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Derrida and Messianic Atheism

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Derrida has famously declared that he “rightly passes for an atheist.” But what kind of atheism is he talking about? Anti-theistic? Pre-theistic? Post-theistic? Ana-theistic? Agnostic? Mystical? Messianic? This is a question I will explore here with particular, if not exclusive, emphasis on the last of these options—the *messianic*.

The specter of messianic atheism was first raised by the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Derrida’s critical reckoning with Levinas in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” (1964) did not prevent him from acknowledging a profound debt to his mentor in a number of subsequent works but especially in his obituary homage, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (1997). While Derrida does not privilege a specifically Jewish reading of Abrahamic messianism (he prefers, as we shall see, the quasi-transcendental term “messianicity”), with the publication of his autobiographical *Circumfession* in 1991 Derrida speaks increasingly of this aspect of his thought. He describes himself here as “*le dernier des juifs*” and recalls how he was expelled from school in Algiers because of the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy government. He also admits that when he laments *de profundis*, in quasi-Augustinian “prayers and tears,” he does so in the language of his religious “tradition.” And he further reflects on the radical implications of the Jewish Holocaust in essays such as *Cendres* (1991) and *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan* (1986).

But none of this, let us be clear at the outset, amounts to a suggestion that Derrida is confessing any form of theism (Jewish or otherwise). One

can pray in the dark without believing there is anyone to pray to. One can call without believing there is anyone listening. But in spite of his candid statement that he "passes for an atheist," Derrida's confessional gestures, captured in the ambidextrous title of *Circumfession*, betray some indelible mark of Jewish circumcision on his flesh. And this, I suspect, is not irrelevant when it comes to his later discussions of messianicity and messianism.¹

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of what Derrida means by atheism, let me say a few more words about how his teacher, Levinas, addressed the relationship between atheism and messianism in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). In the wake of the Holocaust, when he lost members of his family, Levinas spoke of the necessity to reject the triumphal God of power who could allow these horrors.² Against all forms of theodicy, Levinas spoke of atheism as a salutary distancing from idolatrous fusion with the Totality of Being, a separation whereby each person discovers his or her own radical interiority as a self, an "I." This is the basis of autonomy and responsibility:

One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated. . . . The break with participation is implied in this capability. One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I.³

And he goes on:

The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I.⁴

Without this movement of atheistic separateness, the other as irreducibly alien could not be recognized as *other*. And that, for Levinas, would rule out the possibility of a genuinely religious relationship with God understood as absolute Other. We must, Levinas concludes accordingly, be *contre-dieu* before we can be *à-dieu*—in the double sense of taking leave from the old God (*ab-deo*) as we turn toward a God "always still to come" (*ad-deum*). By means of this double A (*ab* of away and *ad* of toward), we reopen our "home" to the radically alien. This we may call ana-theism, though Levinas himself does not use the term. A twofold movement that moves from a first a-theist moment of selfhood to a second ana-theist moment of exposure to the exteriority of the stranger: "Only if it starts

from me as a separated being and goes as a host to the Other, welcoming the Other as guest, only in this manner can an eternal return within the interiority of the circle of being be escaped. For when I turn to the Other, interiority turns into exteriority."⁵ It is in this context that Levinas holds that one of the greatest gifts of Judaism to humanity is atheism—namely, separation from the God of Totality so as to encounter the other as absolutely Other.

This reading of atheism is not lost on Derrida, even if he does not take Levinas's further step to an eschatological God of vertical transcendence beyond traditional theism. Let us now try to see why.

One of Derrida's most arresting contributions to the theism/atheism debate comes, in my view, in a late essay, "Sauf le Nom" (1993). Here he speaks of how we may save the divine "name" by *refusing* to determine its content. This abstentionist gesture, this discretion about naming the divine, borders on a certain style of atheism, a way of saving the name of God by not naming God at all. But we are not dealing here with anti-theism, that is, with militant anti-God talk, anymore than we are dealing with subtle apologetics for apophatic theology (namely, what we *cannot* say about God while believing in God). Derrida seems, in fact, to be excavating a space for what might be called "mystical atheism." And, while he does not, to my knowledge, actually use the term, he does point to a curious reversibility between mysticism and atheism. He calls our attention to a moment of radical receptivity that he terms messianic—a moment when one abandons all inherited certainties, assumptions, and expectations (including religious ones) in order to open oneself to the radical surprise, and trauma, of the incoming Other.

In "Sauf le Nom"—meaning both "saving and exempting the divine name"—Derrida goes so far as to suggest that a genuine desire for God presupposes a certain vacillation between atheism and theism. "The desire of God, God as the other name of desire," he writes, "deals in the desert with radical atheism." And he adds:

The most consequent forms of declared atheism will have always testified to the most intense desire for God. . . . Like mysticism, apophatic discourse has always been suspected of atheism. . . . If atheism, like apophatic theology, testifies to the desire of God . . . in the presence of *whom* does it do so?⁶

Indeed, we may echo Derrida's question: Who *is* this *whom*? While still passing for an atheist, Derrida has been said by some to be offering a post-Holocaust translation of Meister Eckhart's prayer to God to rid him of

God. Unless we let go of God as property and possession, we cannot experience that “desire beyond desire” for the Other as radical stranger. The felt absence of the old God of metaphysical sovereignty ushers in a gap, a rent, a sense of emptiness that may provoke a new desire, an unquenchable longing for the advent of the Other—the uninvited divine guest to come. But while Derrida allows for a messianicity of endless *différance*—deferral and waiting, vigilance and desire—he does not himself take a second step beyond the dichotomy of theism and atheism to a third option—what I call the ana-theist wager.⁷ The retrieval of God “after” God. But I will return to this in my concluding remarks.

