unthinkable proportions, that the annihilation of the human race is now possible, that homelessness and displaced peoples now roam the earth in unprecedented numbers due to incessant global and local-ethnic wars—is *not* a matter of thought. The faceless darkness of *lethe* is a poetico-technological darkening, not the darkness of a murderous heart, not directly, as we both agree, and not as some sort of prior ontological ground, as Richardson argues. To that should be added another and very fundamental disagreement between me and Bill Richardson, which has to do with allowing the very idea of a "clearing" to get off the ground, and to suppose that someone can come along and be in a position to say something "essential" about the *Wesen* of the *Lichtung*, as if there were one (as if there were *one*). That I think is a mistake and an illusion, and it can even be a dangerous idea.

Notes

1. John D. Caputo, "Presenting Heidegger," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (May, 1995): 130–131.
2. For my reading of the lectures on Paul and Aristotle in the first Freiburg period, see DH, chs. 2–3.
3. That is the argument of DH, ch. 9, "Heidegger's Gods."
4. See Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Allan Blunden (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 274–76.
5. I have analyzed these texts with more care in DH, ch. 7, "Heidegger's Scandal."
6. *Parmenides*, pp. 80–81.
7. For my interpretation of Heidegger's reading of Trakl, see DH, ch. 8, "Heidegger's Poets."

5 *KHORA* OR GOD?

Richard Kearney

In an essay entitled "Dark Hearts: Heidegger, Richardson and Evil," Jack Caputo has this to say about his debt to the great American Heideggerian, Bill Richardson: "If, as Heidegger says, thinking is thanking, then one can offer a work of thought as a bit of gratitude. Derrida, on the other hand, repeats the warning of the circle of the gift according to which, in all gift-giving, something is always returned to the giver. The giver always gets a pay back, a return on the investment, if only (or especially) in the most oblique, the most indirect form, of gratitude. Therefore, the purest gift-gifting demands ingratitude, which does not pay the giver back and therefore pay off and nullify his generosity. Since I am in the highest degree the beneficiary of William Richardson's work and friendship, and more grateful than I am permitted to say, I have undertaken to protect his generosity with a certain ingratitude, precisely understood, with an utterly ungrateful bit of disagreement, not only with him, but also with Heidegger, to whom I have accumulated a life-long debt. So I offer what follows in the spirit of the deepest and most loyal ingratitude, cognizant always of the unworthiness of my ungift, which comes in response to what in a simpler world I would call the richness of the contribution that William Richardson has made to philosophy in America."[1] Replace the names Richardson for Caputo—and Derrida for Heidegger—in the above citation, and you will have a reasonable idea of my own "loyal ingratitude" to Jack Caputo here today. Or as Nietzsche put it, in more graphic terms, the best way to thank a mentor is to be a thorn in his flesh.

So here goes. I want to concentrate here on Jack Caputo's intriguing analysis of the notion of *Khora* in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*.[2] Though this analysis is deeply indebted to Derrida, and especially his essay of the same name,[3] there is, I submit, something uniquely suggestive and provocative about Caputo's reading.

The first mention of *khora* in *Prayers and Tears* occurs in the second page. It arises in the context of Caputo's discussion of Derrida's distinction

between the *Differance* of deconstruction and the "God" of negative theology. This is how Caputo unpacks the distinction: "However highly it is esteemed, *differance* is not God. Negative theology is always on the track of a 'hyperessentiality,' of something hyper-present, hyper-real or sur-real, so really real that we are never satisfied simply to say that is is merely real. *Differance*, on the other hand, is less than real, not quite real, never gets as far as being or entity or presence, which is why it is emblematized by insubstantial quasi-beings like ashes and ghosts which flutter between existence and nonexistence, or with humble *khora*, say, rather than with the prestigious Platonic sun" (PT, p. 2). Caputo concludes with this typically teasing inversion: Derrida's *differance*, he suggests, "is but a quasi-transcendental anteriority, not a supereminent, transcendent ulteriority" (PT, p. 3). So far, so good.

Later in this opening chapter, entitled "God is not *Differance*," Caputo adds another telling inflection to the point at issue. If God is higher than being, *differance* is lower than it. If God, like Plato's *agathon*, has gone beyond us, *differance* is more like Plato's *khora* in that it hasn't yet reached us. It is beneath us, before us, behind us: anterior rather than ulterior. This is how Caputo, paraphrasing Derrida, puts it: "God does not *merely* exist; *differance* does not *quite* exist. God is ineffable the way Plato's *agathon* is ineffable, beyond being, whereas *differance* is like the atheological ineffability of Plato's *khora*, beneath being (Khora 30/ON, 96)" (PT, p. 10). In other words, unlike the God of theology, Khora is radically anonymous, amorphous, aleatory and errant—or as Derrida would say, "destinerrant" (PT, p. 11).

In a subsequent section of the book entitled "Three Ways to Avoid Speaking," Caputo revisits Derrida's landmark intervention in the negative theology debate "How not to Speak: Denials" (Psy., 563).[4] The apophatic tradition of negative speaking—extending from the Greeks to Eckhart and Heidegger—begins with Plato. But Plato was complex in that he pointed to two different "topics of negativity" (Psy., 563). On the one hand, the famous Good beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*), that so influenced the Christian neo-Platonic heritage of negative theology; on the other, the infamous *khora* before being. Or as Derrida himself observes, *khora* is without being in that it "eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, all truth."[5] Whereas one is obliged with *khora*, as with *agathon*, to unsay what one has said, the former differs from the latter in that is not a form, or the Form of all Forms, but precedes both form and sensibility. Reinterpreted by human language, *khora* can only be expressed in a series of tentative analogies or "didactic" metaphors—for example, in Plato's *Timaeus* (47e–53b) as space, nurse, mother, matrix, imprint, receptable, winnowing basket, essence of perfume, etc.,[6] or within philosophy itself as a series of approximative notions such as *hyle* (Aristotle, Husserl), *extensio* (Descartes) or *magma* (Castoriadis).

