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The *Praxis* of Erring in Mark C. Taylor's A/theology: To Err is Divine

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Presented to fulfil the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology (MTh) to the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts, University of Glasgow

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Table of Contents

Abstract 3

List of Abbreviations 4

Overture 5

I. Prelude: on the progression (digression?) of Mark Taylor's work

Prelude: Hegel and Kierkegaard 11
Outlining: A/theology (un)veiled 12
Contextualising: A/theology (dis)located 16
Performing: A/theology (dis)embodied 18
Abandoning: A/theology (un)forsaken 22

II. (Un)Veiling: A/theology in Outline

Overview 25
Death of God – God as Writing 30
Disappearance of the Self – Self as Trace 35
End of History – Mazing the Middest 39
Closure of the Book – Opening of Text(uality) 44

III. (Dis)Locating: A/theology in Context

Overview 50
Shifty Marks, part I -- Mark's Gospel and Mark Taylor 54
Shifty Marks, part II – Mystics and Mark Taylor 67

IV. (Dis)Embodying: A/theology in Performance

Overview 76
Reading – Italo Calvino 78
Writing – Paul Auster, part I 81
Remaining – Paul Auster, part II 84
Wandering – the Wilderness 88
Wrestling – the Wound 90
Limping – Valentine Cunningham 92
Confessing – (Un)Writing the Self 93
Emptying – Kenosis 99
Coda – on Praxis 101

V. (Un)Forsaking: A/theology in Abandon

In(-)Conclusion... 104

Bibliography 114

Acknowledgements 125

Abstract

Mark C. Taylor's "deconstructive a/theology," unveiled in 1984 with the publication of *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, represents a significant contribution to the task of theological thinking in a postmodern age. An imaginative synthesis of Hegelian dialectics, Nietzschean negation, Derridean deconstruction and Altizerian radical theology, Taylor's a/theology seeks to be thoroughly *post*-: *post*-foundational, *post*-ecclesial, and even perhaps *post*-theological. However, Taylor's work has been neglected and even in some cases discounted by many within academic theology and has thus far found no sustained discourse with ecclesially accountable Christian theology. I find this to be a startling oversight. While Taylor's a/theology is difficult, and no doubt troubling to traditional doctrinal theology, I assert that it is a potentially viable and even vital path for the future of theological thinking.

In this dissertation, I undertake the task of outlining the basic premises of a/theology as demonstrated and developed in the corpus of Taylor's writings. I seek to contextualise Taylor's a/theology within a particular and particularly Christian textual tradition that goes back to the gospels (best exemplified by St. Mark) and also includes the negative tradition of early and medieval Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius. I argue that the embodiment of a/theology is the practice or performance of *erring*, Taylor's literal and literary metaphor for the contemporary human condition, and bring his a/theological work into mutually-enlightening dialogue with other writers and texts selected for their resonance with Taylor's particular textuality. Furthermore, I suggest that a/theology, as a parasitic and deconstructive force, necessarily deconstructs itself in the process of deconstructing its host (theology), which results in the eventual abandonment of both theology and a/theology, a forsaking that never reaches a final end.

List of Abbreviations

E Mark C. Taylor. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1984.

DC Mark C. Taylor, ed. *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1986.

A Mark C. Taylor. *Altarity*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1987.

T Mark C. Taylor. *Tears*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.

TC Robert P. Scharlemann, ed. *Theology at the End of the Century: A Dialogue on the Postmodern with Thomas J. J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist and Robert P. Scharlemann*. Charlottesville, VA: Virginia UP, 1990.

D Mark C. Taylor. *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992.

N Mark C. Taylor. *Nots*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1993.

H Mark C. Taylor. *Hiding*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1997.

AR Mark C. Taylor. *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1998.

RT Mark C. Taylor. "Retracings." In J. R. Stone, ed., *The Craft of Religious Studies*. Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1998. pp. 258-76.

Overture

The advent in the 1980s of Mark C. Taylor's deconstructive a/theology represents a noteworthy contribution and challenge to the traditional theological enterprise. If, as it has been suggested, the abandonment of theology gives way to 'the more energetic mode of theological thinking,'[1] Taylor's work is a key example of a non-foundational or non-ecclesial approach. Published in 1984, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* emerged as the first comprehensive effort to introduce the theological task to the claims of deconstruction, the French post-structuralist philosophical movement of the mid-1960s, which in the meantime had become the object of great interest in other disciplines such as literary criticism, philosophy and anthropology. The primary touch-point Taylor found by which to carry out his synthesis of deconstruction and theology was the "death of God" theology of radical American theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer[2] which, an ocean away from France, also saw its advent in the mid-1960s. With remarkable candour and stylistic flair, *Erring* set its "author" apart as a bold young thinker carving out his niche and attempting to (re)invent himself (and the paradigm itself) as the *a/theologian*.

Although a/theology attempts to describe the situation of theological discourse in the face of postmodernity, still many questions remain: *What is theological discourse about after the "death of God"? Who is engaged in thinking theologically in a postmodern condition*[3] *characterised by the disappearance of the autonomous Subject?*

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[1] David Jasper. "From Theology to Theological Thinking: The Development of Critical Thought and its Consequences for Theology." pp. 295-96. See also Carl Raschke, *Theological Thinking: An Inquiry*.

[2] As a definitive volume, see Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. While other names are connected with death of God theology, Taylor is primarily indebted to Altizer, and it might be said that Taylor is a sort of "spiritual son" to Altizer.

[3] In light of the many divergent attempts to define the *postmodern*, I have, for reasons that should become obvious, elected to adhere to Taylor's characterisation of postmodernity as having

To what historical tradition(s) is theology accountable after our legitimizing meta-narrative(s)[4] *crumble? Is it possible to speak of theological Truth without God, the Self, the Church, and the Bible? What is the* logia *of theology in the absence of the* Theos? And still our contemporary situation continues to change, to be constantly redefined by cultural, political and economic factors. It seems enough time has passed to find an appropriate vantage point with sufficient critical distance to offer an analysis of Taylor's a/theology. At this time of writing, *Erring* is two decades old, and yet, after thwarting abortive efforts in its infancy, a/theology still failed to grow to maturity and has been set aside, if not forgotten altogether – largely written-off, like its radical forebear, as a timely trend, a flash-in-the-pan. In many ways, even the word a/theology itself, much less the vision it describes, has failed to take root in the lexicon of theology – if it *has* left any sort of mark, it has been on (primarily American) "secular" academic theology[5] as opposed to theology which maintains accountability to the Christian Church.[6] Why is

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experienced the death of God, the disappearance of the Self, the end of History and the closure of the Book. These four traits are not, of course, absolute or all-inclusive. As the roots of these traits lie not in postmodernity but throughout modernity itself, some would opt for the designation *late-modern* (Fredric Jameson's characterisation *late capitalist* is also useful). However, I wish to remain consistent with Taylor in my treatment of his "postmodern a/theology." See fn. 4 below.

[4] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard connects postmodernism to *narrative*, describing how postmodernity ushers in the return of narrative (as opposed to scientific) knowledge, which is repressed by modernity, while also rendering impossible any appeal to the credibility of a grand narrative, or metanarrative. The grand narrative, as the source of legitimation for all other "little" narratives (*petit recits*), is the product of a modern era determined to organise and master reality according to pure rationality – a trend which runs through the work of Descartes, Kant and Hegel, amongst others. Postmodernity, as a reaction to and an attempt to move beyond modernity, renders metanarratives untenable and is for this reason necessarily non-foundational. Of course, as the *geist* of modernity still lingers, foundations are still grasped after, as evidenced by everything from the growing evangelical fervour of American Protestantism to the rise of the "postmodern" theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy. See Gavin Hyman's *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology* for a detailed account of the history (if one is possible) of (post)modernism and the contemporary situation of postmodern theology, especially pp. 9-52.

[5] See Clayton Crockett, ed. *Secular Theology*. The essays in this volume well represent trends and explorations in the loosely-defined area of "secular" theology. See especially Crockett's Introduction (pp. 1-9) and Charles Winquist's essay "Postmodern Secular Theology" (pp. 26-36).

[6] As my perspective and concern in this thesis is with a/theology's relationship to Christian theology, I will use *Church* throughout to refer to the catholic or universal body of Christ known as the Christian Church. I realise, of course, that Taylor's a/theology is influenced by and

this? Why was a/theology destined to be nothing more than the plaything of academics, and even a relatively small number of those? Why has it made no noticeable impact on the belief and practice of the Church? The obvious answer to this question – *because a/theology is rooted in the assumption that God does not exist, an assumption which the Church rejects* – seems unconvincing, and fails to address the significant and potentially constructive, if overlooked, "openings" Taylor's work contributes to both academic and ecclesial theology. So *does* a/theology have anything to offer? Is it a viable path for theology? Might it be that in an era characterised by *post-*'s (*postmodern, post-Christian,* perhaps even *post-theological*) the only way to think theologically is now to look *beyond* theology toward something like an a/theology? Does Taylor's explicitly deconstructive a/theological (which is *not* to say atheistic[7]) endeavour have any constructive, even redemptive, theological value?

In this thesis, I will pursue responses to some of these questions and issues. Where answers cannot be found, this study seeks, despite the deconstruction of narrative, to tell a story in which the function of a/theology might be understood as having something to do with the enduring task of theology, and even perhaps wherein a/theology might have something to say *about* and *to* the beliefs and practices of the Christian Church. Of course dialogue cannot, or at least should not be a one-way endeavour, and so it follows that the Church might also have something to say in response to the challenges of a/theology. It might be suggested that theology and a/theology have no choice but to agree to disagree and go their separate ways. But this

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contains implications relevant to religions other than Christianity, not the least of which is Buddhism. However, I am unequipped to attend to such issues in the scope of this study. It should also be noted that my capitalisation of Church, used throughout, is in no way intended to place Christianity in a masterly relationship to other religions, but rather to distinguish the universal Christian Church, in all of its diversity and plurality, from instances of particular, local churches.

[7] 'A/theology is not the opposite of theology and must not be identified with atheism' (*AR*, 40).

cannot be true if a/theology proves to be that which it claims to be always already existing within theological discourse as something "other," a perpetually critical parasite.[8] It could be said, then, that a/theology cannot be properly understood as an entity, an *–ology* unto itself, as it relies and thrives on the pre-existence and presence of theology to function. But if this is the case and a/theology has no merit of its own because it exists as theology's other, then neither can theology stand alone – it too relies on a/theology as its other. As shall be demonstrated, the relationship between theology and a/theology is complicated, even co-dependent. It is a mistake for positivist theology to ignore or repress the negative challenge that a/theology elicits, for in doing so, theology risks self-negation. The positive needs a negative, just as the negative requires a positive. Kevin Hart writes, 'It is a permanent task of religious thought to keep the negative and the positive in play, to demonstrate that the impossible is not in contradiction with the possible.'[9] Indeed, on the surface Taylor's a/theology *appears* to contradict theology, but their relationship is not blocked, or at least not *fully*. Even if its deconstructionist nature does partially block a/theology's relationship to theology, the very presence of this obstacle, this boundary, reinforces the reality and the radicality of the relationship between the two – a relationship which is difficult, problematic, even precarious, but nonetheless necessary and possibly even life-sustaining.

While it is difficult to begin a work examining a/theology, which inevitably problematises "proper" beginnings and endings, every beginning should contain a clear statement of the aims of the work at hand. This thesis aims broadly to evaluate the contributions and challenges a/theology offers to Christian theology and practice. The first task of this project must be to seek, as much as possible, a clear understanding of

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[8] See Mark C. Taylor. "Text as Victim." In Altizer, et al., *Deconstruction and Theology*. pp. 65-68. Here Taylor discusses more generally the parasitic nature of interpretation upon writing. Elsewhere, Taylor has written: 'Like any parasite, Deconstruction attacks from within' (*E*, 10).

[9] Kevin Hart. "Jacques Derrida: The God Effect." In *Post-Secular Philosophy*, P. Blond, ed. p. 278.

Taylor's deconstructive a/theology – to this end, I will carry out a close reading and analysis of *Erring* as Taylor's seminal work and primary description of his a/theological vision. Achieving some grasp of what an a/theological approach *looks like* – its basic characteristics and functions – I will be equipped to address this project's first aim, which is to locate Taylor's deconstructive a/theology within a particular, and particularly Christian, theological context that extends from the Gospel(s) through to the present day. A/theology did not spring forth fully-formed and wholly original from the pen of Mark Taylor. In fact, for all its currency and controversy, I will argue that a/theology falls within a tradition even more ancient than the systematic and doctrinal forms of theology which a/theology attempts, but finally fails, to subvert.

As the language of the previous sentence suggests, a/theology is necessarily active or performative; hence, the second aim of this project is to explore the possible outcome(s) of the performance of a/theology. Put otherwise, I will seek to follow the movement of a/theology as its work is carried out and performed in a variety of ways. I will explore how, in Taylor's own writings, a/theology *performs itself*. Working from the inside-out, a/theological writing embodies (perhaps by *dis*-embodying) the very discussion it undertakes, and in this way, what a/theology is *about* is the performative moment or deconstructive event of a/theology – it is a *play*, in both the theatrical and recreational sense. Additionally, I will explore the performance of a/theology intertextually with reference to other literature, ancient and contemporary. An additional aim of this thesis concerns the current situation and direction of the theological thought: I will attempt to evaluate the relative success of deconstructive a/theology, not simply by the criteria provided by theology but also by the criteria provided by a/theology itself; I will offer an assessment of the relationship between theology and a/theology in the current context; and I will make suggestions for the furtherance of conversation between

theology and a/theology in hopes that the deconstructive shape of their relationship is only the necessary prelude to (re)constructive interaction. Conclusions, if any arrive, will likely be various and less clearly identifiable.

The end of theology is, in a sense, impossible – an ever-deferred event. It is not an "end" to be accomplished as much as it is a "beyond" to be thought. The end of theology, which is to be thought and thought beyond, is occasioned by the deconstruction from within of theological foundations, which does not so much unravel the fabric of theology as it works to expose its holes and flaws and its inevitable breakdowns. When theology's reliance on certain indubitable truth claims prevents the enterprise from maintaining its intellectual integrity, what emerges, then, is something other than theology which yet resides within theology – theology's other which is at the same time also the same. Whereas theology is modern, defined according to systems and reason, this emergent other is, therefore, *post*modern. While theology relies on foundations, this other is non-foundational. Whereas theology is necessarily conservative, this other appears gratuitously liberal. While theology celebrates orthodoxy, this other is expressly heterodox. The end of theology, which is a plurality of ends, turns out to be a beginning, a multiplicity of beginnings – the possibility of the emergence of something other than theology which yet always already exists within theology. To think the end of theology is, then, to think the beginning of something other than theology which yet owes its genesis to theology. It is this thinking beyond which concerns the work of chasing after truth when all such work is revealed as an endless maze – work which is, in Taylorian terms, endlessly mazing. When certain significance dissipates into the eternal freeplay of signification, play is the work at hand, and all work/play is recreational, generative, constructive – in a word, *poetic*.

I. Prelude: On the progression (digression?) of Mark Taylor's work

> *The moments unfurled one after the other, and at each moment the future stood before me as a blank, a white page of uncertainty. If life was a story and each man was the author of his own story, then I was making it up as I went along. I was working without a plot, writing each sentence as it came to me and refusing to think about the next... The question was what I was supposed to do when the pen ran out of ink.*[10]

Prelude: Kierkegaard and Hegel

It is important to be aware of the overall shape that Mark Taylor's work has taken throughout the course of a career that, at this time of writing, spans four decades. After earning doctoral degrees from Harvard (1973) and the University of Copenhagen (1981), Taylor's earliest work is primarily concerned with the writing of Søren Kierkegaard and the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel,[11] and these two thinkers emerge as key figures in nearly all of Taylor's work to follow. While Hegel, whose dialectical philosophy is integral to deconstructionist thought (and against whose work much of postmodern criticism is a reaction),[12] functions as Taylor's daunting and haunting philosophical interlocutor, Kierkegaard provides the embodied textual and theological model from which Taylor seems to draw his inspiration. It is the anonymity, or perhaps more accurately the *pseudonymity* of Kierkegaard's writing that Taylor attempts to emulate in *Erring* in his denial of authorial responsibility.[13] It is between Kierkegaard's

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[10] Paul Auster. *Moon Palace*. pp. 41-42.

[11] See Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (1975) and *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (1980).

[12] See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*: 'We will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point' (p. 77).

[13] Taylor writes: 'If authorship is never original but always a play that is an interplay, clearly "I" did not write this text. Or at least "I" alone did not write it' (*E*, xi).

either/or and Hegel's both/and that Taylor attempts to navigate by applying Derrida's neither/nor in 'an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation' (*AR*, 32).

Outlining: A/theology (un)veiled

The first important shift in Taylor's work occurs in the early 1980s, when deconstructionist criticism, which had already become incorporated into other academic disciplines, first began to infiltrate theology departments throughout North America. Deconstruction is primarily attributed to the critical and philosophical work of Jacques Derrida, whose reading of the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure[14] led him to identify *logocentrism*, or the deference to and reliance upon the intrinsic truth of words/language that characterises Western thought. The result of the delusion that words and language contain some sort of definitive meaning is a binary, oppositional system of hierarchies in which one term is always privileged over another, such as light to darkness, transcendence to immanence, or as in the preference of the immediacy of speech to the errancy of writing, which is cut off from its author. Derrida traces the primacy of speech back to Plato's *Phaedrus* to demonstrate how speech and writing are,

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[14] In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure distinguishes between fundamental elements of the system of signification, determining that words essentially have an arbitrary relationship to their objects. In Saussurean semiotics, the term *signifier* describes the sign's material component, or how the word sounds when verbally articulated and processed aurally or appears when printed on the page and processed visually. The term *signified*, then, refers to the conceptual component of the sign, or the mental concept of the thing to which the sign refers. These two components, the signifier and the signified, together make up the linguistic *sign*. Saussure identifies that it is not the thing to which the sign refers that gives it its meaning, but rather all of the things which it is not. In a language system that relies purely on differences – definition by negation – only negative, and no positive, terms exist. This breakdown of the linguistic system may be considered the starting point of what is to be a complete and thorough unravelling of all structures of signification and hence meaning, which is exposed as arbitrary, fluid, duplicitous, pluralistic. For Saussure, thought and language are coextensive; therefore there can be no pre-linguistic thought. Therefore, since language contains within itself its own negation, all thought, spoken or written, is fundamentally *flawed*. In addition to the common, adjectival sense meaning "imperfect" or "defective," also note the more obsolete noun form of *flaw*, meaning "a fragment" or "splinter," which is indeed a characteristic of language post-Saussure. For a concise description of Derrida's application of Saussure, see Stephen D. Moore's *Post-structuralism and the New Testament*, pp. 14-16.

in the end, equally flawed. Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, Derrida suggests that this problematic nature applies to all structures of language and, by extension, all structures of thought.

Of course, it would require a voluminous study to outline the development and implications of post-structuralism and deconstruction.[15] Still, as regards Taylor's a/theology, a working knowledge of deconstruction is crucial. With Derrida's work, absolute truth begins to give way to duplicity and a plurality of meaning, and the innate power structures and hierarchies within Western thought are exposed as ultimately biased and oppressive. The epistemological yardstick is turned on its head. The philosophical contribution of deconstruction is often thought of as the overturning of logocentrism, but this description is overly simplistic. Rather than a simple reversal or inversion, deconstruction produces the *rupture* of meaning. In the absence of the transcendental signified – that is, some originary *essence* or source of meaning – all meaning is understood in terms of difference. Derrida coins the term *différance* (derived from French terms for "to differ" and "to defer") which is actually no-thing in and of itself but always already exists within the matrix of signification, a description of the absence of an origin or an originary presence. While Derrida attempts to maintain that his project is non-theological, *not* the same as negative theology, and even famously claiming that *différance* 'blocks every relationship to theology,'[16] the implication and the application of his work nonetheless has a profound impact on theological thinking. Derridean thought, 'which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay.'

> Turned toward the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*... side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the

[15] For a thorough analysis, see Jonathan Culler's monumental *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*.

[16] Jacques Derrida. *Positions*. p. 40.

> world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center.*[17]

Following this, Taylor writes in *Erring* that, in the absence of originary truth, the a/theological task is 'how to count all of this not only as loss but as gain' (*E*, 17).

Despite it continental roots, deconstruction first took hold in North American scholarship, becoming the plaything of philosophers and literary scholars. While Derrida's three early works (*Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*) were all published in the late-1960s, their influence did not penetrate the realm of academic theology until the early 1980s – interestingly around the same time that narrative theology[18] had begun to stake its claim as a much-needed corrective to traditional doctrinal or systematic theology. While narrative theology has perhaps maintained more lasting and farther-reaching impact within the field of theology, deconstructionist theology remained, and remains, almost exclusively a North American phenomenon, its viability and value being largely overlooked and even discredited in Europe.[19] With the release of *Deconstruction and Theology* (1982), a collection of essays by Taylor, Thomas Altizer, Robert Scharlemann, Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist and Max Myers, the connections between these two enterprises began to be further explored. Taylor's inclusion in this volume identified him early as one of the chief proponents of deconstructionist theology. His essay "Text as Victim" employs Kierkegaard to explore the intrinsic problem of authorship and writing and, as Carl Raschke summarises in his Preface, 'shows how textuality is the final meaning of the

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[17] Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. pp. 369-70.

[18] See George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*. Also Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*.

[19] See, for example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*. While not focused on Taylor's work, Vanhoozer's study implicitly and occasionally explicitly criticises Taylor's conception of textuality. Of course, Taylor is not without his American critics; for one example, see Peter Hodgson's review of *Erring* in *Religious Studies Review* 12/3 (1986), 256-259.

incarnate Word, where logos is no longer transcendent but "sacrificed" and totally "disseminated."'[20] Also published that year was Taylor's *Deconstructing Theology*, a short collection of essays wherein Taylor begins to move from theory to application. *Deconstructing Theology* is hardly more than a prelude to *Erring*, basic sketches of the work to come, but it is interesting as one of the first and few attempts at writing (a) *deconstructive* theology – that is, writing deconstruction theologically and/or writing theology deconstructively. In his "Pretext" to this work, Taylor asserts that 'Derrideans who disregard such theological issues risk superficiality, just as theologians who ignore Deconstruction risk irrelevance....Despite its overt atheism, postmodernism remains profoundly religious, and this atheistic religiosity offers a promising point of departure for a truly postmodern theology.'[21] It is exactly this sort of postmodern theology which becomes *a/*theology in *Erring*.

Taylor's next major work, certainly his most significant, begins the a/theological project sketched out by his earlier work. 1984's *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* is arguably Taylor's most original and lucid work,[22] although, as Peter Hodgson points out in his review, it 'is not as original a work as it first appears...[but] rather a clever, exhaustive work of assimilation.'[23] However, I assert that this is precisely *Erring*'s originality, the weaving together of texts and ideas from diverse and disparate writers. In *Erring*, Taylor stakes out his territory, unveiling his postmodern a/theology with such flourish that every attempt to unmask proves impossible; in the end 'revelation is reveilation.'[24] In this way, Taylor gratuitously becomes the 'tailor' who 'stitches together textiles that have been woven by others' (*E*, 180), whose task is not to unclothe

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[20] Carl A. Raschke. "Preface." In Altizer, et al., *Deconstruction and Theology*. p. ix.

[21] Mark C. Taylor. *Deconstructing Theology*. p. xx.

[22] Susan E. Wennemyr. "Dancing in the Dark." p. 573.

[23] Peter Hodgson. "Review of *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*." p. 256.

[24] Mark C. Taylor. "Masking: Domino Effect." p. 549.

but to clothe the meaning or truth of his text. Like Derrida, Taylor draws near by withdrawing, and manages to slip every grip. Though concise, it is a monumental work, and as this thesis elsewhere spends a great deal of time analysing and explicating *Erring*, I will forego further elaboration at this point.