Derrida’s deconstructive ascesis of traditional religions ultimately calls for a “religion without religion,” a faith without faith that can scarce give a name to God at all. More precisely, he embraces a notion of “messianicity” beyond the concrete, historical “messianisms” of the Abrahamic (and other) traditions. Such messianicity serves less as a sacred, incarnate presence in the world than as a quasi-transcendental structure for the condition of possibility (impossibility) of religion in general. This messianicity involves an endless waiting with no sense of what kind of Other might arrive. It is an unconditional “yes” to what is always still to come.

In *Of Hospitality* (1997), Derrida defines pure hospitality in terms of an undecidable openness to the incoming stranger, whoever it may be. “I say ‘come,’ ‘enter’ whoever you are, and whatever your name, your language, your sex, your species may be, be you human, animal or divine.”⁸ And Derrida goes further in his 1998 Dublin dialogue, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility”; here he speaks, perhaps hyperbolically, of absolute hospitality as a radical welcome to the absolute other without name or face. For pure hospitality to occur, he says, “there must be absolute surprise . . . an opening without horizon of expectation . . . to the newcomer whoever that may be.”⁹ And he continues, reopening the question of the unpredictable stranger, the uninvited guest, the unnamable Other—“The newcomer may be good or evil, but if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house, if you want to control this and exclude this terrible possibility in advance, there is no hospitality.” The absolute stranger, he concludes, “like the Messiah, must arrive wherever he or she wants.”¹⁰ (John Caputo glosses this radical messianicity by describing it as an “impossible, unimaginable, un-foreseeable, un-believable, absolute surprise.”¹¹ I would suggest that the most operative term for our present discussion is “un-believable,” at least insofar as it refers to a suspension of traditional “theistic” belief.)

Derrida's atheism reaches here, I think, a critical limit. We have no way of reading the face of the incoming stranger as either messiah or murderer because we can only read *in the dark*. There is little or no room for a discernment of spirits. There is, in short, no hermeneutic discrimination possible between holy and unholy ghosts. For deconstruction all messianic "gods" are ghosts (if we are to follow Derrida's logic in *Specters of Marx* [1994]). And Derrida even concedes that we have no way of telling if any newcomer is more than pure hallucination.¹² In other words, there would seem to be no possibility of a *critical hermeneutic reading* of the mystical name as signal of justice or injustice, of love or hate, of peace or war. There is no face behind the name.

We might recall here Dionysius the Areopagite's influential book on mystical theology, *The Divine Names*. The mystical writings of Dionysius and Silesius clearly fascinate Derrida but he does not subscribe to them.¹³ These Christian mystics deploy the apophatic ways of "negative theology" to point to a divine transcendence beyond all names. Derrida does not follow them but he does not deny *all* forms of faith. *Some* kind of faith, he insists, is the very structure of human experience—*il faut croire!* Why? Because "there is no such thing as perception" per se, and all readings of the world—of persons, things, works, writings—are readings "in the dark." So it is because we are all blind, in the sense outlined in *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993), that we have no choice but to *believe* in what we cannot *see*. But, I repeat, this inevitable condition of faith does not require theistic faith. By no means. It allows for it, but in no way necessitates it. In short, messianicity, for Derrida, precedes and exceeds all specific religious beliefs as such. It is an a-theistic faith that abstains from any historical instantiation of the divine—a faith devoid of specific names and revelations, narratives and prophecies, liturgies and scriptures.

There are some telling suggestions in Derrida's work of a certain communication—or "contagion"—between a messianic precondition of faith and a messianist religious faith as such; but these suggestions remain tentative and incomplete. For example, in his "Post-Scriptum" to the volume *Derrida and Negative Theology*, entitled "Aporias, Ways and Voices," Derrida seems to acknowledge the possibility of certain crossings between what he terms the abyssal "khora" of deconstruction and the abyssal "God" of mysticism.¹⁴ With regard to khora, he develops the radically deconstructive potency of the term, first intimated in Plato's *Timaeus*, to signal an indefinable, indistinct matrix that precedes all metaphysical dualisms into form and matter, sensible and intelligible, divine and human, etc. His question

then becomes how this a-theist khora might relate to God. Focusing particularly on the Christian mystic, Angelus Silesius, Derrida offers this sympathetic reading of the Silesius's faith: "'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language . . . a God which is, at the same time, interpreted by Silesius, as the 'divinity of God as gift.'" ¹⁵ Derrida goes on to explore Silesius's notion of God's gift as a form of play and letting go, expressed in Silesius's verse—"God plays with creation / All that is play that the deity gives itself." ¹⁶ But Derrida's fascination with Silesius does not mean he identifies this divine play of Creation with the deconstructive play of khora. The latter—khora—seems to be prior and privileged for Derrida. But he can still ask of Silesius if the place (*Ort*) opened by the word (*Wort*) of God is part of divine play, God himself, or what precedes both God and his play and makes both possible. In other words, he can still question whether the invisible, inaudible, non-sensible place invoked by Silesius is "opened by God or is 'older' than the time of creation, than time itself, than history, narrative, word, etc." ¹⁷ This is where khora seems to trump God for Derrida, even if he puts the difference between them in the form of an undecidable hypothesis: "It remains to be known (beyond knowing) if the place is opened by appeal (response, the event that calls for the response, revelation, history, etc.) or if it remains impassably foreign, like khora, to everything that takes its place and replaces itself and plays within this place, including what is named God." ¹⁸

