumptions that constitute it, that is, to call it to account.

Deconstruction must itself be deconstructible, if it is to be responsible. Shot through with the undecidable, deconstruction “makes any completeness, any totalization or fulfillment impossible,” while at the same time affirming the irreducible madness of the decision (Duncan 140). Decisions must be made, and in the instant, without the luxury of knowing what, exactly, the outcome will be. To respond ethically, then, one must recognize the singularity of each decision, while maintaining a view of the general law that seeks to govern it. The aporia of undecidability, far from foreclosing on the possibility of justice, holds open the possibility of the incoming future, through the interruption of a ‘perhaps,’ which remains irreducibly undetermined, affirmative of *whatever* may come. Indeed, deconstruction is affirmative “in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply a way of repeating the given institution,” but, in fact, remains committed to the futural (im)possibility, radically hospitable to the wholly other (DN 5).

In his later work, which we will be following here, Derrida more pointedly addresses ethical questions, most notably the gift and hospitality. Though these works have largely been interpreted as evidence of an “ethical turn,” I argue here that deconstruction has been, from its inception, inherently ethical, both in its constitution and practice. To charges of nihilism and ethical relativism, deconstruction registers a particular commitment to faith, a faith that acknowledges the existence of doubt, a faith that remains skeptical of absolutism in any form, but which nevertheless remains passionately committed to the coming of the impossible. Caputo thus argues, “Deconstruction can have no brief

against faith, because deconstruction is *itself* faith, miming and repeating the structure of faith in a faith without dogma” (57). If deconstruction is suspicious of totalizing narratives, it is precisely this doubt that inaugurates the questioning that seeks to save—among other institutions—religion, and within this theological framework, the many names of God, i.e. gift, hospitality, friendship, etc, from totalizing control, indeed from violence, through the acknowledgment that one does not know, but simply believes (Smith 50).

In Chapter 1, I will consider the ontological underpinnings of the gift as the condition for the relation to the other. Following Levinas, Derrida understands individual responsibility to be constituted by a radical openness to the wholly other, and as such, to be a movement out, toward the *tout autre*. Insofar as ‘I’ am responsible, ‘I’ am called to respond to the other, out of my own being, and furthermore, out of my capacity to respond fully to the call issued. The aporia of the gift, if there is one, resides in this impossible responsibility to the wholly other; that is, “It is a matter,” Derrida insists, “of responding faithfully” to the injunction of the gift, to give without obligation and without expectation of remuneration (GT 30). For Derrida, the gift suspends economy, and is, in effect, an interruption in the cycle of exchange, existing as the condition of ‘the impossible,’ “a certain *perhaps* or *maybe*” that remains futural, always awaited but never arrived (*arrivant*).

The structure of messianic time will be the focus of the second chapter, where I will examine the ethical questions posed by the time of the gift. For some, the futural quality of the pure gift seems to foreclose its real possibility; however, as we shall see, such a reading misses the essentially ethical import of Derrida's reading. For the gift to exist, it must exceed economy, that is, it must be in excess, gratuitous; it cannot, however, be said to be 'outside' economy. The gift, then, operates according to a non-dialectical logic, the logic of *khôra*, which conditions the logic of the *logos*, acting as a type of meta-logic that neither excludes nor participates in dialectical reasoning, but remains in excess, as an "absent support" that "provokes *and* resists any binary or dialectical determination" (ON 91, 99). For this reason, Derrida explains, the gift 'interrupts' the economy of exchange, resisting the binary logic of the *logos*. Owing to this aporetic quality, the structural possibility of the pure gift constitutes, for Derrida, a futural *im*-possibility, a "messianicity without messianism," the possibility of a justice to come.

In Chapter 3, I will explore the implications of the gift as messianic structure, especially with regards to the gift of death. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida reads Patocka's *Heretical Essays* as a history of European responsibility, noting that the Christian *mysterium tremendum* functions as a gift of death to inaugurate individual responsibility. Derrida's reading of Abraham, abstracted of any particular Judeo-Christo-Islamic inheritance, aims at recuperating a structural faith preserved in the three religions of the book. Locating Abraham as the example *par excellence* of responsibility, Derrida identifies Abraham as a

wanderer, who, in answering the unseen injunction of God's call, gives his 'most loved' son without expectation of remuneration, and in this renunciation occupies a position of "absolute duty" and "nonexchange with respect to God" (GoD 96). Insofar as Abraham risks losing his most loved son, he risks winning, for in the "instant of absolute renunciation," Abraham sees that "God gives back to him [...] the very thing that he had already [...] decided to sacrifice" (97). It is a matter of suspending economy, if only for the fraction of an instant, to allow the gift, in the form of the wholly other, to appear, as Derrida explains: "The logic that requires a suspension of the reciprocity of vengeance and that commands us not to resist evil is naturally the logic, the *logos* itself, which is life and truth," (103). Christ, as the embodiment of the *logos*, "teaches love for one's enemies," a moral lesson that aims at re/writing the reader, just as Abraham is 'written' through the act of absolute faith that engenders his individual responsibility (103). Derrida remarks that "Each book is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader," noting that, in the act of writing, "One hopes that [the reader] will be reborn differently, determined otherwise, as a result" (LLF 31). To be "determined otherwise" is to recognize oneself to be called to respond, thus "written," by the other. It is the leap of an absolute faith that knows not *what* will happen, that cannot anticipate *who* will arrive, but that remains open every other Other, not only affirming the possibility of their appearance, but rather desiring and welcoming their arrival. It is precisely this hope for the *tout autre*, and by extension, the affirmation of the incalculable that, perhaps ironically, saves deconstruction from charges of moral relativism, or worse nihilism, for it is in the

possibility of “another economy,” one that is “ambiguous enough to seem to integrate noneconomy” that deconstruction locates a radical individual responsibility (GoD 109). To allow oneself to be “determined otherwise” is thus to be responsible, to act ethically with respect to the call of the wholly other.

Chapter 1

The Madness of Economic Reason

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

In *Given Time* Derrida sets as his task a rethinking of a “sort of transcendental illusion” of the gift. According to the Maussian legacy, the gift, subsumed within a cycle of exchange, circulates within a gift economy. Within the economy of gift exchange Mauss describes, the relation of donor to donee entails debt, both symbolic and fiduciary: the gift introduces obligation, binding donee to donor in an increasingly destructive cycle of obligated reciprocation. Reading Mauss, Derrida articulates that the logic of the gift functions “according to the law and the order of the symbolic, according to the figure of circulation” (GT 15). However, as Derrida reminds us, “*At the limit, the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor*” (it. orig. GT 14). That the gift paradoxically must not appear ‘as such’ constitutes a ‘double bind’ that delimits and circumscribes a particular logic of the gift, therein temporalizing givenness and seemingly rendering the gift as ‘the impossible’ (GT 16). The gift, as *present*, is inextricably linked to the question of time, and to the question of presence, or being. Pure presence, or *parousia*, what is apparently *given* to consciousness as pure phenomenality, is but a self-effacing trace. It can never appear.

Similarly, the gift, if there is one, cannot appear *as such*. And it is precisely this self-effacement, or inability to appear *as such* that protects the gift from annihilation. In the possibility of its differ-deferment, the gift ultimately becomes possible, but not phenomenally, that is, not directly approachable by consciousness. In “Ousia and Gramme,” reading Heidegger, Derrida notes, “Presence, then, far from being, as is commonly thought, *what* the sign signifies, ... is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace” (MP 66).

Likewise, the gift “must leave nothing behind it, ... must efface everything, including the traces of repression” (GT 17). Thus, the gift is conditioned by a forgetting, which is a “self-effacement that is carried off with what it effaces” (GT 17).

