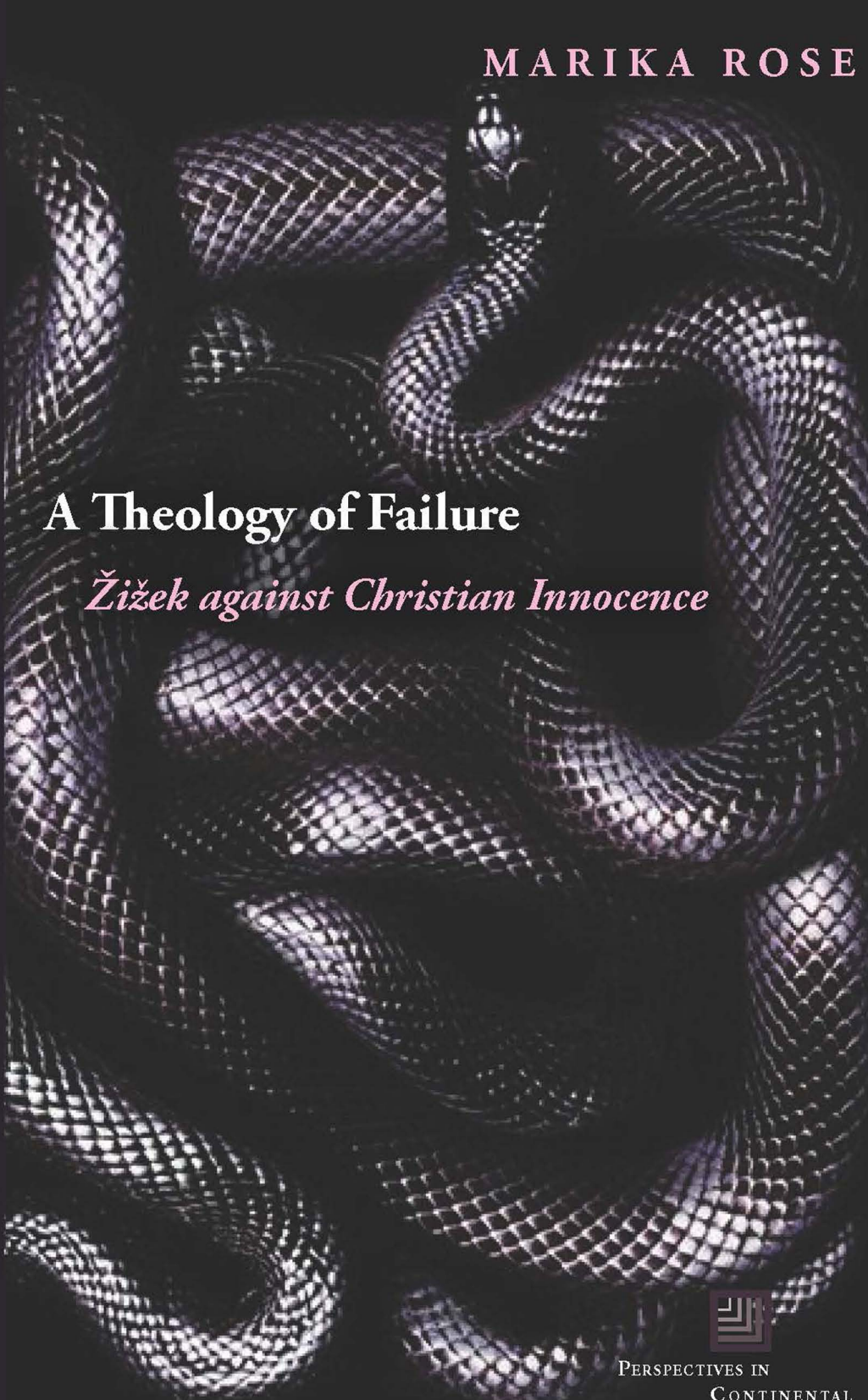
MARIKA ROSE



A Theology of Failure

Žižek against Christian Innocence

Perspectives in
Continental
Philosophy

A Theology of Failure

John D. Caputo, ***series editor***

PERSPECTIVES IN
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PHILOSOPHY

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York ■ 2019

Visit us online at www.fordhampress.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available online at https://catalog.loc.gov.

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

to Myer Rose

Contents

Try again, fail again, fail better.
—Samuel Beckett
"Worstword Ho," in *Nohow On*

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,"
and
"A stone that causes people to stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall."
—1 Peter 2:7 (NIV)

(God) in the name of vulgarity, horror and impurity.
—Marcella Althaus-Reid
The Queer God

Introduction: Failing

Whichever way you look at it, theology has failed. It is not always clear exactly when the rot set in. Perhaps the problems began when it ceded its role as the queen of the sciences and accepted a subordinate role in the academy, or perhaps when it allowed itself to be relegated to the private sphere, the impotent realm of femininity and domesticity. Maybe it was Protestantism's neglect of sacramentality and community in favor of a theology of word and individual salvation that first caused it to stumble, or maybe the source should be located in Descartes's fatal reorientation of philosophical thought around the individual subject. It could be that the problem lies a little further back, with the birth of the modern university and the corresponding separation of theology from contemplation and prayer, or the fatal invention of race and the translation of the Great Commission into European colonialism. Maybe we can blame Constantine and the church's capitulation to the temptations of power and the empire, the nefarious influence of Greek philosophical thought, or perhaps Saint Paul's introduction of misogyny and homophobia to the church.

But it is tempting here to go back a little further in time to consider the persistent thickheadedness of Jesus's disciples: their faithlessness, their obtuseness, their blundering and stumbling. Could we talk also about the disasters of Abraham's descendants? Their adultery (literal and metaphorical), their genocides, their sins of hospitality, of leadership, of obedience. The jealousy, the incest, the truculence of the patriarchs; the hubris of the builders of the tower of Babel; the murderous rage of Cain; right

back to Adam and Eve. And perhaps the Garden of Eden itself is not so much the symbol of some precarious moment of perfection before the Fall but precisely the dangerous fantasy that such a state did once exist and might yet again be possible.

Theology has failed, then; it is, like Hegel's "Calvary of absolute Spirit," "the site of skulls," littered with its own failures.[1] On this, theologians agree, even though (or perhaps because) there is no consensus as to what theology is, what it is trying to achieve, or what it looks like. Perhaps we can narrow it down this much, and say that it is, specifically, the systematic theology of the white, male, heterosexual Western world which has failed, which inhabits now a world overrun by its misbegotten children, by heretics, secularists, and fundamentalists who view their ageing, corrupt progenitor with a mixture of horror, contempt, and irreverence, while it responds with some mixture of desperation, frustration, or blithe obliviousness. Faced with a world in which the secular threatens to escape its grasp and become (what it is not yet) truly independent of Christianity, in which the voices of those whom it has oppressed rise up to challenge its dominance and stand in judgment upon it, this theology can seek to recolonize those people and places that have escaped from its grasp; it can try to make itself clean once again by purifying itself of the taint of Christian history; or it can confront, instead, its own failure. This book will attempt the latter.

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

This uncomfortable encounter between theology and continental philosophy suggests itself as one terrain for an attempt to think theology's failure. For all that the two might understand themselves as competitors, the crisis of the Enlightenment project with which continental philosophy grapples closely parallels the crisis of the Christian churches in the twentieth century: Both are, in different ways, crises of universality, Christendom, and masculinity and, as such, perhaps, crises of the Greek philosophical

and Roman imperialist legacies which have so profoundly shaped the history of the Western world.

The Linguistic Turn

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

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

The crisis of secular reason was always also a crisis of theological speech; however eagerly the secular has sought to emancipate itself from its progenitor and theology to disinherit its rebellious progeny, it is many millennia since European imperialism could claim to be free of Christianity.[3] The birth of the secular from Mother Church (however closely they remain tied to each other) has been traumatic for both: Just as the secular has been forced to confront the limits of its power and the extent of its dependence, so theology has had to confront the shrinking of its authority and reach.

Apophatic theology has been one resource to which both continental philosophy and Christian theology have turned to grapple with these questions. As language seeks to swallow everything that is into its gaping maw, the apophatic tradition inaugurated by Dionysius the Areopagite seems to promise to muzzle language, to teach it humility, and to set it firmly in relation to a future fullness which is yet to come, endlessly deferred, always hungered for and yet never fully present. Smith and Whistler identify three branches of the "religious turn" in continental philosophy—"the religious turn in phenomenology . . . a Christian brand of deconstruction . . . and feminist appeals to Mariology"[4]—and apophatic theology bears a relation to all three. The phenomenological work of Jean-Luc Marion never entirely transcends his earlier theological engagement with Dionysius the Areopagite; John Caputo returns over and again to apophatic and mystical concepts; and the work of French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva returns repeatedly not only to the figure of Mary but also to the theme of mystical theology. In many ways, the focus on apophatic theology within continental thought represents the convergence of the theological turn and the linguistic turn.

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

On the Economic Problem

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

> The figure of the circle . . . stands at the center of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise . . . the—circular—return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home . . . the *odyssean* structure of the economic narrative . . . [following] the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved

> ones or to himself; he goes away only in view of *repatriating* himself, in order to return to the home from which the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen, the lot divided, destiny commanded. The being-next-to-self of the Idea in Absolute Knowledge would be odyssean in this sense, that of an *economy* and a *nostalgia*, a "homesickness," a provisional exile longing for reappropriation.[5]

Economy, then, is the circular figure of exchange, causation, return, identity, and completion. It becomes a problem for thought when the question arises whether what appears to be a self-contained, closed system is in fact in relation to something that exceeds or escapes it, whether immanence is broken open by transcendence. For much Christian theology, the basic problem of economy is that of the relation between God and the world. So, for example, in the economy of the Neoplatonic account of creation with which much of Christian theology grapples, everything that is begins in the perfectly simple One, goes out into the multiplicity of creation, and returns back to its source, where everything is comprehended and reabsorbed, completing the circle and assuring the mastery of the One over difference and multiplicity. Apophatic theology, particularly the thought of Dionysius, both draws on and problematizes this Neoplatonic economy, appropriating its basic motif of exodus and return, yet seeking at the same time to affirm the goodness of creation and some sort of ongoing existence for that which comes from and returns to God. The economic circle is never quite completed. Some of the key points of tension within the Christian tradition arise from this economic model. Denys Turner highlights two of these issues relating to the origin of the economy of the created world. First is the problem of differentiation—if God is One, how can that which is not God come into being? Second is the problem of divine freedom—if God is entirely sufficient unto Godself, a closed economy, how and why would God choose to create?[6] Turner argues that both of these questions are resolved by the Christian-Neoplatonic notion of eros: Desire, he says, is what holds together in human experience both freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation.[7]

But these two questions of the divine relation to the created world are mirrored by two questions of the relationship of the created world to the divine. First is the problem of the persistence of differentiation—whether, if everything that is comes from God and will return to God, it is possible to think of this emergence as anything other than a fall to be regretted and undone, whether the material world can be thought of as a good in itself or merely as a ladder to be climbed and then thrown away on the

ascent to God, whether human individuality will persist once union with God has been attained. Second is the problem of human freedom—why, if created beings are intrinsically ordered toward their end in God, if union with God is the highest human good, they would ever choose to sin. These problems are less easily resolved by the appeal to eros and continue to trouble theology.

Moreover, the particular form of the Neoplatonic economy is not without its problems. Two in particular are worth commenting on briefly. First is that Neoplatonism sets up the abstract unity of God/the Good in opposition to the particular materiality of the created world. This opposition between the material and the intellectual tends to play out in the history of Christian theology in troubling ways—not least in the pervasive misogyny and racism of Christian theology and practice. Second is that the metaphysics of participation, which sees things as good only insofar as they participate in God, tends to equate participation in God with participation in the church. This pushes theology toward a hierarchicalism and colonialism which seeks to incorporate the whole world into itself and denies not only independence but even the right to exist to individuals, cultures, or groups that trouble or challenge Christian orthodoxy.[8]

However, this problem of the economic relationship between God and the world, which has dominated philosophy and theology for many centuries, was displaced by Descartes and those who followed him, in a shift that represents a kind of Copernican revolution in philosophy, a reorientation away from the problematic of the relationship between God and the world to the question of the relationship between the human subject and the world.[9] The philosophical inheritance of post-Enlightenment thought means that traditional theological accounts were often reworked in order to articulate this other relationship. So, for example, the traditional reading of Hegel's thought has him eliding the difference between self and God, positing an ontology in which the self and God are ultimately the same, and external reality is just a necessary stage in the process of self-realization. This version of Hegel is a sort of gnostic-Neoplatonism in which the procession of the self into multiplicity is not a fall to be regretted and undone but a necessary step on the way to full knowledge. The same problems of economy, freedom, and distinction recur in a new form, as do the tendencies toward mastery, misogyny, and colonialism.

As a result of this shift from God to the individual subject as the center of the economic problem, what occurs in later continental thought is the "linguistic turn," a relentless textualism that foregrounds questions of discourse, language, and hermeneutics, explicitly rejecting any kind of "ontotheology," that is, any attempt to name a firm foundation for being,

language, or subjectivity. This linguistic turn entails an affirmation of groundlessness, albeit one haunted by materialism: both the Marxist specters of Derrida's later work and the curiously insubstantial human body that returns to spook feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, which makes itself known as fluidity and plasticity yet which can neither be incorporated into or exorcised from language.

It is the economy of the subject, then, which represents the key problem for much continental philosophical engagement with apophatic theology. Late-twentieth-century continental philosophy focused on the philosophical legacy of Heidegger and Husserl, concerned with an epistemology and ontology in which the individual is at the center of the constitution of the world. Its key themes are language, otherness, and contingency as the limit to human meaning-making. Derrida in particular offers an account of economy as ruptured, a circle inescapably interrupted by that which is its condition of possibility and impossibility. He discusses this moment of rupture in relation to the apophatic moment when language fails but also to the notion of the gift as that which exceeds the economic logic of exchange, and ethical issues such as hospitality, which concern the openness of individual, familial, and national economies to that which is other. Similarly, Lacan's psychoanalytic reworking of Freud shifted from Freud's emphasis on the biological and material factors that shape the emergence of the subject to a focus on the linguistic constitution of the subject.[10] In theology this corresponded to a great proliferation of texts on the topic of hermeneutics, the emergence of narrative theology, and, crucially for our purposes, to a renewed interest in apophatic theology in general and Dionysius the Areopagite in particular.

Since the middle of the first decade of this century, however, continental philosophy (and, in its wake, theology) has taken what is described as a "materialist" or a "speculative" turn, which has led to a renewed interest in the question of whether it is possible to speak about the material world as it exists outside of human language and experience, and a new focus on the natural sciences: mathematics, quantum physics, neuroscience, and biology. Slavoj Žižek's work, particularly after 1996, belongs broadly within this materialist turn. The shift from premodern to modern philosophy was, roughly, the shift from an ontological economy of the material world grounded in God to an epistemological economy grounded in the individual subject. The shift from modern to postmodern thought was, roughly, the shift from a positivist affirmation of the possibility of knowledge and completeness to a negative affirmation of necessary incompleteness. Žižek's work, however, shifts back from epistemology to ontology and from the negative acknowledgment of incompleteness as limit to a strong affirmation of incompleteness

as the positive condition of both being and language. In his work, the economic themes of language, otherness, and contingency as limit are transposed into the themes of materiality, the self-otherness of subjectivity, and contingency as the condition of possibility for all human existence and knowledge. Žižek's work seeks to bring together language, materiality, the self, and the political community around a shared model of a ruptured economy which he draws from the work of Hegel, Lacan, and Schelling.