What interests Derrida—and by extension Caputo—is not, however, how *khora* came to be said, albeit inexactly, *within* the language of the logocentric tradition of metaphysics and metaphorics. It is rather how *khora* manages to escape this tradition of language, appearing instead as an absolute stranger to it—or, to quote Caputo, as an 'outsider with no place to lay her/its head, in philosophy or in mythology, for it is the proper object of neither *logos* nor *mythos*' (PT, p. 35). Caputo claims that this second (more elusive and external) tropic of negativity is anterior to both being and non-being, the intelligible and the sensible, without being analogous to either. Citing Derrida's reading of Plato's reading of *khora*, Caputo makes the following suggestive stab at a description of the indescribable: "*Khora* is neither present nor absent, active nor passive, the Good nor evil, living nor nonliving (*Timaeus*, 50c). Neither theomorphic nor anthropomorphic—but rather atheological and nonhuman—*khora* is not even a receptacle, which would also be something that is itself inscribed within it" (PT, p. 36). Nor, insists Caputo, is this discourse metaphoric, "for it does not have to do with a sensible likeness of something supersensible, a relationship that is itself within *khora* (Psy., 567–68). *Khora* has no meaning or essence, no identity to fall back upon. She/it receives all without becoming anything, which is why she/it can become the subject of neither a philosopheme nor a mytheme ("*Khora*" in ON, p. 102). In short, the *khora* is *tout autre*, very" (PT, p. 36).

Now while we might be tempted to think that the Platonic metaphors of matrix, mother, and nurse in the *Timaeus*, imply a certain act of benevolence or benificence, of nurturing or engendering, Caputo and Derrida are adamant that *khora* is no giver of gifts. One cannot say of *khora*, as one might say of God or the Good, that it "gives." *Khora*, Derrida tells us, is "this 'thing' that is nothing of that to which this 'thing' nonetheless seems to 'give place' (*donner lieu*)—without however, this 'thing' ever *giving* anything" (Psy., p. 568). And even if one can say that *khora* "gives place" to something it does so "without the least generosity, either divine or human" (Foi, p. 86). Giving place is simply a letting take place that has nothing to do with producing, creating, or existing as such. One cannot even say that *khora* is, or is not; only that there is *Khora* (*il y a khora*). But this *il y a*, as Derrida again insists, "gives nothing in giving place or in giving to think, whereby it will be risky to see in it the equivalent of an *es gibt*, of the *es gibt* which remains without a doubt implicated in every negative theology . . ." ("*Khora*" in ON, 96; cited Caputo, PT, p. 36).

In sharp contrast, therefore, to the neo-Platonic/Christian/mystical/metaphysical tradition of One-Good-God beyond being, *khora* is not only a-theological but a-donational. It even eschews the more contemporary idioms of transcendence and mystery—the Levinasian idiom of infinity (otherwise than being), the Marionesque gesture of donation (God without being)

or the Heideggerian principle of event (the gift of being). It is not even a third kind (*genos*) beyond the altenatives of being and non-being. It is not a "kind" at all, but a radical singularity of which one might say—what is your name? (ON, p. 111). But *khora* cannot ever possess a proper or a common name. It is unnameable and unspeakable. And yet, both Derrida and Caputo keep repeating, it is the very impossibility of speaking about *khora* that is also the necessity of speaking about it!

But how can we do so? How can one say anything at all about *khora*? What we are seeking seems impossible. And yet, it is (in Derrida's words) something that "beyond all given philosophemes, has nevertheless left its trace in language" (Psy., 569). Plato, for starters, hazarded a guess at this nameless thing by calling it *khora*, with its attendant bevy of metaphors. And *khora*, unlike the words God or the Good, is a word-trace that "promises nothing" (PT., p. 37). In sharp contradistinction to the theological names deriving from the Good beyond being of Greek metaphysics or the Creator God of Judeo-Christian revelation, *khora* suggests an altogether alternative site—one that is "barren, radically nonhuman and atheological." So that if this "place" called *khora* can be said, like the God of negative theology, to indeed be "wholly other," it is so in a manner totally distinct from all theologies, apophatic or otherwise. Its desert is not a dark night of the soul waiting to be redeemed by light but a no-place that remains deserted. Just ashes and ashes, without ascensions into heaven. Abyss and abyss without elevation from the void. *Il y a la cendre*, to cite Caputo's paraphrase of Derrida.

So one is a little surprised then, is one not, to find Caputo suggesting that there is at bottom a certain undecidability between God and *khora*. Having persuasively demonstrated the radical difference between the two—as exemplified by Levinasian hyperbole on the one hand and Derridean deconstruction on the other—we now have Caputo asking: "what is the wholly other. . . . God or *khora*? What do I love when I love my God, God or *khora*? How are we to decide? Do we have to choose?" (PT., p. 37). I may be wrong but I suspect that Caputo is suggesting that we *don't*—since the issue remains radically undecidable? But I would like to disagree at this point and suggest that we *do* have to choose; and that a religious God is a nonsense unless it calls for such choice (what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith).

Moreover, Caputo would seem to allow as much himself when he claims that the antithesis between *khora* and God admits of no "passage" between the two. Whereas the one takes the high road towards the God/Good beyond being, the other sticks to the uncompromising and inconsolable emptiness of the abyss. Whereas Dionysius and other mystical-apophatic theologians praise and pray to God, invoking his kenotic goodness and hyperousiological generosity, *khora* is a very different kettle of fish. It does not command

prayer or praise for it is neither good nor generous nor giving. It is radical "destinerrance" and those who end up in its desert always end up lost.

Fair enough. But if this be so, is Caputo justified in claiming that Derrida is at the same time on the side of the original desert fathers, the anhorites—or "an-khora-ites" as he rechristens them—with their lean and hungry looks? Can he legitimately nominate, even in jest, the advocate of deconstructive *khora* as "*Saint Jacques*, Derrida the Desert Father!"? For, unlike Derrida, the desert fathers *did* praise and dance and sing before their desert God. Anthony and Jerome, Simon and John Chysostomum, spent many months in their caves—to be sure—but they also walked out into the light from time to time and praised their Maker. To do otherwise would for them be to despair, or as Kierkegaard put it in *Fear and Trembling*, to take only the first step in the two-steps of faith: the step of infinite resignation which gives up creation without taking the second step of wanting it back again. (If Abraham had opted for endless "destinerrance" over religious faith, he would never have ventured his leap of faith and received Isaac *back*).

I am suggesting, in short, that Caputo cannot have it both ways. He cannot claim on the one hand that Derrida takes the path of a-theological desertification and then reclaim him as a saintly ankhorite father. Nor will it do to refuse the two alternatives altogether and declare the issue undecidable—God and/or/neither/nor *Khora*? That too is having it both ways. Not an option, I would submit, for the believer. (Though a perfectly consistent one for the deconstructionist).