The gift, as pure gift, is not transcendent, or without relation, but rather exists in relation to economy, figuring at the limit of economy, as economy’s absolute other. For Derrida, ‘economy’ refers first to the binary logic of the logos, that is to the law which orders meaning, making exchange, both real and symbolic, possible. Thus, he explains,

Economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, indoors). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing or partition [*partage*], the law as partition [*moira*], the given or assigned part, participation. Another sort of tautology already implies the economic within the nomic as such. As soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is *nomy*, there is economy. (GT 6)

Derrida thus argues that the gift functions as an exteriority that “sets the circle going, . . . puts the economy in motion” (GT 30). Such an ‘exteriority’ functions

‘in relation to,’ not ‘outside,’ economy. That is, the gift functions as the limit of economy, the boundary of the system. As Horner points out, “it appears unusual for [Derrida] to use such a word as ‘exteriority’ which imputes a space outside economy (189). However, a simple inside-outside geography of the gift is not accurate. One must give and receive within a system of exchange, meaning that all giving necessarily obligates the other and results in a form of credit awarded to the giver, a debt for the recipient. So, how to understand the meaning of ‘exteriority’? Horner asserts, “There are two possibilities. One is that the breach is instigated by an external force. The other is that the exteriority that is not anything as such within the circle is not anything as such at all” (189-190). However, what Horner fails to appreciate is that the gift, operating according to an other, nondialectical, logic, coexists with, and conditions, economic reason, which itself functions according to the logic of the logos. Quoting Derrida’s “The Truth in Painting,” Horner points to what is, in fact, the nondialectical logic of *khôra*, the ‘groundless ground,’ which is a space “Neither inside nor outside” which “spaces itself without letting itself be framed but [...] does not stand outside the frame” (qtd. in Horner 190). Indeed, as Derrida elsewhere explains, the logic of *khôra* defies the ‘logic of noncontradiction:’ “it is not enough to recall that *khôra* names neither this nor that or that it is both this and that” (ON 89-90). Rather, the logic of *khôra* exists anterior to, not outside of, the logic of the logos, and seems to alternate between the logic of exclusion and participation (ON 90). In this way, the gift, operating according to an anterior logic, is an ‘exteriority’ that ‘puts economy in motion.’ This is precisely why the gift is

conditioned by the structure of forgetting, as Horner recognizes: “The Gift would have passed before a distinction could be drawn between subjectivity and objectivity. It would be immemorial, an event of a past that was never present” (190-191). What Horner alludes to here, the relation of time to presence, lies at the heart of the deconstructive enterprise: to interrogate pure presence, or *parousia*, as a self-effacing trace, one which necessarily obscures and forgets its own grounds, requires a radical forgetting of the omission that allows metaphysics to think time on the basis of pure presence (MP 47). In order to understand time as presence, it can never appear, but must remain *differ-deferred*. Similarly, the gift, as *present*, cannot appear as such, but rather “gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present-being, no being-present)—and of time which . . . is always defined in the paradoxia . . . of what is without being, or what is never present” (GT 27).

Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the gift is structurally akin to Levinas’s conception of the ‘wholly other,’ for the gift, if there is any, must be purely heterological, rending asunder, if only for a moment, the circular enclosure of economic reason. To approach the thought of Levinas, which he does gingerly, even respectfully, Derrida opens with a consideration of Husserl and Heidegger, as inheritors of a certain “Greek element,” the Platonic notion of light, and the idea of the Good beyond Being, or the *epekeina tes ousias*. For Husserl, as for Heidegger, the phenomenological reduction relies upon the clear light of perception, of what is given to see, that is, the visible. Thus, Derrida explains, “More than any other philosophy, phenomenology, in the wake of Plato, was to be

struck with light. Unable to reduce the last naïveté, the naïveté of the glance, it predetermined being as object” (WD 85). Derrida’s critique of empiricism points to the first assumption of Western metaphysics, namely that what is perceived is fully present to consciousness. This “naïveté of the glance,” Derrida asserts, derives from the Greek etymology of theory, *theorein*, ‘to regard’ or ‘to look,’ and from phenomenon, *phainesthai* ‘to appear’ (WD 312). Husserl, in according “absolute existence” to “pure consciousness” privileges the primacy of consciousness as the consciousness of the object, which constitutes an “irreducible primacy of the subject-object correlation” (85). Irreducible—because no distinction may be made between what is perceived and the perception of it—and because the appearance of alterity between subject and object is illusory and internal. The central metaphor of Western philosophy is constructed around the primacy of the subject-object relation in the metaphor of interior-exterior, inside-outside, which functions as a metaphor of space and light. According to Derrida, Levinas attempts a radical separation of interiority-exteriority, arguing, “existence is irreducible to the light of the self-evident” (Levinas qtd. in Derrida 88). Derrida’s reading of Levinas points to the importance of rupture, of resisting closure, and the potential impact this radical rereading of the other has for thinking the gift.

What is taken into account here? Several things: first, the problem of interiority/exteriority: how to ‘undo’ economy from within, which is the aim of deconstructive questioning; secondly, Levinas’ conception of the wholly Other, which must be posited within a certain system, the Greek *logos*: “Levinas

recognizes that there is no thought before language and outside of it—except by formally and thematically posing the question of the relations between belonging and opening, the question of closure” (WD 110). Third, it is a structural question: “We are wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within a traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it” (WD 111). This is the basic, essential deconstructive aim, to interrogate from within, and Derrida locates it within Levinas’s conceptualization of the *tout autre*, not as an acknowledged methodology pursued overtly by Levinas, but as a structural, perhaps ‘extrinsic’ necessity, imposed upon such interrogative aims *potentially* by “some indestructible and unforeseeable resource of the Greek logos” (WD 112). What this means, then, is that the relation of Levinas to Derrida’s reading of the gift is not only ideationally important, but structurally exigent, for the two gestures are theoretically related.

Early in the introduction to *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida charges Husserlian phenomenology with being “tormented” by the problem of time and the constitution of the subject in relation to it. For Husserl, objects in-themselves are extended in time, and the subject’s perception of objects necessitates an internal time-consciousness of them. For Husserl, consciousness must be consciousness of something: the subject is defined by the contents of consciousness. Objects are “in” time, so for us to be able to perceive them, consciousness must be extended in time, too; hence, the “internal time consciousness.” For Husserl, time is treated as a “given”: it is assumed to be present even before being, before existence or essence. Time is first and foremost

what is “given” to consciousness. The problem, Derrida argues, is that the objects given to consciousness are never fully present at the moment of perception: they are always delayed in time. Characterizing the phenomenological reduction as “contested from within,” Derrida illuminates the divisive question at the heart of phenomenology as one of representation and appresentation. Derrida rewrites the subject-object correlation as one of irreducible alterity, wherein binary oppositions are defined in, through, and against the other, such that otherness is not reducible to the selfsame. To perceive a melody or a sentence in its entirety, as a unified whole, the subject must hold open perception, retain in memory the first note even while hearing the present note and while anticipating notes to come. In *Given Time*, Derrida reads the gift against the Husserlian phenomenological inheritance, arguing that the gift, for it to be gift, must not be present to consciousness as such. Derrida argues that “wherever there is time, wherever time predominates or conditions experience in general, wherever time as circle . . . is predominant the gift is impossible” (GT 9). Any recognition or acknowledgement of the gift necessarily annuls it, returning it to economy. The gift, upon receipt, is no longer ‘gift:’ it is reappropriated under the economy of the self-same, recognized or named as ‘gift’ and thereby assigned an exchange value; it begins to be repaid the moment it is received.

Reproducing the trajectory of Husserlian inquiry qua Levinas, Derrida questions what is given in “givenness.” How can we understand *given*-ness? Recall that in Husserl’s phenomenology, the contents of the world, fully present, are incorporated into consciousness, which formulates the subject-object

correlation. Levinas, in his critique of Husserl, charges phenomenology with being a kind of naïve solipsism, because the other is always reduced to the contents of consciousness: the subject comes into being through the appropriation of the other. In giving to the other, the other is reduced to the selfsame, becomes subjectified by the act of giving, and is thus appropriated in an economy of the selfsame. Levinas attempts to overcome this solipsism through revisioning the other as absolute exteriority, or ‘wholly other,’ he who in his absolute separation is irreducible to the selfsame, and cannot be known. For Derrida, as we may recall, objects are always already re-presented to consciousness. Presence, a self-effacing trace, is preserved in the fabric of language, such that givenness, interlaced with intent, amounts to a semantic precomprehension: Husserl naïvely assumes that what ‘is given’ to consciousness may be appropriated through intentional perception; however, objects in time are always-already subject to the play of *différance*, hence the subject, too, is displaced and cannot ever fully ‘know’ itself.