But if it remains unknowable is it still possible to choose between the two? On the face of it, Khora and God appear to exclude each other: "these two experiences of place, these two ways, are no doubt of an absolute heterogeneity. One place excludes the other, one (sur)passes the other, one does without the other, one is, absolutely, *without the other*." ¹⁹ On this reading, the antithesis between the two ways of God and Khora are construed as two abysses facing off against each other. On the one hand we have the biblical abyss of God (the divine abyss calling and being called by the human abyss in Psalm 41; or as Silesius glosses it, "The abyss of my spirit always invokes with cries / The abyss of God"). ²⁰ On the other hand, we have the bottomless, timeless, impassive abyss of Khora. This is how Derrida formulates the alternative:

, *On one side* . . . a profound and abyssal eternity, fundamental but accessible to the teleo-eschatological narrative and to a certain experience of historical (or historial) revelation; *on the other way*, the nontemporality of an abyss without bottom or surface, an absolute impassibility (neither life nor death) that gives rise to everything that it is not. In fact two abysses. ²¹

In the end, and in spite of all his vacillating alternativism (reminiscent of a Kierkegaardian aesthete swinging between either and or), I believe that Derrida chooses a-theistic khora over theistic divinity. Khora is deconstruction, or as Derrida himself puts it: "indestructible khora . . . the very spacing of de-construction."²²

My question, however, is this: Is there a third way between theistic divinity and atheistic khora—namely, an ana-theistic God after God? Not *theos*, not *a-theos*, but *ana-theos*? In such a wager, God would be the name of what we hope for (as Augustine once put it), a promissory note, a maybe (*posse*) that can only be (*esse*) if one responds to its solicitation or seduction. That is, if one responds ethically to the call of the good, or poetically to the call of desire. Such a third ana-theist disposition would involve a messianicity that is not a mere structural abstraction—an anonymous indifferent hold-all of spacing—but a messianicity that invites an endless multiplicity of concrete and committed messianisms: embodyings of flesh and blood, of bread and water, of singularity and thisness, of sacred times and places, calendars and carnalities, pilgrimages and practices.

This is where I have real differences with Derrida (and the deconstructors—John Caputo, Mark Taylor, J. Hillis-Miller, etc.). In the name of unconditional openness to any other at all (*tout autre est tout autre*), deconstruction's "religion without religion" seems to have no visage to speak of, no carnal or narrative presence in the here and now. "Ascesis strips the messianic hope of all biblical forms," Derrida says, "and even all determinable figures of the wait or expectation; it thus denudes itself in view of responding to that which must be absolute hospitality, the 'yes' to the 'arrivant(e),' the 'come' to the future that cannot be anticipated. . . . This hospitality is absolute only if it keeps watch over its own universality."²³ In other words, the messianic universality so dear to deconstruction is only guaranteed, it seems, at the cost of particularity; it forfeits the incarnate singularity of everyday epiphanies. "If one could 'count' on what is coming," says Derrida, "hope would be but the calculation of a program."²⁴ The messianic is a waiting without any horizon of expectation, and an ascesis without anchorage, image, or anticipation. Here there is no anamnesis or anaphora—no repetition forward, no "anticipatory memory" as understood by Marcuse and Benjamin as a commitment to this or that promise. There is no ground to take one's stand on for there is no ground. The A of the absconded *Autre* is so absolute as to absolve itself from all carnal experience—with no possibility for a second A of advent into history. *Abconditus* not *adventurus*. *Adieu* of departure without *adieu* of return. No double AA of "ana" but rather pure abstention of an absentee

Other that does not count and that cannot be counted on. An absencing without covenant or care. Derrida refers to this unconditional abstaining as an epoché (bracketing) of the content of faith; so much so that faith becomes a waiting without hope of any resurrection, revelation, or return (I use all three terms, advisedly, in the lower case, for they may happen at any moment of time). This hopeless absconding, espoused by Derrida, is what he himself calls the “*formality* of a *structural* messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism.”²⁵

In sum, faith serves here as a quasi-transcendental “structure of promise.” It does not call for realization or incarnation in the world of particular beliefs. Its ascesis—the “epoché of the content”—remains radically atheistic. It never poses as a provisional moment before a return to the world of everyday faith and service, of eucharist or epiphany. The difference between Silesius’s mystical theism and Derrida’s deconstructive atheism is, therefore, it seems to me, the choice between a sacred promise of peace and healing, and an option for khora as undecidable void. And this is where Derrida’s atheism contrasts with ana-theism understood as a disposition between, before, and beyond the division into theism and atheism. Where messianic atheism involves a religion “without” religion, messianic ana-theism involves a religion “before” or “after” religion.²⁶