Contextualising: A/theology (dis)located

With *Deconstruction in Context*, Taylor makes both an interesting move in the development of his own work and a significant contribution to the larger enterprise of deconstructionist criticism. While *Erring*, as an assimilation of the words of others, implicitly reveals the sources of his deconstructive a/theology, in *Deconstruction in Context* Taylor explicitly traces the genealogy of deconstruction and by extension his own thought. Paradoxically, the work seems like both an ancestor to and the offspring of *Erring*. Ordered almost chronologically (a strange manoeuvre for one who two years prior declared the end of History), the work is a collection of significant primary texts from the philosophical predecessors of deconstruction: Kant, Hegel, Kojève, Husserl, Saussure, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Bataille, Blanchot, and (naturally) Derrida. Whereas Taylor served as the dispossessed author of *Erring*, here he is the editor who, like every writer, is also a reader. Taylor's introductory essay, "System...Structure...Difference...Other" (*DC*, 1-34), is a crucial point in the development of his deconstructive a/theology, for in it, he carefully crafts a narrative which essentially tells the story of deconstruction and sets the stage for the debut of his own work. *Deconstruction in Context* is an invaluable collection for literary critics and theologians with interests in deconstructive criticism. In *Erring* we are confronted with the death of the A/author, the end of History and the impossibility of the Book, and yet on its heels Taylor publishes a very traditional book,

even a somewhat encyclopaedic book – a Book in the proper sense. *Deconstruction in Context* pays homage to those thinkers whose work has led to and shaped Taylor's own, and by collecting their texts into this very bookish Book, Taylor canonizes these thinkers as "authors" in their own right, authors of these timeless texts which are yet situated in a very temporal narrative which delineates the development – the History – of deconstructive criticism. Furthermore, as Taylor is a scholar of religion and self-proclaimed a/theologian, and as his field had so lagged behind other fields (philosophy, literary studies) in attending to the implications of deconstruction, *Deconstruction in Context* becomes a sort of tool for proselytisation, a primer by one of the leading proponents of deconstructionist theology for those not yet indoctrinated – an a/theological catechism. And yet, like any good deconstructive writing, the Book unmakes itself, a perfect and particularly formal example of how deconstruction deconstructs itself, renders its own task impossible. By exposing logocentrism, by pulling back the curtain on the totalising structures of History's coherent narratives and Books as receptacles of meaning, and by revealing the nothingness that lies beneath, Taylor, knowingly I suspect, must resort to narrative, to (a particular) History, to the Book. To understand deconstruction, Taylor writes the (hi)story of deconstruction, and the collected texts that follow are, in one sense, elaborations on his introductory essay.

Taylor's next two works, *Altarity* and *Tears*, also both collections of essays, are more "original" in the sense that the collected essays are Taylor's own. In *Altarity*, Taylor further pays tribute to the thinkers most influential to his work by writing essays about a particular thinker centred around a certain theme, i.e. Hegel (Conception), Blanchot (Nots), Derrida (Rewriting) and Kierkegaard (Transgression). With this work, Taylor fashions his own version of Derrida's *différance* with the neologism *altarity*, which he claims 'evokes dimensions of difference and aspect of otherness overlooked,

excluded, or repressed by the notion of *differance*' (*A*, xxix). Taylor suggest that 'While the question of the religious, which might be neither theological nor ontotheological, is silent in the *a* of différance, it tolls endlessly in the *a* of altarity' (*A*, xxxiii). Continuing this linguistic playfulness, Taylor titles his next published work *Tears*, punning on the word's duplicitous meaning. In contrast to the *a* of altarity (or, for that matter, the "/" of a/theology), which is silent and cannot be spoken but only written, the distinction between *tears* and *tears* cannot be written but only spoken (as I have just demonstrated). Taylor divulges his intentional duplicity in the last and most significant essay in the collection, "How to do Nothing with Words," where he writes, 'The wound of words is a tear that can never be mended—a tear that can never be wiped away' (*T*, 233).[25] While Taylor's work beginning with *Erring* is decidedly interdisciplinary, attending to literature, painting and sculpture in addition to philosophy and theology, in *Tears*, Taylor begins to expand his project further into the domain of art and architecture, areas he will continue to develop. As half of the twelve essays included in the volume were previously published in other forms between 1988 and 1990,[26] *Tears*, for the most part, seems more like an afterthought than a "proper" work like *Erring, Deconstruction in Context* and *Altarity*, and does more to hint at things to come than necessarily to further develop his deconstructive a/theology.

Performing: A/theology (dis)embodied

Turning the corner into the 1990s, the apocalyptic tone of the previous decade must have dwindled, for at this point, Taylor's work takes a turn away from the theoretical and toward the practical. If in *Erring, Deconstruction in Context* and *Altarity*,

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[25] Compare with Taylor's epigraph to *Tears*, borrowed from Samuel Beckett, which mirrors this play-on-words: '...my words are my tears' (*T*, xv).

[26] Refer to the copyright page in *Tears* for the details of prior publication.

Taylor respectively introduces, supports and expounds upon his a/theology, his next three works are, in a sense, the critical application of that project. 1992's *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* proposes a shift from a modernist notion of theoesthetics, 'in which art and religion join to lead individuals and society from fragmentation and opposition to integration and unification' (*D*, 46), to a postmodern a/theoesthetics which, forsaking the utopian dream of unification and the hope for salvation, recognises and celebrates *altarity* by confessing that 'the impossibility of reconciliation means there is no resurrexit here or elsewhere, now or in the future' (*D*, 317). Taylor's errant journey through the desert of postmodernist art and architecture leads him to conclude that 'there is only exile – chronic exile – without beginning and without ending' (*D*, 319). The discussion of art and architecture is extended to the human body and advertising as a postmodern art form in *Nots*, a collection of essays subdivided into sections on religion, art and the body. As Taylor spells out in his introduction "Why Not?," the overarching concern of the volume is the question of how to think *not*, which 'falls *between* being and nonbeing' and hence remains unthinkable (*N*, 1). The gem of *Nots* is its final essay, "The Betrayal of the Body: Live Not," in which Taylor describes autoimmune dysfunction as 'a breakdown in the communications systems that govern the body.' As the failure that leads to dis-ease is always already present within the body, 'The body betrays – always inevitably betrays' (*N*, 215). This extremely technical exposition is in the end, however, a prelude to a brief autobiographical reflection on Taylor's personal struggle with diabetes. These concluding paragraphs about Taylor's own body mark an interesting first in Taylor's body of work: that of the author – who, recall, *Erring* deconstructs -- turning his critical gaze back upon himself, a self-reflexive move which leads not to deepened self-understanding but to the further deconstruction of the self.

It becomes apparent that in each instance, as Taylor's a/theology is applied to each new area of critique, the theological nature of his work becomes less and less apparent. This is nowhere more obvious than in *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*, which Colin McGinn describes as 'an anti-book for the image age.'[27] This experimental work, co-"authored" (if such a term applies) with Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen, explores the emerging global network of telecommunications at a time when "internet" had yet to become a household word. While touching on education, politics, economics, religion and technology, *Imagologies* can hardly be considered a critical work on any of those subjects but rather more of an experiment in *praxis*, utilizing the very networks it seeks to critique. Taylor continues his experimentation with text and image in 1997 with *Hiding*, which extends Taylor's discussion of bodies to tattooing, neo-tribal body modification and suspension rituals, performance art, and fashion. Reminiscent of Derrida's shattered and shattering *Glas*, *Hiding* superimposes word(s) and image(s) in unconventional ways, producing a text that is impossible to read as a Book – at least to read in the same manner as any other book. In the first chapter, "Skinsc(r)apes," Taylor simultaneously unfolds two separate lines of text, one in the traditional, horizontal formatting and the other running vertically in inserted blocks along each page. The chapter concludes with another autobiographical excursus on the simultaneity of life and death through a description of Taylor's chance introduction to novelist Paul Auster and the deaths of Taylor's mother and father and his friends Edmond and Arlette Jabès. *Hiding* digresses into discussions of Las Vegas,[28] pyramids and computer networks, at

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[27] Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen. *Imagologies*. See front flap 'blurbs.'

[28] Collaborating with José Marquez, Taylor also produced an interactive CD-ROM project called *The Réal, Las Vegas, NV* which acts as a sort of companion piece to *Hiding*. The digital work, which is part art project and part computer game (but not exactly either), is described in the back flap of *Hiding* as a 'virtual scrapbook...a postmodern mystery set in Las Vegas in the year 2033 within the rooms of the Motel Réal.' It is a bizarre piece of cultural criticism, nearly impossible to make sense of, and yet another example of Taylor's attempt to write without B/books or

once looking back to *Imagologies* and hinting at coming works. It is difficult to read and impossible to analyze -- and this is its triumph: Taylor has finally written his "impossible Book," which, like *Erring*, embodies and becomes the very object of its own discussion. *Hiding* is about appearances and surfaces. It seeks a movement not further in-depth but increasingly outward, exterior, toward boundaries by demonstrating that every surface merely conceals/reveals another surface and masks mask masks. Deconstruction becomes a reconstruction as the layers of the onion are not peeled away but restored, un-peeled. The gaze at the body, so deeply penetrating in *Nots*, moves outward toward the surface, the skin, to texts marked on the skin, to textiles which clothe the skin -- surfaces which simultaneously conceal and reveal.

In a strange way, these four texts perform or embody Taylor's a/theology by (dis)embodying it. In the application of a/theology, a/theology becomes lost along the way, hidden deep beneath the surface as that which always already resides within the critical work. As Taylor applies his project to specific objects of scrutiny -- moving from God to art and architecture to advertising, from the inside of bodies to the outside of bodies to fashion – his work probes deeper by becoming increasingly shallow. As such, it becomes decreasingly theological or a/theological; increasingly trivial; profoundly superficial although not superficially profound. And yet this is what Taylor, seemingly, seeks to accomplish – to expose the nothing which lies beneath everything, death which accompanies and is contained within life, the absence masked by every pursuit of presence, the "not" that we cannot think, and yet which we have already thought in the first instance of (not-)thinking.

A/authors. A fine example of collaboration, the project is published jointly by Williams College Museum of Art and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

Abandoning: A/theology (un)forsaken

Taylor's most recent work continues the course he has set in previous work – the occasional autobiographical forays, the outward-moving expansive and expanding gaze, the devolution of his a/theological project, which becomes not so much about theology as religion, attending to "the sacred" rather than "God," and eventually deconstructing to the point that his work seems hardly concerned with theological or religious matters at all. Yet this seems, for all its illogic, a logical progression within the particular, peculiar trajectory of Taylor's work. As he plays out his project, it becomes evident that the end he seeks (of theology, philosophy, criticism) is impossible and ever deferred. A/theology is ultimately embodied in the forsaking and forsakenness of a/theology. 1999's *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* is ironically about religion precisely by being *not* about religion, or at least not overtly. The essays collected in this volume, like much of Taylor's work, are a sort of *unsaying*, wherein he attempts to discuss religion by *not* discussing religion, instead discussing films, literature, art, sculpture, politics, capitalism, cyberspace, architecture and, again, Las Vegas. In his introduction, "About About," Taylor writes: 'Always a matter of surprise, religion is, I believe, most interesting where it is least obvious. Thus, I deliberately avoid the space of church, synagogue, and mosque in order to have time for art, literature, economics, science, and technology' (*AR*, 1). *About Religion* also includes two significant autobiographical essays which add to Taylor's emerging body of such self-reflexive writing. Chapter 2, "Denegating God," is a treatise on negation as well as a reflection on *Erring* and a/theology 15 years on, and chapter 10, "Indifference," is a series of entries as if from a diary that blur the line between fact and fiction, academic writing and autobiography. Fascinatingly, Taylor succeeds in writing much about the sacred, even about faith, and

by extension, about religion, without writing much about religion at all – it is a writing that is a not writing, a writing (of) *not*.

Taylor's most recent works, like *About Religion* (and even less so) seem to be hardly about religion at all.[29] In 1999, Taylor also published *The Picture in Question: Mark Tansey and the Ends of Representation*, a short analysis of artist Tansey's paradoxical recovery and deconstruction of representative painting. *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (2001) continues discussions that Taylor began in *Imagologies* and *Hiding* about communications, networks and media, happily trotting even farther away from his a/theological roots into the realm of complexity theory. *Grave Matters* (2002) is a collection of photographs of the gravesites of many modern artists and thinkers as diverse as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Vincent van Gogh. Taylor's text serves as a commentary on the significance of graves and memorial sites, on the simultaneity of presence and absence, and on the tenuous boundary between life and death. And most recently Taylor has published *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Religion* (2004).[30] Judging from the title alone, Taylor appears to continue along his decidedly errant path – having already examined the telecommunications networks that create such possibilities, he now takes as his subject economics, the global marketplace and "virtual money." With the slight exception of *About Religion*, it seems that every text that Taylor has published since *Nots* is, on the

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[29] Admittedly, I am not as intimately familiar with Taylor's four most recent works as I am with his earlier, more explicitly a/theological work, but, as we learn from Taylor himself, surfaces reveal at least as much as they conceal. Ergo, these works deserve mention as their titles alone describe the progression-digression of Taylor's work that I wish to chronicle here.

[30] Due to the recency of its publication, I have not taken *Confidence Games* into consideration for the purposes of this thesis. However, a description is available on the University of Chicago Press website: 'In *Confidence Games*, Mark C. Taylor considers the implications of [various] developments for our digital and increasingly virtual economy. According to Taylor, money and markets do not exist in a vacuum but grow in a profoundly cultural medium, reflecting and in turn shaping their world. To understand the recent changes in our economy, it is not enough to analyze the impact of politics and technology – one must consider the influence of art, philosophy, and religion as well.' See http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/16411.ctl.

surface, hardly theological, hardly even a/theological – perhaps fitting more comfortably under the description of cultural analysis than theology, religious studies or even philosophy. As will be further explored, it is evident by tracing the arc of Taylor's work over the course of his career that his (un)veiling, (dis)locating, (dis)embodying and (un)forsaking of his a/theological project – a journey which is simultaneously a progression and a digression – is, in fact, the intellectual and textual embodiment of his a/theological vision of *erring*.

II. (Un)Veiling: A/theology in Outline

> *[The] writer can be compared to a tailor. With pens and needles, the writer stitches and cross-stitches....The tailor, after all, is profoundly interested in surfaces and completely preoccupied with appearances. His task is to cover rather than to strip, to veil instead of unveil...surfaces are not superficial.* (*E*, 180)

Overview

If deconstruction is an expressly *post*-structuralist critical event,[31] it is perhaps objectionable to describe Mark Taylor's deconstructive a/theology as or according to a *structure*. Still, for the sake of metaphor, it could be said that the "structure" of Taylor's a/theology is supported by four pillars: the death of God, the disappearance of the Self, the end of History, and the closure of the Book. Perhaps the metaphor would be better rendered thus: Taylor's a/theology arises phoenix-like from the rubble and ruin of the four pillars which were once thought to support the entire Western theological and philosophical tradition – God, Self, History and Book. The site where the old structure once stood becomes the "(de)construction site" for the *para*-site that is a/theology. Of course, this is no proper building site, as the interest is not so much in building as tearing down. In *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Taylor begins by setting out the terms of his project under the section heading "Deconstructing Theology," describing these four events (or *conditions*) – the death of God, the disappearance of the Self, the end of History, and the closure of the Book – which also serve as the first four chapter titles. He responds in the latter half of the text by unfolding his "Deconstructive A/theology."

[31] If deconstruction, as claimed, exists always already within discourse, it should not be considered a particular critical strategy or a sort of system or entity. For this reason, I will refer to deconstruction, and by extension to Taylor's deconstructive a/theology, as a critical event, moment or movement so as to maintain awareness that deconstructive a/theology is a critical *performance* which is, in fact, the performance of criticism. I trust that this rationale will become increasingly apparent as this thesis develops.

The death of God in chapter 1, then, corresponds to the "Writing of God" (ch. 5) in which the *divine milieu* is construed as the freeplay of writing. The disappearance of the Self results in "Markings," which inscribe the presence of the trace that is the absence of the Self. The end of History makes room for "Mazing Grace" in chapter 7, wherein the beginning and end of historical narrative(s) collapse into the middle, the wilderness of the now. Finally, the closure of the Book described in chapter 4 corresponds to "Erring Scripture" in the text's final chapter, wherein this closure marks the simultaneous opening of the text and of textuality. Book-ended by a "...Prelude" and an "Interlude..." with intentional ellipses denoting the endlessness of all writing, *Erring* proves, paradoxically, despite its own denial of its status as a Book, to be a fairly systematic text: divided in half, four chapters per half, each chapter sub-divided into three sections – an introduction and conclusion (if not very introductory or conclusive, respectively), a section of endnotes and a "Biblio Graphy."[32]

It seems, despite the death of God, Taylor cannot help but write about (the impossibility of) God throughout his work. Despite the disappearance of the Self, which, as Taylor describes, renders the A/author, authority and authorship impossible, *Erring* still bears the name of Mark C. Taylor on its cover and copyright pages. Despite the end of History, *Erring*, in its deconstruction of theology, sculpts its own narrative signposted by these four pillars – that is, to deconstruct History, Taylor must tell the story the climax of which is the end of History. And despite the closure of the Book described in these pages, *Erring* cannot fully extricate itself from its given generic forms and conventions. I do not point out these paradoxes to discredit Taylor's work by exposing

[32] I concur with David Jasper, who has commented to me that *Erring* is oddly 'a rather bookish book.' Walter Lowe, in his review article "A Deconstructionist Manifesto: Mark C. Taylor's *Erring*," also notes the text's systematic nature, writing: 'The reader may be relieved to discover that this celebration of errancy exhibits, in its broad outline, a remarkable clarity of structure' (p. 324). Still, out of respect to Taylor's insistence that *Erring* is not properly a Book, nor a proper Book (which I agree is true), I will refer to *Erring* as a *text* or *work* rather than as a *B/book*.

some inconsistency (in fact, it is unfair to think of these features as inconsistent) but rather to indicate the delicate boundary that Taylor's writing "errs" along, this tenuous line between theology and a/theology – a boundary represented by the "/" that both separates and joins *a-* and *theology*. Taylor clearly asserts that 'A/theology represents the liminal thinking of marginal thinkers. The "/" of a/theology (which, it is important to note, can be written but not spoken) marks the *limen* that signifies *both* proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority' (*E*, 12).[33] Carl Raschke, in his review of *Erring*, sheds additional light on a/theology's "/" when he writes 'The slash separating the prefix from the stem of Taylor's neologism suggests that his "a/theology" is a cancelling out of what we ordinarily mean by the "theological" venture....An a/theology is the "end" of theology itself.'[34] It could be said that the larger task of Taylor's a/theological work, most succinctly captured in the pages of *Erring*, is an attempt to think and to *write* (beyond) this "end" of theology, an end which the Western theo-philosophical tradition has left unthought – an end which is always drawing near(er) but is ever deferred and never finally arrives.[35] It is exactly this sense of inconclusion, this lack of closure, that produces the condition of erring, Taylor's titular metaphor, which is rich with layers of meaning. After a comprehensive analysis of the word's etymological potential, Taylor suggests that *erring* 'is "wandering, roaming; deviating from the right or intended course; missing the mark."' However, Taylor warns against associating a/theology with traditional atheism, pointing out that 'erring thought is

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[33] Taylor also writes that 'deconstructive criticism constantly errs along the / of neither/nor' (*E*, 11).

[34] Carl A. Raschke. "Review of *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*." p. 153.

[35] See Taylor's essay "The End(s) of Theology," in which he suggests that 'modern theology reaches a certain end in the death-of-God theology' (p. 239). Ergo, 'The infinite deferral of the end harbors an end that is not the end of theology. An end that is not the end of theology would be an end that is never present – an end that does not, indeed, cannot arrive' (p. 242). Significantly, Taylor borrows from Freud the term "parapraxis," stating 'To write parapraxically is to write the limit rather than to write about the limit' (p. 245). See also Taylor's essays "How to do Nothing with Words" (*T*, 203-31) and "Nothing Ending Nothing" (*TC*, 41-75).

neither *properly* theological nor nontheological, theistic nor atheistic, religious nor secular, believing nor nonbelieving' (*E*, 12).

After the four pillars have crumbled, we are destined to err, and that endlessly. Taylor's vision of erring,[36] in its lack of direction and "unavoidable...*radical* purposelessness" (*E*, 157), is an affront to the conventions of theology. Erring is, in one sense, the condition that theology traditionally seeks to suppress and overcome, and therefore a/theology goes against the grain. The condition of erring implicates all who attempt to write and think theologically in the wake of the death of God. After the erasure of God (Father, Creator, guarantor of meaning), Self (autonomous, rational Subject), History (tradition, ecclesial or otherwise), and Book (Bible, any absolute truth), the Subject finds himself in the role of Jesus' parabolic prodigal son. Taylor writes: 'Convinced that the father is dead, the prodigal is unable to believe in any prospect of return. He is, it seems, destined to err endlessly' (*E*, 143). In this sense, the only way that theological writing remains possible is through *kenosis*, self-emptying. By emptying itself of final or certain meaning, theological writing becomes a/theological. It reve(a)ls (in) the "play"[37] – that is, in the dramatic inter*act*ion of players and fools, and also in the duplicity of linguistic meaning and the plurality of the postmodern condition. But this is not simply a project or experiment of thinking. With Altizerian overtones, Taylor makes the case that 'the death of God is realized in a radical christology in which the incarnate word is read as writing' (*E*, 158). Erring is *praxis*, and therefore, to write erringly is by nature performative – it is the unending performance of (a) play.

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[36] To distinguish Taylor's *text* (*Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*) from the a/theological vision described therein, note that '*Erring*' (capitalized and in italics) refers to the text itself, while "Erring" or "erring" will be used when discussing the condition, event, paradigm, phenomenon, etc. described in Taylor's a/theological writing(s).

[37] See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. 'Play is the disruption of presence…Play is always play of absence and presence…Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around' (p. 369).

This section will examine Taylor's a/theology according to the vision of erring set forth in *Erring*. As will become evident, a deconstructive a/theology can only issue forth from the deconstruction of the four foundational pillars. Interestingly, despite its professed non-foundationalism, Taylor's work is utterly dependent upon this deconstructive "event" for its foundation. Since, as Taylor has famously stated, '*deconstruction is the "hermeneutic" of the death of God*' (*E*, 6 – italics in original), the "death of God" is the lynch-pin of a/theology. Whether an event in the life of God, an attempt to free the Divine from the word/symbol "God," or simply a description of the condition of a godless universe,[38] without the presupposition of the death or absence of God, Taylor's (post-)structure topples. In fact, as Susan Wennemyr points out in her insightful essay, Taylor's work makes several assumptions akin to the 'leaps of faith' upon which ecclesial theology relies.[39] In the same way that Taylor cannot manage to fully escape the conventions of language, form or genre, neither, it seems, can he rid himself of the necessity of faith. As writing emerges as the *divine milieu*, faith in God is exchanged for faith in writing – and indeed, to have faith in *writing*, after the crisis of language ushered in by Saussure via the post-structuralists, is just as unreasonable as a faith in the Divine. But of course, Taylor never claims that *Erring*/erring or a/theology is the least bit rational or reasonable. Rather, it is more akin to what John Schad calls 'Christian Unreason.'[40]

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[38] See Altizer and Hamilton, pp. 14-15 for a list of the possible meanings of the "death of God."

[39] See Susan E. Wennemyr, "Dancing in the Dark: Deconstructive A/theology Leaps with Faith."

[40] See John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida*.

Death of God – God as Writing

Erring begins where it already finds itself to be – at an end.[41] This end, which is the "end" of God, is the beginning and ending, the Alpha and Omega, that becomes the *means* (middle, centre) of a deconstructive a/theology. While its genesis is often thought to be with the declaration of Nietzsche's madman, the roots of the death of God begin · even earlier. As Taylor writes, 'The eclipse of belief in God did not suddenly appear on the horizon' (*E*, 3), and indeed the 200 years beginning with Descartes and leading up to Nietzsche do not spring from nowhere but *do* reach a certain prophetic fulfilment in the proclamation of the death of God. The 17th and 18th centuries were characterised by a profound confidence in freedom and human reason. Since throughout modernity, freedom is associated with autonomy, 'The explicit goal of the fight for mastery and against domination was independent selfhood' (*E*, 22). Of course, the quest for the Self begins much earlier than Descartes' indubitable, doubting *cogito*. Taylor sets about revealing the self as a relatively recent invention, the history of which begins with St. Augustine's *Confessions* and ends with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, writing 'If portraiture and self-portraiture were impossible *before* Augustine, they are no longer possible *after* Hegel' (*E*, 35).[42] He rightly points to the autobiographical *Confessions* of St. Augustine as the beginning of the self-reflexive quest for the Self. Nowhere is there found a better example of the Self seeking to identify itself according to its relationship to the Divine. St. Augustine, "knowing" the God who is Trinity, seeks (but never fully succeeds) to understand his own Self according to some triune figuration. Augustine's example sets the tone, in a sense, for all of Western philosophy and theology,

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[41] See *E*, p. 3. From Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 162: 'We must begin *wherever we are*...in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.'

[42] In Thomas Altizer's contrasting view, the Self finds it beginning on the cross – in the negation of God's Self, in which God becomes fully incarnate, even unto death. See Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*.

culminating, according to Taylor, in the Protestant Reformation, captured in Martin Luther's doctrine of *pro nobis* – that Christ exists *for us*. This focus on the individual human subject is carried to its logical extreme in and throughout the project of modernity.