The transitive structure of giving, that the subject must give *something* to *someone else*, presumes the existence of a subject that may be called to account, that is, one who is capable of identifying itself as subject, and of recognizing others as identifiable subjects. The process of subjectivation threatens to annul the gift in that the gift cannot enter “the realm of the calculable” or pass “between two subjects exchanging objects,” an action which would appropriate the other, reducing the other to an economy of the self-same (GT 24). However, to give *something* to *someone* requires that the donor recognize the donee as a self-

identical subject, i.e. as one who in whose difference is like 'me.' For this reason, the paradox of givenness resides in the aporia of the subject-object correlation: that the gift must precede any determination as relation to the subject (24). The subject, Derrida maintains, is an "arrested effect" of the gift, constituted "in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange, the mastery . . . of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift" (24). Insofar as one gives a gift, the intent is to captivate or surprise the recipient, to render null the possibility of reciprocation, if only for a moment. The gift is a surprise, to the extent that it enralls—holds the donee in thrall, captivated with delight and wonder—and insofar as it defers payment. The gift, excessive, unexpected, and supplementary, is itself no-thing: it cannot be said to 'belong' or it risks re-entering the circle of exchange. Derrida notes, in speaking of Rousseau's writing, that "We should begin by taking rigorous account of this *being held within* [prise], or this *surprise*: the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse cannot dominate absolutely" (OG). Yet, in no way is the logic of the gift different, for we must give *in* a system whose laws we must always follow, even without recognizing that this is what we must do. To surprise a friend, to captivate them, is to seize the friend in a moment, to hold them within the logic of the gift itself, for as the friend is taken aback, the system is arrested, if only for a moment, before payment is negotiated, before the gift is reciprocated. For Derrida, reciprocation always and *necessarily* negates the gift. It is, in fact, an a priori condition of the gift itself, returning it to the

system of exchange, assigning it value, giving it place and a time, noting it as such—a gift—even if the reciprocation is, itself, symbolic: a smile, a hug, the exchange of words, “Thank you.” In that moment, we begin to repay ourselves.

What, then, is the relation of time to the gift? How are we to understand this moment, this “arrest,” before which the gift returns, is reciprocated? Derrida explains “there could be a gift only . . . at the instant all circulations will have been interrupted and *on the condition* of this instant,” here pointing out that the “condition” of this instant “concerns time but does not *belong* to it” (it. orig. 9). The instant is paradoxical, then, in that it introduces an effraction into the circle of exchange, arrests it, but does not belong to it. Does not belong because it is in excess of, is outside the temporality of exchange, is in fact “no longer thinkable as a now,” but rather “tears time apart,” so in this sense, Derrida asserts, “one would never have the time of a gift” (9).

The gift must be given without reason, or it cannot be said to be a gift. If we give with reason—if we render account, calculate as it were, the gift—we annul the gift, making it an object that is to be exchanged, returned, repaid. The madness of the gift, then, is inscribed in the very discourse of giving, that we must give “without reason.” Derrida notes that “The discourse that orders itself on this madness cannot let itself be contaminated by it,” but, that in refusing to speak, it appears “to go mad in its turn,” being at once “*alogos* and *atopos*,” without reason (35).

The double bind of the gift, that it cannot be gift and recognize itself as such, is an impossible madness. The gift, Derrida explains, “demands an

unheard-of accounting,” for it can neither conclude in a balancing of accounts, nor may it participate in calculation, for it to remain a pure gift (GT 35). Even so, the discourse of the gift is ordered on economic reason, on the logic of circulation and exchange. For Derrida, to desire the gift is to desire the impossible, to allow oneself to be contaminated by the madness the discourse of the gift is ordered on. “To desire, to desire to think the impossible, to desire, to desire to give the impossible—this is obviously madness,” Derrida states (GT 35). For many critics, the madness of the gift seems to foreclose on its very possibility; however, we must not mistake the madness, the impossibility of the gift, for a negation of the gift. Caillé, in his article “The Double Inconceivability of the Pure Gift,” registers deep misgivings over the apparent loss of the gift in his reading of Derrida:

I mustn't hide things any longer: this retraction of the gift saddens me. The criticisms of the petty nature of the ordinary gift had allowed us to hope for one that was going to be more appropriate. But now that the gift no longer exists I am tempted, in order to preserve a few remnants of possibility, to inquire where the fault of the Derridean reading lies. (Caillé 29)

Derrida, Caillé articulates, traces the “fault” to the “beginning in the decision not to abide by the phenomena and to entirely ignore—although still recognizing its legitimacy—the anthropologists’ traditional handling of the subject” (29). Yet, Caillé mistakes Derrida’s deconstructive aim to rethink the possibility of the pure gift, offering a misreading, which, it seems to me, originates in a misunderstanding of the affirmative resonance of ‘the impossible’ in Derrida’s work as a whole. The gift must forget itself, not, Derrida cautions, “like an

amnesia,” but as a given and desired forgetting that functions “as the affirmative condition” of the gift (GT 35). In this way, the double bind of the gift is also that which makes possible the appearance of the pure gift, even as it renders impossible the calculation of the gift. The “affirmative condition” of the gift is its very madness, which structures it as ‘the impossible.’

Derrida reproduces the dominant interpretation of the gift, the Maussian sociological reading, in order to traverse it, to show where it breaks down, but his purpose is not to negate the gift but rather to produce the context or the conditions which give rise to the pure gift. Because Derrida’s concerns are philosophical, not anthropological, he must acknowledge the context for his reading, even while admitting that the concerns of the anthropologist are not his own. What Derrida aims to do, then, is to trace Mauss’s logic, to open up the text, to refuse it closure, and all of this in order to think the possibility of the pure gift, to transgress the anthropological inheritance, to read it against itself. According to Critchley, “Closure is the double refusal both of remaining within the limits of the tradition and of the possibility of transgressing that limit. At the moment of historical and philosophical closure, deconstructive thinking occurs as the disruption and interruption of the limit that divides the inside from the outside of the tradition” (Critchley *ED* 20). In this way, the deconstructive method works within and against a tradition, calling it to account for itself, constituting an ethical interrogation of the foundations privileged by a particular inheritance.

To resist closure requires a radical rethinking of the aporetic structure of the gift. Such an interrogation requires a certain faith and a willingness, not only to

suspend economy, i.e. to invoke the gift, but also to risk entering the “destructive circle” of exchange, that is, to risk one’s good intentions being misread and the gift being undone, or reappropriated, by economy. Far from abandoning the possibility of the gift, then, Derrida argues steadfastly for the ‘madness of the decision,’ the risk to commit to the impossible, to “give economy its chance” (30). We must ‘promise’ and ‘swear’ to a radical rethinking of the gift, Derrida avers, for resistance against economic closure paradoxically requires that we participate in economy. Such a commitment to deconstructive affirmation, however, requires that one respond without knowledge of how one’s good intentions might be construed. It might seem as if Derrida’s purpose is to discourage such naïveté, to charge the gift with being ‘impossible.’ However, this is not the case at all. If the gift is ‘the impossible,’ it is necessary to recall that deconstruction, resisting closure and consistently privileging the question, everywhere and always affirms the impossible.

Within the paradox of the gift’s double bind rests the inherent ethical dimension of deconstruction: only in remaining open to ‘the impossible,’ that is, only in responding faithfully to the injunction of the gift, can we resist the closure of economic circulation. Resistance, however, does not signify avoidance; rather, resistance of economic closure denotes a mindful, if hesitant, participation in economy, and an insistent, continual calling of the gift to account. It is in this way that we must everywhere and always “give economy its chance.” The structure of participation, of a ‘taking part,’ requires that everyone share in the steps necessary to make the gift appear, to resist fervently the full disclosure of

economic reason that threatens to subsume everything under the Hegelian paradigm of the eternal return of the same. In *Points*, Derrida speaks of “economies of narcissism,” which we all participate in, explaining that “[w]hat is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism” (199). Here, Derrida is influenced by Heidegger, who, in establishing Dasein’s “authentic uniqueness,” argues in favor of an ethical narcissism that preserves Dasein’s identity in the space of the other, a position which Zlomisc asserts Derrida and Levinas have found to be problematic (177). However, Caputo disagrees, asserting, “[g]iving means giving the other some slack, with more and more hospitality. Uninterrupted narcissism . . . draws the circle of the self ever tighter, turning the gift to poison” (161). By contrast, remaining open to the other allows for the circle of exchange to remain slack, to allow for the appearance of the im-possible. Thus, as we’ve seen, it would be a mistake not to engage in the risk inherent in giving, fearing the double bind that returns gift to economy.