In many ways, then, Žižek's work represents a return to the central concerns of the Christian apophatic theology that drew on Neoplatonic ontology to articulate the interconnectedness of being, language, and desire. The fundamental questions with which Žižek's work grapples are, as for Christian theology, the problem of differentiation (how can the world come into being out of nothing, and is it ever possible to attain ontological, ethical, or political harmony?), and the problem of freedom (how can genuine newness emerge from the economy of cause and effect, and is there such a thing as human freedom?). But where Neoplatonic Christianity asserts God as that which grounds every economy and guarantees reconciliation, for Žižek it is the intrinsically conflictual nature of material being itself that makes possible the diversity and complexity of not only the material world but also the individual subject and the social order. If the Cartesian revolution represents the beginning of a shift from an account of the world as grounded in and by God to an account of the world as grounded in and by the individual, and the postwar shift toward poststructuralism and linguistics represents a shift from an account of the world as grounded in an individual who can—at least potentially—master it to an account of the world as constituted and yet unmasterable by the individual, then the shift toward materialism represented by Žižek is a shift from an account of the world as that which escapes the individual to an account of the world as that which escapes God, which can be conceived in terms of a "creationist materialism."[11] Much theological engagement with Žižek focuses, unsurprisingly, on the explicitly theological themes within his work; it is the argument of this book that it is in fact Žižek's ontology that most deeply unsettles theology and that, as a result, offers the most fertile resources for theological thought.

Structure of the Book

The problem of economy is inescapably bound up with the problem of identity and its borders and limits. Chapter 1 examines the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, from whose marriage of Christian theology and Neoplatonism the Christian apophatic tradition emerged. Dionysius's account of

the economy of the created world and of theological language connects the structure of being to the structure of human desire. This connection is determinative for much subsequent theology, and yet the particular form that it takes in Dionysius's work contains a series of antagonisms around the themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism, which prove troubling yet also productive for Dionysius's inheritors.

From the ontological function of the motif of economy arises a no less important political function. Economy is not only the problem of the nature of the material world, of the systems of cause and effect, but also the problem of the household, the bounded political unit; it is therefore also the problem of the family, the state, and the empire. Chapter 2 tracks this motif of economy through recent theological and philosophical engagements with the apophatic tradition, focusing in particular on the work of Jacques Derrida, which is from very early on engaged with the question of the apophatic. Derrida's work affirms the impossibility of completion, asserting that the condition of possibility for any identity is always also its condition of impossibility. Reconciliation is impossible, then, and yet Derrida's work is struck through with the desire for the impossible end to arrive, caught between the affirmation of the necessity of deciding and the impossibility of doing so.

This aporia is taken up by two key strands of theological thought: Radical Orthodoxy and "deconstructionist Christianity." Yet if the problem of economy is in part also the problem of colonialism, of the desire to swallow up everything that is into a single system, then both of these responses remain within the logic of colonialism. Radical Orthodoxy responds to the groundlessness of deconstructive apophaticism simply by more forcefully reasserting the traditional Christian metaphysics of participation, denouncing the "nihilism" of Derrida and others and appealing instead to the "peaceful ontology" of the Christian metaphysics of participation. Faced with philosophical thought that seeks to assert its autonomy, its independence from theology, Radical Orthodoxy responds with the crudest tools of empire, seeking to force philosophy to bow the knee once more to theology, reacting to continental philosophy's condemnation of the violence of ontotheology by violently asserting its own peacefulness.[12] In contrast, the deconstructionist Christianity of thinkers such as John Caputo and Catherine Keller is more conciliatory, more willing to cede ground to philosophy and to acknowledge the failures of Christian theology. But where Radical Orthodoxy more or less explicitly desires a return to the good old days of British empire and muscular Christian dominance, deconstructionist Christianity too often resembles theological colonialism with a human face. In its uncritical relation to its own particularity, it might be compared

to the notion of "the secular" which has been so roundly criticized of late for its failure to come to terms with its overdetermination by Christian theology.[13] By emphasizing uncertainty and respect for otherness, it covers over its particularity; by refusing to identify the bounds of its identity, it risks colonizing all difference and claiming it for its own. In advocating for a move away from the certainties and clear distinctions that have often characterized theology in the modern era toward an emphasis on unknowability and relationality it does not so much break with the violence of the existing order as mirror the shifts in its functioning.

Chapter 3 turns to Žižek as a resource for rethinking economy and so for reconceiving theology's failure. Žižek draws a fundamental distinction between desire and drive, which are two ways of relating to this fundamental impossibility at the heart of all identity and which function according to the logic of masculinity and femininity. Masculine desire knows that identity is impossible and yet will not give up hope in the possibility of wholeness, whereas feminine drive, realizing that no object can ever satisfy it, instead begins to derive its satisfaction precisely from repeatedly missing the object of desire. Desire aims for wholeness and repeatedly fails; drive does the same thing but failure is its goal. This fundamental model of the distinction between desire and drive functions, in Žižek's work, to give an account of how the cataphatic and the apophatic relate to each other, as an indication of the form that a genuinely revolutionary community might take. On my reading it can also be taken as a model for the nature of Christian commitment. Žižek also connects his account of desire and drive to ontology. Where traditional apophatic theology relies on a problematic Neoplatonic ontology, Žižek's thought rests on the claim that the material world, the social order, and the individual subject alike are structured as internally ruptured economies, failed wholes broken apart by a transcendence that arises from their own immanence. This model allows Žižek to undermine or transform a number of traditional ontological dualisms such that the two sides of the dualism are not straightforwardly opposed to each other but exist as an internal conflict. This ontological claim in turn transforms the Dionysian problematics of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism.

Chapter 4 returns to recent discussions between theology and continental philosophy over the nature of economy via a discussion of three deeply economic notions: the gift (a key problem for Derrida and his theological interlocutors), violence (both a Derridean theme and a favorite theme of Žižek), and the Christian theological notion of creation ex nihilo. Understood in terms of economy, these three notions are related insofar as all represent an attempt to speak about that which disrupts economy. Exam-

ining the three alongside one another functions to illustrate further the relationship between Žižek's thought and earlier discussions of the relationship between continental philosophy and apophatic theology, but also to illuminate what is at stake for Žižek in his often controversial accounts of violence as politically transformative.

However, there are numerous problems with Žižek's use of the notion and rhetoric of violence. In particular, it is often unclear in his work how the difference between "good," desirable, revolutionary violence and "bad," undesirable, oppressive violence might be specified; and the language of violence raises a series of issues relating to Žižek's failure to properly theorize issues of gender, sexuality, and race. Chapter 5 addresses these two issues, turning to the psychoanalytic language of trauma in order to clarify Žižek's sometimes ambiguous language of violence, and to feminist, queer, and Black engagements with Lacan, Marx, and Žižek to resource a reading of Žižek against Žižek, and to explore the implications of his account of violence for understanding Christian identity.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with a Žižekian rereading of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* alongside the Lacanian account of the four discourses that structure the political relationships between individuals, language, knowledge, and desire. It suggests that Žižek's work offers the possibility of repeating Dionysius differently, under the aegis of a Žižekian materialism within which apophatic theology is the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of cataphatic theology. To understand Christian identity according to the logic of drive is to understand it not as a commitment to a particular set of answers, a particular vision of harmony, but precisely as the commitment to a particular problem, the problem of what it means to be faithful to Christ. This problem is never just an abstract theological question but is always incarnated in the body of Christ, the church, and so can be addressed only by struggling with and against the corruption of Christianity rather than by seeking to escape it. Such an account has the potential to liberate theology from the need to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, and set it free to love its others it in all of their grotesque materiality, in their beauty and their horror.

Failure and Fidelity

The question of failure is necessarily bound up with the question of what it means to be faithful, knowing that perfect fidelity is impossible; what it means to commit to a cause, to a community, to an event, knowing that failure is not merely inevitable but constitutive; what it means to speak, knowing that language is inadequate; and what it means to understand this

failure—this infidelity—not as a limitation but as a positive condition of being. This book attempts both to propose and to enact such a model of faithfulness; both form and content, methodology and argument arise from the attempt to be faithful to the church, to Christ, to the task of theology, and to Žižek and Dionysius, the two key figures around whose work the book circles.

What does it mean to be faithful? The New Testament opens with Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, and in doing so ostensibly positions Jesus as the culmination of Israel's identity, the true descendant of the patriarchs, and the rightful inheritor of the promises that God made to Israel. And yet unlike the scriptural genealogies it deliberately evokes, this genealogy is disrupted by the intrusion of five women: Tamar, who disguised herself as a sex worker to seduce her father-in-law and continue the family line; Rahab, the Canaanite sex worker who betrayed her own people to aid Israel's entry into the promised land; Ruth, the Moabite who chose the ties of love over those of land and family; Bathsheba, whose husband was murdered because of a king's adulterous desire for her; and Mary, Jesus's virgin mother, who (like all of these women) belongs in the genealogy by marriage rather than birth and yet is Jesus's only claim to his place therein. The genealogy is structured mathematically, as three sets of fourteen generations; yet the women interrupt the smooth patterning of the begats; they sneak in at odd moments, irregularly, bringing with them the most horrifying specters that threatened Israel's constitution as a holy people under God. They are foreigners, idolaters, and adulterers; they represent Israel's failure to be racially, religiously, and sexually pure. And yet all are, not despite but because of this, righteous and heroic figures; all, in different ways, ensure the continuation of Israel, its identity, its claim to be faithful to its calling.

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

> In the same way as Christ needed Paul's "betrayal" in order for Christianity to emerge as a universal Church (recall that, amongst the twelve apostles, Paul occupies the place of Judas the traitor, replacing him!), Marx needed Lenin's "betrayal" in order to enact the first Marxist revolution: it is an inner necessity of the "original" teaching to submit to and survive this "betrayal"; to survive this violent act of being torn out of one's original context and thrown into a foreign landscape where it has to reinvent itself—*only in this way is universality born.*[14]

As I argue in this book, infidelity and repetition are for Žižek the ways in which the reproduction of the existing order can be disrupted; repeti-

tion is not straightforwardly a faithful reproduction of that which is being repeated any more than a child is a faithful reproduction of their father.[15] To speak about faithfulness and betrayal, Žižek draws explicitly both on the Christian language of death and resurrection[16] and on the language of sexual relationship, of copulation, which is so important to Christian theological narratives of purity, fidelity, and identity.[17] For Žižek, to love is to sacrifice everything for the beloved, only to betray them precisely out of fidelity.

It is this Žižekian model of faithful betrayal which this book seeks to enact, and in whose name the Neoplatonic ontology that so deeply shapes the apophatic tradition is rejected even as the basic move by which it was constituted is repeated, differently. The misogyny, the colonialism, and the hatred of both the body and the material world that so profoundly form much traditional Christian theology are shored up by the language of an unadulterated fidelity that shies away from vulgarity, horror, and impurity.[18] Although this book extensively engages with feminist, queer, and Black thought only in Chapter 5, it is throughout concerned with the question of how to betray Christian theology in the name of faithfulness to the materiality of the church.

Reading Žižek against himself, the book suggests that faithfulness to the event of Christ is not faithfulness to a particular way of reading the significance of Christ's death on the cross and the entry of the Holy Spirit into the community of believers. Rather, it is fidelity precisely to the materiality of Christ's own self, which is to say, to the church understood in a materialist sense not as an idea or a set of ideas but as a particular group of people, a particular set of institutions, a particular collection of texts and practices. It is fidelity to a body, therefore, that is as ill-defined, fluid, and mutable as any other body—which always exceeds and undermines any particular interpretation, any attempt to identify the universal core of Christianity.[19] It seeks to be faithful to the God made known in Christ—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. It seeks to read both Žižek and Christian theology according to the logic of drive rather than desire, according to the logic of creation ex nihilo which delights in the diversity, the multiplicity, and the particularity of the world, which rejoices in its own repeated failure to comprehend, in the fecundity of its transgressive encounters and miscegenetic couplings. It seeks to be both faithful and unfaithful to Žižek, to Dionysius, and to the Christian tradition; to make use of the resources they offer for thinking about ontology, desire, and negation; and to grapple with their internal contradictions and the structures of violence they inherit, reproduce, and generate. Perhaps, this book suggests, Žižek can help theology to fail better.

1

Ontology and Desire in Dionysius the Areopagite

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

However, it is necessary to start somewhere, to pick a moment at which to enter the hermeneutical circle, and so this chapter focuses on a discussion of Dionysius's work, its distinctive characteristics—which arise principally from Dionysius's idiosyncratic coupling of Christian theology and Neoplatonism—and the mixed legacy he bequeaths to his theological offspring. This account will function as a first attempt to sketch the contours of the Dionysian problematic, to which subsequent discussions in the book will return repeatedly, focusing in particular on his conjunction of eros and ontology, and the consequences of this marriage for his account of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universality.

Dionysius

Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether Neoplatonism or Christianity dominates Dionysius's work; what is essentially unquestioned is that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is characterized precisely by the conjunction of Christian orthodoxy[2] with Neoplatonism.[3] Not only does the question of Dionysius's orthodoxy obfuscate the perpetually contested identity of Christian orthodoxy (this is particularly clear in discussions of Dionysius's work that have pitted Eastern and Western Christianities against one another);[4] it also elides the deeply formative influence Dionysius had on the shape of theology in both East and West.[5] It is clear that Dionysius was influenced by both Christian and Neoplatonic sources, and it is no less clear that in bringing these two together, he produced a synthesis in which both of its constituents were transformed by their mutual encounter. Rather than engaging with these well-rehearsed debates any further, then, I seek here to sketch out some of the key coordinates of Dionysius's Neoplatonic Christianity and its legacy for subsequent theological thought.

In response to (what is perceived as) a tendency in Western philosophical engagements with Dionysius's work to focus on the *Mystical Theology*,[6] scholars such as Denys Turner have focused their attention on the connections between the *Mystical Theology* and Dionysius's other works: the *Divine Names*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, and the *Letters,* and in doing so have both clarified what is distinctive about the theological system that Dionysius bequeaths to future readers and highlighted some of the deep tensions within his work—tensions that are, as I argue, in many ways as important to Dionysius's legacy as his constructive solutions to theological problems.

Denys Turner argues that Western Christian thought has its origins in the convergence of Christianity and Platonism and, specifically, in the convergence of the narrative of Moses's encounter with God at the top of Mount Sinai and Plato's allegory of the cave, naming Dionysius as the most influential figure in this meeting of myths. This coupling—particularly clear in the *Mystical Theology*—begets two of the determining metaphors of subsequent Western theology: darkness and light, and ascent and descent.[7] But there is, as Turner acknowledges elsewhere, more to Dionysius's conjunction of Christianity and Platonism than simply the joining of these two narratives.[8] Reading the *Mystical Theology* in the context of Dionysius's work as a whole, key themes that emerge are Dionysius's use of the Neoplatonic language of Oneness to describe the source of all things;[9] his equation of Neoplatonism's basic pattern of emanation and return with the Christian narrative of creation and redemption;[10] the invocation of Plato's

Symposium in the use of the language of eros to describe that which drives this movement; and his invention of the term *hierarchy* to describe the structures of authority in both the church and the angelic orders—both of which become, on Dionysius's account, deeply entangled with the process of progressive ascent by which creatures make their way up to the creator.

Dionysius's conjunction of Christianity and Neoplatonism, then, binds tightly and almost inseparably together being, language, and the structure of human society around the figure of what is, essentially, a closed economy in which everything that is takes its origin in the One, God, from which it emerges into multiplicity and complexity only to return to union with the source from which it came. Slavoj Žižek argues that ontology consists essentially of the claim that "thinking and being are the same," that "there is a mutual accord between thinking (logos as reason or speech) and being."[11] In this sense, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is profoundly ontological. Moreover, it is thoroughly erotic insofar as it is eros, desire, which drives both creation and redemption, both emanation and return; which forms the basis for God's relation to the created world, the created world's relation to God, and the relationships between creatures.