Taylor asserts that the relationship between God and humankind, Creator and creature, is figured according to the hierarchical economy of master and slave – that is, as with Augustine, humankind historically seeks to define the Self in subservient relation to a Creator-God. Therefore, the quest for the Self necessarily results in the slave's quest to overcome the master. This oppositional logic requires that the master be expunged for the Self to become free and autonomous. Descartes' pursuit of truth leads him to doubt everything he knows or perceives until he is left with the only indubitable thing – his own doubting self. Taylor writes that 'Descartes radicalized doubt' and, 'in a move destined to change the face of the earth,' he then 'identified truth with certainty' (*E*, 22). In this way, while never stating it as such, Descartes foretells the death of God in the *cogito ergo sum*. If *I think, therefore I am*, it follows that if *I think God (not), therefore God is (not)*.

Nietzsche seemingly understood the consequences of modernity's emphasis on the individual, rational *ego*. In the literary creation of his madman, Nietzsche himself becomes the madman, the idiot, the absurd court jester who in the face of such (social, intellectual) formality is the only one who gets away with speaking truth.[43] The madman, seeking God amongst the people but finding Him nowhere, responds to his detractors with the now-famous statement: 'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.' Of course, this word has 'come too early.' The madman realises, 'my

[43] Compare with Carl Raschke's comment in his review of *Erring*: 'Perhaps Taylor has deliberately set about to play the part of the voluble jester tinkling his bells before the drunken monarch and his cynical retainer' (p. 156).

time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of man.' Nietzsche, via his madman, offers no cure but only exposes the wound for what it is – a universe without its Creator, 'plunging continually… Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions' – a universe wandering, erring, 'straying as through an infinite nothing.'[44] Still, humankind is not prepared to receive this prophecy, and remains so until it is prepared to face the failure of modernity that is, in one sense, marked by the horrors of the Holocaust and the bombastic end of World War II.[45] Within 20 years of *this* "end" of modernity (which is also a "beginning" of postmodernity), a handful of errant theologians begin the task of setting out their "death of God" theology.

Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton's publication of *Radical Theology and the Death of God* in 1966 marks the first expressly theological attempt to account for the "death of God." Like Hegel and others before them, Altizer and Hamilton attempt to make sense of a world without God – a world that had endured the trauma of two world wars and, with America's involvement in Vietnam, found itself potentially on the cusp of another. In their introduction, the co-authors lay out ten possible interpretations of what is meant by the "event" of the "death of God." Among those most significant to Taylor's work are: '1. That there is no God and that there never has been… 3. That the idea of God and the word God itself are in need of radical reformation. Perhaps totally new words are needed; perhaps a decent silence about God should be observed… 10. …that our language about God is always inadequate and imperfect.'[46] For Altizer, specifically, the death of God is inextricably bound to Christ's death on the cross, and for this reason

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[44] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 125. In Kaufmann, ed. *The Portable Nietzsche*. pp. 95-96.

[45] See Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen, *Imagologies*. 'Modernity ended on August 6, 1945. The postmodern condition we are living is not simply the result of having been raised on television. As the children of Hiroshima, we have always known that modernity is a nightmare from which we must awake.' § "Telepolitics." p. 2.

[46] Altizer and Hamilton, pp. 14-15. See also Altizer, *Christian Atheism*.

his remains a gospel of profoundly *Christian*, or at least christological, atheism. Taylor follows Altizer when he writes,

> The main contours of deconstructive a/theology begin to emerge with the realization of the necessary interrelation between the death of God and radical christology. Radical christology is *thoroughly* incarnational – the divine *"is"* the incarnate word. Furthermore, this embodiment of the divine is the death of God. With the appearance of the divine that is not only itself but is at the same time other, the God who alone is God disappears. The death of God is the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar. Incarnation *irrevocably* erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script enacted in the infinite play of interpretation. To understand incarnation as inscription is to discover the word. Embodied word is script(ure), the writing in which we are inscribed and which we inscribe. Like all writing, the carnal word is transgressive. Inscription inverts the traditional understanding of the God-world relationship and subverts all forms of transcendence. A/theology is, in large measure, a critique of the notion of the transcendent God... (*E*, 103-04)

As the transcendent becomes immanent with the incarnation of the Word (*Logos*) made flesh, God relinquishes God's divinity – God becomes man to be *with us*. Therefore the incarnate Christ, known as a then historical and now ecclesial *presence*, marks the absence of the transcendent God. I will give more attention later how Taylor distinguishes himself from Altizer in subtle but significant ways. Still, it is apparent that Altizer's work is extremely influential and significant to Taylor's deconstructive a/theology.

In a similar way that Augustine's inward quest might involve *looking away* from God so as to see his own reflexive Self,[47] for Taylor turning away from God is the necessary by-product of modernity's turn toward the Self. In attempting to free the created son from the Creative Sun, humankind is forced to "kill off" the Father/Creator God – in this way, it is the En*light*enment that ironically plunges the universe into the darkness and shadows of the death of God. While Taylor claims that his a/theology in no

[47] Augustine, *Confessions*. § 8.7. 'O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself. For I had placed myself behind my own back, refusing to see myself. You were setting me before my own eyes' (p. 169).

way seeks to recover lost presence, I wonder if his construal of writing as the *divine milieu* is not, in some way, a sort of recovery. The deconstruction of the old notions of God makes way for writing to emerge, a reconstruction of sorts. And yet this is a writing – like Derrida's *écriture*, both "writing" and "scripture" – which has lost every vestige of certainty, a writing that issues from and in fact *is* the freeplay of language. In the same way that the old notions of an absolute God unravel with the death of God, so also do the old notions of certainty in language fall apart into semantic play after Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Glimpsing now the "end" of the Book and the "beginning" of writing (wherein "writing" implies a shiftiness of meaning), Taylor suggests that '[w]riting presupposes, on the one hand, that origin is inaccessible and originality illusory and, on the other hand, that ends are elusive and definitive conclusions impossible' (*E*, 98). It may be that Taylor's connection between the Divine and writing is another "leap of faith," and yet this understanding of the Divine and/as writing/*écriture* becomes the paradigm for a radically relational conception of textuality. Like the radically interrelated Trinity, writing can now only be understood as radical intertextuality, for as Taylor writes, 'Since each text becomes itself in relation to other texts, every text implies a difference that dislocates its proper identity...This irreducible relativity constitutes every text an intertext' (*E*, 178). In this view, writing becomes slippery, impossible to hold on to, for 'Words are incurable, scripture holey' (*E*, 110). It is always scattering, disseminating, and running away – it is a freeplay that is also a playing freely 'along this boundless boundary [where] the word appears divine' (*E*, 116). Writing, and all language, now emptied of meaning, becomes a *kenotic* event, and this is central to understanding Taylor when he writes that 'Scripture *is* the divine milieu, and the divine milieu *is* writing' (*E*, 116).[48] As we shall discover in following sections, this

[48] The kenotic nature of language/writing will be discussed further in section IV. See *E*, p. 118.

understanding of writing, of words, relates to the Story of the God-man, the *Logos* made flesh, in the Gospel narrative, for it is only by the death of the Word that humanity might be saved – saved from the need and desire to overcome some primal lack with saving presence.

Disappearance of the Self – Self as Trace

If the quest for the Self ushers in the death of God, the death of God reciprocally instigates the disappearance of the Self. This unqualified corollary might be legitimated with a further explication of the relationship between the Self and God, understood as creature and Creature, son and Father, the Hegelian notion of slave and master. The desire of the slave to overthrow and become the master, ultimately resulting in the death of the master – a sort of *patricide* – can be understood as the slave's desire for mastery or dominance. But as such, the oppositional hierarchies remain in place. This overthrow is not a shattering of the broader problem, which is the system of domination, but simply an inversion of the relationship between the two. As has been stated, the Self, then, moves from an identity once defined according to an "other" – the Creator-God – to one which is self-authenticating, as expressed by Descartes' *cogito*. However, this inversion maintains the struggle for mastery and eventually leads to the unavoidable disappearance of the Self. That is, without an "other" against which to define itself, the Self vanishes along with the "other" of the Creator-God. No longer can the Self be thought of as created in *imago dei*.

Taylor employs *naming/nomination* as his trope for understanding the disappearance of the Self. In modernity, 'To be a self is to possess and to be possessed by a name' (*E*, 34). But this unravels with the death of God which solicits the disappearance of the Self. Names are erased, and all that remains are traces, present only

in profound absence. The Garden of Eden is mythologically the 'the primal scene...of nomination – a scene of naming and being named' (*E*, 34). Just as man receives his name from God, man receives the power of nomination from God, and along with it, mastery over the rest of creation. This is an example of the creature doing the work of the Creator, and by a sort of reverse logic, the only way to disperse the hierarchical economy of domination, between God and man, and man and nature, is to "un-do" the nomination of and nominatory capacity of humankind. This points to what Taylor calls the 'thoroughly specular' relationship between God and man wherein 'each mirrors the other' (*E*, 35). In a thorough discussion of the subjectivity and "Being-ness" of God, who identifies Godself in voicing the "I AM,"[49] Taylor concludes that human subjectivity is conceived according to divine subjectivity, which is fully self-authenticating and self-reflexive.

Therefore, to be a Self, which is to possess and be possessed *by* a name, is also to be one who *possesses* – to possess property, to be a proprietor – and to be "proper." To be a Self is also to be present, to be present *in the present*. Furthermore, just like the God who is One but also Three, the Self begins to reveal the identity of its own interior difference. Taylor reminds us that 'From a monotheistic perspective, to be is to be one,' and thus the Self seeks to gain 'its most precious possession – itself....The property of personality suggests that owning is oneing and oneing is owning' (*E*, 41-42). Here again Augustine provides an understanding which proves to be a *pharmakon*, both poison and cure, problem and solution.[50] Augustine, in his attempt to understand the Self according to some God-mirroring triune figuration, eventually settles on the fact that he may only know himself through a process of remembering himself. Therefore, the identity of the

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[49] For more on the "I AM," see Thomas Altizer's *The Self-Embodiment of God*, especially Ch. IV, "Incarnation" (pp. 63-80).

[50] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. See "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 61-171, especially pp. 95-117 on the *pharmakon*.

self is located not in the present but in the past, and is therefore, in a sense, dis-located. Expounding on this, Taylor writes:

> Nomination, therefore, is not a simple act of presentation, it is, instead, the complex activity of representation...representation can only re-present a presence/present that never is and never can be fully realized... presentation invariably opens the gap it seeks to close....Inasmuch as all presentation is representation, the subject's struggle to secure identity and establish a proper name *inevitably* fails....Like Alice gazing into the looking glass, the reflective/reflexive subject discovers an uncanny hole, through which it disappears. (*E*, 48)

In this dis-possession of the Self, 'Apparent "selving" is actual "unselving" (*E*, 51). Therefore, it becomes necessary for the Self to understand itself and seek coherence by crafting and possessing narratives which allow the Self to construct a symbolic "narrative self" which it may (re)present to itself. The Self seeks a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and end by which, to adapt Nietzsche,[51] to 'tell the Self to itself' – or more appropriately for Taylor, to '*write* the Self to itself.' As difference in identity and identity in difference emerge as the essential nature of the Self, Taylor suggests that, 'In the effort to secure its identity and establish its presence, the self discovers its unavoidable difference and irrepressible absence....The search for self-presence in self-consciousness leads to the discovery of the absence of the self' (*E*, 50). Just as in Christian theology the presence of God is mediated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, and it is the dis-possession and loss – the irreducible absence – of this particular Self (Christ) that leads to grace, so also the constructed human Subject is, now, always the object of its own self-scrutiny and subject to mediation. In this way, 'The journey to selfhood turns out to be a dangerous voyage – nothing less than the way of the cross....Within the space of the trace is inscribed a cross that marks the site of the disappearance of the self' (*E*, 51). If this appears similar to a

[51] In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes, 'I tell my life to myself.' See Walter Kaufman's translation in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 677.

Buddhist understanding of the "no-self," it is perhaps no accident.[52] Several have identified in Taylor's work hints of such Eastern influence which on the surface appears antithetical to the Western binary oppositions he is so intent to deconstruct.[53] In Taylor's vision, the dispossessed and ultimately disappear-ed/ing Self becomes merely the *trace* of the Self – identity is sacrificed and proper names are erased. Wandering errantly with no God and no Self, the Self becomes an "err-er," an *error*, the unvanquishable mark left by the erasure of the Self.

Taylor carries out the abnegation of the Self in Chapter 6 of *Erring*, discussing the way that the name and the signature are evidence that the Self is under erasure, attempting to mark the presence of what is truly an absence, and placing the Self, now the *trace*, within a network of radical interrelation. The ""trace" retains a radical ambiguity. A trace is neither properly present nor absent – it is, in some sense, at the same time present and absent....[The] trace can be represented by the *cross* that marks the place where identity and difference, as well as presence and absence, repeatedly intersect. Always in transition and constantly in the "middest," the trace is irrepressibly liminal and ever erring' (*E*, 138). Naturally, the absence of the Self is also the absence of the author, just as the impossibility of possession, property and propriety renders authority and authorship equally impossible. Recall the specular relationship between Creator and creature; hence, the death of the Author-God is simultaneous with the death of the human author. Whereas the self-possessed Self seeks to be whole and centred, the trace is without a centre, is ex-centric and appears eccentric (*E*, 139). Derrida claims that

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[52] See Thomas J. J. Altizer. *The Contemporary Jesus*, especially Ch. 9, "The Buddhist Jesus" (pp. 161-83).

[53] See, for example, Wyschogrod, et al., "On Deconstructing Theology: A Symposium on *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*," especially pp. 526, 537, and 553. See also Carl Raschke's review of *Erring* in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54/1 (1986), 153-56.

'The absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author,'[54] which serves to illuminate *Erring*'s first sentences: 'If authorship is never original but is always a play that is an interplay, then clearly "I" did not write this text. Or at least "I" alone did not write it' (*E*, xi).[55] This absence of an A/author presents a dilemma to the conventions of theology. As Taylor points out, 'When man is represented as the image of God, the self also appears to be self-identical, self-present, and self-conscious. The *proper* theological subject is the solitary self, whose self-consciousness assumes the form of an individual "I" that defines itself by opposition to and transcendence of other isolated subjects. Such a self is primarily and essentially a *unique individual*' (*E*, 130). Ergo, the disappearance of the Self problematises the theological enterprise by extinguishing its subject, the "I," *and* its object, God.

End of History – Mazing the Middest

Taylor identifies that 'History...grows out of the ceaseless struggle for transcendence' and 'amounts to an unending search for a presence that saves' (*E*, 151). But as shall become apparent, for Taylor this originary saving presence for which humanity unendingly searches is irrecoverable because it is a characteristic of a beginning that never was. Taylor points out that 'History, as well as self, is a theological notion' and 'a relatively recent invention. Indeed, there can be no individual self apart from history and no history without the individual subject' (*E*, 53-54). Here the interconnection between God, Self, History and Book comes more clearly into focus. If the death of God and the disappearance of the Self are inextricably bound, it is certain that the failure of these two pillars will quickly lead to the failure of the remaining two,

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[54] Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. p. 363.

[55] From here, Taylor goes on to recognise those 'who are always already "within" the tangled lines of *Erring*,' including, naturally, the names of Thomas Altizer and Jacques Derrida.

finally toppling the structure of Western thought. Taylor marks the "age" of History in a similar manner that he bookends the era of the Self: with Augustine and Hegel. Just as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* brings to a close what began with Augustine's *Confessions*, so also Hegel's *Philosophy of History* 'completes and subverts [Augustine's] *City of God*' (*E*, 54).

Taylor's understanding of History in *Erring* is heavily dependent on the myth of Ariadne's thread. In this story, which Taylor recounts in chapter 3, Theseus undertakes the slaying of a troublesome Minotaur imprisoned in a labyrinth. Ariadne, having been given the secret to the labyrinth by its creator, imparts this wisdom to Theseus so as to secure the success of his endeavour. She gives Theseus a thread which enables him to locate the Minotaur in the labyrinth and then re-trace his way back out of the maze. Taylor employs Ariadne's thread as a metaphor for the line of History's narrative, which 'presents events as interrelated episodes within a coherent pattern, which emerges progressively. A narrative construes scattered events as meaningful by inscribing them in an intelligible story' (*E*, 63). History presents – makes present in the present – its story in the form of narrative. 'Narrativization ties together the separate threads of chronicle by forming a centred structure with a definite beginning, middle, and end. This reading of narrative helps to explain the structure of history *as a whole*' (*E*, 64). Narratives shape worlds, and narratives thought to explain ultimate reality tend to become "sacred" narrative, which by necessity have easily identifiable beginnings, middles and ends – such as *creation, fall* and *redemption* – and leave no loose ends.

Yet, like Ariadne's thread, narrative coherence only exists inasmuch as it is constructed, re-traced by going back over ground that has already been traversed. Accordingly, it could be said that the events of History have no interconnection except in hindsight. As the fabrication of the Self (now deconstructed) looking back, narrative

centeredness or coherence is proved to be impossible, and this suggests the end of history. The contemporary, postmodern context is one in which 'the centre cannot hold.'[56] Narratives have lost their centre as, following Lyotard, legitimating narratives in the end deconstruct themselves. As History, and the narratives of History, are revealed as the attempt of the Self to deny death by asserting authority, the unity or autonomy of narratives proves to be as elusive and illusory as the unified or autonomous Self creating the narrative. Taylor elucidates this, writing:

> It is possible that there *is* more "imagination" and "fairy tale" in history than most people are willing to acknowledge....To say that history is an "imaginative construction" is not to imply that it is "unreal." The fanciful dimension of history does, however, suggest that "reality" is, in some sense, imaginative. The careful examination of history subverts the sharp distinction between historical fact and fiction. To the extent that history involves narrative it is, like the centered self, ineluctably literary rather than literal....Beginning, middle, and end, as well as the connective narrative thread, are "summational fictions."[57] (*E*, 66-67)

Just as for Nietzsche 'truth is a fiction whose fictive status has been forgotten' (*DC*, 15-16),[58] so History, it seems, though it may be forgotten to be so, never escapes its imaginative core. Like the Self, History is a literary construction, and without a Self serving as its subject, the narratives of History fragment and scatter.

History, then, can be understood as the Self's attempt to deny death by *presenting* Itself with a coherent plot. 'Just as the self-reflexion of the autobiographer interiorizes experiences that otherwise seem only externally related, so the plot of history assembles apparently discrete episodes into a coherent whole' (*E*, 70). Humankind finds itself 'Suspended between a past that has been lost and a future not yet possessed,' and stuck in 'the domain of discontent and restlessness, or striving and strife. Within the bounds of

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[56] William Butler Yeats. "The Second Coming." Quoted in Taylor (*E*, 3).

[57] According to his endnotes, Taylor is here borrowing from Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As if."*

[58] See Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (*DC*, 216-19), excerpted from Kaufman's *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 42-47. Kaufman's translation reads 'truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.'

history, dissatisfied and unhappy subjects struggle to save presence by seeking saving presence' (*E*, 68). Since History is, in one sense, the (hi)story of the relationship between God and humankind – that is, of the interaction between God(s) and Selves – and since God is looked to as the guarantor of Truth, Ariadne's thread unravels with the death of God and the disappearance of the Self. Without the thread, Theseus is abandoned, lost within the maze.

It is the subject's struggle for mastery in the pursuit of presence that exposes a profound lack which is original and irreducible. 'For the guilty subject, lack is an acquired deficiency rather than an "original" incompletion' (*E*, 152). This 'guilty subject' is enslaved to the 'law' of History by his need to say 'No' to death. Here Taylor's vision of erring comes more clearly into focus, for if historical narratives are only the creative literary devices of Selves attempting to navigate what is, in reality, an endless, meaningless maze, the only viable option is to accept, even celebrate, this condition as grace. The errant outlaw breaks the law of History because, 'In the gratuitous play of the wor(l)d, and the gracious wor(l)d of play, the errant trace is a graceful out-law' (*E*, 160). The only way to avoid the guilt which 'eventually leads to a revolt against *oneself*' (*E*, 152) is to be content in the wilderness – to be a happy wanderer, an erring outlaw. Taylor writes: 'Insofar as the outlaw is not only a heretic who transgresses but also a subversive who breaks the (power of the) law, erring points to the ways of grace. Erring is serpentine wandering that comes, if at all, by grace – grace that is mazing' (*E*, 150). Therefore, since the beginning (creation) and end (redemption) of History can no longer be guaranteed by a transcendent God, all that remains is the wilderness of the middle.

Taylor equates the middle with the desert, which is not our destination – as erring is aimless, it has no *telos*, no end goal but which must be *passed through endlessly*, for

there is no past to be recovered nor future to be hoped for. The labyrinth of the desert becomes, for Taylor, the carnival, wherein errors reveal and revel in the carnality of their incarnation-ality. The error embodies his errancy in the grotesqueness of his mortal body. In a phenomenon not unlike Nietzschean eternal recurrence, the endless play of language which results in the endless erring through the mazing desert becomes a sort of hall of mirrors, where every presentation is a representation, and reality is indistinguishable from illusion. Margins, *limen*, boundary, desert, wilderness, labyrinth, maze, hall of mirrors, fun house, carnival – all become for Taylor tropes for his vision of erring, the traversal or transgression of the *limits* by the trace of the Self.

As History endures the same erasure as God and the Self, the structure becomes that much more unstable. Taylor's dissolution of these pillars – God, Self, History, and Book – is, in one sense, not their deconstruction, but their reduction to the 'middest,' the middle, the *milieu*. 'Within the divine milieu, creation and destruction, life and death, are forever joined' (*E*, 168). Altizer concludes his work *Total Presence* by writing, 'Not only is the only true paradise the paradise that we have lost, but the only regained paradise is the final loss of paradise itself.'[59] Taylor reminds us that 'This loss is grace' (*E*, 168). Therefore, as all is reduced to the middle, the *mean(s)* of grace, God becomes the incarnate Christ, who suffers death on the cross; Self becomes non-self in radical interrelationality neither affirmed nor negated by *altarity*, the difference of identity and the identity of difference; History becomes the Fall, eternal fallenness, the endless desert of the middle; and the Book becomes "unbound," boundless stories of only middles with no beginnings or endings, which err endlessly as the bindings come unglued and the pages scatter in the wind. Our exile to the margins of the wilderness is eternal, and not

[59] Thomas J. J. Altizer. *Total Presence*. p. 108.

to be mourned but celebrated – impossible selves joined in impossible, invisible communities that 're-Joyce'[60] in their erring.

Closure of the Book – Opening of Text(uality)

The Western tradition, which grants truth purchase to the narratives of History, regards the Book as the receptacle of historical truth. Similar to the specular relationship between the Self and God, the structure of the Book mirrors the (hi)stories inscribed on its pages. Just as History is considered a coherent narrative with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end – and therefore deemed "true" – so also is the Book a coherent, clearly defined entity, a container of truth. And yet, this understanding of the Book cannot be maintained after the deconstruction of History ushered in by the death of God and the dispossession or erasure of the Self.[61] Since 'Every "proper" book bears a signature – a signature that is a sign or mark,' the Book cannot survive without an Author. 'The distinguishing mark of the sign is its tendency to point beyond itself to something it signifies. In the case of a book, the sign points to the one who signs. Signature, in other words, refers to author' (*E*, 80). Ergo, after the four pillars have

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[60] *E*, 163. As *Finnegans Wake* is amongst the finest literary examples of what could be described as a *boundless* text, Taylor often turns to James Joyce (and Joyce's protégé Samuel Beckett) in the latter chapters of *Erring* to embody – flesh out – his notion of 'erring scripture.'

[61] It is important to note that while these four events – the "ends" of God, Self, History and Book – may at first appear to occur in this particular succession, a chain reaction or 'domino effect' (Taylor employs this phrase in the title of his response essay in Wyschogrod, et al., op. cit.), the crumbling of these four pillars actually occurs simultaneously. These four foundations are so radically interdependent that to compromise the integrity of any one necessarily destroys the others, toppling the entire structure of Western thought. I am reminded of the broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964, by Stein and Harnick, based on the stories of Sholom Aleichem), in which the central character, Tevye, struggling with looming cultural changes, sings a song entitled "Tradition." The song, which is reprised several times and provides a vital motif throughout the show, contains two lines that are particularly relevant to this discussion: 'One little time, you pull out a prop, and where does it stop?...Pull out a thread, and where has it led?' Indeed, without these four foundations, the traditions of the West are as shaky and unstable as a fiddler on the roof. And yet some (Peter Hodgson, for example) have questioned whether engaging in such errant semantic play as Taylor celebrates is the ethical equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns. While I am convinced that it is *not*, my defence of this conviction will emerge as this thesis develops (see fn. 135 for more).

crumbled, it is as ludicrous to suggest that an A/author is the proprietor of his or her writing as it is to say that a book is the property or possession of its A/author(s). Accordingly, the Book has theological co(i)mplications because 'Christianity is a religion of the book, and the West is a book culture' (*E*, 76), and naturally 'God is not just any author, nor is His book just any book. God is the Author of authors who dictates the Book of books. For this reason, God is the Author to whom all authors finally defer, and His Book is the Book to which all books ultimately refer' (*E*, 81). Taylor points out that 'when the book is normative, theology tends to be systematic....If, however, we now stand "beyond" the closure of the book, then it seems likely that systematic theology is at an end' (*E*, 79). If writing is the *divine milieu*, and if, as Taylor suggests, theology has reached a certain end (if an end which never finally arrives), it follows that 'the theologian who realizes the implications of the closure of the book must become a "writer"' (*E*, 79). The a/theologian, then, must be(come) a writer, and the writer, consciously or not, is the a/theologian *par excellence*.