Chapter 2

Working Against Closure: Messianic Time and the Space of the Gift

Deconstruction is not out to undo God or deny faith, or to mock science or make nonsense out of literature, or to break the law, or, generally, to ruin any of those hoary things at whose very mention all your muscles constrict. Deconstruction is not in the business of defaming good names but of saving them. (Caputo 5)

Recently, several scholars have focused on Derrida's ethics, most notably Simon Critchley, Diane Duncan, Christopher Norris, and John D. Caputo. Caputo, whose treatment of Derrida is the most sympathetic of the aforementioned, asserts boldly, "[N]o sensitive and attentive reader could have missed the ethical and political import of deconstruction, even early on" (DN 126). Similarly, Duncan notes that certain critics of Derrida, "Finding a deconstructive ethics either impossible, or the subject of only a recent turn," have missed "the fundamental ethical bearing of deconstructive practice" (Duncan 3). This misunderstanding, she explains, has resulted in the widespread faulty conception of deconstruction as "pure relativism," "nonsense," even "nihilism" among American academics (3). The key to understanding how the political and ethical import of deconstruction could be construed so differently originates in one's interpretation of the basic deconstructive toolkit: differ^{ance}, the trace, etc. For scholars who insist upon closure, the endless play of differ^{ance} presents an unsettling, practically anarchic lack of definitive meaning. It is simply impossible to accept that a text cannot be exhausted by a diligent, careful reading, but Derrida's insistence on the open text does not deny meaning-making; rather, it

requires it, insists upon it, demands it. We cannot help but make meaning, and the meanings we construe are necessarily founded upon something, some set of principles, ideological, theological, philosophical, or otherwise. What keeps a text responsible, and responsive, for Derrida is its openness, its welcoming of radically other(ed) readings, its infinite capacity to retain its textual identity even under violent and appropriative readings. What allows the text this ability is the form of the promise, which makes possible every speech act: texts are contracts between the author and the reader. For Derrida, ethical reading practice requires that meaning is always heralded, but never fully disclosed. This is the play of *differ-ance*. Every text, always open, retains within it the messianic structure—the differ-deferment of meaning, which resides as a promise of the impossible, always arriving, but never fully arrived.

And here let me pause momentarily to consider the objections that are likely accruing to the idea that lack of closure may be considered inherently ethical. How is one to make ethical decisions, construct responsible social projects and programs, work for social justice, if all meaning is always differ-deferred, never fully present to the decision maker? How, furthermore, question critics, is one to proceed responsibly if every reading is a *misreading*, if every concept unwittingly commits a textual violence? How can we know anything for certain? Undoubtedly, these have been the problems that have plagued deconstruction from its arrival on the critical scene in the late 1960s; and certainly, the answers are not easy. The short response is, quite simply, that we cannot know, with certainty, if our decisions are ethical, right, justified, but such

nonknowledge only makes our social responsibility greater, our ethical commitment ever more important, the call of the other ever more insistent and difficult to ignore. That the primary focus of all deconstructive practice, is, in fact, to reread, rethink, reassess our naturalized, ordinary laws, beliefs, customs, and practices, impels ethical practice, impassioned desire for the undeconstructible impossible to appear: justice, hospitality, friendship, the gift. Yet, we must be careful not to read the undeconstructible as a kind of transcendental signifier, something on the order of Truth, or God: we must not make the mistake of reading into deconstruction a new foundationalism, a new center. Rather, as we have seen, the undeconstructible motivates deconstruction from exteriority, much like the gift drives economy, through a desire for the impossible, for the “neither real nor ideal,” the “neither present nor future-present,” the “neither existent nor idealizable” (Caputo DN 128). Because deconstruction posits no new ground, no foundation for its practice—“différance is not a concept”—it remains forever resistant to closure or absolutism of any sort, further resisting any opposition of itself to the undeconstructible. For this reason, every reading must be understood to be a partial, not a mis-, reading, and must be understood as contingent upon the singular case, responsive to circumstances, such as they are.

The messianic structure takes the form of a promise, a certain openness toward the future, and of an irreducible affirmation of the impossible. At work in the messianic structure of deconstruction is undeconstructible justice, which lies, like the gift, before the law and makes possible the appearance of the law. In the

same way that the gift puts in motion economy, justice puts in motion, or gives rise to, the law. But recall the double bind—it also always already annuls the gift and seems to foreclose on the possibility of justice. This is a difficult paradox to understand and will require some working through. It is not that justice does not exist, or that there is no gift, but rather that in order for there to be justice, or gift, for either to exist (elsewhere), neither can ever be proclaimed (here): the kingdom of God is always already “at hand,” but never arrived (*arrivant*). Why? To proclaim the arrival of justice, or gift, or messiah, is to appropriate truth and thereby to establish absolutism, which is not subject to deconstructive interrogation. To address this question, we must now turn to the issue of singularity.

At the “Villanova Roundtable” discussion, Derrida articulates that international law is still rooted in Western philosophy, a philosophy that must be deconstructed, its foundations laid bare, if we are to understand how to perfect the mission of international law, and argue for its necessity and legitimacy (DN 12). Further, in examining the question of justice, he explains the importance of singularity with respect to individual responsibility:

What disrupts totality is the condition for the relation to the other. . . . To understand this, you have to pay attention to what I call singularity. Singularity is not simply unity or multiplicity. Now this does not mean that we have to destroy all forms of unity wherever they occur. I have never said anything like that. Of course, we need unity . . . [but] pure unity or pure multiplicity . . . is a synonym of death. (DN 13)

Pure representation, or the absence of the unknown, amounts to symbolic death,

or an absolute, totalizing state of inertia. For Derrida, singularity is irreducible alterity contra Husserl, who, as we've seen, posits that consciousness is subjectified through an appropriation of the other. Singularity, unlike the Husserlian phenomenological reduction, resists the closure of pure presence, and is always yet to appear.

Closure may be interpreted variously as the 'end' or termination of something in time or as the spatial boundary by which something is defined. Western metaphysics, originating in the thought of Parmenides of Elea, depends upon the concept of limit to define being. According to Parmenides, "It is decreed by divine law that Being shall not be without boundary," for "There is a limit (*peiras*), it is complete on every side, like the mass of a well-rounded (*enkukleou*) sphere. It is all the same to me from which point I begin, for I shall return again to this same point" (qtd. in Critchley 59). The boundary gives form to being, defining it in space and time. Further, there is an implicit connection between being and meaning, as Parmenides is constructing a metaphysics of presence. Parmenides's rationalism leads him to equate being with thinking, for if it can be thought, it can be, whereas, those things that are *not*, cannot be *thought*. In this way, Parmenides outwardly rejects the concept of nothingness: nothing cannot be. Levinas breaks with Parmenides in order to pursue a radical exteriority, to attempt to recognize the other as the *tout autre*, not to appropriate/subsume the other under an economy of the self same. The other does not return to me: I do not comprehend or understand the other in his exteriority.

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger notes that within Greek thought, being is characterized by limit. The *essent* is that which ‘stands’ in itself, producing from within its own limit and sense of limitation: “what thus comes up and becomes intrinsically stable . . . encounters, freely and spontaneously, the necessity of its limit” (60). Consequently, he asserts, a fundamental characteristic of the *essent* is ‘end,’ not in the negative sense, as of a failure, but in the sense of a positive outcome, or fulfillment. Being, Heidegger clarifies, denoted permanence for the Greeks, both in the sense of “arising,” or “standing-in-itself,” and in the sense of endurance. Here, Heidegger is attempting to trace the etymology of the word ‘being,’ to reconstruct its original meaning in Greek thought. The concept of ‘limit’ is necessarily attached to ‘being’: if something is to appear, to be, it must be limited in time and space. The abstraction ‘being,’ a substantive form, is derived from the infinitive. The infinitive, Heidegger notes, cuts away all relational meaning (it is not declined). For this reason, it is as though the infinitive is somehow emptied or voided of part of the verb’s original meaning. The substantive form ‘being,’ however, denotes only the being of being, and is therefore the most empty of the grammatical terms. In this way, the term that should denote presence (*parousia*) is an empty signifier, being entirely abstracted and infinitized.

For Derrida, the end of metaphysics begins when Being is re-presented to itself, that is, when it is understood to constitute a reified concept. In this regard, Derrida departs from Heidegger, as he envisions the closure of metaphysics as a “twisted and devious limit,” one “invaginated,” or “ensheathed within itself,” and

not therefore, as a “body of *padeia* that can be encircled within its own *kuklos*,” that is, within the limits of a simple circle on the order of the Parmendean limit (Critchley 73). Noting that we must take care to distinguish between “end” and “closure” with regards to deconstructive practice, Critchley explains: “the concept of closure designates a *finite totality* which is continually breached by a movement of infinitivization” (64). Closure, as opposed to “end,” which connotes a temporal quality, suggests interior space, or perhaps the definition of an idea as a concept. Differ^{ance} resists closure, that is, resists conceptualization, by oscillating in and out of presence as the becoming time of space and the becoming space of time, being simultaneously a spacing and a temporization of meaning (MP 13). A deconstructive double reading is aimed at faithfully reproducing a trace, from ‘outside’ while employing the language, or idiom, of the ‘inside’ of the discourse. To work against closure, then, means to keep the text open, to allow multiple meanings. If, as the Parmendean theorem holds, being arises from limit, then meaning occurs through the definition of boundaries, i.e. through the limitation of thought. Derrida, however, interrogates the Parmenidean equation of being as presence, which introduces a special problem for closure. He attempts to show that things are never fully present to consciousness because being and meaning are differ-deferred, resulting in the impossibility of closure. The text, forever open to interrogation, produces a dissemination of meaning which is never a return to the same. Yet, it is precisely the impossibility of closure that gives deconstruction its ethical bearing.