Otherwise put, we might say that Derrida’s atheistic concept of *messianicity* is unconditional in its impossibility in contrast to all actual practices of *messianism*, which are conditional in their possibility. If messianism inscribes messianicity into particular religious traditions of revelation or eschatology, Derrida’s messianicity without messianism risks taking the possibility out of im-possibility altogether. And by virtue of such radical excarnation, Derrida’s messianicity risks becoming so devoid of any incarnate narrative, scripture, person, or presence (human or divine) that it forfeits any purchase in the world of suffering or action. The Other dissolves into the undecidability of hallucination.²⁷ Which leaves me with this summary question: Does deconstructive “faith” not run the danger of becoming so empty that it loses faith in *thisness* altogether? So “blind” that it cannot *see* or *touch* the supplicant face of the widow, orphan, and stranger before us?²⁸

I think this is something that could never be said of Levinas’s notion of “Messianic peace” or Walter Benjamin’s “weak messianism” of the mystical stranger—the one who may break open the continuum of history at any moment. Benjamin spoke of the irruption of a mystical “now” (*Jetztzeit*), suggesting that each and every instant is a portal through which the Messiah might enter. Likewise, regardless of Derrida’s profound debt to

his mentor Levinas, his purely formal messianicity prevents him from embracing Levinas's ethical commitment to the *visage d'autrui* as the trace of God. Unlike Benjamin and Levinas, therefore, Derrida's approach to the messianic hovers in the antechamber of messianism. He does not signal a return to a God (or whatever homonym, synonym, or pseudonym one might prefer) after the death of God. He explores rather than embraces the anatheist option. His saving the Name is not a return to the Named. At best, it is an "endless waiting in the desert."²⁹ A waiting for Godot—one always to come who never comes.

One might note here that in Derrida's waiting in the desert, as opposed to Beckett's waiting on the road, there is no child who comes with daily messages to keep the vagrants going. Beckett confessed that the "key word of my work is Perhaps";³⁰ and if anatheism reads this to mean "perhaps Godot will come," deconstructive atheism is more likely to respond, "perhaps Godot won't come." The important thing is, however, that both dispositions of vigilance are open to dialogue. Interminable conversation between believers and non-believers is possible in the space of this Perhaps. We will return to this below.

Three Dialogues with Derrida

In light of all the above, I would suggest that Derrida's messianic atheism has something invaluable to contribute to a radical rethinking of the question of God. In the remainder of this essay, I revisit three conversations I conducted with Derrida on this question between 1981 and 2001. I do so in the hope that these summary exchanges may shed a little further clarification on this task of rethinking religion.

In the first of our dialogues, "Deconstruction and the Other," conducted in Paris in 1981, Derrida addresses what he calls certain messianic "effects" of deconstruction. While stating that the "Judaic dimension" of Levinas's thinking remained for him a "discreet . . . reference," he acknowledges that deconstructive openness to a radical Other (beyond philosophy) brings it into relation with a certain "effect" of prophecy.³¹

This is slippery terrain, and Derrida moves with great caution:

[I do not] dismiss all forms of Messianic or prophetic eschatology. I think that all genuine questioning is summoned by a certain type of eschatology, though it is impossible to define this eschatology in philosophical terms. The search for objective or absolute criteria is, to be sure, an essentially philosophical gesture. Prophecy differs

from philosophy in so far as it dispenses with such criteria. The prophetic word is its own criterion and refuses to submit to an external tribunal which would judge or evaluate it in any objective or neutral fashion. The prophetic word is its own eschatology and finds its index of truthfulness in its own inspiration and not in some transcendental or philosophical criteriology.³²

When I asked Derrida if he considered his attempts to deconstruct philosophy to have any such "prophetic" character, he gave this characteristically circuitous response: "Unfortunately, I do not feel inspired by any sort of hope which would permit me to presume that my work of deconstruction has a prophetic function. But I concede that the style of my questioning as an exodus and dissemination in the desert might produce certain prophetic resonances."³³ It is possible, he says,

[to see] deconstruction as being produced in a space where the prophets are not far away. But the prophetic resonances of my questioning reside at the level of a certain rhetorical discourse which is also shared by several other contemporary thinkers. The fact that I declare it "unfortunate" that I do not personally feel inspired, may be a signal that deep down I still hope. It means that I am in fact still looking for something. So perhaps it is no mere accident of rhetoric that the search itself, the search without hope for hope, assumes a certain prophetic allure.³⁴

He concludes with this typically two-step locution, one foot forward, one foot back: "Perhaps my search is a twentieth century brand of prophecy? But it is difficult for me to believe it."³⁵

Derrida's intriguing oscillations here on the themes of hope and belief are, I think, telling. We have to believe, Derrida says, but not necessarily in God. Messianicity is a necessary structure of all experience qua faith but it does not necessitate a faith in a Messiah or Messianism as such. Messianicity simply means that "deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other."³⁶ So, if messianism is theistic, messianicity is a-theistic, but in a sense that—in this dialogue—rules nothing out, including the possibility of different kinds of theism. And as such it comes very close at times to what I am calling ana-theism.