To write (at) the end of theology means writing without end – and in this sense, '*E/erring is endless*' (*E*, 184).[62] Taylor's notion of the Book is coterminous with his understanding of History and, therefore, time. He conjures up the image of the Book as a Scroll, the closure of which involves the act of *rolling up* the scroll. In this form, the beginning and end are brought together in closest proximity to one another, forming a circular boundary around the text. While the covers of the Book denote a certain linearity, the circuity of the Scroll lends itself to a circular construction of narrative and time. But Taylor reminds us that 'Both circle and line are *forms of closure* and *figures of*

[62] See also Taylor's essay "How to do Nothing with Words" (*T*, 203-31), in which he writes: 'To write beyond the end of theology is to write the lack of language that is (a) nothing other than the nothing of silence....To write the "beyond" that is not the end of theology, it is necessary to write in a way that is nonreferential without being self-reflexive' (*T*, 223). Elsewhere Taylor notes that 'Literature writes the end of philosophy by writing without end' (*DC*, 34). The same could be said for the relationship of *writing* to this end (of theology).

plenitude that serve as *totalizing metaphors*' (*E*, 70) which prove inadequate once the pursuit of presence is forsaken, and which expose the Book as fundamentally logocentric. The only presence (authorial, narrative, etc.) in the Book is, in this (dis)figuration, the presence of (an) absence. Taylor asserts that 'The circularity of the volume reflects the closure of the book' (*E*, 77) and the absent presence/present absence contained therein. After being wrapped around and around itself, coiled up like a serpent, the middle of the scroll – the "body" of this would-be narrative – is only empty space, a void, an absence.

To explore the idea of the Book, Taylor employs the concepts of Hegel's *encyclopedia* and the labyrinthine "Library of Babel" in the short story of that title by Jorge Luis Borges.[63] The encyclopedia, literally meaning 'the circle of learning,' 'must assume the shape of a circle' and is therefore thoroughly systematic: utterly complete, internally organised, self-referential and self-sufficient (*E*, 78-79). Contrast this with Borges' Library of Babel which, although on first glance appearing to be so, proves to be anything *but* systematic. Instead of encyclopedic – circuitous and insular – in structure, the library is an *endless* labyrinth which in(de)finitely repeats itself and extends in(de)finitely in every direction. The universe of Borges' library consists of hexagonal galleries – all identical, all interconnected via portals in ceilings, floors and walls. Each gallery contains precisely the same number of shelves, which hold the same quantity of books, each made up of the same number of pages and lines of text. However upon examination, the characters of these "books" appear completely random, devoid of meaning, bearing no correspondence to one another or (with rare exception) to anything resembling decipherable inscription. Borges writes: 'For every rational line or forthright

[63] Taylor here refers to Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* and Borges "Library of Babel," which was first published in a collection appropriately entitled *Labyrinths*. See Taylor's discussion of Borges' Library (*E*, 75-76) and his discussion of Hegel's encyclopedia (*E*, 78-79).

statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency.'[64] This textual cacography results in the spoken linguistic cacophony of the library, for 'it is true that a few miles to the right...language devolves into dialect and that ninety floors above, it becomes incomprehensible' (*LB*, 114). As the library contains no two identical books, it is believed to contain all possible books: 'all that is able to be expressed, in every language. *All* – the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs...' and on and on (*LB*, 115). While this understanding of the library leads some to fabricate systems of religious belief, 'Infidels claim that the rule in the Library is not "sense," but "non-sense"' (*LB*, 117). Borges' writing, in the end, reveals itself as a mirror of that which it discusses, and in this way Borges does not write *about* the cacography of the Library of Babel so much as he actually attempts to *write* this very cacography.

> To speak is to commit tautologies. This pointless, verbose epistle exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons – as does its refutation. (A number *n* of the possible languages employ the same vocabulary; in some of them, the *symbol* "library" possesses the correct definition "everlasting ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries," while a library – the thing – is a loaf of bread or a pyramid or something else, and the six words that define it themselves have other definitions. You who read me – are you certain you understand my language?) (*LB*, 118)

As such, the story is a non-story, without a plot, with no proper beginning, middle or end. In fact, the story "ends" with a footnote which further (un)veils the concept of the library/Book:

> ...the vast Library is pointless; strictly speaking, all that is required is *a single volume*, of the common size, printed in nine- or ten-point type, that would consist of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages....each apparent page would open into other similar pages; the inconceivable middle page would have no "back." (*LB*, 118)

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[64] Jorge Luis Borges. *Collected Fictions*. pp. 114. Further references to "The Library of Babel" will be abbreviated *LB* and cited in-text.

When the dispossessed "narrator" of this "story" writes 'The certainty that everything has already been written annuls us, or renders us phantasmal' (*LB*, 118), he expresses that which Taylor would have us believe about writing after the "end" of God (Author) and the Self (author): that

> the text is radically open. It is neither self-contained nor definitively bound in a single volume. A text is more like a fabric with loose ends than a hemmed cloth... Since each text becomes itself in relation to other texts, every text implies a difference that dislocates its proper identity...every text [is] an intertext. (*E*, 178)
>
> The fabric(ation) of intertextuality not only lacks beginning and middle; it has no end. Texts forever cross and crisscross in a perpetual process of interweaving... The meaning of a text, therefore, is never fully present. Meaning is always in the process of forming, deforming, and reforming. (*E*, 179)

We therefore discover in the mazing grace of the wilderness Taylor's nomadic 'erring scripture,' which 'renders meaning both transitional and transitory. Floating signifiers yield only migratory meaning' (*E*, 175). 'Having realized that the text is never his own, the author acknowledges his lack of authority. In staging what he had believed to be his wordplay, the writer eventually learns that scripture is the endless play of the word that dispossesses every subject....[The] author discovers that "his" proper name is an empty trace – an erased mark' (*E*, 181). The error, whom Taylor elsewhere calls an 'outlaw,' is then related to Borges' 'infidel,' who realises that the rule is not "sense" but "non-sense" – for whom every saying is an unsaying and writing the end that is not the end means (not) writing (not) without end. In *Erring*/erring, 'The meaning of shifty mark(s) and shifting signs can never be fixed securely' (*E*, 174), and the 'truth can never be pinned/penned down' (*E*, 176). Embodying this, Taylor has produced a work that elides definitive interpretation – an "impossible" B/book written by a 'shifty M/mark' who acknowledges that '*there can be no such thing as proper or literal meaning*. Meaning is always improper – it is more literary than literal' (*E*, 174). Like Borges,

Taylor's text enacts his own discussion – namely, the labyrinthine structure of texts, of meaning, and by in(de)finite extension, of everything. Taylor's use of repetition – like his use of words purloined from others; like the (post-)structure of his text; like his implementation of metaphor and ambiguity – is an enactment or embodiment of his very argument. The/"his" text is the impossible possibility of all textuality. In the frayed lines of the/his text, we find ourselves entangled in Ariadne's thread; lost with no hope, but no desire, to be found, as we know that 'This loss is grace' (*E*, 168). In the wilderness, 'truth is unbecoming' (*E*, 176), a progression that is a digression – a trespass. It is the endless transgression which has always already been committed, and as such alleviates the need for forgiveness.

III. (Dis)Locating: A/theology in (Christian) Context

The meaning of shifty mark(s)...can never be fixed securely.
(*E*, 174)

Overview

Having outlined the primary characteristics of Taylor's a/theology, the task now is to situate a/theology within a particular, and a particularly Christian, theological tradition. Just as the death of God suggested by Hegel, prophesied by Nietzsche and described by Altizer did not simply appear unannounced on the horizon, neither does deconstructive a/theology spring forth fully-formed from the autonomous mind of the Author. Indeed, as a/theology itself renders autonomy and authorship impossible, and as Taylor's a/theological writings are admittedly intertexts leading merely to other texts, it is both feasible and constructive to situate a/theology within a textual tradition from whence it draws its inspiration. In *Erring* and elsewhere, Taylor traces his own thought back to Hegel, occasionally glancing further back to Descartes and Kant, and when appropriate, to St. Augustine. But I suggest that Taylor's a/theology, and the tradition he identifies as his own, may also be understood as consistent with that of an even more ancient textual and performative tradition, a tradition often forgotten or repressed, but no less present for its absence. This tradition is afforded a certain return by the opening made by a/theology's effort to think beyond the totalising structures of Western oppositional binaries, to think in the space between and discover that which is radically other and consistently left unthought.

This section will undertake a similar sort of (re)tracing or back-tracking as is often characteristic of Taylor's own work. I will attend to the particular ways in which Taylor's a/theology emanates from (intentionally or not) or extends themes and trends

that are intrinsic to the Christian tradition. While I make no apologies for the seeming exclusivity of this focus, I would also assert that I am in no way attempting to totalise Taylor's a/theology by contriving for it a location within the "metanarrative" of Christianity – a currently fashionable theological vision that I do not wholly accept[65] – nor am I attempting to "Christianise" Taylor's a/theology by forcing it into consistency with the tenets of orthodox Christianity. I acknowledge that Taylor's work resists such totalisation, and that to understand his work in the first instance is to accept the impossibility of any such "metanarrativisation." What I shall attempt to do, in a mode that is more literary than anything else, is locate Taylor's work within a textual and performative tradition that also includes traces of the Christian tradition; to locate within the Christian tradition the repressed, unthought "other" to which Taylor's a/theology attempts to give voice; and to locate within Taylor's work a repressed, unthought glimmer of Christianity not as realised in 'the precincts once declared holy' (*RT*, 259)[66] but as realised in that disastrous moment of utter abandonment of the Cross – the silence that follows Jesus' despairing death-cry.

This section will unfold in two parts. In the first, I will bring Mark Taylor's deconstructive a/theology into what I hope will be a constructive dialogue with the gospel according to St. Mark.[67] It should be noted that I make no claim to be a biblical

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[65] I here wish to distinguish myself from the recent theological movement known as "radical orthodoxy." While their programme is one with which I share many affinities and similarities, I do not wish to appropriate or be appropriated by their (over-)reliance on legitimating metanarratives. Those associated with radical orthodoxy are perhaps a less loosely-defined group than they might appear on first glance. For example, the centrality of the Christian metanarrative in the work of John Milbank (e.g. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*) is much less a characteristic of the work of Graham Ward (e.g. *Cities of God*). For the definitive collection of essays and an excellent introduction to this school of thought, see John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*.

[66] Taylor's full statement here is: 'Worlds beyond the church – every church – have always seemed more fraught with religion than the world within the precincts once declared holy' (*RT*, 259).

[67] In an a/theology in which proper names are erased, it would appear ill-advised, if not simply asinine, to create such a dialogue solely on the basis of this nominatory coincidence. However, as

scholar, but rather I approach the text of St. Mark's gospel primarily as I would a literary text. When critical analysis of the gospel text should prove necessary, I will turn to two "authorities" that I have found most helpful, structuralist literary critic Frank Kermode and post-structuralist New Testament scholar Stephen D. Moore.[68] Not content to set up a one-way interpretive channel, I will endeavour to allow the "gospels" of St. Mark and Mark C. Taylor to *read each other* and when appropriate to read each other *through* other texts as well. Following this exercise, I will move forward several hundred years to examine the correspondences between Taylor's a/theology and the Christian mystical tradition, focusing on "The Mystical Theology" of Pseudo-Dionysius[69] and the sermons of Meister Eckhart (1260-1327?). While I do not claim that a/theology is synonymous with the *via negativa*, I would suggest that a textual similarity seems to emerge when their respective writings are read alongside one another.[70] The connections I wish to draw will further illustrate the textual and performative tradition shared by these various texts – a tradition that does not find its place in the centre of established religious or philosophical discourse but in the margins, in the desert(ed) wilderness where those considered outsiders by those inside find space to err endlessly.

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shall become obvious, St. Mark's gospel, for all of its aporias and (arguable) incompletion, is the most conducive to the correspondences I wish to draw.

[68] However, I would distinguish my own reading of St. Mark's gospel from those of Kermode and Moore in this way: while I do read Mark (both Marks, actually – Taylor and the gospel) in a primarily literary mode for the purpose of exploring certain tropes and traces, I hesitate to identify my reading as "secular." In saying that I approach the biblical text as I would any other literary text is not to suggest the secularity of Scripture but to suggest the sacrality of writing – 'true fiction' or (in Taylorian terms) 'true scription.' See Douglas Templeton, *The New Testament as True Fiction*.

[69] The actual identity of the author of the texts attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius is highly debated amongst scholars. The texts, written in Greek, date from the fifth or sixth century.

[70] Neither do I wish to paint Taylor himself as a sort of contemporary mystic, but as should become increasingly apparent, "Mark Taylor," as well as being a scholar, professor, writer (husband, father...), for our purposes should also be understood as a collection of texts, just as in her translator's preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, G. C. Spivak writes that 'Jacques Derrida is maître-assistant in philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He was born forty-five years ago of Sephardic Jewish parents in Algiers...(etc.)' and then, having listed Derrida's corpus of publications to date, asserts that '*Jacques Derrida is also this collection of texts*' (emphasis mine). See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. p. ix.

This exercise of locating Taylor's a/theology within a particularly Christian tradition is undeniably problematic. It is, perhaps, more accurate to describe my effort as attempting to locate a particular tradition, or a particular shared *space*, in which Christianity (and the Jewish tradition from which it springs), the gospels, mysticism, a/theology, philosophy, literature – theory and practice – might commune together. In the end, this location reveals itself as a *dis*location, for it requires certain sacrifices be made on all accounts and inevitably results in irreconcilable (which is not to say *irredeemable*) tensions. In one particularly confessional essay, Taylor notes that 'our differences increasingly are tearing us apart. Faced with this situation, I asked: Are the only alternatives a unity that excludes differences or differences that exclude unity?' (*RT*, 274). If the genesis of Christianity is located in the ultimate kenosis of God and Self on the Cross, then Christianity – what it means to "be Christian" – and the redemption to which Christianity bears witness must be figured (or *dis*figured, as the case may be) differently than tradition commonly dictates. While on one level this "opening" created by the dissemination of the Word (made flesh) is, for established orthodoxy, a moment of disaster[71] – of impossibility, seeming to create the very heterodoxy that orthodoxy fears and seeks to repress – this opening, this utter loss which is grace, is a sort of through-road, 'a third alternative that neither mediates nor synthesizes unity and difference and yet opens the space and provides the time for connections and associations that create and sustain differences' (*RT*, 274).

[71] See Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. While it would be futile to attempt to summarise the nuances of Blanchot's aphorisms in full, this passage captures his notion of the disaster particularly well: 'I will not say that the disaster is absolute; on the contrary, it disorients the absolute. It comes and goes, errant disarray, and yet with the imperceptible but intense suddenness of the outside, as an irresistible or unforeseen resolve which would come to us from beyond the confines of decision' (p. 4). Blanchot's work appears to increasingly influence Taylor as his a/theology develops. See especially Taylor's essay on Blanchot, "Nots" (*A*, 219-53) and "Nothing Ending Nothing" (*TC*, 41-75).

Shifty Marks, Part I: Mark's Gospel and Mark Taylor

Recalling the four simultaneous "events" from which deconstructive a/theology emerges – the end(s) of God, Self, History and Book – I suggest that the gospel according to St. Mark's represents a textual example of the a/theological vision described in Mark Taylor's writing. The "story" that St. Mark tells – or, more appropriately, *writes* – like the "story" that Mark Taylor tells/writes, is not a proper story. It cannot be described as proper for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the absence of the A/author. In fact, the gospel text is perhaps a better example of this than any work in Mark Taylor's corpus, for while the gospel we attribute to St. Mark was originally circulated anonymously and only later attributed to "Mark,"[72] all of Mark Taylor's writings indubitably bear his name, the signatory stamp of the author. The questionability of the gospel's author(ship) makes us question his (?) authority – should we believe the words he inscribes in these pages? Is the story told therein *true*? Can he or it be trusted? It could be that the evangelist in question is sowing salacious seed, disseminating a dubious, perhaps devious, word. But, following Taylor, is this not a condition of our entrance into any piece of writing? It could be said that St. Mark's text, which is not properly his property, as well as Mark's excentric/eccentric central character (Jesus), is 'always paradoxical, double, duplicitous, excentric, improper ... errant' (*E*, 10).

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[72] Janice C. Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds. *Mark and Method*. p. 97. Moore further points out that 'This name appears to have been stolen from certain neighbouring texts…that feature a (John) Mark who was a companion of Peter and Paul.' That the name associated with this gospel text is potentially purloined renders the identity and authority of the author all the more uncertain – like Taylor, his signature is a 'shifty M/mark' (*E*, 174).

Furthermore, the narrative of St. Mark's gospel is improper in that it functions, on one level, as a narrative about the obscurity of narratives,[73] a writing about the problem or impossibility of writing, even hinting at something like Taylor's notion of the closure of the Book. By any narrative standards, the beginning and ending of Mark's story are both a disaster. Whereas the other synoptic gospels begin with an explanation of Jesus' origins – Matthew providing a detailed genealogy, and both Matthew and Luke including accounts of the virgin birth – Mark's gospel provides no such account, and thereby 'rips up its own birth record' and '*ends* with a virginal conception – its own. Its tomb becomes a miraculous womb,'[74] from whence the Church is born. Beginning with the proclamation of the good news of Jesus, Mark's narrative (if it can may be described as such) actually begins not with Jesus but a pre-text about his pre-cursor: John, the messenger, a for(tun)e-teller of sorts. In fact, in telling of this teller, the writer unavoidably begins intertextually, referring back to Malachi and Isaiah. It is as if the gospel writer, by pointing beyond the gospel to other texts, is preparing the reader for the excentric text to come. It seems that St. Mark could well have, like Taylor, begun by writing, 'Clearly "I" did not write this text. Or at least "I" alone did not write it' (*E*, xi).

Isaiah's words in John's mouth claim to make straight the Lord's paths (Mk. 1:3), but paradoxically these paths are *not* made straight. Rather, the paths which prepare the way for the Lord are errant and lead in and out of the wilderness – these (a)mazing paths, leading eventually to the Cross, do not even end there but in fact journey on endlessly. The wilderness, a place not to be inhabited so much as *passed through*, is not unfamiliar to Jesus and his followers – nor, as it turns out, to his precursors. John the baptizer, whose appearance marks the already uncertain beginning of Mark, 'appeared in the

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[73] Frank Kermode. *The Genesis of Secrecy*. See especially Ch. 2, "Why Are Narratives Obscure?"

[74] Anderson and Moore, *Mark and Method*. p. 86. See also Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives*. p. 7.

wilderness, proclaiming' (1:4).[75] This proclamation is John's vocation – his calling is simply *to call*, a vocation which is a vocalisation. This voice, crying out in the wilderness, has as its audience only fellow wilderness wanderers, those eccentrics content to dwell in the margins. These are John's people, for John, ever the outsider in dress and manner, certainly does not fit well within "proper" society (1:6). He foretells Jesus' coming, and the good fortune he tells indeed comes to pass. Jesus' own baptism by John is itself an unusual event, with another vocalisation (not John's) emanating from the heavens, identifying Jesus as the Beloved Son of this disembodied voice. The writer of Mark's gospel is often preoccupied with *voice*, perhaps falling prey to the Platonic hierarchy that prefers speech to writing, for indeed the text that he writes is riddled with the spoken word -- with the riddles (called *parables*)[76] spoken *by* the Word.

'Immediately,'[77] the text tells us, following his baptism by John, Jesus is driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness wherein he is 'tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him' (1:12-13). Jesus remains in the wilderness, in such unusual company, until John's voice is arrested and silenced, at which time Jesus returns to Galilee to carry on John's work, his voc(alis)ation, his

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[75] All biblical quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds. To avoid needless repetition, where not otherwise noted, biblical references (cited in-text, *chapter:verse*) refer to the Gospel according to Mark. Also, unless otherwise noted, all italicised biblical passages should be understood as my added emphasis.

[76] See Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. pp. 23-27. Kermode points out that *parable* may be understood as a comparison, an allegory or illustration, but also as an enigma, a riddle or a "dark saying."

[77] This word (also translated *then* or *at once*) is a favourite in Mark's gospel, lending a sense of immediacy or urgency to the text's primary message – the proliferation of the good news of Christ and the journey drawing Jesus and his precursors/followers ever nearer to the Cross. But it also lends to Mark a sense of constant movement and activity. Jesus' journey, although reaching a certain "end" on the Cross, *never truly ends*, and the gospel writer takes great effort to textually embody the endlessness and endless trasitoriness of this dissemination of the Word, employing this term about forty times in a mere sixteen chapters.

foretelling of the good news of God and the Kingdom coming, which both has come and is coming – ever deferred, 'here, not yet here...now-and-not-yet.'[78]

Jesus, fulfilling his calling (which as it turns out, is *calling*), journeys from one place to the next across the pages of Mark's gospel, collecting additional followers along the way, stopping to teach the occasional lesson to the astonishment of the religious and intellectual authorities, to rebuke demons and to offer healing to those in need. The writer tells us that 'he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because *they knew him*' (1:34). This instance of the demons' recognition of Jesus is important, for throughout Mark's text – as the alleged division between outside(rs) and inside(rs) emerges and then immediately dissolves – it is those outside who most often recognize Jesus' otherwise veiled identity, and it is those inside who continually miss the mark. The more Jesus speaks, the less it seems his listeners understand. His answers confound; time and again, his words mislead those inside, those closest to him. His illustrations, which are hardly illustrative of anything, only increase the confusion that Jesus' words incur. Following the parable of the sower, Jesus tells his disciples 'To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but *for those outside, everything comes in parables*; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand"' (4:11-12). Mark later tells us that, 'With many such parables he spoke the word to them; as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables; but he explained everything in private to his disciples' (4:33-34). The parable of the sower scattering his seed on terrain of varying fertility at first appears to illustrate the disciples' inclusion in the hidden meaning of Jesus' otherwise exclusive parabolic speech, but on closer inspection it may illustrate something else entirely. Frank Kermode reads the parable as

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[78] William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. *Lord, Teach Us.* p. 57.

an excursus on the problem of interpretation[79] – the seed sown is the very word of Jesus (*the* Word, according to John's gospel), and as it is scattered upon the minds and hearts of men, it is received and digested in a number of ways. For some, the truth is stolen away by the enemy; for rootless others it is consumed but quickly squandered; and for some, represented by the 'good soil,' the word is heard, accepted, and bears much fruit (4:15-20). Earlier I suggested that one preoccupation in Mark's gospel is the problem of speech and writing, and nowhere is that problem better demonstrated in Jesus' parabolic speech. Take, for example, this allegorical explanation by Jesus of his own parable. As Jesus privately teaches the true meaning of his words to his disciples – those elect few to whom the secret has been given – it seems Jesus could be referring not to spoken but to written words, as in a text.[80] As if pointing not to words spoken out into the void like seed scattered hither and thither, but as if pointing to words (or pictures, hieroglyphs?[81]) *on a page*, Jesus says: '*These* are the ones on the path where the word is sown...And others are those sown among thorns: *these* are the ones...And *these* are the ones sown on the good soil' (4:15, 18, 20). In this way, Jesus' speech takes on the character of writing as condemned by Plato in the *Phaedrus* – it is the orphaned, fatherless word, destined to wander aimlessly to be picked up and interpreted, used or misused, by anyone.

Furthermore, Jesus employs parables to interpret his parables.

> The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. (4:26-29)

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[79] See Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. pp. 23-47.

[80] This conjecture is not rooted in any exegetical evidence but rather serves as a figurative suggestion to reinforce the multiplicitous nature of language – particularly spoken language, and even more particularly of parabolic speech.

[81] Taylor points out that *hieroglyphics* (derived from *hieros*, sacred + *gluphē*, carving) are 'sacred inscription, holy writ' (*E*, 106). It is, then, not unusual that Jesus – Mark's 'man of letters' and John's 'Word made flesh' – should in John's gospel account actually be found writing/carving out words in the ground (see John 8:8).