Eros and Ontology

As Turner argues, eros plays a crucial role in Dionysius's Christian-Neoplatonist synthesis.[12] In particular, as I discussed briefly in the introduction to this book, eros solves two key problems of the Neoplatonic account of creation—the problem of divine freedom and the problem of differentiation. However, in its Dionysian form it also creates a number of interconnected problems for theology—the problem of human freedom, the problem of materiality, the problem of hierarchy, and the problem of universality. All of these bear some relation to economy.

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

twofold: *Why* did God create, and *how* does One become two, and three, and many?

Turner argues that it is the language of eros that makes it possible for Dionysius, and the theology that comes after him, to deal with the problem of creation. He says that, in human experience, it is in eros that "the polarities of freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation" are held together.[13] To love is, Turner argues, to feel compelled to undertake particular obligations to the beloved while recognizing that this erotic obligation is entirely free, the free gift of lover and beloved to each other.[14] Similarly, to love is to desire absolute union with the beloved and yet to be absolutely individualized by the encounter with the beloved other. I am, Turner argues, never more myself than when I love and am loved, and yet to love is to desire to become one with the beloved other. Love is that in human experience that makes most sense of the paradoxical language that Dionysius uses to describe the human encounter with God: the "brilliant darkness" where one "knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."[15]

Freedom

Yet this language of eros, steeped as it is for Dionysius in the myths and metaphysics of Plato and his interpreters, is not without its problems. The notion of the simplicity of the One—important both to Plato and to the Neoplatonists—is the notion that all good things—justice, freedom, life, beauty, etc.—come together and are identical within the One that gives rise to everything that exists. Just as all things come from the One, so all things are to return to the One; this return is both the inherent telos of human life and the ultimate good for human beings. Everything that is good or desirable is united in the One. And so two questions arise. First, if all being comes from the One and is, in the One, identical with goodness, where does evil come from? Can evil exist at all? Second, if everything that is desirable and good for human beings is in the One, why would anyone choose to do anything which was not directed toward their end in the One? How, as Dionysius puts it, "could anything choose [evil] in preference to the Good?"[16]

For Plato, these questions were relatively easily resolved: The essential problem was ignorance. Nobody wants to be unhappy; desiring anything other than the good makes a person unhappy; therefore the only explanation is that they *think* that what they want will make them happy—and therefore that what they want is good—but they are wrong.[17] Although there is an element of discomfort with materiality which (as discussed below) becomes, especially as filtered through Neoplatonism, in some ways close

to a sense of the world's fallenness, it is only really in the encounter with the Christian doctrine of sin that evil becomes a problem for Neoplatonic ontology. For Dionysius's predecessor Gregory of Nyssa, the solution is to make human beings wholly culpable for their ignorance: God is the sun that enlightens the world, and if we are unable to see clearly it can only be because we have chosen to shut our eyes to the divine light.[18] Dionysius shares this dual emphasis on evil as willed ignorance, and yet his discussion of where evil comes from focuses much more strongly on the question of the ontological status of evil. What is evil? Where did it come from? What caused it?[19] These are at heart economic questions: How was the divine economy, the cycle of cause and effect, emanation and return, ruptured? Dionysius's solution is simply to suggest that evil does not exist. All being comes from God; and so anything that has being cannot be entirely evil because insofar as it exists at all it must continue to participate in God.[20] Just as, for Plato, those who desire evil do so only because they are ignorant of the good, so for Dionysius those who are evil are so only insofar as they have fallen away from both knowledge of and participation in the good.[21] Evil is a distortion, a corruption; not a thing in itself but "a deficiency and a lack of perfection . . . evil lies in the inability of things to reach their natural peak of perfection."[22] It is parasitic upon the good and can neither cause itself nor be desired for what it is in itself.[23] Yet although it is "weakness, impotence, a deficiency of knowledge . . . of desire," those who sin are nonetheless culpable because God "generously bestows such capacities on each as needed and, therefore, there can be no excuse for any sin in the realm of one's own good."[24]

As thorough as Dionysius's account of evil is, however, it does not exactly solve his basic problem. Evil is only explicable as a lack, a failure, a weakness; and yet those who fall short are to be blamed for doing so because they were strong enough to do otherwise. So why would anyone—human or angel—ever sin? There can be no reason, no justification for sin; it is a lack which somehow escapes the created economy. Sin, in short, is structured in a manner that exactly parallels creation itself: as an excessive, unjustifiable, inexplicable act that ruptures economy. This parallel is mirrored even in Dionysius's account of the relationship of evil to being: Just as God "falls neither within the predicate of being nor of nonbeing,"[25] so also evil "is not a being . . . nor is it a nonbeing."[26] And yet where the free excessive act of the God who is neither being nor nonbeing is fertile and generative, bringing into being all the multiplicity of the created world, the free excessive act of human and demonic beings that has neither being nor nonbeing can bring only death: It "never produces being or birth. All it can do by itself is in a limited fashion to debase and destroy the substance

of things."[27] The free act of evil is thus arguably the point at which humans most closely resemble the God who created them, it is where human beings are *most divine* in their relationship to the economy of creation; and yet it is this aneconomic act that brings for them death and condemnation. Where God exceeds economy out of the overflow of divine goodness, the human transcendence of economy can be thought only as lack.

Materiality

Moreover, this account of evil as privation, as a descent down the ladder of being, causes further problems for Dionysius as he attempts to bring together Neoplatonic ontology and Christian theology. Both Platonism and Neoplatonism include elements that tend toward the denigration of materiality and the elevation of the abstract and the immaterial. In the hierarchical ascent of Plato's *Symposium*, the desire of the lover leads him upward in a process of increasing abstraction away from the material and the particular:[28] Beginning with the love of an individual beautiful body, the lover comes first to reject attachment to this particular body in favor of an appreciation of all beautiful bodies, and next to the realization that beautiful practices are more beautiful than beautiful bodies, beautiful knowledge than beautiful practices, until finally he comes to love above all "that particular knowledge which is knowledge solely of the beautiful itself."[29] The goal of the philosophical quest for knowledge is to get as far away from the body as possible.[30] This disdain for the material world is, if anything, intensified by Neoplatonism. Where Plato aspired to a political order governed by philosopher kings, the Neoplatonists—writing amid the slow collapse of the Roman Empire—aspired not to rule the world but to escape it.[31] Plotinus was said to seem "ashamed of being in the body,"[32] living a deeply ascetic life, and suggesting that "the perfect life, the true, real life, is in that transcendent intelligible reality, and that other lives are incomplete."[33]

This is the inheritance with which Dionysius grapples, then, and which he seeks to reconcile with two key Christian affirmations: that of the essential goodness of creation and that of the incarnation of God in Christ. Such a reconciliation is by no means easy to achieve, and this mismatched coupling gives birth to a theology of the material world that is thoroughly conflicted. Matter is good, Dionysius argues, because insofar as it has being, it participates in the Good. It is not a heavy weight that drags souls away from God and toward evil.[34] And yet even as Dionysius explicitly refuses the equation of the descent down the hierarchy of being with

the descent toward sin, this association is constantly reinforced by his discussion of the nature of both evil and material being. Evil is a falling away, a lack of the good. And yet, on Dionysius's account, the hierarchy of created being is defined precisely as the hierarchy of greater or lesser participation in the good. Of created things, some "share completely in the Good, others participate in it more or less, others have a slight portion only, and, to others, again, the Good is but a far-off echo . . . this has to be so, for otherwise the most honoured, the most divine things would be on the order with the lowliest."[35] Ignorance "scatters those in error,"[36] and yet angels are higher up in the hierarchy of creation because, in contrast to the "fragmentary and varied nature" of human activities, they are "unified intelligences."[37]

One of the ways in which Dionysius seeks to bring together the Neoplatonic desire to move up the hierarchy of being with the Christian affirmation of the created world is his assertion that, although created things draw closer to God by moving up the hierarchy, each thing has, nonetheless, a direct relationship to God.[38] Different beings differ according to their proximity to God and yet God is equally close to all beings. Although this introduces into Dionysius's work a sense of the direct involvement of God in each element of creation, this does not result in a straightforward affirmation of the "permanent validity" of the sensible world, as Alexander Golitzin suggests,[39] but begets instead a profound conflict at the heart of Dionysius's attitude to materiality.

A parallel difficulty arises from Dionysius's attempts to grapple with the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return. If all things come from God and are to return, ultimately, to God, how can this return be thought as anything other than the undoing of creation itself? How is it possible for the created world to return to God without simply ceasing to exist? How can the closure of economy mean anything other than death? As Thomas Carlson's reading of Dionysius suggests, this relation between completion and death is the basis for the link that mystical theology from Dionysius onward repeatedly makes between mystical unknowing and death.[40] However, this is only one side of the story: As Giorgio Agamben argues, other elements of the Christian tradition after Dionysius wrestle with the question of how to continue to think both the governance of God and the activity of God's creatures after the return of all things to God.[41] If the function of the hierarchy is, as Dionysius argues, to draw creatures up toward God, there must come a point at which this ascent ceases. Here, for Dionysius as well as for the later theologians Agamben discusses, there is nothing for beings to do except engage in continual praise of God.[42] There is a difficult tension here, however: There is a clear sense that to

ascend the hierarchies is to move closer to God, and there is some sense in which, for human beings at least, this ascent is both desirable and possible. Catechumens, for example, on the lowest rung of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are like "children . . . unready and unshaped" and are expected therefore to proceed up the hierarchy in order that they might be "brought to fullness."[43] Dionysius repeatedly affirms the value of moving away from the material and toward the immaterial: The impious should "shed their attachment to material things";[44] scripture, liturgy and hierarchy are given to "lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual, from sacred shapes and symbols to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven."[45] And yet the desirability of ascent up the hierarchy is not absolute: Andrew Louth is partly (though not entirely) right to claim that Dionysius's "hierarchies are *static*: they are not ladders up which one climbs."[46] No human being can ascend higher than the position of hierarch: Above the ecclesiastical hierarchy is the celestial hierarchy, the order of angelic beings. The metaphor of ascent which so thoroughly shapes Dionysius's work as a whole is in conflict with his affirmation of hierarchy.

By seeking to maintain both that God is immediately present to all being and that beings are differentiated precisely by their relative closeness to God, such that the telos of human existence is both increasing participation in God and continuing, distinct existence, Dionysius does not then escape the Neoplatonic queasiness toward materiality but simply adds to it a Christian affirmation of the material world. The conflict between these two persists as a central antagonism within his work—an antagonism that, as I have argued elsewhere, persists through much of the Christian tradition.[47] This central antagonism is clearly visible in the overriding consensus that Dionysius's work as a whole downplays the importance of the incarnation[48] but also plays out in complex ways in the reception of Dionysius's account of ontological, eschatological, and ecclesial hierarchies.

Hierarchy

The question of hierarchy is the point at which Dionysius's work comes most inescapably into contact with questions of politics and power, and readers of Dionysius are deeply divided about whether Dionysius's theological invention of the notion of hierarchy can be redeemed.[49] Hierarchy is a problem for several reasons. First, the association of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the ontological hierarchy that progresses Neoplatonically away from the material and toward the immaterial is closely bound up in the history of the church with the denigration of those groups of people who are more strongly associated with materiality, immanence and

immaturity—particularly women but also working-class, racialized, enslaved, and colonized people (these categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive). Luce Irigaray shows how the Platonic myth of the cave relies on the masculine denial of dependence on the material and maternal,[50] and this erasure of women is no less present in Dionysius's writings. Although it is historically likely that women in the church of Dionysius's time would have played a significant ecclesial role, they are strikingly absent from his work.[51] Moreover, on Dionysius's account women would be entirely excluded from the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy—and hence from the highest degrees of human perfection—simply by virtue of their gender. Mary-Jane Rubenstein registers discomfort with the implications of an all-male hierarchy but hints that it might be possible simply to dismiss this as "an unavoidable cultural remnant," glossing over criticizing the extent to which women's exclusion is very profoundly implicated in the notion of ecclesiastical and ontological hierarchy itself.[52] Grace Jantzen more plausibly argues for the profoundly gendered nature of the Dionysian hierarchies, pointing out that by associating progress toward God both with progress up the ecclesiastical hierarchy and with intellectual ascent, Dionysius's work doubly excludes women, who have historically been refused access both to positions of ecclesiastical power and to education.[53]

More contentious is the extent to which Dionysius's invention of hierarchy can be understood as, first, the theological legitimation of structures of power both within and without the church and, second, as an account of hierarchy that is essentially unquestionable by those lower down. The text that gives Dionysius's readers most cause for discomfort here is Letter 8, which addresses Demophilus, a monk who has violated the ecclesiastical hierarchy by criticizing the decision of a priest (in Dionysius's ecclesiastical hierarchy priests significantly outrank monks). Dionysius responds by rebuking Demophilus, strongly asserting the correlation between an individual's position in the hierarchy and that person's proximity to God. Those who are further up the hierarchy simply do have greater capacity for receiving God;[54] for a person lower down to challenge them is always a violation of justice.[55] "Even if disorder and confusion should undermine the most divine ordinance and regulations," Dionysius writes, "that still gives no right, even on God's behalf, to overturn the order which God himself has established. God is not divided against himself."[56] It is not impossible that a member of the hierarchy should prove unworthy of their position, but this violation of the divinely ordained order can be corrected only by those who remain within the bounds of authority given to them by that order.[57]

Of the commentaries on Dionysius's text, Paul Rorem's comes perhaps closest to a purely historical account; Rorem makes few attempts to draw theological conclusions from his reading of Dionysius. It is interesting, then, that he takes this letter as straightforwardly setting out Dionysius's understanding of hierarchy and authority within the church and suggests that "the Dionysian writings profoundly shaped the idea of hierarchy in the Christian tradition . . . [and] influenced the overall picture of reality, as it was transmitted down through a vertical structure, as 'the order which God himself has established' . . . a concept gladly embraced by Christian monarchs of all kinds."[58]

Those who more clearly attribute theological authority to the Dionysian corpus are queasier. Louth balks at the suggestion that the hierarchies "express a notion of distance from God" such that union with God is reserved for those at the uppermost ranks of the hierarchies, suggesting—somewhat implausibly—that "Denys rarely mentions that notion of the hierarchy,"[59] while acknowledging that this reading is "the most natural suggestion (which Denys himself takes up, when he speaks of the seraphim)."[60] Similarly, in order to sustain this claim, Louth argues that "the *Mystical Theology* nowhere mentions the hierarchies" and that perhaps, therefore, they "are irrelevant for the purpose of that treatise."[61] It not clear how Louth intends to reconcile this argument with the claim—arguably the most distinctive contribution of his own reading of Dionysius—that "the *Mystical Theology* has a liturgical context, and indeed that it relates especially to the hierarch and his role in the liturgy."[62] Louth goes on to conclude that, contra the contemporary tendency to see "all men and women" as equal and society as formed from mutual agreement,[63] Dionysius's notion of hierarchy makes space for individual difference and independence, and "finds room within this strictly hierarchical society for an escape from it, beyond it, by transcending symbols and realising directly one's relationship with God."[64]