By believer I mean, incidentally, not just a believer in God but also—why not?—a believer in *khora*. Perhaps *khora* is no less an interpretative leap in the dark than religious faith is? God and *khora* are conceivably two different names for the same thing—the same nameless, indescribable experience of the abyss. But the choice between names is not insignificant. Which direction you leap in surely matters? For while the former theistic option sees the experience in the empty desert as "a dark night of the soul" on the way towards the encounter with God, the latter sees it rather as a night without end, a place where prayer, promise, praise, or faith is *not* applicable. Not a place the desert fathers would want to hang around for very long, I suspect.

In the *khora* desert it is always inevitable that one loses one's way. Isn't that what the deconstructive commitment to "destinerrance" means? But in the ankhorite wilderness—traversed by the desert fathers and subsequent mystics like Eckhart, Teresa, Silesius, or St John of the Cross—the journey through desolation is made *in the fervent hope* that one will find a path to God, that the lost sheep will be found and brought home to the Father. (A prospect that must be anathema to all deconstructors, no?) There is a genuine difference between ankhorite fathers and deconstructive sons. A healthy difference to be sure; but one that can't be magicked away or turned into a

soft-shoe-shuffle of undecidability. One cannot sit on double-edged fences for ever. (That's maybe unfair but Jack knows what I mean).

It boils down to this, as I see it: Deconstruction isn't just describing *khora* as one might describe a sunset or a storm at sea. It is describing it in the same way it describes *differance* or *pharmakon* or *supplement* or *archi-ecriture* etc. That is, it appears to express a marked preference for *khora*, and its allies, over its opponents. Not moral preference, granted, but in some minimal and irreducible sense, an evaluative preference nonetheless. As one reads Caputo one cannot help surmising that for him *khora* is—at bottom and when all our metaphysical and other illusions are stripped away—the *ways things are*. It is a better and deeper and more profound way of viewing things than its theological rivals, for example. It is, in the heel of the hunt, closer to the "reality" of things than all known non-*khora* alternatives. In that sense, yes, deconstruction does appear to take sides even when it is doing its most non-commital side-step of neither/nor/both/and. Deconstuction makes a preferential option for *khora*, while not denying of course (it would never be so intolerant) that non-*khoraites* can be nice guys too, people with the best of intentions, questioners who might even find their way back to the no-place of deconstruction, eventually.

But that is not the only disagreement I have with my two favorite *khoraites*—Jack and Jacques. I have a much deeper reservation about the nature of *khora* itself—if taken as the most anterior and irreducible site of sites. While I acknowledge that it is a place/no-place each of us must encounter, come to terms with, traverse sometime in our lives, I do not think it is the best place to spend our lives, or to encourage others to spend theirs indefinitely. (I am not talking here, I hasten to add, of Plato's purely cosmological notion of *khora*; nor indeed of Kristeva's psycho-linguistic one: for neither of these, as I read them, see *khora* as an alternative to a theistic God[7]). No, I am speaking here of *khora*, as described by Caputo, in terms of an empty desert abyss, a no-place we experience in the fear-and-trembling moment of uncertainity and loss, a dark night of the soul waiting without response (or what Levinas terms the "mute, absolutely indeterminate menace" of the "there is"—the "horror" of "noctoral space." And Levinas leaves us in little doubt as to the a-theistic nature of this experience: "Rather than to a God, the notion of the *there is* leads us to the absence of God, the absence of any being . . . before the light comes").[8] Yes, I do acknowledge this experience of *khora* as part and parcel of human existence. I do not deny that all of us have some experience of *khora/il y a* as the "horror" of the night with "no exits" which "does not answerable. . . ."[9] But I'm not sure I want to celebrate it as the best we can do. And I certainly wouldn't want to recommend it as an on-going *modus vivendi* for those who are suffering its darkness. If compelled, I'd personally opt for Levinas' move from the *Il y a* of irremissible existence to the *illeite* of ethical transcendence.

But what is *khora* in more familiar language? For most non-philosophers, *khora* is experienced as misery, terror, loss and desolation. *Khora* is Oedipus without eyes, Sisyphus in hades, Prometheus in chains, Ephighenia in waiting. *Khora* is the *tohu bohu* before creation; it is Job in agony, Jonah in the belly of the whale, Joseph at the bottom of the well, Jesus abandoned on the cross (crying out to the father) or descended into hell. It is Conrad's "heart of darkness," Hamlet's "flat stale and unprofitable" world, Monte Christo's prison cell, Primo Levi's camp. Or to put it in more contemporary idioms, it is Brian Keenan (the Irish teacher held hostage in Lebanon) locked in a hole in the ground, it is a Taiwanese or Turkish child trapped under rubble, a cornered East Timor prisoner, waiting, waiting, waiting . . . wishing for the relief of death to end the insomniac dark. Or more banally, more basically, more quotidianly—any one of us faced with the meaningless void of our existence and wondering why we should bother going on.

Now, given the fact that some of my best friends are existentialists and deconstructionists, I am the last person in the world to want to deny the *reality* of these kinds of experiences. They may well be the *most* "real" (at least in Lacan's sense) of all our human experiences, the most unspeakably traumatic "limit experiences" of something that excedes our understanding. The most sublime of horrors. But I'd find it hard to make a preferential option for them and suggest that others do likewise.

Well, I know Jack Caputo will throw his hands in the air and say, on reading this kind of list, "that is not what I meant at all! We know that the *khora* is unlivable; we know—with Eliot—that human kind cannot bear too much reality; we accept that people need to climb out of the *khora* cave into the light of everyday consolations and pastimes and distractions (call it the 'they world,' the 'natural attitude,' the 'metaphysics of presence,' or any number of religious beliefs in God as some saving, healing, loving, benevolent grace). All we are saying is—give *khora* a chance. Because even though it may not be livable it is what life is ultimately and ineluctably and at bottom about!" *Au fond, sans fond, il y a khora*. That's how I imagine Jack replying. (But he'll speak for himself in a moment, if he's still speaking to me. . . .)