Jesus goes a step further, comparing the kingdom of God to 'a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade' (4:30-32). In another pair of parables, both about sowing seed, Jesus seems to deliberately push the meaning of his words even further under the surface, burying the seed deeper beneath the soil; and the fruits produced by this seed will indeed testify to the (in)fertility of the disciples' soil. Jesus parables are indeed like the mustard seed, which grows into a great shrub – for some, it provides a habitable home; yet for others, it casts a shadow of doubt which looms larger the nearer they draw. And yet, even those who make their home in these branches are likened unto birds, bound to fly away, leaving behind their ever-so-temporary nests to be taken over by another or blown apart by the wind.

Both Frank Kermode and Stephen Moore point out that Jesus' parables, according to Mark's own interpretation, attempt to establish the distinction between inside and outside. While it seems that Jesus' parables are designed to keep the outsiders *out* and the insiders *in*, Kermode intuits that 'The sense of the parable...must be this: being an insider is only a more elaborate way of being kept outside.'[82] Throughout Mark's gospel, the reality of this distinction is undermined. The lines between outside and inside become increasingly blurred the more Jesus moves and speaks amongst the people. His sustained presence, even with his disciples, seems to result in incident after incident of confusion and consternation. After feeding the multitude (6:30-44) and

[82] Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. p. 27. (Note that Stephen Moore also picks up on this theme.) Kermode implies the possibility that the gospel writer himself is misled by Jesus' parables, and needing sufficient explanation for these confounding words (which he, of course, did not hear first hand), added in this allegorical reading after the fact, attributing it to the riddler, Jesus. While the accuracy of postulation is, of course, impossible to determine, it yet hints at the underlying problem of signification and interpretation implicit in Mark's text – *how to determine what symbols mean? how to secure presence (of meaning, of being) in the face of profoundest absence?*

Jesus' phantasmagoric appearance walking on the sea (6:47-50), the disciples remain in the dark, mistaking Jesus for a ghost. By St. Mark's account, it sounds as though the disciples are no different from 'those outside,' to whom 'everything comes in parables' – for evidently everything comes in parables to insiders as well. After witnessing so many miracles, seeing so many receive healing, hearing so many teachings, the disciples are still those to whom Jesus says in 7:18, 'Then do you also fail to understand?' They fail to follow and remain 'on the inside looking in, as though they were in fact outside.'[83] But Jesus continually points out their lack of understanding: 'Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?' (8:17-18) Perhaps the metaphor itself is the problem, for every time Jesus speaks of seed, grain, or bread, there seems to be a breakdown in communication. This is nowhere more evident than on the occasion of the Last Supper, in which Jesus tells his followers that the bread they eat represents his body (14:22). In John's account, Jesus' hyperbolic comparison of the bread to his flesh is met with characteristic perplexity: 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' (John 6:60). Jesus knows that this conceit[84] is more than his followers can handle, that his misperceived concepts will ultimately conceive and bear forth chaos and discord. Not long after he tells them that they 'will all become deserters' (14:27), Jesus' disciples proceed to fall asleep on him, betray him, and finally, when 'All of them had deserted him and fled' (14:50), Jesus' clairvoyance proves accurate. Had they forgotten Jesus' prediction, or had they just not listened? 'Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?' (8:17-18). Not only do the disciples have impaired perception, but it seems they have inadequate capacity for memory as well. Or to use Jesus' own seed

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[83] Anderson and Moore, *Mark and Method*. p. 88. See also Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke*, pp. 13-14, 21-24. (Note also that Moore draws upon Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*.)

[84] Note that *conceit*, as well as being an extended metaphor in poetic terms, is etymologically akin to *conceive, conception* and *concept*.

metaphor, these insiders seem to have fertility issues – their soil is a hostile recipient of the seed implanted therein. In fact, any time Jesus tries to sow his seed, his disciples misread his signals; every hint he drops, they fail to pick up.

And so it goes across the pages of Mark's gospel. The distinction between the inside and outside breaks down time and again, and it is the W/word that affects this *confusion*, this mixing/fusing together of assumed opposites. In fact, the more *pro*found the words of Jesus, the more they seem to *con*found those to whom they are directed. 'Sliced through,' Stephen Moore writes, 'Jesus' speech is unable to reach its mark. It falls to the ground and is picked up wrongly. It is as if Jesus were writing instead of speaking, as if his disciples were reading instead of listening.'[85] As the words/seeds of Jesus err time and again, wandering all over the pages of Mark, drifting 'from misunderstanding to misunderstanding,' we are reminded that 'writing has always been a wandering outcast, drifting from (mis)reading to (mis)reading.'[86] Mark Taylor draws similar conclusions: like Jesus' scattered seeds, 'The words of the writer are always stolen' (*E*, 16), carried away by birds, by Satan, or by those wielding the invasive scalpel of interpretation. Kermode notes that 'Mark is a strong witness to the enigmatic and exclusive character of narrative, to its property of banishing interpreters from its secret places'[87] – and I suggest that this is true of both Marks, and indeed of Jesus. As Jesus conceals the messianic secret, constantly commanding those with whom he interacts to tell no one, Mark Taylor plays a similar game of cat and mouse with his reader – the errancy of his writing demonstrates how 'Scripture turns everything inside out and outside in' (*E*, 109).

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[85] Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke*. p. 15.

[86] Ibid. p. 17.

[87] Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. pp. 33-34.

If there is any meaning concealed behind Taylor's endless semantic playfulness, it might well be that *the meaning is that there is no meaning* -- in a similar way that the meaning behind Jesus' life and words might be that on the cross, the Word is crucified; there is no life but in death. Revealing results in re-veiling, as the Word is wrapped in sheets (of paper, of linen), bound in a cloth cover, hidden away from sight. But Jesus says, and Mark reports, that 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.' The words of this writer (in this case, the Word himself) are destined to roam the earth eternally – sharing the curse of Cain, the 'fugitive and wanderer on the earth,' marked by the Lord so as never to be killed (Gen. 4:12-15). Realising that these nomadic immortals receive such a fate for having committed the sin of fratricide, Mark Taylor warns that '(Ab)errant words are dangerous' (*E*, 162). The letter kills – kills, but cannot be killed. Jesus is likened unto the legendary Wandering Jew who mocked him along the *via dolorosa*. Both God and Man, Father and Son, Jesus is guilty of a grave murder – his own: suicide, fratricide and patricide, all rolled into one.

Why is it that, traditionally, theologians and biblical scholars have regarded the gospel according to St. Mark as a slipshod piece of writing, a jumbled and primitive mess of narratives strung together, whose only canonical value is its role as source material for the more comprehensive and eloquent gospels of Matthew and Luke? Could it be that we are dis-eased by the errancy of this bit of scripture? In his introduction to St. Mark's gospel, songwriter Nick Cave writes that 'Mark's *Gospel* is a clatter of bones, so raw, nervy and lean on information that the narrative *aches with the melancholy of absence*.'[88] If we have learned anything from the gospel according to Mark Taylor, it is that we fear and avoid this very absence because in it is manifest the incompleteness, the fallenness, that we desire to overcome by attempting to recover lost presence. And yet,

[88] Nick Cave. "Introduction to the Gospel According to St. Mark." p. ix. (emphasis mine)

if we accept Taylor's account of our errant condition, we must accept this that loss, this lack, is originary, always already in every (un)beginning and (un)ending. As Jesus' body constantly in movement throughout Mark's gospel, slipping from one place to the next, ever-so-slightly out of reach, until finally made most present in its death, its moment of profoundest negation – escapes the final attempt to pin/pen it down and vanishes from the tomb, Mark 'marks the closure of all presence that is not at the same time absence and marks the end of identity that is not also difference. In this way, the incarnate word spells the death of the God who alone is God' (*E*, 106). We must accept that 'In the absence of complete presence, secure foundation, authoritative origin, and ultimate end, there is nothing other than erring' (*E*, 179).

And, for that matter, what should we make of the ending of Mark's gospel? Mark's conclusion – by never saying [or writing] 'In conclusion...' – is profoundly inconclusive, though not inconclusively profound. During his trial, Jesus seems to abandon, or to be abandoned *by* his voice. His words, which have been the source of so much celebration and consternation, are now exchanged for a silence so powerful that even his interrogators are amazed (15:2-5). Jesus' silence communicates more clearly than any other voice, and when he finally 'gave a loud cry and breathed his last' (15:37), in this moment of inarticulation, it is the final silence that speaks the profoundest truth to yet another outsider, 'the centurion, who stood facing him, [who] saw that in this way he breathed his last, [and] he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son' (15:39). On the Cross, in this most naked, definitive moment, as the temple curtain is rent in two (15:38), the curtain is finally pulled back on Jesus, revealing not the great and powerful Oz-like deity, but a feeble and frail man. Finally unveiled only in his death, Jesus no longer says, 'Say nothing to anyone...tell no one about this' – 'pay no attention to that man behind the

curtain.'[89] Now Jesus' silence says it all; that is, it says everything by saying nothing. And yet this un-clothing, this revelation is only the prelude to a re-veilation, when Jesus' body is taken down from the cross, clothed in linen, and entombed (15:46). Even in death, however, as in life, Jesus' body is always on the move, for when the women arrive at the tomb, they find it to be emptied of its corpse/corpus and occupied by another young man, himself veiled in a white robe. 'He is not here,' they are told, 'he has been raised...*Go, tell...he is going ahead of you to Galilee*; there you will see him' (16:6-7). But the women disobey orders, themselves now outsiders/outlaws. Still, with Jesus the action never ends, for the action is erring, the wandering word which even in death never passes away. Outlaws, like Jesus, John, the women, St. Mark and Mark Taylor, 'travel about aimlessly and unprofitably.' Their word, their writing 'moves to and fro, hither and thither, with neither fixed course nor certain end.' The error, who is the true follower, turns out to be one who 'not only roams, roves, and rambles but also strays, deviates, and errs...always unsettled and uncanny' (*E*, 150).

Mark's gospel ends: 'So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and *they said nothing to anyone*, for they were afraid' (16:8).[90] Any reader or writer will testify that this is no proper ending. According to Kermode, the "sense of an ending" is, of course, the organisation and unification of the

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[89] *The Wizard of Oz* (1939 film), dir. Victor Fleming. Based on L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032138/

[90] As Stephen Moore and countless others point out, Mark's gospel has three known endings – the one cited above (16:8), a 'shorter' ending that attempts to tie together all loose ends in a single verse, and a 'longer' ending of 11 verses. However, it is generally accepted amongst biblical scholars that the shorter and longer endings of Mark were added after the fact and were likely authored by someone other than the person responsible for the rest of Mark. As such, it is safe to regard 16:8 as the most "original" end of the text, although it is possible (though impossible to verify) that the writer intended to end Mark differently and was for some reason unable to properly conclude his work. Moore even goes so far as to suggest that, under this assumption, we might imagine a fourth unknown/unwritten ending that was the original author's original intended ending, but this of course is largely irrelevant to the discussion at hand, especially in light of Mark Taylor's indictment of authorship and narrative coherence, and of the property/propriety of all writing.

parts into the whole.[91] But St. Mark's ending neither organises nor unifies, but disrupts, upsets, terrorises – disorients, leaving all in 'errant disarray.'[92] Like Joyce's prototypical postmodern novel *Finnegans Wake*, which Kermode reminds us ends with the word *the*, St. Mark's ending is either weak and 'intolerably clumsy' or 'incredibly subtle' – 'definite though barely pronounced.'[93] Taylor's *Erring* ends with a similarly profound and confounding unending:

It is (un)finished

Amen

Sobeit

(p.s [94]

While beginning with the 'trumpet call' pronouncing 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1), St. Mark's gospel 'ends with this faint whisper of timid women'[95] – or, to adapt T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, 'this is the way the wor(l)d (of Mark) ends / not with a bang, but a whimper.'[96]

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[91] See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*. For another useful study of endings in literature and theology, see Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*. See pp. 9-15 for Fiddes' discussion of Kermode's theory of endings.

[92] Maurice Blanchot, *Disaster*. p. 4.

[93] Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. pp. 67-68. See also David Jasper's reflections on the ending/beginning of *Finnegan's Wake* in his *The Sacred Desert*. pp. 153-54.

[94] *E*, 184. I surmise that Taylor's "(un)ending" can be understood duplicitously – his 'unconcluding postscript' being simply the end matter (notes, "Biblio Graphy" and index) or, like *Finnegans Wake*, a loop in which we 'beginegan' back to the first words of the "Acknowledgments" – 'If authorship is never original but is always a play that is an interplay, then clearly "I" did not write this text. Or at least "I" alone did not write it' (*E*, xi). In this light, it is significant that Taylor chooses as *Erring*'s epigraph lines from Wallace Stevens – 'Thinkers without final thoughts…' Also noteworthy is Taylor's essay "p.s. fin again" (*T*, 55-72), which is a reflection on Altizer's *History as Apocalypse* and which refers to Joyce, Blanchot and to Taylor's own work. Unfortunately, the constraints of this project prohibit me from further exploring these connections.

[95] Frank Kermode, *Genesis*. p. 68.

[96] T. S. Eliot. "The Hollow Men." In *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. pp. 79-82.

In *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write*, Stephen Moore figures Jesus as a writer, a 'man of letters.'[97] St. Mark, in his writing (of) Jesus, demonstrates the way in which 'writing is a kenotic process; it empties everything of absolute self-identity and complete self-presence...As a consequence of the eternal cross(ing) of scripture, nothing stands alone and everything "originates" codependently' (*E*, 118). Perhaps this is why Jesus, intertextualist to the end, purloins his dying words from Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (15:34). Jesus, the deceased father of his own now-orphaned words/writing, is likewise abandoned by his own father.

The wound of words – of language, of writing – is incurable, and its tear stains every page of Mark's text. It is 'a tear that can never be mended—a tear that can never be wiped away' (*T*, 233). In *Erring*, Mark Taylor writes:

> Bewilderment reaches monumental proportions in the perplexing postmodern world. Instead of offering comforting reassurance, writing all too often discloses a world of endless contradiction and conflict. The Author having died and authors having disappeared, words frequently sound senseless and writing often seems to be more scribbling than scripture. The cacography of many postmodern texts reflects the cacophony of much contemporary experience. (*E*, 100)

According to this (mis)reading, could both the gospel according to St. Mark and the writings of Mark Taylor be considered such 'postmodern texts' reflecting the cacophony of some *ancient* experience – an experience with no beginning or ending? Could this ancient experience be the primal lack of presence, the absence of God, which we live and die denying? To make such a suggestion, is it, then, possible to read *Erring* (for example) as a sort of gospel? Whatever the conclusion, it should come as no surprise that reading (both) Mark's gospel(s) have left many 'perplexed at these words' (10:24) which 'frequently sound senseless,...more scribbling than scripture.'

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[97] Stephen D. Moore's insightful and exceedingly playful analysis of Mark's gospel in *Mark and Luke* unfolds in Part 1 (pp. 1-84). See especially "Jesus as a Man of Letters" (pp. 11-18).

Shifty Marks, Part II – Mystics and Mark Taylor

In the Christian mystical tradition, as well as in the textual tradition of St. Mark's gospel, we encounter a certain duplicity of language resulting from the confluence of the spoken and written word. The gospels, which are generally thought of as *written* texts, of course began as spoken testimony, were passed on orally and eventually inscribed for the sake of posterity and proselytisation. Also the writings of Christian mystics, which only survive to be studied in their textual form, demonstrate a similar duplicitous quality. For example, the sermons of Meister Eckhart, once (and probably only once) preached from the pulpit to a gathered congregation, are now preserved in written form. On the other hand, the works of Pseudo-Dionysius suggest within their written form the nature of speech, as treatises in the style of oral lessons to a particular student. While probably never delivered orally as proper addresses, these written texts conflate the distinction between spoken and written language, betraying the way that one mode often exhibits characteristics of the other. When speech is inscribed in writing, testimony is transformed into *text*imony – for once the immediacy of speech is irretrievably lost, writing is all that remains. To quote Derrida, '*There is nothing outside of the text.*'[98]

Likewise, the texts that make up Mark Taylor's corpus are riddled with this duplicity. Not simply a binary, Taylor's writings are perhaps not so much duplicitous as multiplicitous. At times, Taylor relies on a sort of semantic playfulness that is only possible within the context of the written text, most obviously in the "/" of *a/theology*, which can be written but not spoken, or in his penchant for parentheticals, ellipses, puns and misspellings (i.e. *reJoyce*). But at the same time, Taylor's writing often takes on characteristics of the spoken word, as in the distinction between *tears* and *tears*, which

[98] Jacques Derrida. *Grammatology*. p. 158. This statement might also be rendered '*There is no outside text*' or '*There is no outside* to the *text.*' I mean to emphasise the lack of textual limit or outer boundary.

may be spoken but not written. One rather peculiar formal feature of *Erring* is Taylor's style of citation, which could, upon analysis, seem more akin to the conventions of oral than written communication. While most academic texts utilize copious and lengthy footnotes or in-text citations with corresponding endnotes and bibliography, *Erring* utilizes only endnotes and no in-text citations. The extent to and anonymity with which Taylor borrows the words of others, making them his own by incorporating them into his own text is strangely un-literary and almost sneaky, for when Taylor quotes from another source, he more often than not leaves the author whose words he commandeers as his own decidedly unnamed, with only quotation marks and an endnote number to indicate that these words are borrowed. Rather than employing a style that would enable readers to know the source of a quotation as they follow the lines of the text, or by simply glancing down at a footnote, Taylor's style is more difficult, more disruptive to the experience of reading his work by placing all such references at the end of the text. The result is that the reader must either choose to ignore the fact that Taylor's words are often not his at all and resign herself to accepting the words as Taylor's; *or* the reader, at the expense of any textual or narrative continuity, might choose to flip back and forth between the section of endnotes and the text itself so as to identify the "proper" source of the borrowed words. But this is, of course, not a very satisfactory (not to mention unsatisfying) way to read a book. And therein we have the paradox that Taylor seeks to create, for *Erring* is not properly a Book, or at least is not a proper book – it is 'a book,' as one critic puts it, 'that refuses to be a book.'[99] The status of this "book" is placed in quotation marks from the beginning, and actually from before the beginning as the acknowledgements, in which Taylor writes 'this "book" (if it is a book)' (*E*, xi), exist in the precursory void of roman-numeraled pagination. Taylor's text argues that a Book

[99] Eric Holzwarth. "Review of *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*." p. 259.

requires a coherent narrative with an identifiable beginning, middle and end, and is the property of a particular, self-possessed author. Consequently, *Erring* is suspicious from even before page one.

Just as Jesus' parabolic speech disrupts the perception of the listeners in Mark's gospel, and just as, according to Oliver Davies, Meister Eckhart's 'particular use of language...[is] full of contradictions and flourish' so as to 'disrupt any premature complacency in the mind of the listener,'[100] so also Mark Taylor's writing places the reader on precarious footing. The floor of this funhouse of language is always moving, sliding side to side, rocking to and fro with the intention of unsettling the balance and equilibrium of the guest (reader). To enter into the maze of Taylor's writing is to enter the maze of textuality, the playful abyss that is language as a (w)hole. To understand what Taylor's writing is *about* is, in a certain sense, to miss the mark – for *Erring* is really about nothing. That is to say, *Erring* is not about anything because it is about (the) nothing outside of itself – it is, in the first and last instance, about the event, the *performative moment*, of reading the writing and writing the reading that is the text itself. Full of writing, much of which is reading – readings of other writings – *Erring* conflates the distinction between reading and writing in such a way that the reader must reflect upon the plurisignification of these no longer simple terms, now complicated events. Arriving at this impasse, we discover

> language itself, which (as Eckhart knew) is a fundamental part of the problem. Language mediates the world to us with all its finiteness in space and time. And when we use it of God, it gets in the way by making an object of him [*sic*], clothing him in concepts and images which are inappropriate to his uncreated nature. But if language is the obstacle, it is also paradoxically the place of our redemption.[101]

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[100] Oliver Davies, "Introduction." In Meister Eckhart. *Selected Writings*. pp. xxxii-xxxiii.
[101] Ibid. p. xxxv.

Eckhart may be concerned primarily with language about God, but Taylor would perhaps suggest that language is equally incapable of providing the comforting clothing for which humankind longs. In the garden, it is the absence of God, of the immediacy of speech, that leads the first man and woman to (dis)cover their own nakedness, attempting to fashion clothing to hide themselves. Their exposure, not a source of dis-ease when in the presence of God, becomes in God's absence a leprosy which must be hidden. In a manner as punning as ever, Taylor calls to attention the fact that 'the tailor does not weave the material he cuts and sews. He stitches together textiles that have been woven by others...His writing is always a reading' (*E*, 180). Language, it seems, is an ill-fitting garment, but it is all we have. It may indicate the loss of immediacy, of presence, but it is also a means of grace, a mediation that makes it possible to forsake any hope of return in resignation to the finite, the incarnate – the now.

But to consider this loss of immediacy as a *loss* suggests an event prior to which existed the immediacy of presence – an origin to recover. Taylor resists this notion, offering instead the language of *lack* as a condition rather than an event, not quite like Altizer's apocalypse but more like Blanchot's disaster. We do not live in the wake of an apocalypse that *was* so much as subsist in the condition of a disaster that, always having been, simply *is*. This subsistence is not existence in the ontotheological or metaphysical sense, but existence in an a/theological sense, a deconstructed sense, wherein existence equals erring, and erring, without beginning or end, is all in all. The condition of erring is not banishment or punishment imposed upon humanity by God, as one reading of the Eden myth might suggest, but is simply the consequence of being human – of human being(s), of being(s) in relation. It is not God who has taken leave of us or banished us, but rather we who abandon God. 'We are born in an abandonment of which we have no memory. We can, therefore, never be sure that it occurred, where it occurred, whether it

occurred. Nonetheless, we always "know" – or so it seems – that we have been abandoned....Though abandonment occurs, no one, no-thing abandons' (*AR*, 253). Although the Christian narrative figures this abandonment as an act of wilful disobedience, we live (within) this abandonment as a irremediable condition. As Meister Eckhart reflects, 'Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of god' – or in the words of another translation, 'Taking leave of God for the sake of God is the greatest act of renunciation that someone can make.'[102] This renunciation is a moment of pure abandon(ment), of giving (up) freely with no hope or expectation of return. It might also be understood in terms of what Taylor calls denegation, a denial of both affirmation and negation that, denying itself, 'entails *negation without negation*' (*AR*, 32 – italics in original).

In *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius writes: 'Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.'[103] This "beyond" should not be understood in terms of transcendence (as in that which is *higher than*) but in a movement away from the centre and towards the limit. Living beyond affirms one as a perpetual outcast by denying one a place in the centre. This beyond is perpetual movement, wandering, erring along the margins, searching for the limit of the limit, the boundary that delineates the edge of the boundary. Pseudo-Dionysius goes on to discuss this in terms of *aphaeresis*, an 'act of clearing aside' that might also be rendered 'denial.'[104] If our abandonment of God, this 'leave-taking,' is also an act of clearing aside, it is one in which we ourselves are also cleared aside, plunged 'into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing,' the condition in which

[102] See respectively Meister Eckhart, *A Modern Translation* (trans. by R. Blakney), p. 204; and Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings* (trans. O. Davies), p. 178.

[103] Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. p. 136.

[104] Ibid. p. 138 (fn. 11).

one 'knows beyond…by knowing nothing.'[105] Like Jesus' disciples in St. Mark's gospel, perplexed by his parables, sacred knowing is an unknowing; likewise, like the centurion's recognition of Christ in his moment of profoundest negation, unknowing is true knowing. The cross does not simply represent the place where opposites – God and (wo)man, sacred and profane, death and life, etc. – meet and are inverted; it is a place where opposites are crossed *out*, abandoned, denegated. This *coincidentia oppositorum*[106] is not figured in binary terms (both/and, either/or, neither/nor) but as a radical *chiasmus* or over-turning which is beyond mere inversion – a rupture of signification, of meaning, of knowledge, and of being.

But being beyond is to be beyond the safety of home. In this way, to be beyond is to be prodigal – again, not banished or cast out, but one who makes oneself an outcast, who clears aside the ties that bind and takes his leave to wander aimlessly and endlessly. 'For the responsible person who stays near home,' writes Taylor, 'there is something improper and disturbing about prodigality. The prodigal is given to extravagant expenditure and tends to disperse property recklessly. Convinced that the father is dead, the prodigal is unable to believe in any prospect of return. He is, it seems, destined to err endlessly' (*E*, 143). In 1849, in the midst of writing his *Point of View*, Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard wrote the following in his journal:

> What Christianity needs for certain is traitors. Christendom has insidiously betrayed Christianity by wanting not to be truly Christian but to have the appearance of being so. Now traitors are needed.
>
> But this concept, traitors, is dialectical. The devil also, so to speak, has his traitors, his spies, who do not attack Christianity but attack the Christians – with the express purpose of getting more and more to fall away. God, too, has his traitors: God-fearing traitors, who in unconditional obedience

[105] Ibid. p. 137.