At the other end of the spectrum are those who take Dionysius's rigid affirmation of hierarchy to be the truth of his system as a whole. Most significant in this regard is Giorgio Agamben, though Anthony Paul Smith's notion of "weaponized apophaticism" is also worthy of note. Agamben's account focuses on Dionysius's angelology, arguing that his connection of angels with the notion of hierarchy "is one of the most tenacious mystifications in the history of Christian literature."[65] For Agamben, mystical theology is not the most significant element of Dionysius's legacy except insofar as it functions as a cover for "the sacralization of power."[66] It is, he argues, precisely the equation of ecclesial with divine power that Dionysius's work seeks to establish, and which is subsequently taken up, more or

less explicitly, into extra-ecclesial theories of government, functioning, in fact, as *the* paradigm for "civil administration and government."[67] For Agamben, apophatic theology is necessary to an economic account of God's government of the world (and to profane accounts of economy that emerge in the decline of Christendom) because "the economy has no foundation in ontology and the only way to found it is to hide its origin."[68] Smith further expands on Agamben's account of apophasis as a cover for a theological power play via a discussion of the function of negation in the work of Thomas Aquinas.[69] By simultaneously grounding government and power in the authority of God and removing God from the sphere of the natural—and therefore universally knowable—Smith argues, Christian theologians both cover over the particularity of their commitment to a specific tradition and invest the representatives of ecclesial authority with a power that is all the more unquestionable for being grounded on that which is ultimately unknowable.[70]

In between Louth's reading of Dionysius's hierarchicalism, which takes it to be essentially benign, and Agamben's and Smith's readings, which take it to be at best deceitful and at worst pernicious, are Rubenstein's and Newheiser's readings, both of which display an uneasiness with the apparent authoritarianism of Dionysius's hierarchies yet seek to save him from himself precisely by appealing to the apophatic elements of his thought. Both claim to identify in Dionysius's apophaticism resources for reading him against himself, using Dionysius's own text to unsettle the very hierarchies he so firmly sets in place. Rubenstein argues that the hierarchies imply a "radical interconnectedness of God and all things," which undermines the popular image of the mystic as solitary and narcissistic by insisting on the centrality of community and opposes any distaste for the material world by insisting that "the wretched world is the means by which we are related to God."[71] Yet Dionysius also insists on the ascent to God via a male hierarchy and worries about contamination and the need to keep secrets from those who are unworthy. Dionysius is caught, Rubenstein argues (via Derrida), between the desire to welcome and the desire to maintain theology's purity.[72] Dionysius can, therefore, be read "through, and against, himself" for "a theo-ethic that unsettles the very hierarchy and teleology it poses."[73]

Newheiser takes a similar tack, responding to Agamben's critique of Dionysius by arguing that he misses the tensions within Dionysius's work.[74] As well as identifying a number of incoherencies and contradictions in Dionysius's detailed accounts of the functioning of both ecclesial and celestial hierarchies,[75] Newheiser appeals to the strength of Dionysius's apophatic denials of the possibility of knowledge of God to argue that although "in relation to theological language, apophatic negativity demands not the

cessation of speech but rather the juxtaposition of affirmation and negation, here it consists in simultaneously maintaining a particular account of hierarchy and the recognition that any such account is inadequate."[76] The crucial question here is the nature of the relationship of the cataphatic to the apophatic: whether the apophatic merely functions to radically qualify the cataphatic (i.e., a particular set of scriptural, doctrinal, and ecclesial structures) or is capable of not only unsettling the cataphatic but forcing its transformation. Newheiser and Rubenstein are right to suggest that the radical nature of Dionysius's apophatic claims has the potential for challenging and transforming his cataphatic claims. Newheiser downplays the extent to which this potential in Dionysius's work represents not simply an ambiguity or a potentiality in the text but an antagonism. To fully endorse the apophatic undermining of authority is actively to reject other of Dionysius's formulations concerning the nature of authority and power within the church.

Universalism

The question of hierarchy is closely bound up with the question of the nature and status of that which exists outside of the church. Dionysius explicitly argues that those lower down the ecclesiastical hierarchy have a lesser capacity for good: "Each rank around God conforms more to him than the one further away. . . . What I mean by nearness is the greatest possible capacity to receive God."[77] Yet the rigidity of the hierarchies and their close association with the hierarchy of being itself means that there is no space in Dionysius's work to give a nuanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of particular individuals or concepts. Progress toward God is a straightforward process of ascent along "a specific—one might say prefabricated—journey."[78] This implies a strongly universalizing account of the church, which certain readers of Dionysius acknowledge. Von Balthasar says, regarding Dionysius, that "not only is philosophy in a non-Christian sense derived for him from the true, revealed Wisdom, but he makes the historical economy of salvation include the whole of history in an all-embracing way" and that his work tends "towards an historical universality, which is . . . realised in the conception of the Church as the heart of the world, the source of all form and life."[79] Alexander Golitzin pushes this logic to its extreme, claiming that "the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is our context, our world, the place of our strivings and the milieu of our encounter with Christ. . . . Nothing of any validity or truth may be accomplished outside of our hierarchy."[80] Although Newheiser is right to point out that this model of ecclesial universality is qualified by the apophatic elements

of Dionysius's thought,[81] he overstates the extent to which this is the case. The encounter with God that shatters human speech takes place *within* the ecclesiastical hierarchy: not only is it associated with the liturgy of the Eucharist but Dionysius is very clear that it is accessible only to those who have already made a certain amount of spiritual progress, who have been to some degree initiated into the divine and hence into the church.[82]

This strong correlation between participation in the church hierarchy and participation in truth and goodness is troubling in light of its political consequences. Sylvia Wynter, for example, has traced the historical shifts by which this pattern of thought comes to ground the formation of European Christendom as what R. I. Moore describes as a "persecuting society," legitimizing violence against European Christianity's stigmatized and racialized others.[83] But it is also completely at odds with the ways in which Dionysius's theology has been transformed and enriched by his encounter with Neoplatonic thought. That ideas such as emanation and return and the simplicity of God are neither inherent nor implicit within earlier Christian tradition is clear not only from the originality of Dionysius's synthesis but also from the internal antagonisms that result from the coupling of these heterogeneous traditions. This is not to say that Dionysius's Neoplatonic Christianity is either a disaster or a dead end (it is evident from his subsequent influence on thought that the combination is in many ways remarkably fertile), but to deny its originality and in fact to argue for the ontological impossibility of such originality is disingenuous at best. Charles Stang claims that Dionysius's pseudonym is specifically intended to "suggest that, following Paul he will effect a new rapprochement between the wisdom of pagan Athens and the revelation of God in Christ."[84] Although he is right to recognize the novelty of Dionysius's work, Stang misses the extent to which the pseudonym also functions precisely to obscure this novelty, to suggest that Dionysius's work is more thoroughly consistent with earlier Christian thought than is in fact the case.[85] This dissembling is also evident in Dionysius's treatment of hierarchy as "a venerable sacred tradition,"[86] a statement that, as Rorem points out, "is actually the creation, not the reception" of the notion.[87] Dionysius's notion of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that is essentially inextricable from the hierarchy of being itself means that he must deny that anything new can come from outside the church even as the basic coordinates of his work depend on precisely this possibility. Dionysius's commitment to a pure genealogy outweighs his commitment to the truth.

In bringing together theology, language, and ontology around the figure of an erotic economy, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* sets the terms for much

subsequent theological debate and makes a series of metaphorical and conceptual connections that will prove difficult, if not impossible, to undo. Yet this Dionysian legacy contains crucial antagonisms with which his intellectual descendants must grapple: the structural homology of creation and fall, the dual desire to escape and to affirm the material world, the problematic association of the hierarchies of ecclesial authority and being itself, and an account that simultaneously denies and embodies the transformation of Christianity by the encounter with that which is foreign to it. As a result, it is not straightforwardly—if at all—possible to be simply faithful to Dionysius's work, which is itself internally inconsistent. Dionysius's readers are, to some extent, condemned to failure, to the very diversity and impurity that Dionysius himself seeks to escape.

2

Apophatic Theology and Its Vicissitudes

Although much has been made of the recent "return of religion" in society and the "religious turn" in continental philosophy,[1] recent accounts of the genealogy of secularism have demonstrated that theology never really went away. Similarly, the proliferation of studies of individual continental thinkers and their relationship to apophaticism might prompt one to wonder whether in fact any figure within the continental tradition does *not* have a relationship to apophatic theology.[2] This is, in part, a consequence of the formative influence of Dionysius's work on the Western theological tradition as a whole, but it also arises from the historical vicissitudes of Christian apophaticism as the attempt to speak about that which cannot be named. Between Dionysius and Jacques Derrida, a crucial shift takes place such that the primary locus of the problem of unknowability and unnameability is no longer the gap between (omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent) God and the world but the gap between the (colonizing, white, property-owning, educated, male) individual subject and the world.[3]

For much of Christian theology, the fundamental theological problem was the question of the divine economy, the relationship of the world to God. Here apophatic theology provided a way of speaking about God as grounding, sustaining, and yet also transcending the economy of the created world. But the Enlightenment represented a kind of Copernican revolution, the fundamental reordering of the center of the economic question away from God and toward the individual human subject. Descartes sought to make sense of the world beginning from the mind of the

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

Not coincidentally, this move reflected a transformation within Christian theology in general and mystical theology in particular which had begun with the emergence of the university, which meant that the academic discipline of theology became increasingly distinct from the monastic life and the contemplative practices with which it had previously been connected[6]—and continued with the post-Reformation emphasis on individual access to God. Over time, mysticism became increasingly associated with intense emotional experiences, with a privatized form of spirituality and—as is usually the case with things domestic, emotional, and material—with women and femininity.[7] It was in part these shifts, however, that paved the way for mysticism's influence on continental thought, as the apophatic mysticism of Meister Eckhart made its way via Jakob Böhme and Angelus Silesius to the works of Hegel and Heidegger[8] and both the intense visionary mysticism of women such as Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch, and Marguerite Porete, and the works of Dionysius and other founding fathers of the Christian apophatic tradition made their way to France via the influential medievalism of Georges Bataille and the *Ressourcement* movement's (re)turn to patristic texts.[9]

All of these strands converge and diverge in complex ways through the history of twentieth-century continental thought, but arguably their most significant meeting is in the work of Jacques Derrida, which is inescapable in any discussion of Dionysius's contemporary legacy. This chapter explores Derrida's work in relation to apophatic theology (leaving aside many of the broader themes and therefore also many rich theological responses to his work), examining the ways in which the Dionysian inheritance is transformed in his writings so as to repeat differently the four themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism according to a new configuration of eros and ontology. This new configuration in turn becomes a problem for theology. These responses to the apophatic elements of

Dionysius's work are perhaps best captured by the twin poles of Radical Orthodoxy and deconstructionist Christianity. Although these two appear initially to be dramatically divergent responses to Derrida, I will show that both ultimately retain the same colonizing universalism of systematic theology.

Derrida and Dionysius

In his seminal paper "Différance," originally presented in 1968, Derrida attempts to give an account of *différance*, a key term within his work. *Différance* is "neither a word nor a concept";[10] it "*is not*, does not exist, is not a present being . . . it has neither existence nor essence"; it is "the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history";[11] it is that which "maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence.'[12] Derrida acknowledges the parallels between this account of *différance* and the apophatic tradition, but attempts to distance himself from negative theology, arguing that although

> the detours, locutions and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology . . . those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies which are always concerned with dis-engaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.[13]

This disavowal is often taken as paradigmatic of Derrida's relationship to apophatic theology in general and Dionysius in particular.[14] But to read Derrida in this way is to miss both the subtleties of his reading of theological texts and the deep entanglement of his thought with Dionysius's legacy.

As David Newheiser has established, Derrida engaged with Dionysius's work from very early on,[15] and Derrida himself acknowledged the persistence of the question of the relationship between his work and negative theology.[16] His most explicit engagements with negative theology occur in 1968's "Différance," 1987's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," and 1992's "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices." Whereas in "Différance," Derrida primarily seeks to distance himself from negative theology, his later

texts are more nuanced and ambiguous. In "How to Avoid Speaking" he acknowledges that negative theology is not monolithic or univocal, such that "one is never certain of being able to attribute to anyone a project of negative theology as such."[17] Both negative theology and *différance* struggle to escape hyperessentiality and the movement of "reappropriation" that the appeal to a "supreme Being" represents.[18] The comparison with negative theology can "sometimes give rise to simplistic interpretations,"[19] and yet it is, finally, inevitable.[20] Derrida seeks, consequently, to distinguish between negativity as it pertains to the attempt to speak about the Platonic notion of the Good (*agathon*), the hyperessential goal of all being and existence,[21] and as it pertains to the Platonic notion of the *khōra*, the unthinkable condition of possibility for being and language, the womb-like not-quite-a-space within which space itself comes into being, the "place, spacing, receptacle"[22] in which things come to be, which is neither sensible nor intelligible, not Being, non-being or even becoming, a "something that no dialectic, participatory schema, or analogy would allow one to rearticulate together with any philosopheme whatsoever."[23] While maintaining that much Christian apophatic theology remains within the logic of the *agathon*,[24] Derrida detects traces of the *khōra* in negative theology in general and in Dionysius in particular.[25]

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

> —More than one, it is necessary to be more than one to speak, several voices are necessary for that . . .
>
> —Yes, and *par excellence*, let us say exemplarily, when it's a matter of God . . .
>
> —Still more, if this is possible, when one claims to speak about God according to the apophatic. . . . This voice multiplies itself, dividing within itself: it says one thing and its contrary.[26]

"Post-Scriptum" explores the affinity between atheism and apophatic theology, suggesting that "apophatic boldness always consists in going further than is reasonably permitted."[27] Again, Derrida acknowledges here the proximity of apophatic theology and deconstruction,[28] and suggests that "All the apophatic mystics can also be read as powerful discourses on death."[29] Moreover, he takes negative theology to be a manifestation of the contradiction at the heart of any identity—be it of meta-

physics, ontotheology, Christian revelation, "self-identity in general, the one, etc."[30]

Yet complex and nuanced though Derrida's explicit engagement with negative theology is,[31] his engagement with the theme of economy is more relevant for my purpose. The question of economy and its transgression is arguably the central and constitutive concern of Derrida's work as a whole, recurring both as a theme in its own right and as the underlying structure of key Derridean notions including *différance*, violence, desire, law, gift, hospitality, futurity, otherness, and death.[32] As for Dionysius, the structuring role of economy gives rise to a certain set of concerns about the origins and ends of human existence, the nature of human freedom, and the problems of materiality, hierarchy, and universalism. Yet these concerns are crucially refigured not only—as is generally acknowledged—by Derrida's more ambiguous relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular, but also—as is less commonly recognized—by the refocusing of the theme of economy around the subject and language, that is, around the human rather than God.[33] Derrida himself glosses over the importance of this subtle yet fundamental shift in the focus of the economic problem for his reading of apophatic theology.[34] Although he acknowledges the importance of Platonism and Neoplatonism to the Christian apophatic tradition[35] and positions his work in relation to the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology,[36] his attempt to disrupt ontotheology by driving a wedge between language and being reads apophatic theology in relation to this specific task. Throughout his engagement with negative theology he persistently returns to the theme of language: The question of how to avoid speaking always comes too late because language "has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God."[37] Apophatic discourse "does not seem separable from a certain boldness of language, from a poetic or metaphoric tongue";[38] "negative theology . . . is a language."[39] Thus Derrida misses the extent to which, for earlier theology, the gap is located elsewhere: not between words and objects but between the created world and God. For earlier theological thought it is less that signifier and signified are equated than that the whole of the created world is a sign imperfectly gesturing toward God. This is not to say that Derrida is wrong to pick at the association of signs and presence, or even that his reading of negative theology is invalid, but that the questions he asks are structurally different questions from those asked by Dionysius, for whom it is not just language, the individual subject, or even the community that begins to come apart in the encounter with that which escapes or interrupts economy, but being itself, materiality, the whole of the created world.[40]

Freedom

The result of this shift is that the questions that arise from the classical economy of Neoplatonic Christian theology are reconfigured and transformed in complex ways. The question of human freedom, which is in some ways the unspoken converse of Dionysius's account of divine freedom, is at the forefront of Derrida's work, especially as his later thought shifts toward more explicitly ethical and political concerns.[41] For Derrida the crucial question is, as for Dionysius, one of differentiation. But where Dionysius is concerned with the question of how God creates the many from the One, Derrida's fundamental dilemma is how can human beings, faced with infinite responsibility toward the overwhelming multiplicity of the world, commit themselves to *one* action?[42] Where for Dionysius the choice is essentially between pursuing a single good or irrationally and inexplicably rejecting it, for Derrida human finitude means that every ethical action is a decision between an almost infinite multiplicity of possibilities. For Dionysius, problematically, it is only in sin that human beings are creative. For Derrida every action, every choice, is an act of division that brings a new configuration of the world into being, yet which is also inextricably bound up with death, with the rejection of other possibilities.