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting we flee the shadow at the heart of existence. I'm not saying we shouldn't face up to the terrors and horrors and absurdities of the world and do so in fear in trembling. If we do not acknowledge the existence of ineffable emptiness and meaningless torment—how can we ever speak about it or go beyond it. As Camus rightly said, you must live the absurd in order to fight it. Agreed. But is that what Caputo is saying about *khora*? That we should confront it in order to struggle against it, go

beyond it, put an end to it as soon as we can? I get the impression rather that for deconstructors like Caputo *khora* is really rather more fundamental and anterior and "really real" than God or the Good or Being and all that. Just as writing is more archi-ultimate than speech and textuality is more archi-ultimate than presence? If *khora* is indeed being lost in the desert—destinerrance—the undecidable, atheological absence of light and grace, I don't get the feeling that Jack is reassuring us that this is just temporary, that we may (with a few more prayers and tears) soon find our shepherd again, be saved by the Father, and redeemed into the Kingdom.

I may be wrong but I get the *opposite* impression reading *Prayers and Tears*: that to accept being lost in the desert of destinerrance, without looking for meaning or healing, is really more courageous, more steel-nerved and uncompromising than seeking to be found. Not that Jack doesn't have heaps of sympathy for those who can't hack it, who just can't take the cold of the desert night for too long, can't bear being scared witless by the horror of *toho bohu/il y a*. His heart goes out to those who need to put an end to the fear and trembling by taking a leap of faith and gettting their Isaac back, climbing down off the cross, opening the cell hatch, hankering for redemption and peace and calm. He bleeds for those who pray the black void of depression will soon fade, that the chalice will pass from them—even if it means adding a little prozac to their prayers at times. But he doesn't buy it. It's not for him, or JD and the other chevaliers of deconstruction. Higher than the knight of faith (or children of faith) is the knight of *khora* who braves the long day's journey into never-ending night. And never looks back. Nor forward.

But I read things somewhat differently. In my less heroic book, ankhorites went to the desert to find God, not *khora*. They didn't make a mystique of loss or a virtue of the void. And if it is indeed true that they traversed emptiness and destitution it was *faute de mieux*, an unavoidable detour on the way to grace. They'd have preferred (unless they were Levinasian *miserabilistes*) to have hit the land of milk and honey after the first dune. But since life isn't like that, they had to learn the hard way on their way to the kingdom. Losing life—yes—but in order to gain it.

What I'm basically saying is that I don't believe Jack Caputo is entirely neutral on the question of *khora*. If anything, I reckon he reckons it's the place (or no-place) to be if you really want to get to the heart of things. It's what is really out there (in here) once we go beyond alibis and illusions, salves and solaces, credoes and consolations, and open our eyes and ears.

I may be wrong of course. It's hard to be right about something as elusive as *khora*.[10] So by way of conclusion, let me return to Jack's extraordinary book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*.

On p. 39 of *Prayers and Tears*, Jack Caputo does indeed admit prayer into the unholy of unholies—the *khora*; but it is a very specific kind of

a-theistic, a-theological, deconstructive prayer; not at all like Dionysius' "Christian prayer, directed to the Trinity" (p. 39). This latter prayer—the kind invoked in the title of JC's book—is not one addressed to God "the saving name, the giver of all good gifts" (*ibid*). It does not seek to keep itself "safe from the abyss of *khora*" (*ibid*) by having recourse to something else beyond that formless anonymous "spacing" or "interval" within which all things find their place ("*Khora*," ON, 125). Here prayer is no "desert guide" but an unconsoling, uncompromising and, as JC notes, "slightly sinful" mode of address—for it addresses an alterity in each and everything so terrifyingly sublime, so textually irreducible, that there is no exit (short of some quick backflip into theology/ideology/logocentrism—or some common sense of presence. An option for the fainthearted). This is why JC can agree with JD that *khora* has very little to do with a theistic divinity and everything to do with the "very spacing of de-construction" (ON, p. 80): something like a "surname for differance." (PT, p. 40)

For me, if I may repeat myself, the problem with JC's approach here—and I am not saying it is identical with JD's—is that it sets *deconstruction/differance/khora* up as an alternative to, even perhaps an adversary of, theology (apophatic or otherwise). Either *khora* or God. Either Dionysius or Derrida. (Or as he rephrases the alternative in a later chapter: either the "angelic doctor" from Aquino or the "devilish deconstructor" from the Rue d'Ulm p. 168–169). On the left side of the ring, Caputo marshals the idioms of the originary Father—fusion, presence, union, circularity, totality, economy, sameness. On the right, over and against them, he places the clearly preferred idioms of the "more maternal simulacrum" of *khora*—"aleatory gratuiteousness and anarchic abandon" (p. 169). If you say thanks to God the giver, concedes Caputo, you do "*not* say thanks" to *khora* (*ibid*). "*Il y a khora*," he goes on to explain, "but she/it does not generously 'give' anything" and is not "the gesture of a donor subject" (*Khora*, 37–38/ON, 100). "Rather she/it is the spacing within which an unlimited number of events take place, in her/its place" (p. 169).

I have a problem with this kind of alternativism which risks turning theology (negative and positive) into a caricature and seems to assume that most canonized saints were either curia hacks or obsessional neurotics—suckers for ecclesiastical certainty and closure (as he implies of Thomas Aquinas after he had seen the light) (PT, p. 60–61). Not all mystical experience is "unitive" and fusional, as JC seems to imply in such passages. Certainly not the experiences of Teresa of Lisieux, Angelus Silesius, or Meister Eckhart. And not every notion of the Christian Trinitarian God—not to mention the Jewish Yahweh or Muslim Allah—is a paralyzing fetish of presence or hyper-essence. What of Eckhart's God beyond God? Silesius' rose without why? Cusanus' *Possest*. Or the wonderfully ludic notion of the three persons dancing around an empty

space in respective acts of dispossession—*perichoresis* (translated by the Latins as *circumincessio*): an event of loving letting-be stunningly captured in Andrei Rublev's icon of the three angels? (The early Jack Caputo knew far more than most about these things).

This is all a far cry, is it not, from the metaphysical chestnuts of pure self-identical presence: *ens causa sui, ipsum esse subsistens, actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate*? Hoary chestnuts which we should all be grateful were cracked open, over various fires, by the likes of Nietzsche, Feueurbach, Marx, Sartre, and Derrida.