[106] See E. A. Livingstone, ed. *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. See "Nicholas of Cusa." A *coincidentia oppositorum* is a coincidence of opposites 'wherein all contradictions meet. God is at once infinitely great and infinitely small, the center and circumference of the universe, everywhere and nowhere, neither One nor Three, but Triune' (p. 358).

> to him simply and sincerely present Christianity in order that for once people may get to know what Christianity is. I am sure that established Christendom regards them as traitors, since Christendom has taken illegal possession of Christianity by a colossal forgery...
>
> ...I was contemplating the possibility of not letting myself be taken over by Christianity, even if it was my most honest intention to devote my whole life and daily diligence to the cause of Christianity, to do everything, to do nothing else but to expound and interpret it, even though I were to become like, be like the legendary Wandering Jew – myself not a Christian in the final and most decisive sense of the word and yet leading others to Christianity.[107]

Recall that, in addition to Hegel, the most significant figure in the development of Taylor's thought is Kierkegaard, who inspired Taylor to learn Danish so as to read his writings in their original language. While it is probable that Taylor, in his comprehensive study of Kierkegaard's works, read these words at some point, it is not my purpose to somehow "prove" that Taylor intentionally set out to be the sort of traitor to Christianity that Kierkegaard describes in this passage. It seems to me that the mantle of the "traitor as *true Christian*" is not to be taken up and put off at will, but perhaps simply is either something one is or is not. Perhaps to be the purest of traitors would be to fully abandon Christianity 'in the final and most decisive sense' with no intention or hope of ever returning, of ever being redeemed. The pure traitor would hardly intend or even recognise his treachery as the deconstructive force that gives way to a reconstruction. In this way, the hero of the Passion narrative might as likely be Judas as Jesus (a possibility that Nikos Kazantzakis explores in *The Last Temptation*[108]). If the events that culminate in Jesus' crucifixion had to be set in motion by Judas' betrayal, then perhaps Judas is not Jesus' foil so much as his co-conspirator. Likewise Satan, traditionally the villain of the Eden story, is in fact a necessary component, an implement

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[107] Søren Kierkegaard. *The Point of View*. pp. 220-21.

[108] Kazantzakis' novel portrays a frail, human Jesus, afraid of death, uncertain of his ability to carry God's plan to completion; Jesus implores an unwilling Judas, his loyal and protective 'sheep-dog,' to betray him – 'We two must save the world,' Jesus says. 'Help me.' See *The Last Temptation*, pp. 394-98, 430-31.

in a greater scheme, for there would be no Fall without the tempter (and there would be no need for redemption without the Fall). As David Daiches reflects on Milton's portrait in *Paradise Lost*, the story's heroes, Adam and Eve, are afforded by Satan the opportunity to 'face the post-lapsarian world with hope and dignity,' a gift beyond compare. He goes on to write: 'They leave Paradise, now made terrible by armed Cherubim, and slowly, hand in hand, leave their forfeited garden for the real world.'[109] And it is this real world to which Mark Taylor attends – a 'world without end,' with no promised-land paradise to look forward to and no utopian garden at which to glance back longingly (at the risk of becoming a pillar of salt) – a world where everything is as it is, as it is meant to be. The world without end is equally without beginning – the world of the middle, the middest, where 'the middle children of history'[110] err to and fro, aimlessly and endlessly. The trick is not overcoming this condition by a denial of death, which turns out to be a denial of humanity, but learning to celebrate our carnality, our incarnationality, as sacred in the most primary and profound sense.

Like Judas' kiss, sacred writing (like that of Taylor, St. Mark, the mystics) is a betrayal of the *logos* – the Word that claims to be steadfast and sure and in possession of truth. By writing an a/theology that portrays language as errant, and erring as grace, Taylor enters into a strange realm that I suggest is similar to a liturgical performance. With language that is active, playful, shifty and more veiling than revealing of any certain meaning, Taylor's writing becomes his act of worship, his sacrament, his means of grace – it is this possibility to which I will direct my attention in the section that follows. To read the word, as to eat the Word made flesh, is to transform and to be transformed by this act. In this aberrant textual performance we discover that we are not

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[109] David Daiches. *God and the Poets*. p. 48.

[110] *Fight Club* (film, 1999), dir. David Fincher, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel.

locked inside language's prison house[111] so much as caught up in its church house. In this place of worship, mediation is all there is, and the plurisignificance of the Word is the totality of presence.

[111] This phrase, 'the prison-house of language,' is Nietzsche's, and is borrowed by Fredric Jameson for the title of his *The Prison-House of Language: A critical account of structuralism and Russian formalism*. Nietzsche's passage is reprinted as Jameson's epigraph: 'We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really the limit.'

IV. (Dis)Embodying: A/theology in performance

> *Strange, that the act of writing should deflect one's ideas so much from their proper course – I thought I knew by now how I wanted to fashion that opening scene, and yet once I actually began putting pen to paper, it soon wandered off in quite the wrong direction. Sadly, I can see only one solution to the problem. I shall have to start again.*[112]

> *This is why my reading has no end: I read and reread, each time seeking the confirmation of a new discovery among the folds of the sentences.*[113]

Overview

In this section, I will consider the possibility of embodying, both literally and literarily, Mark Taylor's a/theology as the *praxis* of erring. As a description of the human condition under the shadow of God's withdrawal, erring is not so much a theoretical concept as a performance, something we *do*, an activity in which we are engaged (wittingly or not), and as such might be considered a sort of liturgical enactment. For Taylor, this performance is nowhere more "real" than in the arena of writing, in the play of textual surfaces. As I have suggested previously, far from being a 'prison-house of language' or a 'gaol' of textuality,[114] the page for Taylor is a church-house, a wholly sacred space which is all the more holy for its holey-ness.

Thomas Altizer suggests in his Forward to *Deconstructing Theology* that Taylor is 'the first American post-ecclesiastical systematic or philosophic theologian, the first theologian free of the scars or perhaps even the memory of Church theology, and the first theologian to address himself solely to the purely theoretical or cognitive problems of

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[112] Andrew Crumey. *Music, In a Foreign Language*. p. 113.

[113] Italo Calvino. *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*. p. 201.

[114] See fn. 111. See also Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol*.

theology.'[115] However, I suspect that Taylor is neither the first such theologian, nor is he completely free of the scars or memory of the Church. Taylor forgoes the task of interpreting religion (i.e. the Christian Church) to the world, and instead concerns himself with interpreting the world *as* a church -- in other words, a sort of religious reading of the world.[116] In this way, he is not so much interested in seeing the ways in which religion functions in the world as he is with exploring the ways in which the world behaves religiously – the ways in which worldly practices take on a quasi-religious character as they are housed within the world. Taylor is not truly 'free' from the *ecclesia*, as Altizer claims; rather, he seeks to rupture the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the church and the world, to finger the wounds, to watch them bleed and blur into each other. Furthermore, Taylor cannot, as Altizer suggests, 'address himself solely to the theoretical or cognitive problems of theology,' simply because theory is inseparable from practice, a dictum which becomes increasingly apparent over the course of Taylor's work.[117] Like the false line of demarcation between the sacred and the secular, the boundary between theory and *praxis* necessarily dissolves when theory is put into practice and when practices give rise to theory – the two are co-determinative and coterminous. Taylor's *theory* of a/theology, which is the *praxis* of erring, is necessarily active. His thinking, and by necessary extension his writing, is always a *doing*. It must, in the first instance, be embodied and performed to *be(come)* anything at all.

For Taylor, this performance is necessarily interdisciplinary, leading him into dialogue with philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and technology. However, as this thesis is concerned with Taylor's writings, and because a large portion of his writings are

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[115] Mark C. Taylor. *Deconstructing Theology*. p. xii.

[116] See Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*. See especially Ch. 2, "What is Reading Religiously?" (pp. 30-66).

[117] Revealing his own position on the matter, Taylor writes: 'I have always believed that the worlds of theory and practice are inseparable' (*RT*, 275).

about writing, I will attend to the performance of erring as it is embodied in a textual milieu. In particular, I will focus on moments in Taylor's work where he slips into an autobiographical or self-reflexive mode. Unlike traditional scholarly writing which strives to eradicate such subjectivity, these notably confessional essays and passages are necessary aberrations in the writing of an a/theology – as shall become clear, Taylor cannot do without them. In a secondary sense, I will also draw upon other stories which I believe capture the essence of a/theological writing – the writing of erring.

Reading – Italo Calvino

The act of reading Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (written just a few years before Taylor's *Erring* was first published) is unsettling, disconcerting. From the beginning, the line of demarcation between the reader *outside* of the text (i.e. me) and the Reader *inside* the world of the text (i.e. him, the novel's protagonist) are obscured, if not erased entirely. The novel begins with a Reader who walks into a bookshop and purchases a copy of Italo Calvino's latest novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Finishing the first chapter, the Reader realises that he has in fact acquired a corrupt copy of the book, for the book's remaining pages contain nothing more than repetitions of that first chapter. When he returns to the bookshop to exchange his flawed copy for a correct one, he discovers that the novel he has begun is not *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino after all, but another novel by another author. However, by this time, the Reader is captivated by the story already underway and is intent on tracking down and finishing the book he started. The narrative, which eschews most narrative conventions, commences from there into a search for the Book – first one, then another, then another – a Book which is whole and complete and coherent, with a proper beginning and a proper ending, with a discernible plot and a definitive author.

But what the Reader encounters, time and again, are books that begin but do not end; chapters extracted from their contexts; beginnings of stories that, without ever proceeding on to middles and ends, arguably even qualify as beginnings. The Reader labours in vain, for the true Book for which he searches is not to be found – it turns out to be an impossibility, an elusive and ultimately illusive hoped-for object that cannot be grasped. In the novel's penultimate chapter, the Reader's 'tempest-tossed vessel' comes to port in a library, where the Reader encounters a series of anonymous other readers who offer reflections on the problem of one's encounter with the text. One such reader notes:

> Reading is a discontinuous and fragmentary operation…In the spreading expanse of the writing, the reader's attention isolates some minimal segments, juxtapositions of words, metaphors, syntactic nexuses, logical passages, lexical peculiarities that prove to possess an extremely concentrated density of meaning…like the void at the bottom of a vortex...[118]

Is this not the predicament of all reading, of every attempt of a reader to grasp, possess, and capture the meaning behind any piece of writing? Certainly the reader *of* Calvino's novel, along with the Reader *in* Calvino's novel, comes to realise the frustrating and problematic nature of our encounter with texts. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* deliberately directs the attention of the reader(s) to this; it requires a certain amount of reflection on the multiplicity of narratives for the reader to even continue his reading in spite of the mounting frustration of reading stories that begin but do not end, that open but are never brought to a close. By creating a text (but hardly a "Book") that embodies the very problem it seeks to explore, Calvino's novel *creates* a 'discontinuous and fragmentary' reading experience, one riddled with metaphors and 'lexical peculiarities' and that gives the reader(s) a sense of 'the void at the bottom of a vortex.' It is a

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[118] Italo Calvino, *Winter's Night*. p. 201. The final reader notes: 'The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death' (p. 204).

collision of the "real" world with the narrative world, the collusion and confusion of the reader (me) with the Reader (him) that unsettles both worlds, dispossessing both readers of any original or final certainty.

Yet this is the excitement of entering into what Taylor calls the 'fun house' of reading. While 'Many people enjoy the fun house only as long as they are convinced that there is an exit...[for] other carnival-goers, the assurance of an exit takes all the fun out of the fun house. These wary readers are persuaded that the only thing more disconcerting than uncertainty is certainty' (*E*, 76). Our encounter with a text, any text, is one which requires what Coleridge calls our willing suspension of disbelief,[119] our willingness to *get lost* in the fun-house of the narrative world. When I successfully *get lost*, what is lost is my Self, and with my Self, my certainty of anything inside or outside of the narrative world. My every attempt to capture meaning or truth from a text is ill-advised and bound for failure, for the text spins what Calvino terms 'a network of lines that enlace,'[120] and reading places us *within* this network. I do not capture the text, but rather the text is a net that holds me captive. I am not, however, bound within a cell of a prison-house; I am set free and sent on a journey in the bound-*less* wilderness of the page. Paul Auster provides a wonderful description of such errancy:

> He wandered. He walked around in circles. He allowed himself to be lost...Cut off from everything that was familiar to him, unable to discover even a single point of reference, he saw that his steps, by taking him nowhere, were taking him nowhere but into himself. He was wandering inside himself, and he was lost. Far from troubling him, this state of

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[119] C. Hugh Holman, ed. *A Handbook to Literature* (4th ed.). See "Suspension of Disbelief" – 'The willingness to withhold questions about the truth, accuracy, or probability of characters or actions in a literary work. This willingness to suspend doubt makes possible the reader's temporary acceptance of the vicarious participation in an author's imaginative world. The phrase *suspension of disbelief* comes from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, in which he writes of "that willing *suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith"' (p. 435).

[120] Italo Calvino. *Winter's Night*. pp. 106-11.

> being lost became a source of happiness, of exhilaration. He breathed it into his very bones...and said to himself, almost triumphantly: I am lost.[121]

As I get lost on this journey of reading, I discover that, in Christian terms, the only way to find my Self is to lose my Self – to allow my Self to be lost, utterly lost, abandoning all hope of ever being found. This reading of *lost-ness,* which is the lost-ness of reading, is the essence of erring. Reading Taylor's writings, I find myself engaged in the sort of erring that *Erring* and his other works are *about* – the semantic playfulness; the erratic intertextuality culled from Taylor's own readings of other writers' texts; the deliberate inconclusiveness; the sense of one writing in a disembodied voice. 'In other words, writing is always in other words' (*E*, 119).

Writing – Paul Auster, part I

The lost-ness that we encounter through reading is characteristic of all writing. For Taylor, writing is that which is no longer possible in the same way after the death of God. And yet it is an unavoidable, even necessary characteristic of erring a/theology. He asserts that 'writing inscribes the disappearance of the transcendental signified. In this way, scripture embodies or enacts the death of God, even as the death of God opens and releases writing. The disappearance of the transcendental signified closes the theological age of the sign and makes possible the free play of a/theological writing' (*E*, 105-06). The disappearance of the transcendental signified, which in Taylor's synthesis of Derridean and Altizerian thought is synonymous with the death of God, might be better understood as less an "event" and more the "condition" of the withdrawal or absence of the F/father. It is this absence that consumes Paul Auster in his memoir *The Invention of Solitude*. Auster's writing, which is very important to Taylor himself,

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[121] Paul Auster. *The Invention of Solitude*. pp. 86-87. References to this work hereafter cited in-text as *IS* with corresponding page numbers.

explores very similar themes as those which consume Taylor: issues of language and identity, of writing and art, of meaning and existence.[122] Struggling to write of his father's sudden death, Auster confesses:

> The closer I come to the end of what I am able to say, the more reluctant I am to say anything. I want to postpone the moment of ending, and in this way delude myself into thinking that I have only just begun, that the better part of my story still lies ahead. No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever. (*IS*, 65)

The death of the F/father, or (M)other for that matter, leaves one with 'nothing left to say. Always nothing left to say. But how to say it?' (*TC*, 136) Taylor writes these words in the wake of his own mother's death, words which mark the "beginning" of an essay in which Taylor says *nothing*, he *does 'nothing with words'* in an attempt to respond to that to which no response is appropriate or sufficient. *Death*, not so much an event as a condition, is that to which the only response is silence, death's withdrawal and the absence that is left over as trace. Taylor writes, 'Death...is always sudden...even when it comes slowly....More I cannot say. The suddenness of it leaves no room for thought' (*TC*, 138). It appears that death is that which does not *appear* so much as *surfaces* as that which is always already present within life. Wrestling with the death of his mother, Taylor notes that 'Death is always in some sense the death of the m-other – even when it is the death of the F/father or S/son,' and as such 'repeats the nonevent that has always already taken place and thus never actually takes place' (*TC*, 146). In his own writing, Auster reflects on the absurdity of writing about the nonevent of death:

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[122] In *Hiding*, Taylor writes: 'Paul Auster is one of the most inventive authors currently writing. Best known for works that are commonly regarded as detective novels, Auster uses this popular genre as a disguise for provocative reflections on the nature and limits of language' (*H*, 47). Taylor discusses Auster's remarkable "City of Glass" (the first part of his *New York Trilogy*) in the first chapter of *Hiding* (*H*, 41-58). Even more remarkable are Taylor's reflections on his "introduction" to Auster, on the nature of life, death and chance, and on (to borrow from Calvino again) the 'network of lines that enlace' Taylor's own life (see *H*, 63-71). Upon reading Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (see above fn.), Taylor writes, 'it was clear to me that Auster and I were pursed by similar demons and obsessed with the same uncanny *je ne sais quoi*' (*H*, 64).

> Slowly, I am coming to understand the absurdity of the task I have set for myself. I have a sense of trying to go somewhere, as if I knew what I wanted to say, but the farther I go the more certain I am that the path towards my object does not exist. I have to invent the road with each step, and this means that I can never be sure of where I am. A feeling of moving around in circles, of perpetual back-tracking, of going off in many directions at once. And even if I do manage to make some progress, I am not at all convinced that it will take me to where I think I am going. Just because you wander in the desert, it does not mean there is a promised land...
>
> For the past few days, in fact, I have begun to feel that the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important, and that when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it.
>
> There has been a wound, and I realize now that it is very deep. Instead of healing me as I thought it would, the act of writing has kept this wound open. At times I have even felt the pain of it concentrated in my right hand, as if each time I picked up the pen and pressed it against the page, my hand were being torn apart. (*IS*, 32)

Auster's and Taylor's writings about life and death intertwine and enlace both writers and the reader. These confessions have a strange resonance, a ghostly quality, when read in parallel, like twins separated at birth but still somehow, across time and space, sharing (in) the feeling – pain, despair, ecstasy – of the other. Both Taylor and Auster write about the wound of words, and the inevitable impossibility of writing in the face of the profound absence that accompanies death – the death of God, of the F/father, of the m-other. Both write of the fear that accompanies every attempt to express the inexpressible. What both writers inscribe is the failure of language to capture grief, to respond to death, to heal anything at all. In an essay entitled "The End(s) of Theology," Taylor writes: 'In the aftermath of the death of God, religion no longer heals wounds by binding together the opposites that tear apart...religion exposes wounds that can never be cured.'[123] Religion and writing, each of which might be understood as the attempt to cheat death by

[123] Mark C. Taylor. "The End(s) of Theology." p. 244.

fabricating immortality, inevitably fail. And yet the practice of writing, and of religion, is no less necessary for this failure.

Remaining – Paul Auster, part II

I began by referring to Calvino's novel because, as with Auster's writing, in it I find an incredible literary embodiment of the a/theological vision of textuality traced in Mark Taylor's writings, and in a way no less significant for being unintentional. Like Calvino's novel, Taylor's texts are not so much definitive treatises filled with conclusive meaning so much as wanderings across the surfaces of and boundaries between texts. These wanderings inevitably do not lead to intellectual enlightenment or describable conclusions but rather to the shadows that result from the eclipse of (the) E/enlightenment, and the inexpressible, inarticulate place where language gives way to silence – where 'we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, [where] we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.'[124] By striving to embody textually the very discussion they undertake, Taylor's writings become a performance – a performance of the impossibility of their own being or meaning. For example, in *Altarity*, Taylor begins with an ending – an introduction to the volume titled 'Encore' – wherein he writes: 'To "begin" with an encore is not to bring the argument full circle but is to call into question all forms of circularity by confessing (at the outset) the uncertainty of conclusions and the impossibility of concluding' (*A*, xxxiii). Whereas *Erring* concludes with an 'Interlude,' which itself "ends" with its own sort of '(un)concluding postscript'[125] – (p.s – *Altarity* in a strange way picks up *Erring*'s gaping parenthetical. 'A p. s. is, of course, something

[124] Pseudo-Dionysius. p. 139.

[125] Taylor's '(un)concluding postscript' recalls Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Note that Taylor's own postscript whereby *Erring* "ends" is unconcluding – an open-parenthesis that never achieves closure, and a 'p.s' that never receives its final full-stop.

like an encore – a supplement to what appeared closed, a remainder left after everything seemed finished' (*A*, xxxiii). The work is never complete; this wor(l)d without end is always unfinished. Like Calvino's serpentine, surreptitious novel, Taylor's texts always leave a remainder. In an important essay reflecting on his deconstructive a/theology some 15 years on, Taylor "begins" thus: 'I thought I was done with God – or that God was done with me. But I suppose I am not, at least not yet. And I am beginning to fear not ever. *Erring* was to have ended it all but it has not' (*AR*, 29). In other words, while at the time it may have been considered (by others if not Taylor himself) an attempt to bring about the "end" of theology by tracing the "ends" of God, Self, History and Book, *Erring* essentially *ends nothing*, or perhaps only ends as much as it begins. What ends with *Erring*'s wor(l)d without end is the *need*, the *desire*, for an end – a proper end; fulfilment; completion. What *Erring* then *begins* is fear that the work is not yet done, and indeed will never be done – not ever. Thus we must begin to attend to what remains *beyond* the end. This remainder is the sacred which approaches (as it simultaneously withdraws) at the moment when 'Belief in God becomes impossible and belief in the impossible unavoidable' (*AR*, 31). Taylor writes that 'the sacred is that which allows God to be God by enabling God to be other than everything that is not god. God, in other words, is an after-effect or symptom of the sacred' (*AR*, 32). The sacred remains, and with it, God – 'Questions linger, calling us to linger with the question' (*AR*, 30).

Paul Auster's novel *Moon Palace* (1989) is an exceptional example of an unending text and deserves at least brief mention here (although the a/theological implications of this novel are too complex to fully explore in this context). The novel is the story of M. S. Fogg, a young man who after a period of self-destructiveness is hired to be the companion of a blind, ill-tempered, and dying elderly man named (or pseudo-

named, as it turns out) Thomas Effing.[126] The majority of the novel consists of Fogg, the narrator, recounting to the reader his experiences with Effing, the bulk of which consists of Fogg's transcription of Effing's life story. Effing confesses, and Fogg writes. Actually, Fogg *wrote* (the novel is written thoroughly in past-tense) Effing's confession, and now Fogg *writes* the novel that the reader reads. (Of course, Auster is the *actual* author – if such designation is even possible – which even further complicates the relationship between author, narrator, confessor, and reader. Pseudonyms proliferate as the narratives crisscross, straying to and fro.) Throughout his task of writing Effing's life, Fogg doubts the veracity of the story his pen produces, but eventually he gives up:

> After a while, I stopped wondering if he was telling the truth or not. His narrative had taken on a phantasmagoric quality by then, and there were times when he did not seem to be remembering the outward facts of his life so much as inventing a parable to explain its inner meanings....[It] was all so farfetched, and yet the very outrageousness of the story was probably its most convincing element....I simply wanted to let myself go along with it, refusing to question whether these things had happened or not. (*MP*, 183)

Fact intermingles with fiction, and finally, for Fogg, fiction becomes fact.

Moon Palace is also on one level about the search for the F/father. The identity of Fogg's father is a life-long mystery to him, but this all changes after his encounter with Effing. In a strange and rather far-fetched turn of events, Fogg learns that Effing, who by refiguring his own identity had left behind an orphaned son, is actually his own grandfather – Effing's anonymous son is Fogg's anonymous father. After Effing's death, Fogg finally meets his "real father" Soloman Barber, who turns out to be hardly real or a father, and fails to possess the wisdom of his biblical namesake. And yet the

[126] While I realise there is no connection between the two, and indeed to suggest so would be wildly far-fetched, I am amused by the fact that Effing and Erring are only distinguished by one letter. In the novel, Fogg intuits that Thomas is most likely a reference to doubting Thomas, and Effing's surname is a play on 'fucking,' shortened to f-ing,. Ergo, by re-naming himself Thomas Effing, Julian Barber effectively calls himself 'Fucking Thomas, the man who fucked his life' – implying a certain cursedness, among other things. See Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*. pp. 184-85. References to this work hereafter cited as *MP* with corresponding page numbers.