Materiality

Yet although this decision is, for Derrida, both necessary and creative, there remain in his work traces of the Platonic longing for the transcendence of the material world and its limitations. Derrida persistently seeks to hold onto both particularity *and* abstraction: "The determinate and undecidability necessarily co-exist" such that Derrida's work "opens the prospect of inhabiting particular philosophical, political and religious traditions while acknowledging that they are disrupted from within."[43] Furthermore, alongside this sense of being caught impossibly between the particular and the abstract in Derrida's work is a sense that it is not only the other, the universal, and the perfect which remain perpetually out of reach but the body too which tends to slip away: We "appear to be enclosed" in the circle of language that arises precisely because when "we cannot grasp or show the thing, [or] state the present . . . we go through the detour of the sign."[44]

Hierarchy

Toby Foshay positions Derrida's account of negative theology precisely in opposition to Dionysius's world, to "a classical age in which the energy of

synthesis and perception of unity was so necessary," which held "a statically hierarchical vision of the world," positioning him instead in a context in which "our autonomy is most characteristically expressed in its capacity to exceed all centrally defined and anticipatable limits and boundaries."[45] Yet the account that Derrida himself gives of Dionysius undermines this sharp delimitation of the two thinkers. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy" supports Foshay's account to some extent, discussing Kant's attack on the mystagogy of earlier philosophy that positions the philosopher as an "initiatory priest," in possession of secret knowledge that sets him apart from "the crowd" of ordinary people.[46] This mystagogy is an "aristocratic esotericism" that derives ultimately from Plato and those aspects of his work that deal with "mystic illumination" and "theophanic vision."[47] But Derrida argues that Kant himself desires a form of illumination, an enlightenment that "undertakes to demystify the lordly tone," that desires "critique and truth" and yet "keeps within itself some apocalyptic desire . . . in order to demystify it."[48] The language of apocalypse is the language of veiling and unveiling, concealing and revealing, and so "today," Derrida argues, "each of us is the mystagogue *and* the *Aufklärer* [enlightener] of an other."[49]

Derrida picks up this theme of veiling and unveiling specifically in relation to Dionysius in "How to Avoid Speaking," acknowledging a parallel between the accusations of elitism and esotericism leveled at deconstruction and Dionysius's negative theology.[50] Like Giorgio Agamben and Anthony Paul Smith, Derrida identifies a political function to Dionysius's apophaticism: "The signs and figures of the sacred discourse . . . are invented as 'shields' against the many. . . . The allegorical veil becomes a political shield, the solid barrier of a social division." Yet Derrida also notes that this esoteric hierarchicalism is in tension with another mode of theological speech that is "demonstrative, capable of being shown." These two modes are inseparable: "A secret must and must not allow itself to be divulged."[51] But where for Dionysius the desire to conceal and the desire to reveal can seem to be directly opposed to one another, for Derrida the two are mutually and explicitly implicated in each other, both characteristic and constitutive of the human relation to language, of finitude. Here again Derrida's account is shaped by his focus not on the relationship of God to the world, but on the relationship of the individual to the world. Whereas God might be thought as originating and guaranteeing hierarchy, the perspective of human finitude offers no such guarantees: To be finite, to speak, is always to find that language "has started without us, in us and before us."[52]

Universalism

Where Dionysius takes God to be the source and goal of everything that is, Derrida starts from the particularity of human existence. Yet despite this shift of perspective, Derrida's understanding of universality remains remarkably close to that of Dionysius. For Dionysius and his theological descendants it is only particularity that begins to make speech about God possible, yet particularity is also a limit to be transcended, a starting point to be surpassed. Similarly, in Derrida's work the recognition of the particularity of human thought and existence coincides with a desire to access a universality that renders particularity not only unnecessary but undesirable. Newheiser reads Derrida's work in terms of an "eschatological affirmation" of the particularity of religious traditions, acknowledging the necessary co-constitution of determinacy and indeterminacy, the particular and the universal and so making space for a positive valuation of particular religious identities, of "the possibility of affirmation—in hope—that holds itself open to the beyond by practicing a rigorous negativity."[53] This is in a sense true: The tension between particular and the universal, immanence and transcendence is characteristic of Derrida's work throughout. And yet what it misses is that the inescapability of particularity is for Derrida something to be regretted, a limit against which human desire must strain. The longing that Derrida persistently expresses is for the escape from the particular.

In "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone,"[54] Derrida seeks to distinguish the "messianic" he advocates from the religiously determined "messianism" he seeks to escape, acknowledging the particular history of the term only as a regrettable necessity, something he is "obliged" to do.[55] As in "How to Avoid Speaking," he sets up the notion of the *khōra* in opposition to the Christian *via negativa* and its Platonic and Plotinian inheritance not because of its desire to escape particularity but precisely because of the way in which its cultural and historical origins mean that "its 'idiom' is not universalisable."[56] Christianity fails because it is not universal enough, and Derrida hopes instead in the possibility of "a universalisable culture of singularities, a culture in which the abstract possibility of the impossible translation could nevertheless be announced."[57] Although Derrida's different perspective on the economy of immanence and transcendence gives rise to a much less confident affirmation of that which constitutes and makes possible human existence, he, as much as Dionysius, affirms a desire—albeit an impossible one—to escape the particular and material for that which is universal, ahistorical, and immaterial.

Ontology and Desire

Again, as for Dionysius, all of these complex tensions in Derrida's work come together around the theme of desire. Yet where for Dionysius desire is that which makes it possible to hold together unity and distinction, freedom and necessity in God, in Derrida's work desire is thought only in relation to the human. Here it is that which breaks into economy, holding it open to the incoming of an unnamed, unknown otherness, which not only remains unsatisfied but must renounce the quest for satisfaction: "To go towards the absolute other, isn't that the extreme tension of a desire that tries thereby to renounce its own proper movement, its own movement of appropriation?"[58] Richard Kearney describes this account of desire as eschatological rather than ontotheological: Where ontotheological desire seeks "to be and to know absolutely," eschatological desire is "for something that eye has never seen nor ear heard."[59] Again, this account of desire is distinct from Dionysius's primarily because of the way in which the economic question is framed, starting from the human rather than the One God. The shift from desire as the longing for economy's completion to the yearning for its rupture seems inevitable once philosophy renounces the claim to speak from the divine perspective and begins instead from the human. Yet the complex ways that this shift interacts with theological themes has prompted a range of theological responses to Derrida's work, the most significant of which are, first, those of the thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy and, second, those whose work may be grouped together as deconstructionist Christianity.

Dionysius, Derrida, and Radical Orthodoxy

Radical Orthodoxy is not monolithic, although it has become more conservative and less diverse over time as some of those associated with the movement early on have moved away, and its newer thinkers have tended to adhere to a much narrower sense of the movement's central project. The three figures within Radical Orthodoxy who have engaged in the most extensive discussion of Derrida's work also happen to be those who might be considered the movement's founding figures—John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward.[60] Of these three, however, Ward is something of an outlier. His early book *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology*[61] lacks many of the distinctive characteristics of Radical Orthodoxy (which I describe below)—both in terms of the positive affirmations of particular theological positions and the strong critique of continental philosophy that tends to arise from these affirmations. His later *Cities of God*[62]

marks a move toward more typical Radical Orthodox arguments but simultaneously a move away from detailed engagement with Derrida.[63] Ward has subsequently distanced himself from Radical Orthodoxy. My argument, then, focuses primarily on the works of John Milbank, particularly *Theology and Social Theory*, which both appeals to Dionysius as the originator of the theological ontology that Milbank advocates and engages critically with Derrida; and Catherine Pickstock, particularly *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, the bulk of whose critical engagement with contemporary philosophy consists of an attack on Derrida's reading of Plato.[64]

Where Dionysius's radically apophatic undermining of the certainty of all human knowledge of God and his Christian assertion of the value of particularity is often in tension with the Neoplatonic metaphysics that so deeply shapes his work, Radical Orthodoxy asserts that a Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation is not only compatible with Christianity but is in fact the only possible form that Christian metaphysics can take.[65] As a result, it reproduces many of the key tensions that mark Dionysius's work and sets up a strong opposition between the "peaceful ontology" of Christian theology and the contemporary continental interest in difference, otherness, and uncertainty such that not only is the proximity of Derrida's work to the Christian apophatic tradition downplayed[66] but the complexity and the tensions that mark Dionysius's work are overlooked in order to articulate an idealized version of Christian orthodoxy along with a strong claim to possess and represent that orthodoxy. This results in an account of the relationship between theology and philosophy that is both internally contradictory and politically troubling, functioning according to a colonizing logic of domination and mastery.

Radical Orthodoxy's central claim is that "secular modernity" is not in fact secular but the result of a corruption of theological ideas resulting in a philosophy and a politics that is essentially nihilistic. Radical Orthodoxy holds that the theological response to this contemporary nihilism must be a return to and a reassertion of a metaphysics of participation. Where Dionysius's work is marked by a radical gap between God and the world such that a strong account of eros is necessary to bridge it, the metaphysics of Radical Orthodoxy is troubled by no such break, such that one of its primary distinguishing tropes is the affirmation of an "ontology of peace" against the "violent" ontology of rupture that it describes in the work of "secular" and "postmodern" thinkers.[67]

Freedom

In "Forgiveness and Incarnation," Milbank acknowledges the parallels between the problem of human sin and the problem of creation, arguing that

> theology considers what are, to us, three absolute impossibilities . . . the impossibility that anything should exist outside God, who is replete Being. . . . Then . . . that creatures enjoying to their appropriate degree the absolute . . . might discover an illusory "of themselves" wherewith to reject the absolute in the name of something lesser. . . . [And finally] the third impossibility of redemption for a fault which, since it cuts finite being off from (infinite) reality, would appear to be without redress.[68]

Yet this parallel goes largely unexplored both in the rest of this article and elsewhere within his work, persisting, instead, as an unacknowledged tension. For Milbank, the church "has no *telos* properly speaking but continuously *is* the differential sequence which has the goal beyond goal of generating new relationships."[69] This is to say that there is a sense in which the Christian community exceeds the economy of cause and effect, exodus and return. What is visible in history is "not just arbitrary transitions, but constant contingent shifts either towards or away from what is projected as the true human *telos*, a true concrete representation of the analogical blending of difference"[70]—that is, that Christian community has a single goal contained within the economy of creation and return. The problem of creation is softened, according to Milbank, by the Dionysian account of God as both *one* and *three*, that is, as already containing differentiation.[71] Thus creation can be thought by Milbank not as a rupture but as peaceful, as the "free unlimited exchange of charity,"[72] and by Pickstock as the "*uninterrupted* flow and exchange of gift."[73] The divine economy is "excessive" and "ecstatic," yet somehow this excess remains solidly economic.[74] By contrast, Milbank persistently associates arbitrariness with violence[75] and endorses the traditional Christian account of evil as "the (impossible) refusal of cause."[76] The failure to fully explore the structural homology between the Christian account of creation ex nihilo and the notion of evil as privation, as essentially inexplicable, is particularly apparent in the tendency of Radically Orthodox thinkers to describe those who diverge from their account of Christianity as "nihilists"—both the connection and Radical Orthodoxy's failure to notice it are particularly evident in Milbank's claim that "the nihilistic vision concludes . . . that, in the end, there is an incomprehensible springing of all from nothing."[77]

Materiality

One of the central claims of Radical Orthodoxy is that "only" their Christian-Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation makes it possible to value difference, particularity, and materiality. Christianity, Milbank argues, "makes difference ontologically ultimate and worthy of the highest valuation" such that "it could be adequately repeated in very diverse cultural settings."[78] For Pickstock, Christianity uniquely treats "the spirit and the body together."[79] Both Milbank and Pickstock claim that Christianity values non-identical repetition over recollection and thus opens up the space for diversity.[80] Radical Orthodoxy, then, claims to give an account of the world that promotes "creative freedom"[81] and values "time, matter, artistic making and ritual."[82] It is, in theory, "a more incarnate, more participatory, more aesthetic, more erotic, more socialised . . . Christianity," which "refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity."[83]

Yet not only does this account crucially gloss over the tendency of the metaphysics of participation to push Christian theology away from a valuation of the material,[84] it is also indicative of an unresolved tension within the work of Radical Orthodox thinkers themselves. For example, Milbank claims to value diversity. He speaks approvingly of Nicholas of Cusa's claim that "human art is now a mode of creation and that the finite is a scene of real originality"[85] and of Augustine's notion that "desire . . . exceeds virtue in the direction of the more individual and particular" precisely because the human will "is linked not just to discrimination of right from wrong . . . but also with idiosyncratic, yet equally valid, moral and aesthetic preferences."[86] Yet Milbank persistently portrays the aesthetic as itself a matter of moral judgment. Secularism "cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people—for reasons of 'literary taste'—that Christianity offers a much better story";[87] our "judgment of the 'truth of events,' according to Augustine in the *Confessions*, is essentially an aesthetic matter."[88]

Similarly, Catherine Pickstock makes several claims about the necessity of particularity and enculturation for Christian liturgical practice. "Any drift towards the static centre," she argues, "must automatically involve a movement away from liturgy embedded within an ecstatic temporality, and as reciprocally and substantially situated within the Church." When this happened, historically, it "gave rise to an impoverishment of liturgical temporality."[89] And yet *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* consistently appeals to very particular forms of Christianity as absolutely necessary: The book's central argument is that the Roman Rite uniquely perfects the Christian grounding of meaning and necessity in the

Eucharistic liturgy (it is arguably the Roman Rite that represents "the consummation of philosophy" to which the book's subtitle refers).[90] Transubstantiation—whose theological formulation, it is worth pointing out, simply *did not exist* for the first ten centuries of Christianity—is "the Condition of Possibility for All Meaning."[91] Both Milbank's and Pickstock's work is rhetorically marked by assertions that "only" their particular account of theology will suffice.[92] Although they fail to acknowledge the complexity and the tensions of the Christian tradition that they assert as the solution to the dead-end represented by the thought of Derrida and his contemporaries, the tensions between the particular and the universal, the material and the ideal, which Dionysius bequeaths to Christian tradition resurface despite their claim that only a Christian-Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation can offer a peaceful ontology without the antagonisms of secular thought.