In our discussion entitled "Desire of God," chaired by Jack Caputo at Villanova University in 1997, Derrida expanded on several of these initial remarks about the Messianic. The vexed question of hermeneutic discernment between true or false prophets again arose. Questioning Derrida on

how—given his reading of messianicity as a waiting in the desert—we might distinguish between a “desertification” of God and a “desertion” of God, he candidly replied: “as soon as you look for a clear line between desertification and desertion, between an authentic God and a false God or prophet . . . as soon as you think you have found this criterion, that is the end of faith. You can be sure that God has left.”³⁷ So far so clear. And yet Derrida does not deny here the “terrifying” implications of such a radically non-hermeneutic messianicity: “You have to resist the resistance to [the] openness to a possible monstrosity and to [this] evil.”³⁸ Which means, if I understand him correctly, that if “every other is every other” (Derrida’s “axiom of messianicity”), then *any* other—animal, human, or divine—is “infinitely, absolutely other.”³⁹ More pointedly still, there is no critical hermeneutic to help us tell whether messianicity means war or peace.⁴⁰

This *is*, indeed, Derrida confesses, a “terrible moment.” And he is the first to admit that when it comes to political and ethical decisions about acting justly, we are compelled to move from “absolute non-knowledge and indeterminacy” to “the necessity of criteria” for negotiation and discrimination.⁴¹ Hence the need, where belief is concerned, to move from messianicity to messianism, for if the two are indeed heterogeneous, one cannot deny a certain “contamination” between them. What is *translation* for hermeneutics is *contamination* for deconstruction. And contamination is not a derogatory term for Derrida; it represents a mutual subversion of binary meanings in contrast to the hermeneutic principle of translation from one meaning to another: foreign to familiar, old to new, upper to lower, spiritual to carnal, or vice versa.

Derrida admits that he personally (by birth and history) shares with Caputo and myself a belonging to a specific tradition of Abrahamic messianism (whether one is atheistic or not). “If I make reference to the Messiah,” he explains, “to the tradition of messianisms in our (western) culture, in order to name messianicity, it is in order to keep this memory. Even if messianicity is totally heterogeneous to messianism, there is this belonging to a tradition and language, which is mine as well as yours.”⁴² But my question remains: How do we *transit* from unconditional messianicity to conditional messianism, from the absolute to the practical, from the impossible to the possible? How do we account for a hermeneutics of *translation* between these two orders? How do we provide an ethics of everyday agency and action? How answer the question: What is to be done?⁴³

Finally, in our third and last dialogue, conducted in New York City in 2001, Derrida returned to the question of messianicity. Here we had our

most explicit conversation—more of a critical encounter (*Auseinandersetzung*) than an intellectual exercise. And, as always, “a loving struggle.” Our meeting took place on October 16, just one month after 9/11. Returning from a visit to Ground Zero together with the stench of destruction still in our lungs, the stakes seemed more relevant than ever. We cut straight to the chase. Derrida located the difference between his deconstructive take on the *messianic-to-come* and my hermeneutic take on the *God-who-may-be* by focusing on the question of hope:

Perhaps the difference between us [is this]: the indeterminacy of the messianic leaves you unsatisfied. To speak roughly, you, Richard, would not give up the hope of some redemption, resurrection, and so forth. I would not either. But I would argue that when one is not ready to suspend the *determination* of hope, then our relation with the other becomes economical (namely political, ethical).⁴⁴

He goes on to explain: “when I am political, juridical, and perhaps ethical, I am with you—[but] when I try to think the most rigorous relation with the other I must be ready to give up the hope for a return to salvation, the hope for resurrection, or even reconciliation. In the pure act of giving and forgiving we should be free from any hope of reconciliation.”⁴⁵

Perhaps there is a faint echo here of Levinas’s claim that to get to the kingdom we must give up the Kingdom. I, for one, would have no hesitation in embracing such an idea of letting go so as to receive a gift from the absolute Other. So understood, might not the passage through the radical atheism of Derrida’s “khora”—that absolutely indeterminate, nameless space—be construed as an opening to the grace of the impossible becoming possible? What is impossible to khora is possible to God. In this way, deconstructive khora might be said, as hinted above, to enter into an “exemplary” relationship of disjunction-conjunction with the work of mystics like Angelus Silesius; and Derrida does seem to leave open a sense that khora and God may somehow supplement, even as they exclude, each other. If this be so, my own reading of such mutual supplementarity would be this: If God without khora risks dogmatism, khora without God risks desolation. Perhaps khora could thus be reinterpreted as the aboriginal matrix that God would need to become flesh? And perhaps then the dark night of khora could be construed as a mystical kenosis on a return journey to a God *after* God? Perhaps, in other words, the deconstructive work of Khora might serve as an indispensable and integral prelude to ana-theism? The key word of both Khora and Kingdom is “perhaps.” All this would seem to throw a bridge between us. Yes. Both of us ultimately agree that we can never *know* the Absolute Stranger for sure and that all

we can do is "desire" something beyond the impossible. But, once again, where I place the emphasis on Perhaps construed as *Posse* (the God-who-may-be), Derrida tends to read it more often as *Im-Posse* (the God-who-may-not-be). What Derrida calls the *impossible* possible is what I call the *possible* impossible. It is a matter of emphasis. The difference between deconstruction and hermeneutics. A hairline. But a line nonetheless.⁴⁶