What I am trying to say, by way of conclusion, is that I think Caputo, and also at times Derrida, has a tendency to set up a somewhat precipitous and over-dramatic polarity between God (equated with fusion/union/essence/presence) and its deconstructive opposite (*khora/differance/ecriture/pharmakon*). While I can see the temptation to do this from a pedagogical point of view—we all need *some* black and white distinctions—it is rather surprising coming from the maestroes of deconstruction themselves. And surely something of a compromise of the celebrated deconstructive logic of both/and/neither/nor?

To avoid such polarizing gestures, I would suggest that there are many degrees of latitude and longtitude between the north pole of God (qua pure hyper-essence) and the south pole of *khora* (qua irreducible anonymous abyss). My shortlist above, ranging from Eckhart to *perichoresis*, mentions just a few of these possible "third-ways" beyond such polarity. Indeed I would suggest that we might go further still. Beyond two- and even three-fold approaches to a *four-fold* one including in its chiasmic interplay the following players: *khora*, God, being, and the Good. But that is for another day of dialogue and *disputatio* with my dear colleague and friend, Jack Caputo.

Epilogues

To be entirely fair to Jack, the arguments rehearsed above, do not perhaps tell the whole story of his approach to the *khora*/God relation. (Indeed how could it if this testimonial to Jack Caputo's wonderful book is to be more than servile paraphrase). In certain other passages of *Prayers and Tears*, it does appear that Caputo is offering a different take on this relation, but without acknowledging it as different (even incompatible). Whether it is a case of not noticing his own textual inconsistencies or of wanting to have it both ways, or simply being too dialectically subtle for the likes of me, none is really the issue. The important thing to note is that, at times, JC does acknowledge that *khora* may be an ally as much as an adversary of God. On one occasion, for

instance, he even sees *khora* as a precondition of genuine theistic faith. *Khora*, he concedes here, is "a general condition of any 'belief'"; adding: "How could Derrida—for whom everything depends upon faith—rule out religious faith? Why would Derrida want to ban the name of God, a name he dearly loves" (p. 59). Caputo even appears, in this passage, to equate Derrida's version of *khora* with Kierkegaard's version of theistic faith: "Derrida does no more than follow Johannes de Silentio, Abraham's poet, from whose fear and trembling we learn that faith 'must never be a certainty' but a passion, the 'highest passion' that . . . still has the heart to push ahead (DM, 78/GD 80), which is the repetition forward and the marvel" (p. 59). But that is a change of note, is it not, from the more prevalent tune of either/or—either *khora or God*—rehearsed above?

A curious thing about Caputo's approach to *khora* and Derrida's is that the latter often seems more ready to make bridges (however provisional) between the engulfing *khora* and the saving God. It's as if Caputo, a crypto-theist, is desperately trying *not* to evangelize deconstruction by turning it into a crypto-theology. A case of the theist does protest too much? Whereas Derrida, a self-declared atheist, has far less difficulty throwing ropes across the ostensible gap between the ungodly *khora* and God. (Note that he has as little compunction about cutting these cords also!) While making sure never to identify God directly with *Khora*, Derrida seems prepared at times to go some considerable way in acknowledging unexpected analogies and overlaps between the two. Let me cite some startling passages from his famous "Post-Scriptum" to *Derrida and Negative Theology*, subtitled "Aporias, Ways and Voices."

I begin with his more than sympathetic commentary of the Christian mystic, Angelus Silesius: "'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language" (p. 301)—a name which is, at the same time, interpreted by Silesius as "the divinity of God as gift" (p. 300), Derrida proceeds to relate this God of Silesius—a God whom he, Silesius, prays to give Himself to the prayer—to "some *khora* (interval, place, spacing)" (p. 301). Everything, says Derrida, "is played out here" (ibid). And to Silesius' equation of the "Place" (*Ort*) and the "word" (*Wort*)—*Der Ort und's Wort ist Eins*—Derrida adjoins this reflection: "It is not that in which is found a subject or an object. It is found in us . . . The here of eternity is situated there, already: already there, it situates this throwing or this throwing up . . . but first of all throwing that puts outside, that produces the outside and thus space . . ." (p. 301). Later in the same "Post-Scriptum," Derrida displays a deep fascination with Silesius' approach to God's giving in terms of *Gelassenheit* and *play*. (The verse of Silesius he is commenting reads: "God plays with creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself," ibid.)

But before we lapse into ecumenical euphoria, Derrida puts an end to equivocation by marking a clear and unbridgeable difference—an abyss in fact—between the reading of place as God and as khora. As this statement of Derrida's position is crucial I quote the passage in full: "'*Der Ort is das Wort* (1:205) indeed affirms the place as word of God.—Is this place created by God? Is it part of the play? Or else is it God himself? Or even what precedes, in order to make them possible, both God and his Play? In other words, it remains to be known if this nonsensible (invisible and inaudible) place is opened by God, by the name of God (which would again be some other thing, perhaps), or if it is 'older' than the time of creation, than time itself, than history, narrative, word, etc. 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 impassively foreign, like *Khora*, to everything that takes its place and replaces itself and plays within this place, including what is named God" (pp. 314).

Derrida leaves us in little doubt that a choice is called for here between two rival, incompatible, and mutually exclusive notions of place. "Do we have any choice? Why choose between the two? Is it possible?" he asks rhetorically. To which he proffers the following altogether non-rhetorical answer: "But it is true that these two 'places,' 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" (p. 315). And so we have the antithesis: "*on one side*, on one way, a profound and abyssal eternity, fundamental but accessible to the teleo-eschatological narrative and to a certain experience or historical (or historial) revelation; *on the other side*, 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" (p. 315).

As I read him, Derrida is on the side of the latter—the nontemporal, bottomless, impassible abyss, that does the work of *khora* and *differance*. To be sure, Derrida does admit to a certain relation between these two "places" in terms of an "exemplarism" of conjunction-disjunction vis-à-vis the term "without"; but this highly complex notion cannot really distract from the fundamental opposition between the two senses of "place," nor can it mitigate or abrogate Derrida's fundamental choice (as I see it) for *khora* over God. A choice I respect, even admire, but do not share.

To repeat: despite numerous analogies, there is a radical difference, in the heel of hunt, between Derrida and Silesius. Silesius sees our experience of the place of play as "one abyss calling to the other" (as in Psalm 41)—the void within us crying out to the unfathomable deep of God. (Silesius: "The abyss of my spirit always invokes with cries/The abyss of God: say which may be deeper?") By contrast, Derrida construes the place as the "indestructible *Khora* . . . the very spacing of de-construction" (p. 318).