The irruption of the wholly other is the question that announces the death of philosophy, the rupture that is opening itself, as Derrida characterizes the potential effect of Levinas's thought:

[T]he messianic eschatology . . . [which] is but a question of designating a space or a hollow within naked experience This hollow space is not an opening among others. It is opening itself, the opening of opening, that which can be enclosed within no category or totality . . . which resists every philosopheme. (83)

Levinas dreams of “a purely heterological thought,” “a thought that negates itself, a trace that effaces itself, in order to let the other be” (Caputo 23). Levinas's thought is characterized not by transcendence, but ex-cendence, a movement not up, or beyond being, but out, toward the other. This excendent movement inaugurates an ethical relationship with the other, as it is directed toward “a pluralism which does not fuse into unity,” that is, does not attempt to understand, or know, the other in relation to the ego (89). To effect this movement *out*, Levinas calls for a break from Parmenides, the first Greek metaphysician, whose thought is preserved in the Platonic dialogues of the same name. Derrida articulates that the Greek logos necessitates the relation of non-being to being, asserting that Parmenides “had to give language its due for having vanquished him: shaping non-being according to Being, he had to . . . confine non-Being to its relativity to Being, that is, to the movement of alterity” (89). Thus, alterity always appears as a relation to, but this relationality is only possible under an economy of the self-same, that is, only after difference has been reduced to the domination of the one and the same. In this way, the totally other remains

invisible, unable to appear, resulting in a naïve solipsism. Levinas's break with Parmenides, then, is a break from alterity, a movement toward a radical exteriority, yet it remains unclear, for Derrida, how exteriority is safe from the same totalizing, appropriative movement of being. According to what metaphysical grounds is it possible to have exteriority that is not, finally, relational *to* something else? What would exteriority signify without being in relation to interiority?

Derrida's concern with Levinas's thought, in an attempt to think the 'totally other,' is the problem of identity in solitude, that is, not in relation to the selfsame or to the other in alterity, which is always defined in, against, through the self. This solitude of the existent in his existence, according to Levinas, must be primordial, and cannot be thought of on the basis of "the neutral unity of *existence*," since such a conception of neutrality requires that existence figure as an object of common understanding, one that comm-unifies perception under the "there is," which Derrida articulates shares a particular consonance with Heidegger's "*es gibt*" (WD 89). According to Levinas, "the [ethical] relationship to the other arises from the depths of this solitude," a relationship not founded on the unity of existence, but on the face-to-face confrontation of the other, whose "absolute proximity and absolute distance" resist closure (WD 90). The ethical relationship, then, allows for the otherness of the other, in resisting the neutral light of the Platonic good, toward which we are expected to turn as toward an objective third party. Ethical transcendence can only be accomplished when the "ancient clandestine friendship between light and power" is shown to be the alibi

and *raison d'être* of all oppression, as Levinas explains, "If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power" (*Levinas, Totality and Infinity*, qtd. in Derrida 91).

If this is so, how does ethical transcendence work, according to Levinas? It would seem that such an ethics is one that always waits, but never works. If justice does not belong to the category of the self-evident, if we are to understand the Platonic inheritance as a metaphysical violence that reduces the other to the selfsame, does this set of circumstances negate the possibility of social justice? More problematic, for Derrida, perhaps, is the question of how to understand the marginalized alterities as pure exteriorities, as Levinas proposes we do. Levinas's attempt to escape the Parmenidean dialectic inadvertently reifies the binary opposition of interiority-exteriority. If the hungry, for example, exist simply in relation to the fed, as a simple binary opposition, then the other, for Levinas, would be subsumed under the economy of the selfsame, and is thereby rendered invisible. Levinas's attempt to posit a radical otherness that calls me to my responsibility is idealistic, since it remains unclear how exteriorizing the other allows for a more ethical relationship. If we could, somehow, construct a society of radical plurality, acknowledging our own solitude and interiority, how does this constitute an ethical transcendence? As we may recall, unassailed absolutisms in any form, whether pure plurality or pure unity, negate the possibility of justice. Caputo asserts that for Derrida, "The movement of justice is a movement beyond the hinges and fixed junctures of the law to the ghost of the

other, who unhinges me from my fixity in the present” (PTJD 123). Here, the Levinasian influence is clear, as it is the accusatory stance of the other that functions to call me to account.

Derrida’s concern is with the formulation of a new concept of democracy, one that veers away from the totalizing effects of identity politics in his insistence on an ethical response/recognition of the other, who always presents an irreducible alterity:

[T]he people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on. (DN 13-14)

Derrida explains that everyone has an “ethical and political duty” to recognize that identity entails dissociation and irreducible alterity. For Derrida, dissociation is a “relationless relation,” which prevents full comprehension or disclosure between individuals. Dissociation is both necessary for, and enabling of, community, and all it fosters: love, friendship, hospitality, justice, the gift. Friendship and hospitality require such an opacity: it is “the condition of any unity as such” (DN 15).

The structure of the messianic is always at work in deconstruction, which awaits the arrival of ‘the impossible,’ in the form of the gift, friendship, hospitality. In each of these guises, deconstruction awaits the arrival of justice. Always awaiting, the messianic resists closure, the rush to judgment, in favor of

the promise of a justice to come. Deconstruction is concerned with justice, not the letter of the law, with the framework, the context that gives rise to, and which conditions/makes possible/intelligible the appearance of the law. The messianic structure of the promise holds open the arrival of an unforeseeable future. In this way, Derrida does not reject the structure of messianicity, but particular content-laden messianisms, such as the Judeo-Christo-Islamic inheritance. He rejects not form, but content because the content presets expectations. In “Force of Law,” he explains: “I say *content* and not form, for every messianic form, every messianicity, is never absent from a promise, whatever it may be” (AoR 56). Caputo explains that the “very idea of the messianic, of messianicity, is to shatter horizons, to let the promise of something *tout autre* shock the horizon of the same and the foreseeable” (PTJD 118). For Derrida, it is the gift that has the capability of soliciting the system of exchange and rendering mad economic reason. Yet, why must we understand such an action as just or ethical? At the heart of deconstruction, Caputo argues, is “the irreducible religious structure” of messianicity that haunts Derrida’s work, forcing it to burn with a passion for the impossible. Caputo’s sympathetic, even poetic, reading of Derrida may strike some as overly beneficent, even fanciful; yet, Caputo is quick to recognize the inherently ethical demeanor of deconstruction. Caputo explains that for Derrida, “it is only if (the) time is out of joint, if time is an un-gathering *Un-fug*, unhinged from the gathering unity of the living present, disjointed and opened up to the specter of what is not there, that justice is possible” (PTJD 123).

Thus, justice may never be proclaimed if it is to exist at all. Similarly, the gift, as the impossible, must be out of place and time, *atopos* and *alogos*, interlaced with a type of madness, if it is to appear.

Chapter 3

Religion without Religion: Messianic Structure in the Gift of Death

Derrida tells us that what lies at the heart of deconstruction is the structure of a promise, of a particular “expectation for the future,” and that this expectation has to do with justice (DN 23). The form of this promise is the messianic structure, abstracted of any particular messianism, the basic structure of Derrida’s deconstructive faith, of his ‘religion without religion.’ Such an abstraction, what Derrida has referred to as ‘desertification,’ may seem to posit a new universalism, to replace old messianisms with a new, deconstructive, ‘messianic.’ However, the “universal faith” espoused by deconstructive affirmation does not seek to establish any new foundationalism, but rather aims to recuperate what Derrida understands as a structural faith embodied in the ‘universal’ experience of the messianic. For Derrida, the ‘messianic’ “refers to the promise of something” *‘to come,’* a promise that seeks to posit no content, no new foundation, which will “come in such a way that does not anticipate at all what or who will come, when or where” (PLI 3). What Derrida here seeks is the inauguration of a “universalizable culture of singularities,” one wherein a “faith without dogma” allows for the emergence of a purely rational discourse, and whereupon the foundation of law is a “‘performative’ event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies” (AoR 57). Caputo sees in Derrida’s

‘religion without religion’ a “most barren, desert-like atheologization” of concrete messianisms, the embodiment of “postmodern reason and universality, the heart of a justice and democracy to come” (Caputo 156). Indeed, what Derrida understands as the “messianic” is not a particular faith, which defends a privileged ground, mounting violent attacks against other particular messianisms, but rather the irreducible heterogeneity of a ‘universal’ culture of ‘singularities,’ which, unbound [*ligare*] from any particular faith, effaces its own trace, “uprooting the tradition that bears it” (AoR 57). The messianic, thus atheologized as the structure of the promise, inscribes itself in every act of faith, every appeal to the other, insinuating itself as the logic of a justice ‘to come,’ but never proclaiming itself as the arrival of a justice at hand.