Effing, the Father of them both, even in his absence ends up sending these two, Barber and Fogg, on an errand, an errant journey that eventually leads to the de(con)struction of both father and son. The journey begins with Effing's confession, laboriously written by Fogg's own hand, and ends with Fogg's decision to leave everything, his very life, behind in pursuit of the past life of a virtual (and dead) stranger, a stranger who is his Father. The story Fogg tells "ends" like this:

> That was when I started walking....I walked the whole of that day, from sunup to sundown, walking as thought I meant to punish the ground beneath my feet. The next day, I did the same thing again. And the day after that. And then the day after that. For the next three months, I continued walking, slowly working my way west...Once I reached the end of the continent, I felt that some important question would be resolved for me. I had no idea what that question was, but the answer had already been formed in my steps, and I had only to keep walking to know that I had left myself behind, that I was no longer the person I had once been.
>
> [...] I had come to the end of the world, and beyond it there was nothing but air and waves, an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China. This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins. (*MP*, 305-06)

At this point it becomes clear why Fogg has told (written) the entire story in the past tense, and even finally "ends" the book in the past tense: because the real story is yet to come – here-not-yet-here. The ending is a beginning. The story moves into the present tense now, but this story has not and cannot yet be written. In a sense, it is like *Erring* – the response now is to go and do likewise, to take up the mantle of this errant vision and "go ye and *wand-er(r)* likewise." *Moon Palace* does not end as much as simply fade away, wander off into the sunset...there is no way to know what the world beyond might bring, life or death. By writing (a story/book) without end, Fogg's (Auster's?) story becomes a world without end....a wor(l)d without end....a prelude to the coming unknown, to the unknown that is to come.

Fogg's journey to the end of the earth is a wandering into himself which results in the loss of the Self. It is also a wandering into a past which *never was*, and which cannot

exist as anything but fiction. Of course, Fogg's journey west is also physically – *topographically* – a journey into the desert of the American west, which Effing describes as 'The flattest, most desolate spot on the planet, a boneyard of oblivion. You travel along day after day, and you don't see a goddamned thing....It's a dead world, and the only thing you ever get closer to is the same nothing....A giant cemetery was what it was, a blank page of death' (*MP*, 154). Taylor, too, considers the desert synonymous with the blank page, and indeed the venue of physical erring might be the arid wasteland of the desert just as the venue of literary erring is the wilderness of the blank page.

> The desert is the place of time im-memorial, time outside of time, time that can never be recollected, time whose silence cannot be broken. This time is never present, nor is it absent; rather, it approaches by withdrawing. *Desert*, after all, is a verb as well as a noun. To desert is to withdraw, leave, forsake, abandon. Desert...deserting: What withdraws? Who forsakes? What abandons? Who is abandoned – and to what?[127]

The Father deserts the son; the Son deserts the father. The Son deserts his Self, abandons his own history, his-story. He closes the book on the life he has known, and looks ahead into the abyss of what lies beyond the end. He abandons any hope of recovery, of ever being recovered. He *gets lost* – and in so doing, embarks on his greatest journey, taking his leave (of God, of Self, of History, of Book), again and again...into the wor(l)d without end. Only the trace, the remainder, remains.

Wandering – the Wilderness

Taylor's wandering writings are in large part writings about wandering. In *Erring*, Taylor draws on a passage from Henry David Thoreau, entitled "Walking." He explores the various semantic implications of walking, wandering, and sauntering, suggesting that to *saunter* is to be *sans terre*, without a land or home (*E*, 149-50). Yet to be homeless, that is, to call no-where "home," is also to be at home everywhere. To

[127] Mark C. Taylor. "Rubbings of Reality." (*Unpublished essay*)

saunter is also to wander towards *Sainte Terre*, or the Holy Land – to be a 'holylander.' In a sense, the holylander is one who follows the sacred, which inevitably sets one on a journey of erring, and leads into the wilderness. Yet in each case, the errant wanderer is a happy drifter, content to saunter. Taylor sets this in contrast to the 'unhappy, lacerated consciousness' (*E*, 152) of the guilty subject who understands the loss of presence as an acquired deficiency rather than an originary lack. For this unhappy soul

> Lack...is regarded as a deficiency that should not be or as an emptiness that ought to be filled. When carried to completion, the pursuit of mastery proves to be a self-contradictory undertaking in which an agent simultaneously tries to deny deficiency and attempts to satisfy need. The historical subject's apparent self-affirmation (which is covert self-negation) is mediated by the negation of other subjects and objects. Though intended to demonstrate self-sufficiency, the effort to subjugate otherness actually discloses incurable need. The master who needs to be master is no master at all. (*E*, 69)

We must come to accept that 'if lack is "original" and not secondary, then it is not necessarily a deficiency' (*E*, 148). The people of God have always wandered. Scripture tells us that the Israelites erred for years in the wilderness in search of the promised land – which might be understood as a quest to recover lost, promised presence – but the promise is ever deferred and never fulfilled. Indeed, as Auster writes, 'Just because you wander in the desert, it does not mean there is a promised land' (*IS*, 32). The origin cannot be recovered because it never was. The promise will never come to pass in the future because the future never is and never will be. The *desire* for the promised land is, in a way, an end unto itself, for to fully realise and receive the promise brings an end to desire. Taylor suggests that 'When desire forsakes the prospect of complete satisfaction, it opens the possibility of delight.... Since delight always involves loss, the joy it brings is an anguished joy' (*E*, 148). But this does not mean we forsake the quest. On the contrary, our 'desire desires not satisfaction but desire itself' (*E*, 31). The journey always implies the end that, paradoxically, is never finally realised, and the meaning

sought is found in the search for meaning itself. It is not an end at which we arrive, for as Taylor argues over and over, the end at best eludes us, and more likely is an illusion in the first place. This a-teleological or an-eschatological vision is at first glance antithetical to orthodox Christianity, and indeed to most world religions save perhaps Buddhism. But Taylor's point is that the purpose of the end is the *desire* for the end, the *desire* for fulfilment. The thing that sustains Christian practice is the *hope* for the Kingdom *come*, coming but not yet here. To bring about the fulfilment of this hope is the end to the hope. Therefore, for now, we must not give up hope, but embrace our hope even more fully as an end unto itself. Our hope is built on nothing past or future, but rather on nothing less than the eternal now of everlasting hope. As Charles Winquist writes, 'The text is never a totality. The self as subjectivity is always unfinished.'[128] To accept the incompletion of desire, of hope, is not to admit defeat, but to acknowledge the triumph of hope in the face of all despair and adversity.

Wrestling – the Wound

As we wander, we encounter others along the way. These other wandering errors sometimes take the form of angels, but sometimes appear as demons. Sometimes they grant a blessing, and other times they curse us or leave us wounded. If wanderings always *follow* after the sacred, it seems that actual encounters with the sacred are few and far between. The sacred is that which is wholly Other, the divine which oftentimes takes the form of the demonic. On the journey, the leader retains the possibility of becoming the adversary. Valentine Cunningham writes that 'the encounter with the Other, with the transcendent, the divine is, literally, wounding.'[129] In Genesis 32, Jacob goes out wandering and encounters the divine in the form of a man, with whom he wrestles until

[128] Charles E. Winquist. *Desiring Theology*. p. 126.

[129] Valentine Cunningham. "It is No Sin to Limp." p. 305.

daybreak (Gen. 32:24). Jacob (who we might recall is a trickster, thief of his brother's birthright – an error in his own right) demands that his opponent reveal his identity. But his opponent responds not by stating his name, but by giving Jacob a blessing. Jacob makes the same misjudgement that we all do – confusing identity with presence, believing that 'To be a self is to possess and to be possessed by a name' (*E*, 34). For this adversary of Jacob's to be "real" in any way, he must be a Self and therefore must have a name. Yet the opponent gives no name, but rather gives Jacob a wound and a blessing – a blessing in the form of a wound – a blessing that appears as a *pharmakon* of sorts, a cur(s)e. Jacob, like everyone who encounters the sacred, emerges from this encounter a changed man. Identities are not just reformed, but deformed, radically altered. Every such encounter involves a dispossession of sorts. Names are taken away and replaced with pseudonyms: Jacob, 'the supplanter,' becomes Israel, 'the one who strives with God.' Some come away blind (St. Paul) or, in this case, lame. Jacob's conversation with this mysterious Other takes place both physically and verbally. The two struggle with one another, struggle *together*, each attempting to master the other, to emerge as the better. As opponents, their aim is the same – or perhaps it is not. Perhaps Jacob's aim is to be the victor, while the intention of the Stranger is simply to give Jacob the blessing, and it is only by wounding Jacob that he is able to accomplish his goal. In any case, it should come as no surprise to us that, as Mark Taylor implicitly suggests, every encounter with the sacred, via texts, via art or architecture, via technology or indeed any commun(icat)ion, even via traditional religious rituals like the Eucharist, necessarily involves a sort of *laming* – or as my own father used to say, 'It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt.' Our every attempt at mastery is bound for failure, and our every wrestling match inevitably ends with our walking away wounded. This is the nature of communion, of communication, of conversation – for every conversation

inevitably leads to conversion, to further convers(at)ion. David Jasper reminds us of violent nature of every literary, or even literal, conversation, writing: '*Conversations*—or even, after the experience of Jacob, *wrestlings* with the mysterious 'other'...need space—a room at least—across the text, with a delicate consideration of environment, that is the *textuality* of the text.'[130] Interpretation is an invasion into the text, and the place that this invasion occurs is the page itself. The words penned by the writer fall under the gaze of the reader, but when the reader turns to interpret, his invasive tool is, too, the pen – his reading becomes a writing, as 'His writing is always a reading' (*E*, 180), a drama that is staged along the lines of the page.[131] Under Enlightenment-era auspices, the right amount of cutting into the text eventually leads to uncovering the kernel of pure meaning hidden within the text. However, in an a/theological vision that embraces the metaphor of erring, our engagement with the text is a struggle that *cuts into us*, wounds us, and uncovers the emptiness and dispossession hidden beneath every surface. Jacob's wrestling match ends at daybreak, but his limp lasts forever. The alteration is visible and is the result of divine *altarity* – otherness that can be neither avoided nor escaped.

Limping – Valentine Cunningham

Reflecting on Jacob's struggle with the angel, Valentine Cunningham writes:

> This God, like this story, just won't go away. Our whole experience is marked indelibly by this past and by successive encounters with it, and our whole culture limps after. It is for many a disagreeable residue, a set of too painful traces, reminders, and remainders....Encounters with this mystery, with such mysteries, with stories and texts and histories like this, are the kind of necessary, painful, laming, struggle that, as the Jacob story

[130] David Jasper. "From Theology to Theological Thinking." p. 296.

[131] Taylor writes: 'A book is no more possible without blanks than speech is possible apart from silence. Books stage an unfixable play in/of black and white' (*E*, 92).

> has declared from the beginning, can be redemptive, saving, transforming, healing...[132]

This idea of the *wounded* wanderer might be a slight supplement or correction to Taylor's construal of the happy wanderer. We can be happy despite our wounds, certainly, but it is nigh impossible to saunter erringly through this desert (as *Erring* at times seems to envision) when we are so wounded. As we follow the sacred, occasionally we might have the strength to walk, but most of the time, it seems, we limp or even crawl. We are bound to limp through life, bearing the marks of a presence only known in absence, which, in a sense, make the presence all the more present. The wound is the trace, the sign, and in the end, all-in-all. The wound is incurable. As Cunningham later writes, 'the people of God must limp…limping is no unfortunate contingency of the encounter with God, but a necessary component of it…The grip of the divine wrestler persists – and harshly. He leaves a mark – an inerasable mark – that's a kind of scarring, a legacy of pain.'[133] This legacy of pain is what writers like Taylor, Auster, Calvino and others inscribe in the pages of their writing. The pen *is* (mightier than?) the sword. Paper cuts.

Confessing – (Un)Writing the Self

After Jacob's blessing/wounding, he undertakes a re-naming of his own, calling the site of the encounter Peniel, meaning 'the face of God,' and confesses 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life was preserved' (Gen. 32:30). (Interestingly, he seems to *assume* or *intuit* that his encounter was with God, for his opponent, with whom he wrestled throughout the night, never actually revealed himself. Perhaps those who

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[132] Valentine Cunningham. "It is No Sin to Limp." p. 309. It is noteworthy that this essay was delivered as a sermon to the University of Oxford, 12 May 1991. The phrase 'it is no sin to limp' has its origins in rabbinic midrash.

[133] Ibid. p. 307.

encounter the divine in such a way, and who come away wounded, do not have to be told but simply *know* what they have experienced.) Jacob's confession is a necessary accompaniment to the encounter, the necessary but painful follow-up to the wound/blessing of God. In Taylor's own work, and we have also seen that this is true of Auster's fiction,

> the page tends to become a confessional without walls where our most intimate thoughts and unthoughts stand revealed for all to see and hear. Faced with the prospect of such exposure, we grow modest and withdraw. Devising strategies of avoidance in an effort not to think and not to say what nonetheless we cannot not think and cannot not say, we turn to history, politics, economics, literature, art. (*AR*, 30-31)

Taylor's writings often subvert the conventions of scholarly writing by periodically shifting into such a confessional or autobiographical mode. The essay cited above, "Denegating God," is one such example. In this essay, Taylor almost completely forgoes the strictures of academic writing – the references to other works, citations and footnotes, etc. – for exactly the sort of confession that he describes in the above passage. The critical gaze is directed back at his own writings, and his own self, in a soul-searching moment of self-reflexion. The essay reflects on a/theology, on the (lasting?) impact of *Erring*, and to its reception around the time of its publication. Taylor describes the reactions of colleagues, comments or letters he received, criticisms to which he never found the right words of response. He traces the syntheses in his thinking that led to the production of *Erring*, and attempts to clarify some of the most often misunderstood components of his a/theological vision, writing:

> A/theology is not the opposite of theology and must not be identified with atheism. Neither exactly positive nor negative, a/theology draws on the resources of deconstruction to develop a nonnegative negative theology that seeks to think what Western ontotheology leaves unthought. By so doing, a/theology traces the limits of theology in a way that displaces classical concepts of God. [...]
>
> The first task of the a/theologian is to reread the theological tradition against the grain in an effort to discern the unsaid in the midst of the said.

> This is the deconstructive moment of a/theology. Second, it is necessary to move beyond deconstruction sensu strictissimo to reconfigure theological notions in an a/theological register. At this point, more radical implications of a/theology begin to emerge. (*AR*, 40)

Taylor deals with his own inability to respond to the criticisms his early work received, and as the earlier passage suggests, might even consider the development of his work thereafter to be a withdrawal – a strategy of avoidance in the form of a turn away from the (original) subject toward other subjects, away from depth and toward surfaces. Elsewhere in this essay, he writes,

> Since I am always lacking, the I is always wanting. This lack and this want, which are never my own, are gifts of the sacred...For a gift to be a gift, it must be prodigal, extravagant, excessive; it must, in other words, be an expenditure without return. The very possibility of return introduces an element of calculation that annuls the gift. (*AR*, 43)

This statement suggests the very essence of erring – gratuity, lack, wandering, limping. Acknowledging a wound that sometimes comes at the hand of another, a mysterious divine stranger, but oftentimes is the violation of one's own hand.

In "The Betrayal of the Body: Live Not," the last chapter of his *Nots*, Taylor writes about a very personal experience: the ritualised violence of the syringe in self-administered insulin injections designed to regulate his diabetic condition; the wounding by his own hand; the injection of a foreign, synthetic substance, an antidote that is both cure and poison. Taylor spends the bulk of this essay exploring the medical phenomenon of autoimmune disease as an event wherein 'the body inevitably betrays itself' (*N*, 239). After a thorough and insightful synthesis of medical research and poststructuralist linguistics, Taylor concludes that 'autoimmune disease results from the body's failure to distinguish self from nonself. The body mistakes itself for an other and initiates an attack on itself, which is normally reserved for foreign invaders… autoimmune diseases result from a breakdown in the communications systems that govern the body' (*N*, 246). But as the essay nears its end, Taylor shifts from a scholarly tone into the profoundly

human voice of confession, of a mortal man trying to make sense of his frail body. In a voice so much his own that it seems not his own, he writes:

> I remember all too well (how could I ever forget?) the first time I suffered by my own hand the wound of the syringe. It was not the pain I dreaded, though there was that, but the violence, the violation of my body. Its wounding, puncture, bleeding; the injection of a foreign, synthetic, artificial agent. I felt that I was betraying the body that had betrayed me. Wound upon wound, betrayal upon betrayal. What would it all solve? What would it cure?
>
> My body, which, of course, is not my own, is a text that remains unreadable for me as well as the others who watch over it....[T]he more I struggle to achieve "reasonable control," the more I am forced to admit that control is neither reasonable or possible. *Things are always out of control.*
>
> In time, it all becomes ritualized....Rituals are often violent and bloody... As in any ritual worth repeating, there is a moment when death draws near....
>
> "This is my body
> broken"[134]

As if gushing emotion into a diary, the sort of "book" the author never intends for another to read, the page becomes the stage upon which this drama is played out; the page becomes the altar for this sacramental performance. And like the needle in Taylor's own hand, which violates the trust of his own body, the pen in his hand violates his trust by spilling the ink of confession all over the page. The diary is unlocked, not hidden away but left in plain view. This most private of rituals, something as personal as a medical condition, the torment and turmoil that accompanies a failing body – these confessions become for Taylor a necessary part of his writing. For his writing, like his body, is not ultimately his own, and to read these words, as to write them, is a violation of trust. And yet, in both instances, this violation is necessary. Diaries are meant for keeping secrets, and yet, if I want to keep something truly secret, I would never write it

[134] *N*, 253-55. (I have here opted for a footnote rather than an in-text citation of this passage so as not to disrupt the intentional textual placement of Taylor's final, eucharistic phrase.)

down in the first place – not even "just for me." In this way, a diary is meant for secrets that *must* be told, trusts that *must* be broken...sins that must be confessed.

In *About Religion*, again the last chapter, "Indifference," Taylor re(ac)quires this confessional voice, writing under various subtitles: Betrayal, Loving, Letting-Go, Disappointment. In Abandonment, he writes of a miscarried pregnancy and the sister he never knew. Later, at the very end, in these few pages which serve as a sort of "public" diary of his own, Taylor writes about his mother's secret diary. He describes stumbling upon the private book 'years before her death while looking for some writing paper in a drawer in her desk' (*AR*, 262), but his intrusion into her concealed thoughts is interrupted by approaching footsteps.

> The page my eyes fell upon as if by chance described the room they had prepared for the baby....Though she gave no hint, it was clear that birth was near.
>
> I never finished reading the diary. When we faced the melancholy task of emptying the house after he died, the drawer of her desk was where I went first. But the diary was gone....Did she have second thoughts about writing what she had never said? Did she consider (her) writing a betrayal?...Did they fear I would betray their secret? Didn't they see that the secret was not theirs to betray or betray not?...Didn't they know that their not-telling was telling? Did they realize, long before I, that the writing I believe was my own betrayed a secret I did not know by rewriting a diary I had never read? (*AR*, 262)

The miscarriage of the sister he never knew marks Taylor's life with a profound sense of absence. Life and death exists from the beginning, even before the beginning. His sister's life that never was could well have been, while his life could have been the one that yielded to death before the beginning.

> It began, as it always begins, with loss, lack, absence. A loss that occurred not long before I was and will continue long after I will have been. This loss was not, therefore, *my* loss, yet it is the loss that has, in no small measure, made me what I am and am not. The loss was the loss of a nameless one – a nameless one who will remain nameless or who will be named only in the absence of which "my" name has become the mark. (*AR*, 248)

Further (re)writing the story of his unborn sister, Taylor writes: 'Without this wound *I* am not; with this wound I *am* not. Since wounding is the unavoidable condition of my being, recovery is impossible' (*AR*, 251). Accepting the way life is marked by others, by everything, by nothing, is accepting that "my" life is not my own. *This* is the disappearance, this dispossession of the self. This is the loss that cannot be recovered, for "I" am in large part irresponsible for who "I" am, for my very being. I am the result of events that have no narrative coherence except as it is imposed in retrospect, and the chance gift of my life is nothing more than the gift of chance (*H*, 63). What underlies this feeling of abandonment, of loss and lack and absence, is the sort of "Indifference" that Taylor explores in this section, asking 'What would it mean to live (with) indifference?' Contrary to Peter Hodgson's criticism, the implications of indifference in Taylor's work are far from being devoid of 'ethical seriousness.'[135] This indifference is 'a difference that would make a difference' (*RT*, 265), not ignorance of or blindness to difference, but rather an 'essential indifference...[which] is always slipping away and, thus, is never present. Even when it seems near, indifference remains impossible.

[135] In his review of *Erring*, Peter Hodgson writes: 'Taylor's god, it appears to me, is for those who don't need a real God – a God who saves from sin and death and the oppressive powers – because they already have all that life can offer; this is a god for those who have the leisure and economic resources to engages in an endless play of words, to spend themselves unreservedly in the carnival of life, to engage in solipsistic play primarily to avoid boredom and attain and certain aesthetic and erotic pleasure. Taylor's god is a god for the children of privilege, not the children of poverty; a god for the oppressors, not the oppressed...' (pp. 257-58). I consider Hodgson's remarks demonstrative of a fundamental misconception of Taylor's work. The ethical seriousness of Taylor's deconstructive a/theology, and indeed of any deconstructionist enterprise, is bound to the uncertainty of meaning that attends the deconstructive event. Positivistic approaches require the negative so as to avoid becoming essentialist and totalising (or worse, totalitarian) – ergo, for one to be "certain" about the nature of the Divine is to risk abusing what one understands or believes to be the "will" of God. Centuries of Christian history attest to this dangerous tendency, and, tragically, we can see that this concern is still great – perhaps the greatest it has ever been – simply by looking at the response of the United States to 9/11 and their consequent (though largely unrelated) initiatives in the Middle East under the auspices of a "War on Terror." If the necessary result of a theology such as Taylor's is a fundamental *un*certainty about the Divine, even to the extent of the abnegation of (belief in) God, it could be said that perhaps the *most* ethical option in the "information age" is the pursuit of doubt – unknowing rather than knowing, unreason rather than reason, illogic rather than logic. To attend to the immanent, even to the negation of the transcendent, is not abysmally nihilistic (a critique often levied against Taylor's work) but rather purely humanistic or existentialistic, which situates us within the realm of the here and now (*hic et nunc)*, the ethical realm of *human relationality*.

Strangely, the impossibility of indifference does not engender indifference; rather, its impossibility is what makes indifference so alluring' (*AR*, 251). This indifference, this underpinning nothing that obsesses Taylor as it does the mystics, is what Meister Eckhart also writes about in terms of "Disinterest," or what another translation renders "Detachment":

> Now I ask what the object of pure disinterest is. I reply that it is neither this nor that. Pure disinterest is empty nothingness....What is the prayer of the disinterested heart? I answer by saying that a disinterested man, pure in heart, has no prayer, for to pray is to want something from God, something added that one desires, or something that God is to take away. The disinterested person, however, wants nothing, and neither has he anything of which he would be rid. Therefore he has no prayer...[136]

Emptying – Kenosis

A common theme throughout these topical explorations is that of *kenosis*, which is both biblical and Hegelian, of emptying, or more precisely of *self*-emptying. The reader becomes lost in the narrative world. The writer loses himself in his creative practice, which might not be a calculated "craft" so much as an addiction or an obsession. Furthermore, the writer finds himself exposed in the confessional chamber of the text, spilling himself out all over the page for all to see. Confession, or autobiography, is not a solution to the lost Self – that is to say, it is not a means of *finding* the Self – but inevitably fails, resulting in the utter loss, disappearance and dissolution of the Self. This is the embodiment, which is finally a (dis)embodiment, of erring; this is a/theology put into practice. By writing, and writing without end, the end is (being) written – but it is an end that is found only in an emptying out, a move from the transcendent to the immanent, from immortality to mortality, from infallibility to eternal fallenness, from belief to disbelief, from speech to silence and from immediacy to

[136] Meister Eckhart. *A Modern Translation*. pp. 88-89.

mediation, from knowing to unknowing, to not knowing by knowing (the) *not*. This is where we are being led, and, being led, we must remember that we are always following. What we inevitably follow is *the sacred*, for as Taylor writes: 'To follow the sacred – and everything as well as everybody inevitably follows the sacred – is to err' (*AR*, 45). Of course, as the sacred inevitably leads us *outside* the 'spaces once deemed holy,' we find ourselves in the secular, and thereby the divisions between the two – the sacred and the secular or profane – tend to dissolve, deconstruct, and in desolation, allow the space for (re)construction to occur – to see the sacred where it once was forbidden by structures designed to divide, to keep the sacred (God) *in here* and not *out there*. But indeed it does not have to be this way, and this is one thing that deconstruction, and that a deconstructive a/theology, might uniquely provide – an opportunity to see the sacred in the unlikeliest of places, to explore God's presence in the places which seem the most devoid of God – to unfetter God by breaking the ligature of *-ligion*, the demonic captivity of Legion, so as to allow re-ligion to re-bind us back spiritually to the sacred (God) and ethically to one another.