Where Silesius' God promises peace and healing, Derrida's *Khora* is "gulf and chaos" (p. 321). The choice is, at bottom, between theism and atheism. Or if one prefers Derrida's more recent terms, between messianism and messianicity. The two are as inextricably linked as siamese twins but they beat with different hearts. They may look exactly alike, but they think very different thoughts and signal very different options.

"My faith comes forth from the crucible of doubt," confessed Dostoyevsky, the crucible serving here the function of atheistic *khora*. But his faith does come forth; it surpasses and goes beyond the preconditioning crucible—rightly or wrongly, for better or worse. It does not remain within it. There is, after all, and in spite of what Jack Caputo sometimes seems to suggest, a fundamental choice to be made between *khora* and God. I know what Derrida chooses; I know what I choose. My question to Jack is, what do you choose?

Notes

1. J. Caputo, "Dark Hearts" in *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy and Desire*, ed. (B. E. Babich, Kluwer, Netherlands, 1995), p. 267.
2. J. Caputo, PT.
3. J. Derrida, "Khora" in ON, pp. 89–127.
4. J. Derrida, Psy.
5. J. Derrida, "*Khora*" in ON, p. 124.
6. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. H. Lee, (Penguin, 1965). In the *Timaeus* 48–53, Plato describes the *khora* as follows: "it is the receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change (49) . . . anything that is to receive in itself every kind of character must be devoid of all character. Manufacturers of scent contrive the same initial conditions when they make liquids which are to receive the scent as odourless as possible . . . In the same way that which is going to receive properly and uniformly all the likenesses of the intelligible and eternal things must itself be devoid of all character. Therefore we must not call the mother and receptable of visible and sensible things either earth or air or fire or water . . . but we shall not be wrong if we describe it as invisible and formless, all embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp (51) . . . (It is) space which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in—we look at it indeed in a kind of dream . . . (52)."
7. See Julia Kristeva's analysis of *khora* in *Revolution and Poetic Language*, excerpted in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Blackwell, (London, 1986), pp. 93–98, 108–109, 115–117. Kristeva defines the indefinable *khora* in the following terms: ". . . the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks,

articulate what we call a *chora:* a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation . . . the *chora,* as rupture and articulations rhythm, precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitely posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form" (pp. 93–94). Blending Plato with Klein, Kristeva goes on to argue that it is this same "rhythmic space" of *khora*, devoid of thesis or position, which constitutes significance. Plato himself, she points out, "leads us to such a process when he calls this receptacle or *chora* nourishing and maternal, not yet unified in an ordered whole because deity is absent from it" (p. 94). And yet, though deprived of identity, unity, and divinity, the *chora* is "is subject to a regulating process which is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again" (p. 94). The *khora* thus emerges for Kristeva as a "pre-verbal semiotic space," before language, law, or cognition proper. As a psychosomatic modality of signifying, "anterior to sign and syntax," it is not something that can be assumed by a knowing, constituted subject but rather governs the very connections "between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects and the protagonists of family structure" (p. 95). Thus while the semiotic *khora*—as the place of unconscious, pre-cognitive, pre-verbal drives—is "on the path of destruction, aggressivity and death," it is also, insists Kristeva, the locus of a maternal "ordering principle." She explains the paradox thus: "This is to say that the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him" (p. 95). And yet the very semiotic processes and relations that make up the space of *khora* are only, Kristeva admits, properly attended to in "*dream* logic" (here she agrees with Plato, *Timaeus*, 52a) or in the semotic rhythms of the literary *text:* "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment . . ." (p. 97). For Kristeva—as for Plato, Klein, Derrida and Caputo—*khora* brushes against the limits of logic and language (what Lacan calls the symbolic order).

8. E. Levinas, "There is: existence without existents," first published in 1946 as a section of *De l'existence a l'existant* (Vrin, Paris) and reprinted in the *The Levinas Reader,* ed. S. Hand, Blackwell, (London, 1989), pp. 32–33. Elsewhere in this same passage, which first outlines his original and highly influential notion of the *there is/il y a*, Levinas writes: ". . . night and the silence of nothingness. This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. . . . The anyonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing. . . We

could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is,* if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light" (p. 30). In terms reminiscent of Derrida's/Caputo's *khora,* Levinas goes on to explain the inextricable link between the *there is* and darkness: "When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the the night . . . invades like a presence. In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that;* there is not 'something'. . . . It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens us like the silence of those infinite spaces" (p. 30). But in so far as the *there is* is an impersonal form, like it rains, or it is warm, its anonymity serves to de-subjectivize and de-personalise the human self. "What we call the I," says Levinas, "is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it" (p. 31). Without actually invoking the aboriginal notion of *khora,* Levinas' *Il y a* bears many of its traces qua dark and undifferentiated "background of existence" (p. 32). But Levinas, like Derrida and Caputo after him, will add certain existential aspects to this pre-conditioning, anonymous, nocturnal space: "It makes things appear to us, in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia" (p. 32). And this bearing down takes the form not just of fear and trembling but of horror itself: "Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity' . . . In horror . . . the subject is depersonalized" (p. 33). But this horror is exacerbated by the fact that the *there is* has no exits. It is more horrifying than death, indeed, for unlike death, it offers no escape. As the ludic event of the night, the *il y a* is, concludes Levinas, "like the density of the void, like a murmur of silence. . . . Darkness is the very play of existence which would play itself out even if there were nothing. It is to express just this paradoxical existence that we have introudced the term 'there is' " (p. 35). Levinas' notion of the *there is* was to exert a deep influence on subsequent thinkers, informing not only Blanchot's concept of "disaster" but also Derrida's and Caputo's reading of *khora*. Sean Hand offers this highly suggestive account of this enigmatic and elusive phenomenon: " 'There is' is anonymous and impersonal being in general. . . . It exists prior even to nothingness, the rumbling within silence that one hears when putting a shell to one's ear, the horrifying silence confronting the vigilant insomniac who is and is not an 'I' " (Introduction to 'There Is,' *The Levinas Reader,* p. 29). The *il y a* recurs throughout Levinas' oeuvre—*Time and the Other, Totality and Infinity, Difficult Freedom*—receiving this final formulation in Levinas' last major publication, *Autrement qu'etre ou au-dela de l'essence* (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974, p. 207): "Mais l'essence imperturbable, egale et indifferente a toute responsabilite que, desormais, elle englobe, vire comme, dans l'insomnie, de cette neutralite et de cette egalite, en monotonie, en anonymat, en insignifiance, en bourdonnement incessant que rien ne peut plus arreter et qui absorbe toute signification, jusqu'a celle dont ce remue-menage est une modalite. L'essence s'etirant indefiniment, sans retenue, sans interruption possible . . . sans repit, sans suspension possible—c'est l'*il y a* horrifiant derriere toute finalite propre du *moi* thematisant . . ."