Derrida, following Levinas, articulates this ‘messianicity’ or ‘religion without religion’ as an experience of the other, an ‘address of the other’ or a ‘waiting for the other,’ which amounts to an expectation for the future with which justice will always have to concern itself. In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, the messianic event, that is, the return of the Messiah, may come at any time; it is foretold, waited for, anticipated, and so to some degree is already determined. However, Derrida insists, the other must be radically undetermined, unknown, unanticipated. In this experience of the “messianic” “to come,” Derrida privileges an “absolute openness” that he equates with the experience of the absolute other, whose irreducible alterity “implies that the other may come when I am totally unprepared,” a condition that the experience of the other shares with death: “Otherness and death,” Derrida maintains, are the primary figures of the

messianic 'to come' (PLI 4). Justice and the gift, not unlike the absolute other and death, remain incalculable, futural, *the impossible* (DN 19).

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida, following Heidegger, interrogates the onto-theological status of death as that which no one can endure in my stead; death is that which belongs most properly to me. Placing death within an economy of sacrifice, Derrida posits the gift of death as a gift of absolute responsibility: Death, as that which no one else can experience for me, forms the limit of my existence, and calls me to my responsibility as a singular, irreplaceable individual, or, qua Heidegger, a being-before-death. However, we must be cautious not to read in Derrida a simple acceptance of the Heideggerian premise of death as the "possibility of the impossible." The word play of the French expression, "donne la mort," includes the idea of giving *oneself* death, as in suicide, or in giving to oneself the gift of death. Everyone's death is *sui generis*, an "impossible possibility," to follow Levinas, rather than Heidegger, in the recognition that I first experience death as mourning, through witnessing the death of the other. Derrida clarifies, "In the first place it is because the *other* is mortal that my responsibility is singular and 'inalienable,'" quoting Levinas in explanation, "I am responsible for the other inasmuch as the other is mortal.' It is the other's death that is the foremost death" (GD 46). Derrida, however, departs from Levinas in articulating that it is mourning, rather than death, which constitutes the radical singularity of the self. Roberts explains, "Whether death or mourning, for Derrida, the distinction between what is mine and what is the other's becomes impossible to discern in any final way" (267). The capacity to

mourn, “more originary than my being for death,” enables me to respond ethically to the other: “It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility” (GoD 41). To approach the gift of death, then, we must follow, cautiously and with due diligence, a certain trace, the trace of individual responsibility, and the experience of singularity as tied to the foreknowledge, or anticipation, of one’s own death.

In “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone,¹” Derrida interrogates the foundations of monotheism, focusing on what he perceives to be a world Latinisation, or mondialatinisation, that is, a Westernizing or Christianizing force. Asking what would religion be, if radically abstracted from any particular messianism, Derrida articulates the outline of a religion without religion, a democratic faith that would not “depend upon any messianism,” nor follow any “determinate revelation,” nor belong properly to any Abrahamic religion (AoR 56). Such a religion within the limits of reason alone would paradoxically have to depend upon and work against Kantian ethics, for it would amount to the “liberation” of a pure morality from Christianity, from which it has been indissociable (AoR 50). The political stakes in such an abstraction, a messianicity without messianism, are clear: “in uprooting the tradition that bears it . . . this abstraction, without denying the possibility of faith, liberates a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be

¹ Here, the title of Derrida’s essay consciously draws upon Kant’s essay “Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone” as he seeks to establish a ‘religion without religion’ which would yet acknowledge a structural faith.

dissociated from it” (AoR 57). Such a religion without religion would derive from two sources, faith and knowledge, which Derrida renames, or rather, provisionally refers to, as “the messianic,” and “the khôra” (55-56). The first name, the messianic, would be “[T]he opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration” (56). The second name, khôra, or the “first name prior to all naming,” before the logic of the logos, would situate itself as “the place of absolute exteriority,” and would in effect speak “at the borders” or “at the source” of monotheistic religions, “without being able to reappropriate” the origins of these revelations.

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida reads Patocka’s history of European responsibility, *Heretical Essays*, as a history of mourning. In tracing the history of European responsibility, Patocka notes two turns or conversions, namely the turn from the demonic sacred, or mythical mysteries, to Platonism, and the turn from Platonism to Christianity (Evink 309). In Patocka’s estimation, each conversion amounts to an incorporation or repression of one mystery by the other, such that, as Derrida explains, each “rupture [i.e. conversion] takes the form of either subordination by incorporation [one secret subjects or silences the other] or repression” (GoD 7). According to Evink, Patocka reproduces the Christian notion of responsibility, reading therein the origin of man’s responsibility in a “secretive and mysterious relation” to an “infinitely loving God,” a relationship that he refers to as the *mysterium tremendum*. In Patocka’s reproduction, Evink explains, “The *mysterium tremendum* is a gift of death: God

becomes finite and gives his death, i.e. gives his life, sacrifices himself for man, in an act of infinite love,” a background against which human responsibility must be interpreted (Evink 311).

Derrida is primarily interested in Patocka’s reading of responsibility as a history of the secret, especially as one that is incorporated, or held within the body, or, more precisely, within history, as a (cultural) memory of loss. For Derrida, the secret functions as the condition of the messianic “to come:” it is the structure of absolute secrecy that ensures that what is coming will be unknown, indeed be “structurally unknowable” (Caputo 101). Pointing to Patocka’s use of the terms ‘incorporation’ and ‘repression,’ Derrida interrogates to what extent Patocka may have wished to confer upon the secret a psychoanalytic contour, as in a theory of mourning, noting that, according to Patocka, one secret keeps inside it another secret *unconsciously*, “after having effected a topical displacement and a hierarchical subordination: one secret is at the same time enclosed and dominated by another” (GoD 9). Derrida asserts,

This [history] all takes place, therefore, as if conversion amounted to a process of mourning, facing up to a loss, in the sense of keeping within oneself that whose death one must endure. And what one keeps inside at the very moment that there comes into play a new experience of secrecy and a new structure of responsibility as an apportioning of mystery, is the buried memory or crypt of a more ancient secret. (GoD 9)

From this, we should understand that the secret acts to preserve in cultural memory the “quasi-transcendental condition” of the possibility or impossibility of the messianic (Caputo 101). The secret not only points to the past, a shared

history of repeatability, but also maintains a kind of vigil over the future, for the arrival of whatever is to come. Roberts asserts that responsibility, like so many Derridean concepts, takes on a “quasi-transcendental” quality, which, owing to its instability, requires interruption for its instantiation, a condition that manifests itself in a “proleptic act that gestures not only to the future, but also to the past, attesting to its link with the past, [...] but faithful only in the sense of a *mourning* that holds onto the past by breaking away with it” (italics mine 277, 278). We must take care here to understand that the quasi-transcendental of responsibility, as preserved in the secret (‘forgotten’ without ‘forgetting’) posits no new foundation, but is itself a performative act, established over time by its repeatability. Indeed, for Derrida the *mysterium tremendum* is linked to the structure of the absolute secret, the content of which is null; the secret hides that there is no secret, no content to withhold or divulge. And this is what holds open the future, the possibility of the messianic event. What is preserved in each conversion is, therefore, the secret that there is no secret.

In this way, Derrida’s understanding of the *mysterium tremendum* becomes suffused with a certain mourning: through the incorporation of a secret, the *mysterium tremendum*, or “gift of death,” gives rise to individual responsibility. The “I” will have been called to responsibility at the moment when death, accepted as a gift of infinite love, will also, paradoxically, have been the moment of giving oneself death, that is, of accepting one’s own mortality in the form of a singular, irreplaceable being. The self emerges through an interior separation, what amounts to the mourning of a secret, a “provisional mourning,”

wherein the self “in recalling itself to itself,” maintains a “vigil over death” (GoD 15). Elsewhere, Derrida discusses the ethical relationship of the self to the wholly other as one characterized by a work of mourning, whereby the self seeks to bear the other in itself, articulating “The paradox of mourning is that the other remains totally other, totally outside, whilst being kept within oneself” (PLI 14). Thus, what links the gift to responsibility is a “psychoanalytic economy of secrecy as mourning” wherein the *mysterium tremendum*, as gift of death, is repressed through a series of incorporations, retained secretly as a type of mourning from one cultural revelation to the next (GoD 22).