Hierarchy

As part of its appeal to the metaphysics of participation, Radical Orthodoxy explicitly endorses a Dionysian notion of hierarchy,[93] yet makes no attempt to grapple with those elements of Dionysius's account of hierarchy that have troubled others among his readers. Milbank's reading of Dionysius's notion of hierarchy corresponds particularly closely to Andrew Louth's account of Dionysius, in which hierarchy functions primarily to assert the necessity of human community: The goal of "hierarchic initiation is not contemplation of God but a 'co-working' with God . . . when one starts oneself to transmit the power of divine charity and the light of divine knowledge to those initiates within the churches who have not yet risen so far in the scale."[94] Hierarchy is "educative" rather than "fixed," and "every 'position' it establishes is of equal importance, and of equal necessity to all the other positions, even if there remain inequalities of ability and necessary inequalities of function."[95] It is "a vertical sequence up which each individual can contemplatively and actively rise. At its summit lies not a static completion, but a full participation in the suspension downwards of hierarchies (the aiding of others by charity) and a greater participation in the suspension forwards of the thearchy, God's infinite self-realisation."[96]

The more troubling aspects of Dionysius's account of hierarchy and of actually existing ecclesiastical hierarchies are glossed over. Pickstock contrasts the ecclesial community with "the pagan *polis*, in which only a full citizen could offer a liturgy. . . . In Christian liturgical space, there are no prior determining criteria for both the subject and the community."[97] Yet

she ignores the question of the ordination of women, whose exclusion from the priesthood might be compatible with a hierarchy in which all are different but equal, yet not with a hierarchy that all may ascend; and she sidesteps the question of race, which emerges precisely as the ontologization of the difference between those inside and those outside of the ecclesial community.[98] Similarly, Milbank argues that "Augustine's Christian ontology . . . stands directly opposed" to any notion of a state in which the sovereign and the individual exist in "direct relationship," ignoring Dionysius's assertion of the direct relationship between each individual and God and so excising the central element of Dionysius's thought that offers the possibility for the subversion and transformation of unjust rule.[99] There is, furthermore, an apparent contradiction between Milbank's ontology of peace, which gives an account of relationality as "mutual and unending gift-exchange,"[100] and his account of the necessary mastery of theology over other discourses, which positions relationality as, essentially, a struggle for dominance: "If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticise other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology."[101] The Christian metaphysics of participation is problematic at the best of times in its muddling of the distinctions between spiritual progress, ecclesiastical status, and ontological value. But the problems with Dionysius's notion of hierarchy are exacerbated in Radical Orthodoxy, which asserts the necessity and value of hierarchy without in any way tempering this claim with an apophatic insistence on the inadequacy of all human structures to God.

Universalism

One of Radical Orthodoxy's more admirable features is the consistency with which it can be found at the forefront of theological engagement with contemporary continental philosophy. Yet this engagement seems to be driven less by curiosity or a desire to learn from theology's others than by a kind of colonizing desire to explore new worlds of thought simply in order to make them bend the knee to theology, whose imperial rule as the "queen of the sciences" Radical Orthodoxy seeks to reinstate.[102] Like the theorists of British Empire who set out to civilize the savages, Radical Orthodoxy positions itself as the (white) savior of the world.[103] Milbank claims that "only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery."[104] Catherine Pickstock asserts, with remarkable confidence, that her work "completes and surpasses philosophy."[105] As Stephen

Shakespeare argues, "Radical Orthodoxy's God is an overflowing fullness. . . . There is no secular space."[106]

Yet again, as for Dionysius, it is clear that Radical Orthodoxy is, nonetheless, deeply shaped by its encounter with "secular" thought. That which is most original, most creative, and most fertile in its thought arises precisely out of its encounter with the thinkers it deems nihilistic, which (on its account of evil-as-privation) differ from Christian theology only insofar as they fail, fall short, fall away from existence and tend toward nothingness. If only negatively, "our modern habits of thought and speech" make it impossible for theology simply to "'return' to an earlier form" but instead demand that "we again begin to live, to speak."[107]

Ontology and Desire

Where Western philosophy from Descartes onward increasingly shifts the economic question away from the relationship of God to the world and toward the relationship of the individual to the world, Radical Orthodoxy proposes, essentially, a return to the classical Christian construction of the problem of economy. But in setting up this classical Christian economy in direct opposition to Derrida and his contemporaries, Radical Orthodoxy misses the extent to which Derrida's work functions not as a straightforward critique of classical Christian theology but as a reorientation, a refocusing of the questions of Christian theology around the individual rather than God. Derrida's emphasis on the radical uncertainty of human knowledge is not (contra Radical Orthodoxy) totally at odds with the Christian tradition but draws out apophatic elements that characterize the Christian tradition insofar as it attempts to speak of the human relationship to God rather than the divine relationship to the world. Derrida's work radicalizes this apophaticism by broadening the scope of transcendence to include not simply the divine transcendence of the created world but also the transcendence of the world more generally in relation both to the human individual and to human language and culture. By contrast, for all of Radical Orthodoxy's claims concerning the centrality of transcendence to their Christian ontology of peace, what is perhaps most notable about its account of its own thought is precisely the absence of any sense in which it is transcended by the divine. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein says, this is essentially "*the demand for transcendence, coupled with the claim to know what that transcendence looks like.* This is a problem because, to risk a tautology, transcendence is not transcendence if it doesn't transcend—if it just confirms our vision of the way the world really is."[108] Moreover, it is a problem because it effectively erases the ontological gap between God and the world,

ignoring the problems of both creation and sin, which are, ultimately, questions of desire. It is symptomatic, therefore, of deeper problems within this account of theology that the question of the proximity of Derrida's work to Dionysius's apophatic theology is so systematically evaded.

Dionysius, Derrida, and Deconstructionist Christianity

Although thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy gather around a very clear set of common claims and a distinctive sensibility, it is not surprising that those thinkers who see Derrida's work as posing an important challenge to theology are a less coherent and more diffuse group. Numerous works have been written seeking to draw on Derrida's reading of negative theology as a positive resource for Christian thought;[109] probably the most significant of these thinkers are John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller, on whose work this section focuses.

Caputo's early work, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*,[110] examines the relationship between the work of Martin Heidegger and the Christian mystical tradition, but several later works focus primarily on the attempt to bring Derridean deconstruction into conversation with Christian theological concepts of God. He suggests that Derrida's "religion without religion" avoids the dangers of religious fundamentalism by refusing to articulate any definite content for the idea of God.[111] Caputo argues for a "generalized apophatics" which adds to negative theology a negative anthropology, negative ethics, and negative politics, where all that can be said of the anthropology, ethics, and politics to come is that they will transgress and unsettle all existing boundaries and concepts.[112] Later, Caputo moves away from this emphasis on the apophatic to argue that "Derrida's religion is more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists . . . moved more by propheticoethico-political aspiration than by aspiring to be one with the One."[113] The prophetic is better than the apophatic, he argues, because it "saves negative theology from closure" which "spells exclusion, exclusiveness; closure spills blood."[114] This move can be read as an affirmation of the economic shift from the divine to the human perspective—because the individual can never access the divine perspective on the world, the crucial thing is to emphasize the limits of human knowledge and to refuse ontology and metaphysics, which presume such a perspective.

At the heart of Caputo's work is a worry about what happens ethically and politically when theological commitments are asserted too strongly and uncritically. On his account of a deconstructive Christianity, he says, "You would neither fly aircraft into the side of tall buildings nor would you have

launched this unjust war in Iraq; you would live in fear and trembling about the things that you believe and keep your fingers crossed that your beliefs will not harm anyone."[115] The particular language of Christianity, he argues, houses something which is less particular and contingent. He distinguishes between the particular constructions of Christian theology and the event which is located *within* these constructions: "The name is the historically inherited form of life, what is handed down to us by the tradition. Then there is what is astir within this name, its inner energy or life, what I am calling the *event* within it."[116] As Slavoj Žižek argues, the notion of "God" is "deprived of any positive onto-teleological status: God is no longer the Highest Being watching over our destiny, but a name for radical openness, for the hope of change, for the always-to-come Otherness."[117]

Caputo's later work is profoundly influenced by Catherine Keller, whose thought draws heavily on both Derrida and the process philosophy and relational ontology of Alfred North Whitehead. Her groundbreaking *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*[118] offers a Derrida-inflected rereading of the Genesis creation narrative. Keller proposes a "becoming theology" that sees creation as a "beginningless process," continuing "a *deconstruction* of the paradigm and presumption of linear time: the bottom line of the straight line of salvation history, the violent end of the line of time itself."[119] This account is set up specifically in opposition to the false choice between "the depth restored in Christ—or else abysmal relativism" presented by Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy.[120]

Where Caputo is concerned with the violence of theological certainty in general, for Keller theology must specifically confront the way that its claim to exclusive possession of the truth has entangled it with the logics of racism, sexism, and colonialism, which result from its "tehomophobia"—its fear of chaos, relationality, and becoming. Yet her prescription anticipates (and subsequently influences) Caputo's: The dangers of theological foundationalism become clear "when they mobilize crusades, holy ways, market reforms and other mobile extensions of their uncompromising truths"; instead we should seek for "a third way, neither nihilism nor *ex nihilism* . . . the affirmation of difference."[121]

In 2015's *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, Keller draws the themes of her earlier work—process, relationality, deconstruction—into more explicit conversation with apophatic theology.[122] She argues that there are real conflicts between negative theology, which unsettles certainties, and liberationist relational theologies whose focus on "race, gender, sex, class, ecology" tempts them toward a "justice-empowering but perhaps all too knowable God," which has value

but, in the absence of negation, risks becoming "incredible."[123] Yet despite these points of antagonism, Keller argues, we need both apophasis and relationality, and will find in fact that the two are always already entangled. Just as relationality of necessity entails process, so too is the relationship between knowing and unknowing one of open-ended interaction and transformation; only in this way will it be possible to liberate ourselves from "the powers of violence" that go hand in hand with "the perennial myth of religious purity."[124] Where Caputo's work largely follows Derrida in focusing the problem of economy on the relationship between the individual and the world, Keller's process theology locates God too within the realm of potentiality and uncertainty, drawing on Cusa's account of "the nonseparability of God from the world *as* the apophatic."[125]

Freedom

Where Derrida's work is caught, tragically, between the ethical necessity and the inevitable violence of decision, Keller's and Caputo's work tends to fall on the side of the refusal of decision in the name of openness to an unknown other or to possibility as such. Caputo sometimes positions deconstruction as essentially neutral on questions of ethical, religious, and political commitment—it is "not authorized to decide among" different possibilities, it "has not come into the world to tell humankind what to do" but is merely a "description of the conditions under which we act."[126] But he more often treats deconstruction as also (at least once it has been taken up by his radical hermeneutics) an account of how individuals are to relate to the world. "Our best bet," he argues, is "a happy minimalism about who we think we are, or who others are, or what history or nature or sexuality is, or who God is."[127] As soon as religion makes truth claims, it becomes "a factional power and a force of oppression," and "sits down to the table with the powers that be, just when it ought otherwise have been committed to their disruption."[128] There is a tension, for Caputo, between the "tragic view," which sees suffering as an inescapable aspect of life with which we must make peace, and the "religious view," which struggles against suffering and injustice in the name of God, and yet this tension is undecidable such that the crucial task is "to keep open to the mystery, to keep the play in play."[129] Where for Derrida we must act, and yet our acting is always, inescapably, caught up with death and with violence, Caputo expresses the hope for a nonviolent world in which—much as for Radical Orthodoxy—differences can peacefully coexist, a "democracy" in which there would be "a profusion of differences that would be adjudicated without killing one another."[130]

Keller acknowledges the violence of decision, via reference not to Derrida but to Whitehead for whom, she argues, every "actual subject . . . is an act of decision, of actualization of *this* possibility and not that."[131] Much like Caputo, she argues that the best way to render oneself able to make this decision is precisely to refuse the violence of choosing one thing and rejecting others. Theologians should neither resist the death of God nor embrace it; only by pausing in the indeterminate zone between the life and death of God can they discover "the sort of contemplation that can cut—*de/cisare*—through paralysis." Yet it is never clear how this does anything but defer the problem. Keller offers no explanation of how, exactly, this refusal of decision will ultimately result in decision and instead moves to a critique of Žižek's "manful" decisiveness, arguing that "each impatient apocalypse . . . risks further paralyzing those already faltering in the uncertainties of complexity, empathy, vulnerability." To act, it seems, is to render others unable to act; the only way to escape this pitfall is not to act but to contemplate.[132] Perhaps, Keller says, quoting Caputo, if we hold back from a decision when it comes to God, we will see that "we *really do not* know at all what we mean."[133]

As Radical Orthodoxy argues, it is hard to see how this vision of the peaceful coexistence of difference is possible in the context of a Derridean account of the world, which sees difference as always inevitably grounded upon a free, unjustifiable act of decision that cuts across possibility. The "confrontation with one's own finitude" is, for Caputo, "the condition under which facticity is transformed from a random choice into a heritage ripe with possibility."[134] Yet this focus on possibility and openness does not grapple with the essential aporia of Derrida's thought: that to choose *one* possibility is always to reject others, to do violence to them; that the necessity of choosing means that a "bad conscience" is inescapable.[135] If, as Stephen Shakespeare argues, Radical Orthodoxy misses essential affirmative aspects of Derrida's work in order to read him as a nihilistic thinker of violence,[136] Caputo and Keller are at risk of focusing on Derrida's affirmation of difference at the expense of grappling with his account of death, violence, and nothingness.

Materiality

Although Caputo repeatedly affirms the value of particularity,[137] the broad thrust of his thought is away from the particular and the material and toward the transcendent and the abstract. Deconstruction, he argues, "is set in motion by an overarching aspiration . . . what would have been called, in the plodding language of the tradition . . . a movement of '*transcendence*.'"[138]

Although particularity is not bad as such, for Caputo it is dangerous ever to assume that any particularity is adequate to or necessary for speaking about the transcendent.[139] "Names are," he argues, "historical, contingent, provisional expressions in natural languages," in contrast to the event, which is "not a *thing* but something astir in a thing."[140] Much as for Plato, particularity is valuable only insofar as it inspires a desire for the transcendent.[141] Caputo is rigorous in his refusal to accept that the universal and transcendent is ever obtainable, ever identifiable; but this insistence functions not so much as a rejection of Platonism or essentialism but, rather, as a rigorous apophaticism that denies that the transcendent can be captured by the particular only in order to assert all the more strongly its transcendence and its immateriality. That to which the material world gestures is "*tout autre* [totally other], *the* impossible, the unimaginable, un-foreseeable, un-believable ab-solute surprise."[142] Yet it is precisely this affirmation of a transcendence that exceeds materiality that Caputo criticizes in apophatic theology, drawing on Derrida's anxiety about the negative theological tendency to function not to disrupt economy but to ensure that apophaticism is "safely inscribed in a circle originating from and returning to 'God.'"[143] This irony is not lost on Žižek, who comments that "after rejecting the Christian opposition between the dead Letter and the living Spirit" in his rejection of supersessionist readings of the relation of Judaism to Christianity, "Caputo has to mobilize this very opposition to sustain the 'separability' of the event from its name." What distinguishes Caputo from Platonism and traditional Christian apophaticism is not the value he places on materiality but, rather, his rejection of metaphysics, "the move from substantial entities to events."[144] This move can be read in terms of the shift from an economic account of the world built around God to one built around the—limited, fallible—individual subject, such that metaphysics can no longer claim to "have seized the soft underbelly of Nature, or Being, or Reality."[145] But the basic model remains intact: Precisely because we are material we cannot grasp the pure notion of the immaterial event that, despite Caputo's protestations about the limitations of our knowledge, is "unconditional."[146]

By contrast, Keller seeks not to move away from the particular toward the transcendent but to fold transcendence into immanence, to entangle God in (but not *as*) the world such that the Dionysian negation of all language can be read not as "an exodus from all relation" but as a break from the dream of escaping relation, from "any mental conception of such an abstract freedom."[147] For Keller the problem is reason as a denial of relation, as a means of separating oneself from the *hoi polloi* as witnessed in the early stages of Dionysius's mystical ascent. For Keller, Derrida's earlier

suspicion of negative theology is rightly supplanted by a later, more positive assessment that belongs, not coincidentally, with his ethical turn, such that his insistence that he "trust(s) no text that is not in some way contaminated with negative theology" belongs with his "potent invocation . . . of 'the greatest power of the possible.'"[148]

For Derrida the ethics of possibility is always already the ethics of decision, of choosing this and not that, just as his thinking of materiality holds on both to the longing for transcendence and the affirmation of particularity that so antagonistically constitutes the Christian tradition, and just as his engagement with negative theology recognizes both its disruptive and its hegemonic potential. Yet in Keller's work these conflicts are softened into a much more straightforward affirmation both of Dionysius's contribution to the Christian tradition and of the material world as such. *Cloud of the Impossible* opens with a roundabout nod to radicalism via Žižek:

> It is in . . . cloud contemplation that a particular possibility may come to light, whichever barely possible possibility it is that most needs realization now. . . . I do not in this book argue for one unifying impossibility: if I were to I might agree on this point with Slavoj Žižek: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."