Therefore, by embodying the very deconstruction that is carried out, Taylor's words are the sacrificial victim of the deconstructive event. The body (corpse) of Taylor's corpus is crucified, marked out on/with the cross. The sacrificial offering is the very sacrifice of *Erring*. This self-embodiment turns out, then, to be a certain disembodiment, as the texts time and again reveal their holey-ness. However, it must be inscribed as a (dis)embodiment, not fully embodied or disembodied, for 'The word is never disembodied [since] it is forever inscribed in writing' (*E*, 119). Writing is the embodiment of the text/scripture, but its body is broken and its blood is spilled. Poured out, writing is

> radically, and thus "originally" kenotic....Kenosis is a self-emptying that becomes actual in the crucifixion of independent individuals. This

> kenotic process is not a once-and-for-all event, confined to the distant past. It occurs repeatedly in and through the dissemination of the word. The word is spread through the crucifixion of the self. Here lies the unavoidable passion of writing. (*E*, 141-42)

Like seed which must die to grow into life, for the word to spread, it must die and be reborn as writing. The corpse becomes the corpus. The wooden cross, stained with blood, is refined into paper and marked with ink. The stone that once covered the empty tomb becomes a tablet inscribed with the proclamation 'The Word is not here.' The folds of the loose grave-clothes contain the mysterious and troubling message of the blank page – *nothing*. Not a mark, stain or tear. Not a jot nor a tittle.

Coda – on Praxis[137]

The passion of writing...the Passion of Christ...the Passion of the Word (*Logos*)...the Passion (of) play. We have followed Taylor into 'the desert of criticism,'[138] not arriving at but passing through a place where we may learn to read all writing as scripture, and all scripture as erring. 'Within the relative play of erring scripture, interpretation does not unveil established meaning but produces new meanings that have not previously been realized. So conceived, interpretation extends the text through an endless process of multiplication, pluralization, and dispersal' (*E*, 180). For this reason,

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[137] In a similar way that this entire thesis is designed to somewhat mirror the "shape" that I suggest Taylor's a/theological project has taken, in this section, I have intentionally mimicked Taylor's formal style in "Indifference," his final essay in *About Religion* (pp. 248-62). As has been repeatedly suggested, theory and practice are inseparable, and as such, I have found it both beneficial and in a sense necessary to embrace the conventions (if such things as a/theological "conventions" exist) of the material that I seek to discuss. In his introduction to *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives*, Stephen Moore writes, 'Rather than take a jackhammer to the concrete, parabolic language of the Gospels, replacing graphic images with abstract categories, I prefer to respond to a pictographic text pictographically, to a narrative text narratively, producing a critical text that is a postmodern analogue of the premodern text that it purports to read' (p. xviii). While the distinctions between pre- and post-modern textuality do not apply to my interaction with Taylor's writings, it is fair to say that I have attempted to respond to a/theological writing a/theologically (and in a microcosmic way, to mystical texts mystically, to confessional texts confessionally, etc.), however ambitious, or pretentious, this endeavour might seem.

[138] Paul Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*. p. 349.

both literally and figuratively, '*E/erring is endless*' (*E*, 184) – for the writing/reading of *Erring* is the liturgical performance of the cruci-fiction of the Word. Taylor's writings, which he claims are not his own, do not exist until they are put into practice in the *praxis* of reading. And yet, this is a 'reading [which] has no end: I read and reread, each time seeking the confirmation of a new discovery among the folds of the sentences.'[139] However the confirmation never comes – it is always deferred. We search amongst the folds of the text(ile)s and find, exactly, *nothing*. 'In other words,' writes David Jasper,

> we read not through the text, somehow consuming it in a search for its meaning, but read only by extending in ourselves the very existence of the text. In the oxymoronic text the saintly body becomes a total presence only in its absolute self-forgetfulness, in pure kenosis, and thus the impossible *imitatio Christi*, an impossibility which we therefore entertain in our reading. For in this act of reading, the letters that we *see* are only possible against the greater reality of the pure, blank spaces that allow them to become visual. The desert, we may say, is the blank page...[140]

To embark on the journey of reading these bol(e)y scriptures 'is to follow the sacred by denegating God....Erring is the gift of the sacred's of(f)-erring. The non-place and no-where of erring is the desert created by the desertion of the sacred' (*AR*, 45). This desert is a *pharmakon*, the cur(s)e we need and long for, both a space of endless freedom and a scorching, deadly wilderness where travellers are wind-whipped and withered, where the ground shifts endlessly underfoot. This is the desert to which we are called again (and again, and...). If theory and practice are inseparable, as Taylor believes, this vision of erring is not just abstract theory but is concrete, incarnate *praxis*. It is a ritual, a liturgical enactment played out not in the realm of the spiritual but rather in the realm of the textual, in the sacred *ecclesia* of the blank/written page. It is to this place that we return to wander, to explore, like children in the crypt of a church-house, simultaneously frightened and excited by the thought of what they might encounter in such dark,

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[139] Italo Calvino. *Winter's Night*. p. 201.

[140] David Jasper. *The Sacred Desert*. pp. 29-30.

mysterious spaces. It is a game, a pointless game, a diversion from the proper course. 'Strange, that the act of writing should deflect one's ideas so much from their proper course.'[141] If 'The endlessness of erring discloses its unavoidable purposelessness' (*E*, 157), it is a purposelessness that is correlate to gratuity – the extravagance of grace, given freely, without purpose or hope for return; grace that is (a)mazing.

[141] Andrew Crumey, *Music*, p. 113.

V. (Un)Forsaking: A/theology in Abandon

> *Since abandonment turns away even when it turns toward, living with abandon is always a diversion even when it seems hopelessly serious....To live (with) indifference is to live an infinite detour with abandon.* (*AR*, 253-54)

In(-)conclusion...

In this final section, I hope to draw together the many themes brought forth in the preceding pages of this thesis and offer both conclusions and suggestions for further exploration. What I mean to suggest by the title of this section is that a/theology inevitably ends in abandon. 'But what does it mean to live (with) abandon(ment)? Who abandons? What abandons? Who is abandoned? What is abandoned?' (*AR*, 253) Who or what finally abandons or is abandoned is uncertain, but this abandonment should not be mistaken for failure, for a/theology is not resignedly forsaken but necessarily (un)forsaken – unforsaken by being endlessly forsaken. This, too, is part of the praxis of erring: to wander, or limp as the case may be, in the God-forsaken wilderness of the here and now is a process of eternal leave-taking wherein we take our leave of God for the sake of God, God having taken leave of us. This process is a journey that never ends. Along the way, Self, History, all vestiges of certain truth or meaning must be continually forsaken, never in a once-and-for-all event, but in an errand on which we must leave over and over again. Running (from) this errand accomplishes nothing.

As I have endeavoured to bring this project to an end (although perhaps an end that does not imply completion), I have realised that to write *about* a/theology in a way that respects and accounts for the claims a/theology makes has required that I attempt to think and write a/theologically. The shape this thesis has taken attests to this. The prelude of reading and research led me to outline what I understand to be the overarching

shape of Taylor's work, a shape which I then applied to the outline of my own project. With this outline in place, I sought to contextualise Taylor's a/theology in a way that makes sense to me as a Christian – not to commandeer or co-opt one for the other but hopefully, in a way that respects and even celebrates difference, recognising the radical interrelatedness of a/theology and Christian theology. My attempt to locate the site where theology and a/theology converge has led me repeatedly to the cross, the place where all opposites finally coincide in the *kerygma* and the silence that accompanies Christ's death and echoes through the empty tomb. This location shows itself to be (a) nowhere, nothing more than a point on a grid where two lines (labelled *life/death, heaven/earth, God/man*, etc.) intersect. This no-where is as small as nothing and as large as everything – it is the site of the sacred, which is both 'center and circumference of the universe,'[142] the stage upon which this passion(ate) play is set. Here I have realised that the tensions that hold a/theology and theology in their dialectical relationship – suspended between forces of attraction and repulsion, bound together and yet held apart – are inescapable. Ultimately what Taylor seems to seek is 'An affirmation that is a negation and a negation that is an affirmation [that] would not necessarily reconcile opposites but would maintain a tension that would leave everything in suspense' (*RT*, 265). The appropriate response is not to strive to overcome these tensions but to learn to live with(in) them. This living within is a "living between," and is only as real as it is performed, and it can only be performed by an act of (dis)embodiment – in other words, on the stage of the page, the writer becomes disembodied so as to allow erring to be embodied in writing. This performative quality brings theory to practice by giving text to context – and this seems to be a common misunderstanding of how a/theology functions and what it might accomplish. Not simply endless and meaningless semantic

[142] E. A. Livingstone, op. cit.

playfulness, a/theological writing forces the reader out of her usual role as interpreter, out of her usual conceptual, intellectual mode, and into the role of a *practitioner* – in sacramental terms, the passive reader becomes an active *communicant*. By endlessly upsetting certainty in deference to play and meaninglessness, a/theology refuses to be grasped by anyone unwilling to take the step of faith required to put a/theology into practice, which is to say, *to live it out*. Indeed, it seems to me that one cannot understand the claims or contributions a/theology might make to the life of faith without first the willingness to abandon certainty and accept the challenge of the journey toward the nothingness of death, that coming absence which makes life present, however fleetingly. Although it may not be precisely what Mark Taylor means when he describes what it means to *err* or to live *erringly*, it occurs to me that this is something Jesus understood when he said, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it' (Lk. 9:23-24).

In St. Mark's gospel, we find Jesus in perpetual movement. Although it often seems scattered or random – errant – in fact Jesus is always journeying toward Jerusalem, and what waits for him in Jerusalem is the cross. The cross is the site of the crucifixion, and a/theological writing likewise takes the form of a cruci-fiction – a fiction shaped according to the cross, which rejoices in the tension created by such a coincidence of opposites. And in this way fictional writing – such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the writing of Borges, Calvino, Crumey, Auster, Kazantzakis and the poetry of Edmond Jabès – might also be, in a sense, a/theological.[143] But is it any more

[143] Although Taylor is an American thinker, American writers certainly do not corner the market on the task of a/theological writing. Indeed, the above list of writers includes an Irishman, an Argentinian, an Italian, a Scotsman, an American, a Greek and a Frenchman. Of course this list is far from exhaustive and cannot even hint at wholeness without more gender diversity. To rectify this, I suggest a possible beginning with the parabolic short works of Isak Dinesen, the

appropriate to call Jabès' poetry "fiction" than it is to call the quasi-autobiographical novels of Auster or Crumey "non-fiction"? (And of course to attempt to categorise *Finnegans Wake* as fiction or non-fiction seems wildly impossible, if not simply inane.) Also in this way, the a/theological writings of Mark Taylor or Thomas Altizer (or Jacques Derrida, for that matter) are in one sense *fictional*, for their use of language instantiates *poiesis*. When theological writing ceases to be *poetic* it also ceases to possess any recreational power – its very language must on one level remain ambiguous and resist solidification.[144] How then do we determine whether or not (such/any) writing is "true"? Such writing becomes a 'true fiction,' in the sense that Douglas Templeton might understand the term, when it is *put into practice* in the act(s) of writing/reading. Therefore I echo his admonition: 'Let fiction flourish. And then, if *they* wrote, we must write. We must leave the poets – for our own poetry. The task is not yet finished.'[145]

And the task is never finished precisely because to reach an end is impossible. When we learn to read and write and live erringly, we discover that the impossible is the only thing worth pursuing. It requires ultimate faith to knowingly undertake the pursuit of the impossible – some might even say "foolishness," but 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom' (I Cor. 1:25), and furthermore Christians are called to be 'fools for the sake of Christ' (I Cor. 4:10). To undertake a task or a journey that is decidedly impossible is to accept failure from before the beginning. Ergo, if failure is accepted as

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pseudonym of Scandinavian-born Karen Blixen. Her story "The Blank Page" is an especially excellent example of the type of writing I attempt to catalogue here. See *Last Tales*, pp. 99-105.

[144] In his unpublished essay "down through all Christian minstrelsy: Genesis, Joyce and contemporary vocabularies of creation," David Jasper notes that 'To read Joyce, it might be said then, is only possible when his absolute unreadability is confessed, when reading passes into a kind of mysticism' (p. 4). He later describes this as a quality of Altizer's writing as well: 'As in Altizer's most recent book, *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003), Joyce's language is hardly comprehensible because it is utterly reflexive, utterly absorbed in making all things new. It does not seek to *mean* – it hardly claims reference in its purpose. It makes a world, though the world barely comprehends it...' (p. 7). I suggest that such description admirably characterises a/theological writing, as the same could be said for Taylor, Derrida, and the other writers mentioned above.

[145] Douglas Templeton. *The New Testament as True Fiction*. p. 311.

inevitable, it might be celebrated as victory. To accept the impossible is to be indifferent to the results. This indifference, like Eckhart's disinterest, 'is empty nothingness,' and only the heart that has been emptied out to a state nothingness is prepared for communion with the sacred.[146] When one learns to live with(in) (in)difference, which is to live (with) abandon, one might glimpse (but only for the briefest moment) what it means to celebrate these tensions, to rejoice in the *mysterion*, and to follow after the sacred.

Interestingly, almost concurrent with Taylor's writing of *Erring*, a similar but unrelated project was underway across the Atlantic. Although not translated into English until 1991, Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* [*Dieu sans l'être*] was first published in France in 1982. In this work, Marion undertakes his own sort of deconstruction of theology by seeking to extract God from essentialist categories of "being." By beginning with a God whose very essence, according to scripture and the incarnate Christ, is *love*, Marion admonishes us 'To think God without any conditions, not even that of Being, hence to think God without pretending to inscribe him or to describe him as a being.'[147] The being of God, which is love, is ever emptied – that is, God's love, which is God's very being, is *being ever poured out* on behalf of the world.

> For what is peculiar to love consists in the fact that it gives itself... If...God is not because he does not have to be, but loves, then, by definition, no condition can continue to restrict his initiative, amplitude, and ecstasy. Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; he thus loves without limit or restriction....[It] does not mean at all to take; it postulates its own giving, giving where the giver strictly coincides with the gift, without any restriction, reservation, or mastery. Thus love gives itself only in abandoning itself, ceaselessly transgressing the limits of its own gift...[148]

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[146] Meister Eckhart. *A Modern Translation*. p. 88.

[147] Jean-Luc Marion. *God Without Being*. p. 45.

[148] Ibid. pp. 47-48.

This vision of profound and perpetual kenosis is significant, for if God only "exists" inasmuch as God is *love being given*, then for God to exist "for us" is for God to not exist at all. Consistent with the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, Marion provides a useful correction to a lesser view of God that might be captured, understood, described – known, in the first instance, as either this or that. According to a vision of a God without Being, to know God is to *not* know God, or perhaps more appropriately, to *un*-know God – to labour endlessly to divest oneself of the limited and finally insufficient human knowledge of God. *This* is what Eckhart means by *taking leave of God for God's sake,* and this is what Taylor means when he writes that 'Belief in God becomes impossible and belief in the impossible unavoidable' (*AR*, 31).

While I do not suggest any serendipity or divine providence behind such a coincidence (indeed, as Taylor has explained, such narrative coherence is merely a fabrication of looking-back), it is not insignificant that Marion undertakes such a project, an ocean away from Taylor and his brand of American deconstructionist theology, at roughly the same time. Just as in the mid- to late-1960s, Thomas Altizer and Jacques Derrida were at work writing their respective (de)negations – the "death of God" in the case of the former, and the ultimate fallibility of language in the case of the latter – so also Mark Taylor and Jean-Luc Marion take on similar (de)negatory projects. Both Taylor and Marion are philosophical theologians, and both have obviously been influenced by continental thought, especially that of France's premier intellectual celebrity, Jacques Derrida. But while Marion remains explicitly Christian (as did Altizer in his own way), and indeed even decidedly *ecclesial* inasmuch as Marion is a Catholic theologian working within a certain amount of accountability to the Church, Taylor appears as his distinctively secular counterpart (just as Derrida appears relatively non-theological alongside his contemporary Altizer). In the case of Marion and Taylor, the

roles are reversed – in contrast to Derrida and Altizer, this time it is the American who is a/theological and the French thinker who is overtly theological. Still, both might be described as atheistic, albeit uneasily, for at the same time, both thinkers are preoccupied with what is at various times called the sacred or the Divine – in a word, God[149] – however impossible each finds it to talk about God in any intelligible terms.

It is important to consider, however, that if a/theology is taken seriously, the line that divides the sacred and secular is obscured to the point of invisibility. Throughout his career as a scholar, Taylor has focussed his attention on the secular, the 'Worlds beyond the church' which seem even 'more fraught with religion than the precincts once declared holy' (*RT*, 259), exploring the ways in which this outside or 'beyond' world also actively pursues the sacred. In marked contrast to efforts such as those of Radical Orthodoxy, which attempts to erase the boundaries (post)modernity has erected between the sacred and the secular by reinstituting the sort of all-encompassing sacrality of medieval Christendom, Taylor's work deconstructs these imaginary boundaries by transgressing them, erringly and endlessly. If everything is sacred, then nothing is sacred; so also, if everything is secular, then nothing is secular. In other words, Taylor's negative approach – which imagines God not as nothing *nor* as everything but as *the nothing that is everything* and *the everything that is nothing* – demonstrates that both the secular and the sacred are human categories that are meaningless in and of themselves, that only mean anything at all within a system of differences and negations. Taylor writes that 'God and faith might be a difference that makes no difference' (*RT*, 264). Arriving at this realisation, it seems that indifference to difference is the only difference

[149] In *God Without Being*, Marion follows Derrida (who follows Heidegger before him) by putting particular terms under erasure – in this case, God. Throughout most of the text, Marion transcribes the "proper" name of the Divine ~~God~~. As such, the word ~~God~~ remains visible, despite its having been crossed out – it is present in its absence. This, of course, bears theological significance to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is "crossed out" on the cross, emptied of being in an act of Divine love. In this way, Marion's theology, like Altizer's, is profoundly incarnational. In short, for God to be God, God *must* become ~~God~~ on the cross.

that would make a difference. Such indifference is abandonment, a forsaking of the structures that inevitably deconstruct – God, Self, History and Book.

And Taylor's work embodies these very characteristics – indifference, abandonment, forsakenness. As I have suggested before, let me now state explicitly that the necessary out-playing of a/theology is the eventual deconstruction of a/theology itself – for if a/theology is always already present within theology, ergo if theology is subject to deconstruction, so also is a/theology as that deconstructive force. Therefore, a/theology reaches a certain end that appears as failure, but as this is its stated aim from the beginning, such failure is its success. By inscribing these qualities, a/theology – the praxis of which is erring – affords a number of opportunities for the future of theological thinking. First, by attending to the terms and voices that have been excluded and marginalised by logocentric hierarchies, an a/theological perspective recognises that 'The task of thinking at the end of theology is to think what theology has left unthought by repeatedly refiguring interfaces that cannot be figured. Such thinking or not-thinking is a thinking-not, which is forever kept in motion by a desire that knows it is wanting but knows not what it wants' (*RT*, 275-76). In this way, it is possible to see the future of theology that lies beyond what oftentimes appears to be the end of theology. Deconstruction creates the opening which allows the possibility for reconstruction. This has been Taylor's task throughout his writing career, as indicated when he writes: 'I decided to undertake the seemingly impossible task of appropriating deconstructive philosophy to write a "constructive" a/theology' (*RT*, 267). To understand deconstruction as simply a nihilistic force which uproots any certainty of meaning is to betray only a partial understanding of the merits of deconstruction. While the tendency toward this misconception is fairly common, I hope that in some way this project has demonstrated the possibility of a more holistic view.

Second, Taylor's work inscribes the possibility of being decisively *post-* in all of its multifarious ways – *post*-modern, *post*-foundational, *post*-ecclesial... perhaps even *post*-Christian or *post*-theological. The sort of *anamnesis* that a/theology relies upon looks forward whilst simultaneously looking back, *not* to a time unlike ours (as might be the view of the *post*-secular approaches of John Milbank or Phillip Blond[150]) but to a *now* that ever *is* and is all in all. In this sense, Taylor's a/theology is also *post*-secular and *post*-sacred in a way that a radical orthodox approach cannot be. By being thoroughly *post-*, Taylor is able to move beyond by moving *through*, taking into account particular theological/philosophical developments (e.g. Augustine's reflexivity, Descartes' radicalised doubt, etc.) without being encumbered by a false notion of "progress." A/theology is not necessarily a radical heterodoxy and is not located at the extreme end of a continuum opposite Radical Orthodoxy at the other extreme. Neither is a/theology a radical theology identical to or derivative of (although related and indebted to) Altizer and Hamilton's "death of God." Rather, a/theology is perhaps most able to deal with the contemporary *post-* age because it is a *post*-theology – a theology of transition, of beyond...of erring. Hence it might be argued that a/theology is radical by not being radical, but by radicalising (the) *not*, by being radically *not* theology (which is radical by being both theology and not theology simultaneously).

Additionally, a/theology when carried out becomes necessarily interdisciplinary, which is also to say *interrelational*, as evidenced by Taylor's own traversal into the fields of literature, art, architecture, science, technology, and most recently economics. By looking away from the Church and toward the cultural forms and structures (sutures?) that stitch us together, Taylor finds his 'third alternative that neither mediates nor synthesizes unity and difference and yet opens the space and provides the time for

[150] See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, and Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy*.

connections and associations that create and sustain differences' (*RT*, 274). By exploring how the sacred might be at work in such religious, non-religious and quasi-religious forms, we discover the ethical imperative of deconstruction and of a deconstructive a/theology by recognizing 'the difference that would make a difference' (*RT*, 265).

I feel it is appropriate to close this dissertation by referring to one of Taylor's most recently published pieces of writing. It should be apparent by now that Taylor is inextricably linked not only to deconstructive philosophy but also to Jacques Derrida himself. Following his death in October 2004, the New York Times published a eulogy for Derrida written by Taylor. In extraordinarily accessible terms, Taylor clarifies some common misconceptions about deconstruction and describes the value not only of Derrida's intellectual contributions but also of the merits of the man himself. Taylor inadvertently argues for the ethical value of his own work when he asserts that, 'By struggling to find ways to overcome patterns that exclude the differences that make life worth living, [Derrida] developed a vision that is consistently ethical.'[151] Taylor also writes of Derrida's twilight preoccupation with religion as perhaps his most significant contribution to the present *post*-age. Just as every positive requires a negative (and vice versa), Taylor writes that, for Derrida,

> Belief not tempered by doubt poses a mortal danger....Fortunately, [Derrida] also taught us that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief - one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not understand. In a complex world, wisdom is knowing what we don't know so that we can keep the future open.[152]

When we reach the end, we realise that by reading, writing, remembering *without end*, the future remains radically open to the (im)possibility of the redemption that is only possible through commun(icat)ion with God.

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[151] Mark C. Taylor. "What Derrida Really Meant." (*Online Source*)
[152] Ibid.

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Acknowledgements

If all meaning is fundamentally a matter of difference, a function of every "other" which a thing is *not*, then it seems to me that all *human* significance derives from one's relationship to others different from oneself, all those who constitute everything one was, is, and hopes to be(come). In this way, relationality always precedes any notion of individuality, and I confess that I am hardly a person apart from those others through my relationship to whom I am incredibly blessed.

Henceforth, the completion of this thesis would have been impossible without the commitment, support, encouragement and love of several individuals. Foremost, I owe my deepest debt of love and gratitude to my wife, Gloria, for her patience and understanding throughout this wonderfully trying stage of life's journey. I also wish to thank my parents, Rev. Michael and Rebecca Hancock, and my in-laws, Rev. Allen and Charlotte Barrett, for allowing us to move so far away, and for countless prayers lifted up on our behalf. My grandparents, Rev. John and Venita Hancock, lent financial support to this adventure – a debt that I can (and will) repay – but for the heritage I receive from them I will be forever in their debt.

The success of this project I owe to my supervisors, Dr. Jeff Keuss and Prof. David Jasper. Their time, guidance, knowledge *and* wisdom (two very different things) have been invaluable, and I offer my sincerest gratitude and humblest admiration. I have benefited greatly from the constructive criticism of my examiners, Prof. George Newlands and Dr. Andrew Hass, and I especially appreciate the care and generosity with which they read my work. I also appreciate the fertile intellectual community of all involved in the University of Glasgow's Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts, especially the friendship of Fiona Wilson, Brad Johnson and Michael DeLashmutt. Over countless hours and various beverages, our discussions and friendly debates have challenged me and continue to shape my thinking.

Finally I wish to thank Dr. Paul and Cathy Tarrant (and their ever-growing family) and the congregation of Hart Memorial Church of the Nazarene, especially Pastor Robert and Carol White and Rev. Andrew and Elma Young, for adopting two wayfaring Americans and helping us feel less like "strangers in a strange land" and more like we'd found a "home away from home." With these, we have sang and prayed and broken bread, laughed and told stories, shared opinions and insights, all the while exploring the mystery of the faith. I am certain that we have received from their fellowship and hospitality far more than we could ever give in return.