To understand how responsibility is made possible through the gift, and further, on what conditions responsibility is possible at all, we must recall that for there to be gift, it must be given without calculation. Derrida, following Patocka’s analysis, notes that responsibility is made possible, on the condition that the Good must “no longer be a transcendental objective, [...] but the relation to the other, [...] a movement of intention” toward the other (GoD 50). Contra Husserl, Derrida contends that consciousness cannot, ever, fully appropriate the gift, because the Good cannot be seized as an intentional object of consciousness. Indeed, responsibility is made possible “On the condition that goodness forget itself,” and not, therefore, on the condition that the Good be recognized as an end in itself (GoD 51). Such a forgetting is constituted by an impassioned desire for the *tout autre*: only infinite love, Derrida articulates, may renounce itself to love a finite other. Thus, responsibility is conditioned by an affirmative forgetting, which amounts to an intentional “movement of infinite love” toward the wholly

other. In this way, 'I' am made responsible through a gift of infinite goodness, which—forgetful of itself—creates a radical asymmetry between myself, the responsible mortal, and infinite goodness. For Derrida, then, the experience of responsibility is, through the “structural disproportion” of the gift, transformed into one of guilt (51). The finite, mortal being, “alone before God,” and “Responsible from the very depths of his being, [...] must die to himself, repent and sacrifice himself in order to respond to the sacrificial gift of infinite love,” Caputo explains (194). Derrida’s notion of singularity, and by extension, responsibility, is fraught with guilt: brought to responsibility through the acceptance of an infinite gift of love, the gift of death, the singular, irreplaceable “I” awakens to itself and the other, only within an economy of sacrifice and suicide.

The demands of individual responsibility outlined here are, without question, incompatible with the undecidability that characterizes every decision for Derrida. One cannot be responsible unless s/he acts according to her moral compass, that is, in accordance with good judgment. Yet, every decision is a limitation placed on my responsibility: in choosing to act, I sacrifice as it were, all other possible acts. Thomson points out that Derrida’s “emphasis on the incalculable ignores the real and apparent practical constraints on individual responsibility,” concluding that for Derrida, the calculable notion of responsibility can not ever be enough, but, most importantly, Thomson articulates, “nor can it be dismissed either, and Derrida does not mean us to do so” (67). Here, Thomson’s emphasis is on the crucial distinction Derrida makes,

and points to the central paradox of Derrida's ethics of the incalculable, for even though it might seem that Derrida's notion of absolute responsibility renders nil any lesser attempt to fulfill one's ethical duty to the other, the fact remains that one must continue to act. Every decision participates in the horizon of absolute responsibility; it cannot do otherwise. This is the madness of the decision: if I act on behalf of one other, I may do harm to all the other others, but this contingency does not release me from the ethical obligation to act, and to act now, immediately, in the instant. Derrida's concern is not with a subject's willingness or capacity to act, but rather with a structural condition of responsibility that precedes every decision to act: "The decision is already inscribed within the subject; [...] the subject is taken by the decision" (Thomson 67).

For Derrida, the figure of responsibility par excellence is Abraham, whose "Here I am" answers the call of the unseen God, pledging an unwavering allegiance that demonstrates perfect faith. Abraham's heteronomic obedience to God's injunction to sacrifice his "most loved" son is, Derrida insists, "the absolute religious experience," "the asymmetrical obedience to an absurd order, an unintelligible order, an order that is beyond ethics and knowledge" (D&R 35). Religion, Derrida asserts, "presumes access to the responsibility of a free self" (GoD 2). Abraham's responsibility bespeaks a religious faith that presumes his freedom to act, to make what amounts to a "mad" decision, which is at once absolutely responsible and seemingly against ethics. The requirement of free will for religion to appear sets it against the emergence of the state, which is

dependent upon the individual who has, willingly or no, pledged or given his allegiance to the community, and in so doing has relinquished some degree of privacy, or interior decision-making, for the observance of a duty or obligation to the community. According to this logic, Derrida explains, to be responsible becomes synonymous with one's motives and reasoning being transparent and, to some degree, intelligible or dictated to by the exigencies of the state. Such responsibility is possible only after the sacred or demonic mystery has been fully integrated into the sphere of responsibility, when it has, in effect, asked sacred mystery to account for itself. At this point, religion appears as a force tied to responsibility and the willingness to undergo a rigorous accounting of the self. Thus, Derrida asserts, "Religion is responsibility or it is nothing at all" (GoD 2). Thus, the figure of Abraham represents a particular form of responsibility, an absolute responsibility that transgresses the laws of ethics pertaining to the state or family.

Abraham's secrecy makes him appear insane or murderous: like one who is mad, Abraham does not speak of his reasoning, but trusts in an unseen injunction, choosing to act independently, without securing the confidence of his family or the community. To act in perfect accordance to the law, or to obey God as universal law-giver, without questioning, amounts to a totalizing violence: it is to act against ethics; for this reason, "Abraham remains a criminal," Derrida explains (35). Pointing out that in trusting the call of Being, Abraham effectively ignores the "real suffering of beings," Caputo asserts that Derrida's Abraham,

“abstracted out of any particular messianism” is not the Abraham of the Judaic or Christian church fathers (AE 145). He is, rather, a figure of the desert, whose wanderings through the “risks of absolute night” bespeak a “faith without dogma,” a passionate seeking for the impossible, which knows not what to believe, neither affirms nor denies any particular messianism, while retaining faithfully the injunction to respond, to believe. For Derrida, such responsibility without definite knowledge is manifested in radical hospitality, in a welcoming in of the Other, a welcome, we should understand, that admits of the possibility that the guest received may be evil or ill-coming. Hospitality requires that we welcome we know not what to let the absolute Other appear: we must wait “not only without knowing what we are waiting for but without waiting,” must ‘expect’ “without being expectant” (RoD 3). In demanding an absolute openness to the Other, hospitality maintains a kind of vigil over the messianic arrival of the tout autre, which is always awaited but never proclaimed. Such is the injunction of the unconditional law of hospitality, as Derrida explains:

[A] law which tells us or invites us, or gives us the order or injunction to welcome anyone, any other one, without checking at the border who he or she is, what his or her nationality is, it’s a way of being open to whoever comes. Whoever comes should feel at home here. That’s the unconditional law of hospitality. (RoD 8) The gift, like the pharmakon, may be restorative or poisonous. The “good friend may become the devil,” Derrida cautions; the threat remains that “the experience might have been terrible” of the Other’s arrival, which is why we cannot ever fully anticipate the outcome of any act of hospitality (RoD 9).

In “Foreigner Question,” Derrida notes that it is the foreigner who, “putting the first question, puts me in question,” who asks for asylum or

assistance, but who asks in a language and in an idiom not my own, comes before me as one who is outside of the laws of hospitality (Hos 3, 14). The question of hospitality posed by the foreigner concerns the violence imposed on him by the “master of the house, the host, [...] the State” who requires “translation into their own language” (15). The question, a paradox, concerns the limitations of language, and more precisely, of one’s mother tongue, and by extension, one’s nationality: if we are to extend hospitality, Derrida asks, “must we ask the foreigner to understand us [...]?” And more problematically, if language, “with all that that implies,” were already shared, would the foreigner still be foreign, and “could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?” (Hos 17). Thomson notes that, for Derrida, “because I am within language, political decisions precede me,” concluding that deconstruction amounts to an “exemplary vigilance” which “keeps watch” over a politico-national violence that I inherit in language, a violence which “I could have done nothing about” and which “I must negotiate [...] to which I have no alternatives” (73). Hospitality is extended only to those who may be named, or recognized, before the law; the name or patronym, makes possible the “hospitable relationship to the foreigner,” but also, because hospitality cannot be extended to the nameless, faceless masses, or the “anonymous new arrival,” also “limits” and “prohibits” the possibility of hospitality (Hos 25).