9. E. Levinas, "There is," *op.cit.*, p. 34.

10. If hermeneutics always begins with an element of misreading or misunderstanding—as Gadamer reminds us—then there is, I suspect, both a certain creative mis-prism in Caputo's reading of Derrida on *khora*: as there is in Derrida's reading of Plato on *khora*; and in my reading of both of their readings. But the buck stops, momentarily at least, somewhere. Otherwise we could never begin or end.

ABYSSUS ABYSSUM INVOCAT: A RESPONSE TO KEARNEY

John D. Caputo

A year or so after *Against Ethics* appeared I received a letter from a former student who, having absorbed its last chapter on suicide and worms inching their way to silent graves was moved to asked me whether something had gone dreadfully wrong in my life! Not to worry, I said. I have always been fascinated—or hounded—by the abyss, an abyss, some abyss, from the *Abgrund* of the Godhead in Meister Eckhart, the abyss of Being in Heidegger, the *il y a* in Levinas, to Derrida's *khora*, abyss calling to abyss (Psy. 42:7), as the psalmist says, ceaselessly it seems, wherever I turned. Such flirtation with the abyss was trouble enough on its own but it was bound to buy me still more trouble from my readers, to expose my hide to the exquisite needling of the sort to which I am subjected by Kearney, Westphal, and Ayres. But this is important needling, because the work that the abyss does, or un-does, cannot be ducked. Abysses are tricky things, stretching as they do the all way from the *khora* in the *Timaeus* "up" to the mystical abyss of the Godhead beyond God, and they sometimes fall into a "possible confusion" with one another, as Levinas says. There are two tropics of negativity, Derrida said;[1] "at least," I would add. Consider that when you say "the rose is without why," you might mean that love or the gift is without why, which has all the makings of a lovely and benign abyss, or you might mean a Nietzschean play of forces, the great cosmic stupidity, which sounds downright nihilistic.

So the abyss, if there is one, repays reflection. But I do not think there is *one*, only one. The troubling thing about the abyss is precisely that this phenomenon lies at the outer limits of our experience, while our phenomenological powers function best with the medium sized things of quotidian life, in the temperate zones between the opposite polar regions. But the abyss lies at the outer limits, above or below, *au-delà de l'être* or *au dessous*, like the *agathon* or *khora*, or like God or *khora*, where there is, following Levinas, a possible confusion, or, following Derrida, a certain undecidability.

Like God or *khora*: that is the precise point of insertion for Richard Kearney's pointed blade. Richard Kearney, from whose brilliant "poetics of the possible" we have all so greatly profited, is worried about monsters. Good

friend that he is, he is worried about me, worried that I am left by this undecidability to twist slowly in the winds of indecision, one more despairing destinerrant deconstructionist wandering in the desert, a lost an-khor-ite *sans* faith, an anchorite *sans* anchor, not a desert father but a stray son.

Richard Kearney does not want to be consumed by monsters. Who does? But he tends to run together very disparate phenomena, like madness, terror, *il y a* and *khora/différance*, which are hardly synonymous. They variously point to an underlying stratum of anonymity that inhabits and disturbs our world from within, but in very different ways. Richard tends to single out the most extreme states of madness, misery, terror, torture, depression, and desolation, like the nightmare of a prisoner trapped in the ground or a child crushed by rubble. But these phenomena would certainly need to be differentiated from *différance*, the play of differences in virtue of which we make any distinctions or differentiations at all. *Différance*, while maddening enough at times, does not constitute a state of madness, insanity, or terror, let alone of torture or imprisonment, but rather of the inescapable "spacing," the play of traces, within which we constitute or "forge" our beliefs and practices, some of which are quite cheery, sane, and wholesome. *Différance* is that condition in virtue of which whatever meaning we constitute is made possible, but also impossible, that is, the quasi-transcendental condition which sees to it that a meaning is a temporary unity that is forged from the flux of signifiers or traces and that lasts just as long as the purpose it serves and the contexts endure in which it can function. It is in virtue of *différance* that whatever we can do with words can also come undone. That is at times awfully annoying, but it is hardly madness, torture, desolation, or imprisonment.

Khora, Derrida says, is a "surname" for *différance*,[3] that is, *khora* is a figure found in the history of philosophy, in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the brute "out of which" quality that simulates *différance* shows through the seams of metaphysics, even here, in the founding moment of metaphysics, Plato himself. The *khora* thus constitutes a kind of counter-part to a Levinasian move, when Levinas said that this very Jewish *tout autre* shows up occasionally in philosophy, most notably in the *agathon*. So *khora* is a counter-image of what is not beyond *ousia* but below it, a structure that falls below the level of meaning and being, rather than exceeding them. Thus it is used by Derrida to show how *différance* insinuates itself into everything. Whatever we say or pray, think or believe, dream or desire, is inscribed in the shifting sands of *différance*, that is, inscribed in *khora*. I emphasize Derrida's interest in the mirror-image effect of the Platonic *agathon* and *khora*, in the way that the beyond-being and below-being mirror each other. Now put that beside Levinas's observation that *illéité* (which is his way of appropriating the *agathon*) is so far beyond the other one (*autrui*), so other than the other one (*autre qu'autrui*), that it begins to fall into a "possible confusion" with *il y a*. By

putting these two mirror effects side by side, we see that there is a certain ambiguity or undecidability between the two. They share common characteristics, that is, neither belongs to the medium sized phenomena of daily life, neither has the determinacy, the form, the structure of a definite thing or being. That is why in the middle ages David of Dinant made the argument that God is prime matter, because God does not have and cannot be restricted by "form." Thomas Aquinas thought that was a particularly stupid thing to say and that David should have distinguished the way *ipsum esse subsistens* is beyond form from the way prime matter is below form. While Thomas was right to say that we can keep these *concepts* apart, I would say that David had hit upon a phenomenological point, that our *experiences* of the two are not necessarily so widely divided, for in both cases we experience a certain confusion (Levinas), a kind of bedazzlement (Marion), or what Derrida and I with him would call an "undecidability," which I think can only be resolved by *faith*.