Our New York conversation concluded by our returning to the unresolved question of the Perhaps. Defining Khora as the "only possible groundless ground for a universal [politics]," Derrida insisted that he is "not excluding anything."⁴⁷ He spoke of the "thinnest difference" existing between his own position and the atheist "God who may be," understood as a powerless hovering between divine names and nameless khora. Reminded of his own avowal (at the Villanova conference in 1997) that "if he were interested in God, it would be a God of the powerless,"⁴⁸ Derrida endeavored to clarify the difference between our respective notions of the powerless Maybe (*Peut-être*). While he admitted sharing the "dream" of reconciliation/resurrection, he explained that as someone who "thinks deconstructively" he himself felt a "responsibility" to "obey the necessity of the possibility that there is khora *rather than* a relationship with an anthropotheologic God of Revelation."⁴⁹ Instead of translating faith into something determinable, which obliges one to keep the "name" of the resurrection, deconstructive faith, by contrast, means giving up any "determined hope." For if one says that resurrection is the horizon of one's hope, then one knows what one names when one says "resurrection"—and then "faith is not faith. It is already knowledge."⁵⁰ So, returning to the classic claim that he rightly passes for an atheist, Derrida added this revealing phrase: "Sometimes . . . you have to be an atheist *of this sort* if one is to be true to faith, to *pure* faith. . . . It is a very *complicated* logic."⁵¹

Complicated indeed, but no less subtle and vigilant for all that. There are, I think, some telling inflections in this last sentence. Derrida refers 1) to atheism of a specific *sort* (complicated); 2) to faith of a particularly *pure* kind (blind and unconditional); and 3) to a special, unpredictable time for this obligation (namely, "*sometimes* you have to be an atheist . . ."). These micrological qualifiers are tantalizing and intriguing. And the intrigue is heightened when Derrida reweaves the messianic woof back into the khoral warp. Any form of prayer to a Messianic Other still-to-come is, he insists, only made possible by Khora. For khora is that "neutral, indifferent, impassible spacing—that enables me to pray."⁵² So "without Khora there would be no prayer"; but more dramatically, "without khora there would be no God, no *other*."⁵³ Khora, it now appears, is that impassable spacing of the "there is" before and "beyond being" without which there could be

no prayer, reconciliation, redemption, etc. But *once you actually pray* you have left the messianic no-place of khora and embraced a messianism of determinate belief: "you can address a prayer only to *something* or *someone*, not to khora."⁵⁴

To sum up: If the ana-theist God-who-may-be is, as Derrida acknowledges, "a powerless God . . . beyond sovereignty," a powerlessness to which "justice and love are precisely oriented," his own notion of khora is, by contrast, an abyssal powerlessness *prior* to love and justice. In other words, if the divine Maybe is powerless in the sense of "poor or vulnerable," khora, by Derrida's candid admission, is "powerlessness as simply no-power. No power at all."⁵⁵ Khora does not care and we cannot care for Khora. Khora is not another name for God. Khora is not a Messiah in drag, a pseudonym for divine grace. No. Khora rightly passes for atheism. Albeit a specifically deconstructive atheism: an a-theism separated, if only by the "thinnest of differences" (Derrida's phrase), from the ana-theist God who may be.⁵⁶

Khora and messianicity are the two faces of Derrida's atheism. Khora looks before the beginning while messianicity looks beyond the end. But the Janus face is always blind and always a little mad. Because of khora, our prayers are tears. Because of messianicity, our prayers are dreams.

78. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 56.
79. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 173.
80. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 174.
81. Derrida, "Penser ce qui vient," in *Derrida pour les temps à venir*, ed. René Major (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2007), 21.

Derrida and Messianic Atheism

Richard Kearney

1. Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). On the question of confessing circumcision, I recall Paul Ricoeur, another of Derrida's mentors, saying to me having just read a copy of *Circumfession* that Derrida had sent him: "I would never dare to write a philosophy of my penis!"
2. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Between Us* (London: Athlone Press, 1997).
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 58.
4. Ibid.
5. John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 67.
6. Jacques Derrida, "Sauf le Nom (Post-Scriptum)," in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. John Leavey Jr. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 82.
7. I try to explore further the crucial difference between Derrida's atheism and my own notion of ana-theism in chapter 3 of *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 138–39. The original French text, *De l'hospitalité*, was published by Calmann-Levy (Paris, 1997).
9. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility" (1998 Conversation at University College Dublin), in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1998), 77–78.
10. Ibid., 66.
11. John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 73. Caputo offers, in my view, the most persuasive and profound reading available of Derrida's thinking on God, religion, theology, and mysticism. I am indebted to our ongoing creative and critical conversations on these subjects.
12. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," 77. On the question of deconstruction as a blind "reading in the dark," see Derrida's admission: "We always read in the dark, we always write in the dark. . . . this is a general law." "Desire of God: An Exchange," a conversation between Jacques Derrida, Richard Kearney, and John Caputo at Villanova University, 1997, published in

After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy, ed. John Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 304.

13. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

14. Ibid. See here Derrida's crucial essay, "Khora," in *On the Name*, 89–130, and my own critical engagement with Derrida and Caputo on this subject in Richard Kearney, "God or Khora?" in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 191–212.

15. Derrida, "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices," 300–1.

16. Ibid., 301.

17. Ibid., 314.

18. Ibid., 314.

19. Ibid., 315.

20. Ibid., 315.

21. Ibid., 315.

22. Ibid., 318.

23. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 166. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Neal Deroo for bringing my attention to several relevant passages in this text.

24. Ibid., 168–69.

25. Ibid., 59. See Martin Hägglund's challenging reading of Derrida's "religion without religion" as rigorously and uncompromisingly anti-theistic, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

26. On this possibility of something or someone called "God" beyond both theistic Godness and atheistic Godlessness (what Heidegger called *Gottlosigkeit*), see my exploration of the notion of a "God after God" (*ana-theos*) in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*.