Yet Keller goes on, first, to decry Žižek's "impatient apocalypse" and subsequently to close her book with the assertion that "the ending one wants to avoid is the apocalypse."[149] We are not, it seems, to imagine the end either of the world or of capitalism, and so we are left in "that indeterminate third space Cusa dubbed the *coincidentia oppositorum* . . . a space of cloudy (de)construction." Although we are promised that relationality may mean "a strike, a resistance movement, a demonstration," it is far from clear how Keller's Dionysian "third way" is to be distinguished from the dream of a "utopian 'third way' beyond capitalism and 'really existing' socialism," which Žižek discusses on a number of occasions, pointing out that the "sincere belief and insistence" on the part of third-wayers that "they were not working for the restoration of Western capitalism . . . proved to be nothing but an insubstantial illusion."[150] Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that the Cusanian *coincidentia oppositorum* which for Keller so perfectly exemplifies the third way opened by the entanglement of negative theology and deconstruction is also the framework for the participatory ontology that John Milbank sets up against Žižek's "violent" political ontology; it is also the basis of Radical Orthodoxy's "misty conceit of paradox" to which Žižek opposes the "dialectical clarity" of properly Christian negation.[151]

Hierarchy

Where Radical Orthodoxy asserts the value of hierarchy without any of the apophaticism that tempers Dionysius's original invention of the term, Caputo refuses any and all claims to have privileged access to truth in order to assert a basic equality of all people. Yet his work remains "haunted" by the Dionysian hierarchical vision.[152] On Caputo's account, when we come to realize that none of us has privileged access to the truth, that "the secret is, there is no Secret,"[153] we arrive at "an ethics of *Gelassenheit*," of letting go, "which is all at once an ethics of liberation, toleration, and solidarity."[154] For Caputo, the problem with institutions and with hierarchies is a problem of individual belief, such that if "people actually believed that they really don't know in some deep way what is true, we would have more modest and tolerant and humane institutions."[155]

Yet to make this claim is to miss the way in which existing institutions and structures are (as is clear from the discussion of Dionysius's notion of hierarchy above) themselves deeply shaped by particular sorts of beliefs, that inequalities and hierarchies are not simply the result of the way in which people believe but of the particular content of their beliefs. Caputo wants a world in which everyone believes "that there is no one thing for everyone to believe,"[156] as though this belief itself is somehow exempt from the certainty with which all other beliefs are held. Furthermore, he makes this claim specifically to oppose the more radical political critiques of Alain Badiou and Žižek, to oppose the demand for systematic change in favor of small, local interventions.[157] Yet at the same time he asserts that "the political correlate" of his work is "a nonauthoritarian democracy,"[158] performing an epistemological legitimation of the existing order of things that structurally parallels the aspects of Dionysius's work that—as Smith and Agamben discuss—metaphysically legitimize the existing order. To affirm that no radical challenge to the existing order of things is necessary is to affirm that there is nothing radically wrong with the existing order of things, that the world we inhabit is fundamentally one of democracy, that political liberalism is contingently, rather than essentially, bound up with white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Caputo's critique of hierarchy makes possible a critique of existing hierarchies on the grounds that they are too authoritarian—that is, insufficiently tempered by the realization of the ultimate inadequacy of all forms of government—but leaves him unable to "address the more subtle and nefarious hierarchy of capitalist economics."[159] Moreover, where Milbank's assertion of aesthetic diversity collapses under his tendency to present all difference in terms of moral judgment, Caputo's refusal to admit any grounds for moral judgment leaves him unable to

make any judgments that are *not* aesthetic. Although he recognizes in Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer "everything that's good and just and true,"[160] there is little within his work to ground this preference for Bonhoeffer and King over any other figures who disrupt the existing order of things, or to claim that any particular structure of society might be more conducive to liberation, toleration, and solidarity than others.[161]

Keller similarly tends to focus on form at the expense of content, repeatedly offering connection and relationality as goods in themselves. Although she does acknowledge the ambivalence of relationality, recognizing that "relation, like difference, may work for good or ill," nonetheless she insists, over and again, that the answer is not to refuse or resist relationality but to intensify it.[162] Much like Caputo, she argues that the key problem with both Islam and Christianity in the contemporary world is that they are "dominated by an unapologetic exclusivism," which "need not produce violence against the religious other, but justifies and fuels the violence when—out of multiple causes—it arises." What we need, then is "the imaginary of a convivial, all-exceeding and enfolding mystery."[163]

There are two problems with this diagnosis of what ails us. First, if relationality is, as Keller argues, expressed not only in connection but also in refusal of connection, if "non-participation is itself a form of participation," then it is hard to see what work relationality does. Is not the "ontic separability" Keller critiques itself a form of relation, a particular type of language to describe and express relationality?[164] The second, related problem is that Keller fails to fully acknowledge that ontology is always already political theology. Although the ontology of disconnection and distinction which she (rightly) diagnoses as characteristic of the early modern period is indeed entangled with the racism, sexism, and undemocratic forms of sovereignty that she decries, this ontology emerges along with particular forms of relationality, of the disciplinary power that structures human relations around distinct and contained institutions such as (as Foucault describes), the prison, the school, and the factory or, more broadly, around the distinctions between newly emergent nation-states, between colonizers and colonized, between the newly emergent realms of the feminized private and the masculinized public sphere. Moreover, the participatory ontology this focus on distinction replaces is precisely that of the kyriarchal Great Chain of Being whose links were first forged by Dionysius's (and others') alloy of Christianity and Neoplatonism, which related all things—as Keller urges us to do—both to one another and to God, not—as Keller hopes—in order to "intensify" the "democratizing forcefield" of "relational consciousness," but to fix its members firmly in their feudal and hierarchical place. It should be no surprise, then, that the emergence of

new forms and languages of connectivity that Keller glimpses in "a global economy enmeshing the planetary ecology" is, as Amaryah Armstrong points out, less the signifier of an emerging planetary democracy than it is of a new kind of "crusading Christian colonial imagination that, in this neoliberal moment, increasingly desires our participation in an inclusive and coalitional affirmation of Christianized capitalist logic."[165] No wonder, then, that Keller's assessment of Dionysius's work is so blithe, and that her celebration of his mystical theology makes no reference to the celestial or ecclesiastical hierarchies with which his account of Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai are so inextricably connected. Moses' separation of himself from the multitude to ascend the mountain does not, she argues, "first of all signal elitism but wisdom"; even as Keller acknowledges the structuring misogyny of Dionysius's corpus she maintains that what we find in his work is not "the denigration of the desirous multitude" but "an *aesthetic* negating of the *ascetic* negating of the body."[166]

Universalism

As for Derrida, the inescapability of particularity is for Caputo a regrettable necessity that ought to be struggled against in the name of an all-embracing universalism. Although the universal cannot be exclusively located in any particular tradition,[167] each particular tradition must aspire "to be catholic (universal)" and "committed in principle to universal liberation."[168] Caputo worries about the tendency for death of God theologies to endorse a supersessionist schema of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and responds to this concern by articulating the ways in which his deconstructive Christianity is very deeply Jewish.[169] But in this attempt to portray all particular traditions as contingent attempts to speak about a more universal truth, Caputo is often guilty of overlooking the real antagonisms at play, the real disagreements and differences between particular thinkers and traditions. Žižek, for example, "often serves up excellent postmodern goods" when he "leaves off abusing postmodern theories," as though what is valuable in Žižek's project is what he shares in common with Caputo, as though his disagreements with Derrida and Caputo, which (as I shall argue) are crucial to understanding his project, can simply be discarded as inessential.[170] In a way this offers a curious mirror image of Radical Orthodoxy: Where the universalism of the ontology of peace seeks to erase all uncertainty, Caputo's model of perpetual deconstruction seeks to pull apart any and all certainty, to the point where it is hard to see what might give Christianity any particular positive value for him, while absolving him of responsibility for Christianity's particular history of violence.

Caputo's universalism tends, in its desire to deconstruct and to transcend particularity, to dissolve everything into sameness. It is not in the end clear that this dissolution of specificity is any less violent than the metaphysics that Caputo derides.

Although Keller's explicit political stances—against patriarchy, against racism, for decolonization and ecological thinking—place her work in many ways in conflict with the underlying project of Radical Orthodoxy, it is striking that her project, nonetheless, shares a number of formal parallels with the work of Radical Orthodox thinkers. Like them, she locates the solution to Christianity's woes within premodern Christian thought—and specifically in the paradoxes of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*, which John Milbank describes as the logic of "the analogical, the constitutively relational."[171] Participation and relationality are, for Keller, the solution to Christianity's divisive history, and yet, as should be clear from Radical Orthodoxy's explicitly colonial metaphysics of participation, coloniality is, as Armstrong has argued, "in part, the imposition of participation in subjection and subjectivity within the Western mode of conception."[172] Tellingly, for Keller the discovery of a relational ontology of participation in Cusa means that—although the critiques of Christianity she is responding to originate in large part from outsiders to Christianity and the West—she need not rely on non-Christian thinkers for her transformation of Christian theology but can appeal to a tradition that always already contains all the resources necessary for its own perfection. This is, by and large, a liberal theology that aims for universal inclusion within existing structures, rather than the radical universalism that, Žižek argues, would identify those who are excluded from existing structures with the truth of the whole. In this sense Keller remains within a certain kind of universalizing liberalism: The problem with theology is not so much with the fundamental structures of its thought but with the unduly crusading attitude of its defenders. Negative theology offers us a way to hold fundamentally unchanged theological beliefs more lightly, more gently; the role of weaponized apophaticism in facilitating the colonizing Christian universalism Keller decries remains uninterrogated.

Where Radical Orthodoxy explicitly endorses the colonizing logic of domination and absorption, then, Caputo's and Keller's work functions as the philosophical correlate of third way politics, whose message is, as Žižek argues, "simply that *there is no second way*, no actual *alternative* to global capitalism. . . . The Third Way is simply *global capitalism with a human face*, that is, an attempt to minimize the human costs of the global capitalism machinery, whose functioning is left undisturbed."[173] To adapt Žižek's comparison of Bush to Obama: If Radical Orthodoxy is the empire with

a brutal face, deconstructionist Christianity represents the empire with a human face—but it is still, despite its best intentions, the same empire.[174]

Ontology and Desire

Caputo is clear that his Christian and Derridean hermeneutics exists in direct opposition to "large and overarching theories" and to metaphysics.[175] Yet his own work functions precisely as a large and overarching theory of the nature of human knowledge, the relationship of immanence to transcendence, events to the Event, and the particular to the universal. If there is no God to ground the being of the world or to guarantee its future, then what is the nature of the event that Caputo so vigorously asserts: Where does it come from and what is it? The future "might turn into a monster. It might be awful. It might be worse than what we've got now,"[176] and yet the event is that which we "affirm unconditionally,"[177] and it belongs with "the prophetic," which stands for "everything that's good and just and true."[178] Caputo may be reluctant to articulate an ontology, yet his work constantly gestures toward some sort of account of the nature of being, the relationship between immanence and transcendence, the material and the immaterial. Why is every system of meaning and truth incomplete? Why does the deconstruction of these systems promise more than their construction? Alongside the question of ontology (which haunts Caputo's work throughout) there is the question of desire, which, Caputo acknowledges, drives deconstruction and its quest for transcendence,[179] yet which is not so much accounted for by Caputo's work as taken for granted.

Both Keller's early work, drawing as much on Whitehead as Dionysius, and her later work, shaped increasingly by the ontological turn in continental philosophy, are much more explicitly ontological than either Derrida's or Caputo's; but despite her insistence that relationality is not a good in itself, her focus on a relational, apophatic ontology as the peaceful alternative to ontologies of distinction, certainty, and separation seeks to recover from the deeply ambivalent tradition of negative theology a resource that, if not quite pure in itself can, nonetheless, be purified. Where the peaceful participatory ontology of Radical Orthodoxy leads to an evasion of the transformative potential of theological negation, Keller's peaceful relational ontology fails to grapple either with the weaponized apophaticism at work in Dionysius's work or the relational, processual functioning of empire under late capitalism.

If we are to find a way of remaining faithfully unfaithful to Dionysius's work in a context that differs dramatically from Dionysius's own, we can-

not—as Caputo suggests—evade questions of metaphysics and ontology; nor can we—as Keller suggests—evade ontology's history, the ways in which actually existing Christianity continues to be formed by the decisions of actually existing Christians to actualize certain possibilities and not others. Nor, if we are to face up to the complexity and contradictions of the Dionysian legacy, can we—as Radical Orthodoxy suggests—simply resort to the cataphatic affirmation of Neoplatonic metaphysics stripped of the apophatic elements of rupture and inexplicability that are central to Dionysius's account of both desire and ontology and that work both to establish and disrupt the marriage he effects between Christianity and Neoplatonism.

Is there a way for white Western theologians to respond to the philosophical shift from the divine to the human economy, to give an account of the homology between the problems of creation and sin, to cling both to the traditional affirmation of and the desire to transcend materiality, to confront the reality of political and ecclesiastical power while also providing the resources to resist them, and to acknowledge both the particularity of Christianity and the fecundity of its liaisons with its others? In the subsequent chapters, I argue that Žižek's work, in its attempt to move beyond the impasses of Derrida's philosophical legacy and the antagonisms of Neoplatonism, seeks to bring together questions of ontology and desire around an account of economy that repeats the problematics of both Christian theology and contemporary continental philosophy differently and as such offers one possible way forward for those of us who want to confront the deep antagonisms of our theological inheritance.

3

The Death Drive
From Freud to Žižek

Whereas Jacques Derrida and John Caputo engage in the endless task of attempting to escape ontology, Catherine Keller seeks to find a peaceful and inclusive ontology, and Radical Orthodoxy simply asserts a crude form of the Neoplatonic ontology that Christian theology inherits from Dionysius, Slavoj Žižek seeks to move beyond these positions by repeating the conjunction of ontology and desire differently. As I argue, Žižek's early work extends the Lacanian account of desire to the realm of the social and the political. He subsequently extends this model to material reality as a whole in order to articulate his own version of an erotic ontology. This chapter examines Žižek's account of the relation between desire and the death drive, and gives an account of the ways in which this central Žižekian notion is ontologized and how this model inherits and transforms certain key theological terms, offering resources not for escaping but for confronting the antagonisms of Christian theology.

The Death Drive

Žižek's account of the structure of human desiring underlies most of the key aspects of his thought (including his account of subjectivity and materialism and his discussion of social and political change) and is the locus for his coupling of Jacques Lacan and G. W. F. Hegel, the two thinkers whose ideas most profoundly shape his work. The psychoanalytic notion of the death drive is fundamental to Žižek's understanding of desire. Here

I give a brief overview of Sigmund Freud's and Lacan's accounts of the death drive in order to set out the basic theoretical coordinates within which Žižek works. I follow this with a discussion of Žižek's use and transformation of these concepts. From there, I argue that the shift from desire to drive is what makes possible not only individual but also social and political transformation. Crucially, for Žižek, the shift from desire to drive is the shift from the perpetually failed attempt to obtain the object that will provide satisfaction for the individual or social order to a satisfaction that consists precisely in this repeated failure to attain completeness. I have chosen to use masculine pronouns when discussing the Freudian subject, as Freud himself typically takes the subject to be male by default, but use feminine pronouns to discuss the Lacanian and Žižekian subject, on the grounds that Žižek claims that the tendency of Western thought to take the subject as masculine by default in fact conceals the truth of Cartesian and post-Cartesian subjectivity, which is, on his reading, essentially feminine—that is, structured according to the logic of drive rather than desire (see below, in the section "Žižek on the Death Drive").