But Richard has not discriminated the chiefly semiotic and quasi-transcendental function of *différance* as "spacing" from terror, torture, and desolation. Then, trading on that ambiguity, he says that Derrida and I have consigned us all to live in an unlivable desert space called *khora*, without hope or faith, wallowing without decision in the waters of undecidability. Kearney argues that Caputo and Derrida think that *khora*—conceived now as terror—is what is really real, what is really there, that every sense or meaning is a forgery, a fake, a simulacrum, an impostor, a fiction stretched over a void, and that all there is is the anonymous rustling of the *there is* that is eventually going to gobble us up or turn us to ash. *il y a là cendre*. He thinks that Caputo and Derrida have not been able to reassure us that *khora* is "temporary" and that we can "get beyond it," and that they have not shown us how we can be saved. They would rather be one of those hearty chevaliers, those knights, not of faith, but of nocturnal *khora* who go chin to chin with the abyss and try to stare it down. For the true anchorites (an-khora-ites), on the other hand, the desert was a medium through which they must pass on the way to redemption. You must first lose your self if you would save yourself according to the ancient economy. (Kearney wants to emphasize the anchoral economy, that you get something out of this, whereas Thomas Carlson wants to see if we can de-emphasize that and make the Neoplatonic God look more like *khora*.) Caputo and Derrida are knights of infinite resignation, whereas it is only the knight of faith that gets Isaac back.

But, I would say, Richard's argument falls wide of the mark on two counts. (1) He has consistently reduced undecidability to indecision, instead of recognizing that undecidability is precisely the condition of possibility of a decision. The opposite of undecidability is not a decision or decisiveness but rather "programmability." If you got rid of undecidability you would not get a

decision but a computer program. If a situation were not inhabited by undecidability then the decision could be made by a decision procedure, by a program or an algorithm that would process the components of the problem and render the decision in a strictly rule-governed formalizable process. Undecidability means that human judgment and decision-making are required, which means entering into an idiosyncratic situation that is not covered by the rules; undecidability was first recognized by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *phronesis* was precisely the acquired skill of figuring out what to do in situations that are unique enough to fall below the radar of rules and universals. The emphasis on singularity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and in Derrida and Levinas, is it seems to me a radicalization of Aristotle's point, which Gadamer also took up, which is why there are days when I am willing to describe deconstruction as a form of "radical hermeneutics."

Hence when I say that as we approach the God who comes after metaphysics, we enter a region where we do not know whether it is "God or *khora*," I am not leaving us twisting slowly in the winds of indecision. Rather, I am describing the desert sphere in which any genuine decision or movement of faith is to be made, where God and *khora* bleed into each other and create an element of ambiguity and undecidability *within which the movement of faith is made*, which shows up in mysticism as a dark night of the soul, which I also mention in response to Carlson below, where the mystic does not know if she believes in God. Without *khora*, we would be programmed to seek God, divine automatons hard wired to the divine being, devoid of responsibility, decision, judgment—and *faith*.

(2) Because Richard has misconstrued undecidability as indecision, he thinks that the movement of decision, here faith in God, would somehow or another extinguish *khora*, get us past it, put it behind us. That view goes along with a "linear" interpretation of Levinas that I reject, that we can so decisively surpass *il y a* that it goes away, that we can get on top of it or beyond it, dominate it and drive it off for good, and then, resting from a hard day's work, get a good night's sleep safe from its insomnia. I on the other hand think the ghost of *il y a* is inextinguishable and irrepressible, that it disturbs our days and haunts our nights, and that as such it is precisely the condition of possibility of the ethical decision. In other words, in rigorously Derridean fashion, *il y a* is the very thing that makes ethical transcendence possible and impossible. It makes ethics possible, by confronting it with something to be overcome, and impossible, by delimiting ethics as the ever haunting possibility of the anonymous that never goes away, that refused to be banished, that returns night after night. That is why ethics is a *beau risque*.[4]

Without *il y a* there is no *risque*, just the *beau*.

Without *khora* there is no *faith*, because then God would have plainly and unambiguously revealed Godself, without any possible confusion.

Without *khora* there is triumphalism, dogmatism, the illusion that we have been granted a secret access to the Secret. That is the illusion that makes religion dangerous and that fires the fundamentalist religious hallucination. That is why religious people think that they have been hard-wired to the Almighty, that they know in some privileged way the Secret that has been communicated to *them*—because God prefers *them* to *others*, Jews to Egyptians, or Christians to Jews, or Muslims to Christians and Jews, Protestants to Catholics. Or whatever! It goes on and on.

Without *khora*, there is no "impossible," no poetics of the possible, no poetics of the possibility of the impossible, because there would be nothing to drive us to the impossible. Without *khora* we would know what we need to know, and we would not be pushed to the point of keeping *faith* alive just when faith seems incredible and impossible. After all, believing only what is highly credible is the mark of a mediocre fellow; rather than a *beau risque*, it always bets on the favorite horse, as Tom Carlson might want to say. Without *khora*, we would have every reason to think that we will succeed and we would not be forced into the impossible situation of hoping against hope, hoping when hope is impossible.

Without *khora*, the situation which evokes the impossible, which demands the impossible of us, which elicits faith, hope and charity would not obtain. *Khora* is the *felix culpa* of a passion for the impossible, the happy fault of a poetics of the possible, the heartless heart of an ethical and religious eschatology. *Khora* is the devil that justice demands we give his due.

Notes

1. See Derrida's discussion of the two tropics of negativity in "Denials: How to Avoid Speaking," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Howard Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 100–108.

2. Jacques Derrida, "*Comme si c'était possible*, 'within such limits' . . . ," *Revue internationale de Philosophie*, No. 3 (1998): 497–529.

3. Derrida, ON, p. 126; for a commentary, see DN, pp. 96–105.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), p. 212; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 167.

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To Laura, Madeline, and Kathy

A Passion *for the* Impossible

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