27. See Derrida on deconstruction and the hallucination of the Other in the 1998 Dublin dialogue, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility."

28. See my essays on a carnal/diacritical hermeneutics of the sacred: Richard Kearney, "Eros, Diacritical Hermeneutics and the Maybe," in *Philosophical Thresholds: Crossings of Life and World*, Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, vol. 36, ed. Cynthia Willett and Leonard Lawlor, *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement, 2011; Richard Kearney, "What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?," in *The Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–14; and Richard Kearney, "Diacritical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutic Rationality/La rationalité herméneutique*, ed. Maria Luisa Portocarrero, Luis Umbelino, and Andrzej Wiercinski (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2011), 177–96. The difficulty with deconstructive analysis, as I see it, is that it is often less concerned with concrete existential examples than with quasi-transcendental allusions. See, for instance, Derrida's brilliant but quintessentially non-committal readings of Mount Moriah, Blanchot's "L'Instant," Celan's *Shibboleth*, etc., where Derrida's

texts are always texts reading other texts—philosophical, poetic, religious—but rarely or ever texts reading human experiences, carnalities, or testimonies. No Holocaust witnesses, no political narratives (Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day), no lives of the Saints, no phenomenologies of the incarnate life-world. Deconstruction, in the first and last analysis, is the end of phenomenology. It is literary, not lived. Unlike the tradition of philosophy as healing—from Socrates and the Stoics to Wittgenstein, Freud, and Foucault—deconstruction flirts with literariness to the point of excarnation; even though Derrida does so with extraordinary scholarship, genius, and style. Deconstruction reads and writes but rarely speaks or acts. It risks the elision of the real. And that, perhaps, is what Derrida meant.

29. Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other: Dialogue with Richard Kearney,” in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 139. See in particular where Derrida describes his own philosophical position as that of a wandering *émigré* committed to a “politics of exodus” (151).

30. Samuel Beckett interview with Tom Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, eds., *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1979), 220.

31. *Ibid.*, 141. Derrida goes on to spell out some of the radical consequences of this claim: “Deconstruction is in itself a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons, or motivates it. The other, as the other than self, the other that opposes self-identity, is not something that can be detected and disclosed within a philosophical space. . . . [it] precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin” (141). Then, referring explicitly to prophecy, Derrida intimates that a possible non-biblical sense of this term might obtain for certain “effects” of deconstruction. “When deconstructive themes begin to dominate the scene, as they do today, one is sure to find a proliferation of prophecies. And this proliferation is precisely a reason why we should be all the more wary and prudent, all the more discriminating” (149). But how can we be discriminating if we can only read in the dark, as he insisted to me in the Villanova exchange “Desire of God” (1997, see note 12 above), and have no way of telling the difference between messiahs or hallucinations?

32. *Ibid.*, 150.

33. *Ibid.*, 150.

34. *Ibid.*, 150.

35. *Ibid.*, 150.

36. *Ibid.*, 155.

37. Derrida, “Desire of God,” 304–5.

38. *Ibid.*, 305.

39. *Ibid.*, 307.

40. *Ibid.*, 307.

41. *Ibid.*, 307–8.

42. Ibid., 307.

43. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," 67. In this Dublin Dialogue Derrida seems to me to deepen the dilemma by affirming that it is not a personal self or subject who decides or discerns in these matters but the other:

Not only should I not be certain that I made a good decision; I should not even be certain that I made a decision. A decision *may* have happened. . . .

"I" never decide. . . . I am passive in a decision, because as soon as I am active, as soon as I know that "I" am the master of my decision, I am claiming that I know what to do. (67)

In short, the event of decision is a matter of the other (in me), not me. Once again, the question of ethical agency and responsibility arises. In saying this, however, I am speaking of the limits of deconstruction as I see it, and not of Derrida's own courageous personal commitment to political and social causes from educational reform and emigration rights to apartheid and justice for prisoners (see, for example, his unstinting support for the *sans papiers* and death row prisoners like Abu Jamal).

44. Jacques Derrida, "Terror, Religion and the New Politics," in Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, 5.

45. Ibid.

46. On my contrasting hermeneutic reading of khora see Kearney, "God or Khora?," 211; and in particular the appendix entitled "Derrida and the Double Abyss," 208–11. I develop this discussion of my differences with the deconstructive readings of khora in Derrida and Caputo in an alternative interpretation of khora as womb of natality, as it relates both to the Abrahamic-Christian mother (the womb of Sarah and Mary as *khora akhoraton*: containers of the uncontainable) and the eschatological image of *perichoresis*, namely the three strangers/persons circling the *khora* at the midst of the divine-human eschaton (see Kearney, *Anatheism*, chapter 1, and "Eros, Diacritical Hermeneutics and the Maybe," part 3). For a more detailed account of my critical reading of Derrida's notion of *le peut-être* see my *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 93–100. In my analysis of Derrida's philosophy of religion in chapter 3 of *Anatheism* I suggest he may be read as an *ana-theist atheist* rather than an *ana-theist theist* like Levinas, Ricoeur, Bonhoeffer, and myself. But I am not sure Derrida would have accepted the term. For an opposing reading of Derrida as an *anti-theistic atheist*, see the very clear and cogent arguments of Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. I am also grateful to my Boston College colleagues, Kevin Newmark and Kalpana Sheshandri, for their challenging and helpful comments on this theme.