Derrida’s reading of hospitality hinges upon the understanding of responsibility as an absolute openness and obligation to the other, and in this

regard owes much to Levinas's ethics. For Levinas, the experience of responsibility is one wherein

[M]y relation to the other is not some benign benevolence, compassionate care or respect for the other's autonomy, [it] is the obsessive experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight. I am the other's hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo. (Critchley 2007: 61)

Thus, to be ethically responsible to *the* law of hospitality, one must accept responsibility for every other Other, even if—nay, *especially* if—this Other arrives unexpected, uninvited, *hostile*. Such are the conditions of hospitality: without the irreducible willingness to remain open to *whatever* comes, one cannot be said to be hospitable. Even so, in the midst of my inability to know whether the *hôte* be wel- or ill-coming, hospitality extended “out of mere duty” is no welcome: I must learn to give what I possess without condition *and* without obligation. For Levinas, it is the face of the other that calls me to my individual, and particular, responsibility; however, Derridean responsibility resists all subjectivation (Zlomislic 122). Indeed, the Derridean subject can never be responsible enough due to the incalculable nature of responsibility; thus, to be a subject is to be “suspect in advance” (GoD 51, Zlomislic 122). In *Circonfession*, Derrida speaks of the “other” who “must have good reason to accuse me” (57/300). Haunted by the presence of the other who has the authority, impunity, capacity to “charge” him, he is forced (in)to account for himself, the result of which is guilt and

[A] shame in which I persevere all the more in that I have nothing to do with it, I'm not admitting anything and yet I am ready to justify or even repeat the very thing I'm being accused of, even tirelessly to provide you with arguments of my own vintage to establish this fault which nonetheless is all Hebrew to me [. . .].
(57/302)

Arguing that the ordeal of undecidability is “proof of both freedom and law,” Duncan explains, “[I]t is *particularity*, or being (and not Being) which actually *in practice* issues law, and it is *undecidability* which makes each decision a free one, that is, one based upon an imaginatively constructed and idiomatic law” (PTE 20). Abraham is example *par excellence* of responsibility precisely because he acts in accordance to the impossible demands of *the* law of hospitality, becoming, for Derrida, the absolute *hôte*: Abraham, cloaked in the secret, must *freely* attend to the unseen injunction issued for him, and him alone in *particular*, which demands that he offer in sacrifice his ‘most loved’ son without *condition*, that is, without knowing why, and without mere *obligation* to duty, but *willingly*.

The risk of undecidability preserved at the heart of hospitality, then, harbors a deconstructive promise, introduces a *madness* into the concept of hospitality, which extends, attends, holds open, or holds out for the possibility of thinking past a certain Kantian limitation that conditions hospitality. Hospitality, as does any concept, deconstructs itself. It has to, if it is to remain open, to allow the other in. Thus, there is an inherent competition preserved in all concepts, as “each concept opens itself to its opposite Each concept becomes hospitable to its other, to an other than itself that is no longer *its* other” (362). This is the madness of hospitality, and it is precisely that which makes

possible any justice, any sense of due or right. We may posit, perhaps, that madness always and necessarily underlies deconstruction, the aporetic madness of indecidability, the impossibility of deciding. And yet, also, of always hearing the call of the other, of always being responsible, of needing to respond. Thus, we might trace through Derrida's writings the consistent appearance of madness as an interrogation of possibility, or of the conditions of possibility, as always already penetrating every discourse: justice, the gift, hospitality, and so on. Each of which we might ask of: the gift *if there is any* (GT et. al.); hospitality *if there is any* (363), and so on. Madness, which circumscribes a certain limit of reason, or horizon of understanding, underlies every discourse on the possibility of the impossible, the gift, justice, hospitality, etc. Thus, Derrida explains of hospitality, that it is the "experience, the apprehension . . . as the possibility of impossibility . . . –this is the exemplary experience of deconstruction itself, when it is or does what it has to do or be, that is, the experience of the impossible" (364). Further, it is important to note that Abraham also always stands behind (or perhaps, more rightly 'before,' before "*d'avant*" and "*devant*") these discourses as well, as the structure, or perhaps the *force*, which conditions and attenuates all of these discourses in perpetual tension, both offering and undoing itself at every turn.

The Kantian unconditional imperative to veracity, which identifies truth-telling as the basis of the social bond, requires one to "always speak the truth, whatever the consequences" (Derrida 2000: 67). As host, I must be prepared to surrender my guest, if s/he is asked for by authorities, because I must not lie. To

this extent, hospitality would be conditioned on “the unconditionality [i.e. the imperative to veracity] that is the basis of the law” and further, would make a perpetual foreigner of the guest (Derrida 2000: 73). In this way, the aporia of hospitality lies in an antimony concerning the law: “it is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality [...] consisted in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality,” resulting in an “insoluble antimony” that does not oppose a law to nature; rather, marks the “collision between two laws, at the frontier between two regimes of law” (2000: 77). The two laws Derrida here refers to are asymmetrical: the law of the law, or “*The* law,” which in its “universal singularity” is the “law above the laws,” and the laws themselves, which form a “structured multiplicity” that “threaten” to corrupt or pervert the absolute law (Hos 79). And, Derrida adds, hospitality “must always be able to do this,” because without such possibility of the perfectibility of law, “*the* unconditional law of hospitality [...] wouldn’t be effectively unconditional;” it would be, rather, “abstract, utopian, illusory” (Hos 79). For Derrida, then, attending to the singular case always threatens to undo the universal law: my careful concern for those I love necessarily requires that I not attend to all other others; hence, in following the laws of hospitality, I threaten to transgress *the* law of hospitality.

Horner explains that hospitality, “very much like love, finds itself at the impossible intersection of the aneconomic and the economic,” the very intersection, I would add, where Derrida’s Abraham resides (211). Abraham’s sacrifice is aneconomic to the extent that he acts without expectation of remuneration: the gift of Isaac is given without knowledge of whether his actions

are just or ethical. Superadded to this aporia of responsibility is Abraham's status as absolute *hôte*, or guest/host, whose wanderings in search of the Promised Land point to his importance to hospitality. Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard's Abraham in *The Gift of Death* registers a concern that Kierkegaard Christianizes Abraham, at least insofar as he "reinscrib[es] the secret of Abraham within a space that seems, in its literality at least, to be evangelical" (GoD 81). In this way, Derrida's reading of Abraham relies upon a certain trace through Islam, through the idea of the remnant, the people who are cut off from the root of Judea, lost, outside of the Covenant. It is perhaps that he here attempts to read Judaism, even Christianity, through the lens of Islam, but this is perhaps to read too far. Nevertheless, Massignon's study of Abraham, as an Islamologist, leads him to retrace the steps of Abraham, and to regard Abraham as the "absolute *hôte* and the father of the three religions" (369). According to all three traditions, Yahweh orders Abraham to depart his land, transforming him into a *hôte*, at the same time promising him a new land (369). As foreigner, or stranger, Abraham wanders in the desert in search of the promised land. Massignon understands that for the Islamic tradition, "the hospitality of the *hôte* Abraham . . . is placed at the center of Islam [which] . . . makes of Islam the most faithful heir, the exemplary heir of the Abrahamic tradition" (370). Thus Derrida quotes Massignon, writing

Abraham's hospitality is the sign announcing the final completion of the gathering of all nations, all blessed in Abraham, in this Holy Land that must be monopolized by none. . . . This notion of sacred hospitality seems to me essential ... This mystery

touches the very bottom of the mystery of the Trinity,
where God is at once Guest [*Hôte*], Host [*hospitalier*],
and Home [*Foyer*]. (qtd. in Derrida 373)

The trivium here in these three names of God all name hospitality, service to the other, and all refer directly or indirectly to the waiting upon or for the other. The example of Abraham, as one who is visited by the Lord, who is made promises, whose example is, in effect, the promise of hospitality, serves to inscribe the three names of God. Again, we should recall the Christian nominalizations as well, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—certainly we may read here these overtones as well.

The paradox of Abrahamic responsibility hinges, as we've seen, upon the aporia of the secret. Abraham acts in secret, seen only by the Father, who sees in secret, and to the degree that he does not register an account for his actions, Abraham acts against ethics. Yet, Derrida insists, Abraham is ethical, radically so. Abraham's renunciation of "all sense and all property" is the point at which his absolute duty, and his individual responsibility, begins (GoD 96). God returns to Abraham the very thing sacrificed in the very moment he renounced it—his most loved son. As such, Abraham's act constituted an impossible, unjustifiable risk, but one which allowed for the emergence of an alternate, aneconomic economy to emerge, and in this way, was ethical.

Conclusion

Aneconomic Sacrifice (Knowing Whom to Give To)

At every moment of every day, decisions must be made as to what, and to whom, to give to. We choose to devote ourselves to our work, or our family, to the possible neglect of every other worthy thing. These sacrifices constitute the fundamental ethical bearing of our lives. In each decision 'I' make, 'I' run the risk of sacrificing something or someone I love, and to whom I would rather give all. Insofar as a sacrifice is a gift of death, these choices determine what 'I' love most. In his later work, Derrida considered the political as well as the ethical questions posed by the gift. We should not deny, of course, the wider political ramifications of Derrida's argument, the politico-national violence that wages a war that knows no boundaries, between the hungry and the fed, the poor and the wealthy, the disenfranchised and the elite peoples of the world over. Derrida was very concerned with the advent of a democracy that could unite democratic peoples, particularly Europe, to think the possibility of a new international. Derrida's suspicion of any organized politics, which threatened to posit a new foundationalism, hence a violence of its own, may seem to have troubled this aim; however, it is important to recognize that the ultimate goals of such a deconstruction are not to found any new law, but to hold open the possibility for one to emerge. In this way, deconstruction registers a deeply affirmative conviction in the something new, something coming, a desire that never rests.

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