47. Derrida, "Terror, Religion and the New Politics," 12.

48. Ibid., 13.

49. Ibid., 12.

50. Ibid., 12.

51. Ibid., 12–13. Emphasis added.

52. Ibid., 13.

53. Ibid., 13.

54. Ibid., 14.

55. Ibid., 13. In our New York dialogue, “Terror, Religion and the New Politics,” Derrida and I discussed this critical relationship between his deconstructive “Maybe” (mentioned in numerous of his later works) and my own eschatological “God-who-May-Be” as explored in *Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) and later in *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Derrida’s essay on the Perhaps, “Comme si c’était possible, ‘within such limits’ . . .” (*Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 3, no. 205 [1998]), was written, as he acknowledges, in part as a response to my hermeneutics of the *Peut-Etre* in *Poétique du Possible*. My response to his response is contained in chapter 5 of *The God Who May Be*, entitled “Possibilising God,” 93–100. As always, I am grateful to Derrida for the honor and the provocation that makes such exchanges possible—this current essay being another modest example.

56. Derrida, “Terror, Religion and the New Politics,” 13, and Kearney, *Anatheism*, 62–65, 106–7. By way of epilogue, let me summarize what I see as some of the most important differences that distinguish our respective positions. First and most obviously there is the difference of faith—my anatheist theism as opposed to what I call Derrida’s anatheist atheism. Both of us share an anatheist openness to wagering for or against faith in a religious God, but the difference expresses itself in our distinct, and often opposing, readings of specific events, images, persons, and narratives. I have already referred to our contrasting interpretations of khora and Christian revelation, but it might be helpful to add here our respective readings of the Abrahamic story. For Derrida this begins on Mount Moriah with the impossible sacrifice of Isaac—as signaled in Derrida’s title *Donner la mort: The Gift of Death*. For me it begins under the tree at Mamre with Abraham’s impossible hospitality to the strangers—*donner la vie: the gift of birth* (as presented in the opening chapter of *Anatheism*). In the first instance we have the sacrifice of a child, in the second the conception of a child—the same child, Isaac (meaning “laughter” in Hebrew because the barren Sarah laughs when she hears the strangers announce the arrival of an impossible son when they will return the following year). In Mount Moriah, as read by Derrida after Kierkegaard, Abraham is full of “fear and trembling”: That is what the deconstructive Other does to one. In Mamre, by contrast, Abraham turns from fear to trust as he treats the incoming stranger (*ger/xenos/hostis*) as guest rather than enemy (the word *hostis* can mean both guest and enemy in most languages). Here Abraham becomes a host who turns his guest into God—a sacred stranger—by turning hostility (his initial fear and trembling before the arrival of the desert vagrants) into hospitality (he and Sarah offer them food and drink). The Genesis text describes the three aliens becoming divine in the sharing of the food—a moment celebrated in Andrei Rublev’s famous icon of the *perichoresis*: a trinity of divine strangers seated around the chalice/bowl/womb/khora. But in the Moriah

narrative, Abraham is suddenly prepared to abandon his role as host to the stranger's gift—namely, the impossible birth of Isaac—and turn his original act of hospitality into one of hostility: the command of the Absolute to kill his son. Now I am not suggesting for a moment that Derrida's atheism leads to death while my anatheism leads to life—God forbid! I am simply pointing to a different emphasis of election and interpretation when it comes to God stories. If Derrida reads through the deconstructive lens of Kierkegaard—who, he confessed, was a more important philosophical influence than the three Hs (Hegel/Husserl/Heidegger)—I am more inclined to read through the hermeneutic lens of Ricoeur and Gadamer, where a wager on community, dialogue, and translation trumps the terror of the solitary Knight of Faith, alone on the hill, out of his mind, obsessed and violated by the Absolute. For me, the Derridian-Kierkegaardian option is *too* impossible, irrational, “mad,” and “blind.” There is too much fear and too much trembling for any workable ethics of action or poetics of saying. Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard that the only adequate human response to this impossible, horrible, command of death is silence. (Either total speech or total muteness; either total knowledge or blind faith.) But Abraham, Kierkegaard, and Derrida all ended up speaking. They let the word out. And we have endless writings and readings to prove it—hermeneutics in spite of itself. Language that dares not speak its name. Hence, as a result, the fortunate possibility of ongoing interpretation and discussion. (Even though I must confess that struggling with Derrida's elusive style is sometimes like trying to have a fistfight with the fog.) Where deconstruction speaks of “contagion” and “contamination” between guest and host languages, hermeneutics speaks of conversation and translation (defined by Ricoeur as “linguistic hospitality” in *On Translation*). Once again, the thinnest of differences but differences nonetheless. So while a deconstructive response to the voice or face of the other is, as noted, always a matter of reading in the dark, a hermeneutic response reads in half-light, twilight, wagering on some form of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), however tentative, inspired by a mix of carnal savvy, narrative understanding, moral reckoning, and discernment of spirits. Where deconstruction reads the khora of alterity as a gaping unspeakable abyss, hermeneutics reads it as a matrix of possible sensings, mappings, journeyings, storyings, hopes. Deconstruction and hermeneutics: two different approaches to the absolute Other, that perhaps need each other in order to be fully answerable to the stranger in every other.