Freud on the Death Drive

Where for Dionysius the problem of creation is essentially that of the emergence of multiplicity from the simplicity of the divine, for Freudian psychoanalysis the problem of creation is that of the birth of the individual subject from the original union with the mother. As for Dionysius the problem of creation was inextricably entangled with the questions of desire, return, and death, so for Freud the notion of the death drive came to take a central place in his account of the subject's emergence and desire for satisfaction and completion.

The death drive is first found in Freud's work in the 1920s in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."[1] Here Freud proposed a new concept, the death drive, in an attempt to make sense of his observations of repetitive behavior on the part of his patients that seemed to deliberately repeat unpleasant experiences: the dreams of traumatized individuals that repeated the situation that had originally traumatized them; cases of individuals deliberately re-creating the patterns of previous unhappy relationships in new relationships with their romantic partners or psychoanalysts;[2] and the repetitive game of a young child playing with a cotton reel, which seemed to repeatedly reenact the distressing experience of his mother's departure.[3] All of these examples of compulsive repetition problematized Freud's earlier claim that people are fundamentally driven to seek pleasure. In light of these cases, Freud drew on contemporary biological ideas to argue that all

living things are essentially motivated to seek out earlier states of their being; as inanimate things existed before living things, this ultimately means that all living things are driven to seek their own deaths. Instincts for survival are aimed simply at preserving the organism long enough to allow it to die "in its own fashion."[4] The life instinct is a unifying force that pushes the organism toward self-preservation, whereas the death drive pushes the organism to bring an end to its own life.[5]

Various issues, crucial in the subsequent reception of the notion of the death drive, are clearly visible in Freud's discussions of the drive. First is the question of the relationship of the drive to language and the body. In "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," Freud describes the drive as located on "the frontier between the mental and the somatic."[6] The drive is clearly associated with the body, and yet, as Charles Shepherdson points out, the Freudian body is never simply biological but always the result of the way in which the human organism is caught up into systems of language and meaning.[7] Among the consequences of this complex relationship between the symbolic and the material is a certain ambiguity over what precisely is meant by the claim that grounds Freud's account of the death drive, that "the aim of all life is death."[8] For Žižek, crucially, this means that it is not the "life cycle of generation and corruption" that the death drive "strives to annihilate" but "the symbolic order . . . that regulates social change."[9]

The complex relationship of the death drive to creation and destruction, and to the material and the symbolic, means that it is also entangled with femininity and natality. Because, on Freud's account, it is the separation from the mother that makes possible the subject's consciousness of his distinct identity, and the originary unity with the mother is in some sense the source of the subject's fantasy of wholeness, the death drive shares with the Neoplatonic notion of return to the originating One an ambivalence: This return represents both ultimate satisfaction and the complete dissolution of the subject's identity. The already gendered nature of this philosophical model is only intensified by its more thorough entanglement with actually existing women, both as mothers and as sexual partners. As Grace Jantzen argues, for example, "The drive to return to a prior, tensionless state can be read as a longing for the womb from which one has been ejected."[10]

The functioning of the death drive in Freud, then, is in many ways parallel to the role of eros in Dionysius, albeit within an economy focused around the relationship of the individual subject to the symbolic order (the systems of language and relationships within which he is born) and to his own body, rather than Dionysius's theological economy within which the symbolic and material worlds are fundamentally positioned by their relationship to God. As such, many of the tensions within Dionysius's work

are visible in analogous forms in Freud's account of the death drive. In particular, where Dionysius struggles to negotiate the tension between the desire to affirm particularity with the longing for undifferentiated union with God, for Freud (as Adrian Johnston argues) this tension is located within the subject such that human beings are characterized precisely by the impossible contradiction between their desire for an atemporal satisfaction and the constitutive temporality of human beings, which guarantees "their repeated failure to achieve . . . 'satisfaction.'"[11] These tensions between creation and destruction, life and death, time and timelessness are the fundamental antagonisms that constitute the drive.

Lacan on the Death Drive

Lacan describes his own work as a "return to Freud,"[12] but the nature of this return makes very clear the impossibility of pure repetition; his fidelity to the founding father of his discipline is made possible only by a simultaneous infidelity, by reading Freud "against the grain" or "in reverse."[13] Key to Lacan's unfaithful fidelity to Freud is his focus on the drive as the central notion of Freudian psychoanalysis.

As Bruce Fink argues, the Lacanian subject is in some sense identified with the drive,[14] so in order to explicate Lacan's reading of the Freudian notion of drive it is helpful to begin with a brief overview of the Lacanian account of the creation of the subject. Where for Dionysius creation begins at the moment of a rupture in causality, a gap in the divine economy, for Lacan the subject comes into being out of nothing around a central and constitutive cut. This cut can be described in several ways. It can be understood as the split between the subject's perception of herself as a unified whole and her actual condition of dependence. It can be understood as the split between what the subject asks for and what she receives from her primary caregivers. It can be understood as the contradiction inherent in the subject's entry into language, which simultaneously enables her to have a conscious sense of her own identity and entangles her identity forever with words she did not create, which speak her as much as she speaks them and tie her to structures of relationship and sociality which she does not control. Or it can be understood as the inevitable gap between the core of the subject's being and identity and any attempt to put this essence into words: As Žižek glosses Lacan, this gap *is* the subject: "The subject is *nothing but* the failure point of the process of his symbolic representation."[15]

In all of these Lacanian accounts of the structure of the self, the basic issue is the same: The subject is split, with a gap at the heart of her being. This splitting of the subject is also caught up with the question of the

subject's borders, that is, the gap between the subject and others. Lacan's account of the drive is centrally concerned with this constitutive gap. Lacan's work underwent a number of important shifts over the course of his career which were, at least in part, the result of his changing understanding of the nature of desire and drive. As it is in 1964's *Seminar XI* that Lacan gives the fullest account of his mature theory of the drive, the subsequent discussion focuses on this seminar.

As for Dionysius, the question of the One is central to Lacan's account of the subject, which is also an account of both eros and ontology and, moreover, the point at which the themes of creation and newness, materiality and language, nature and culture, and mysticism converge. But where the One of the Dionysian God is a simple, self-contained unity, the One of the Lacanian subject is "the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of rupture." The splitting of the One is not a problem for Lacan in the same way that it is for Dionysius because the identity of the individual subject is always already ruptured, incomplete, failed, such that the notion of "a closed *one*" is not the necessary starting point of any account of creation but a fantasy, a "mirage."[16] As for Dionysius, though, this rupture or failure that marks the point of creation is also a rupture or failure of causality. Lacan speaks of the initial moment of rupture that brings the subject into being as trauma, that is, as "that which is *unassimilable*," which cannot be contained within the homoeostasis of the pleasure principle and which occurs "*as if by chance*," imposing upon the subject "an apparently accidental origin."[17]

Similarly, the problem of the splitting of the One is for Lacan also the problem of the relationship to the Other, or to others. Crucially, the split is in many ways a split within the subject. On Lacan's account the game of the small child with the cotton reel is a response to the child's separation from his mother; and yet what is lost is not the mother herself but "a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his."[18] Yet it is precisely this split that makes possible the subject's relationship with others, marking the point at which language enters her from outside and irrevocably shapes the structure of her being. Lacan explicitly relates this question of the splitting of the One to ontology. Speaking about the unconscious as the gap that grounds the subject, Lacan says that "when speaking of this gap one is dealing with an ontological function"; and yet the gap of the unconscious itself is "*pre-ontological* . . . neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealised."[19] In Lacan's earlier work, this ontology of the subject is related to Sartre's account of the essential nothingness of the subject; in his later work it becomes increasingly connected to the notion of the drive, which is neither psychological nor biological but ontological.[20]

In his elaboration of the drive, Lacan gives a name to the small piece of the subject that is lost and yet remains the subject: He calls it the *objet petit a*, the object which is the small-a *autre*/other of the subject to the big-A *Autre*/Other which is in Lacan's work the name for the symbolic order. Lacan traces the vicissitudes of the drive: The pressure of the drive is "a mere tendency to discharge" but is not—like the pressure of biological needs such as hunger and thirst—rhythmic and changing, but constant and unrelenting.[21] The drive aims at satisfaction, but this satisfaction cannot be provided by the object (which Lacan here equates with the *objet petit a*); in fact, Lacan says, quoting Freud, the object of the drive "*is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference.*"[22] The satisfaction of the drive comes, rather, from its own movement around the object. The source of the drive is in four erogenous zones of the body that are characterized by their "rim-like structure": the lips, the anus, the eyes, and the ears, all located at the points of the body where the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other are regulated.[23] The drives circulate, emerging from the body at its rim, moving around the *objet petit a*, the part of the body which is me-and-yet-not-me, and returning, their path described by Lacan with reference to paradoxical geometrical structures such as the Möbius strip, whose "outside continues its inside,"[24] or the torus, whose "peripheral exteriority and . . . central exteriority constitute only one single region."[25] The *objet petit a*, then, is to be thought of in terms of "extimacy," a term coined by Lacan to describe an "intimate exteriority,"[26] and is itself paradoxical—although it is "simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied . . . by any object,"[27] it is particularly associated with the breasts, the faeces, the gaze and the voice, all of which are characterized by two things: first, that they "serve no function," and second that they are associated with the negotiation of the boundaries of the subject's body and of her relationships with others.[28] The *objet petit a* is both the stand-in for the unknown desire of the Other and for the piece of the subject that was lost in the originary loss on which the subject's being is founded. It purports to be "what the subject wants," though it is really just a contingent object that happens to fit the necessary criteria for triggering the subject's desire, which is really to return to the fictional "lost unity." But again, as for Dionysius, so too for Lacan complete union is effectively indistinguishable from death and the dissolution of the individual; so the *objet petit a* is simultaneously desired and feared, "both the object of anxiety, and the final irreducible reserve of libido."[29]

The drive stands in complex relation to desire. Although both are essentially caught up with and constituted by the symbolic order, with language and the way that it internally ruptures the individual subject, and

with the *objet petit a*, which is the cause of desire and the object of the drive, the precise nature of the relation between desire and drive is one of the points on which Lacan's interpreters most clearly diverge. For Adrian Johnston in *Time Driven*, the lost object was once possessed by the subject and this initial complete satisfaction is drive; but the intrinsic temporality of the subject's experience of the world means that this originary completeness can never be regained. Desire, as temporalized drive, can never be satisfied, but dissatisfaction is the source of human freedom.[30] Other Lacanians are more hopeful. Bruce Fink, for example, suggests that, for the later Lacan, it is the drives, which "pursue their own course without any regard for what is appropriate or approved of," which are both constitutive of subjectivity and also the locus of subjective transformation: The goal of analysis is "*to allow the analysand finally to be able to enjoy his or her enjoyment*" by teaching desire "how to keep its mouth shut and let enjoyment prevail."[31] Again, the drive is the full satisfaction that exists before the subject's entanglement in language and desire means that the quest for satisfaction comes to be mediated by the symbolic order; but for Fink it is possible to regain this lost satisfaction. What readings of the Lacanian distinction between desire and drive consistently maintain, however, is that both pertain essentially to questions of the origin of the subject, of teleology (this is, for Lacan, primarily the question of the goal of analysis), and of the relationship between the individual subject and others.

As Adrian Johnston argues, Lacan has often been taken for a structuralist, denying the existence of the body outside language or at least the possibility of accessing it.[32] But the reality is more complex, particularly in terms of Lacan's account of the drive. Questions of materiality and human embodiment pervade Lacan's work and are particularly evident in his discussion of the drive. The drive is persistently associated (by Lacan, even more so than by Freud) with the body's boundaries, the frontier between the body and the world, inside and outside. The topology of the drive as rim is, Lacan says, a rearticulation of "the function of the cut," the way that the subject "emerges from the structure of the signifier," the way that the subject is "defined as the effect of the signifier."[33] The drives that mark the boundaries of the body are brought into being by the signifier, and their rotation is determined by the subject's particular history, by the "montage" of contingent symbolic associations that form the core of the subject's particular identity, which "constantly jumps, without transition, between the most heterogeneous images," related to one another "only by means of grammatical references."[34] Inside and outside, material and symbolic are, then, constantly intertwined in Lacan's account of human embodiment and subjectivity.

Žižek on the Death Drive

Where Lacan seeks to be unfaithfully faithful to Freud, Žižek describes his project as seeking to "bugger Hegel with Lacan," to bring together Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics in such a way as to produce a "monstrous Hegel."[35] At the heart of this coupling is Žižek's elaboration of the difference between desire and drive, and the claim that drive, rather than desire, is the foundation of ethical and political transformation. Although Žižek's work relies profoundly—as I argue in the rest of this chapter—on particular claims about the nature of individual desire and the structure of the material world, it is politics—the structure of human society—to which his account of eros and ontology is most fundamentally and frequently directed.[36]

The key move that Žižek makes in his early work is to elaborate Lacan's account of the structure of individuals and social relations into a critique of political ideology.[37] Žižek identifies a structural homology between Lacan's claim that the subject *is* its own failure and Hegel's account of the progress of knowledge and the social order according to which "every attempt at rational totalization fails [but] this failure is the very impetus of the 'dialectical progress.'"[38] Like Lacan's individual, Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian society comes into being around a central antagonism at its heart, which cleaves it so decisively that it can never be whole, harmonious, self-contained, or self-identical. This means that "every process of identification conferring on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail."[39] Like the Lacanian subject, the structure of signification—meaning, law, and order—within a society is founded on a decision that cannot be justified by the system of meaning-making that rests on it. The foundation stone of law is always itself illegal—or, as Žižek glosses G. K. Chesterton, "Law is the greatest transgression, the defender of the Law the greatest rebel."[40] Every society has its own form of Lacan's fundamental fantasy, the framework that papers over the crack at its heart: This, says Žižek, is the true nature of ideology.[41] Societies gain a sense of unity by constituting themselves around a "sublime object of ideology," an object like Coca-Cola, the Marlboro man, "God," "Country," "Party" or "Class," which, though meaningless in themselves, come to be the anchoring-points for narratives of social identity and unity.[42] Yet this sublime object that stands in for social harmony also has an obverse, an abject figure that is taken as the contingent barrier to the full realization of social harmony. Žižek's favored example of this move is anti-Semitism: If it weren't for the Jews, this fantasy goes, society would be harmonious and peaceful.[43] Fantasy is thus "a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account

in advance."[44] For Žižek, the fundamental antagonism at the heart of each and every society is always fundamentally the antagonism of class. This irreconcilable antagonism—this perpetual failure to achieve wholeness—propels historical development, as societies repeatedly reconstitute themselves in an attempt to resolve the irresolvable. Hegel's dialectical thought is, for Žižek, the key mediator between the Lacanian account of subjectivity and the Marxist account of history: Hegel depicts human history and culture as a series of attempts to overcome the gap between subject and object, a split that, on Žižek's reading, is internal to the subject.

On Žižek's account, ideology functions according to the logic of desire. To be human, to be a "being of language," is to be constitutively dissatisfied; and this constitutive dissatisfaction is transformed into "*a desire for unsatisfaction*."[45] Like the desiring subject of both Dionysius and Derrida, the Žižekian subject longs for completion, for success, for the acquisition of the object of desire; and as for both Dionysius and Derrida, this completeness, were it obtained, would represent the death of the subject or the dissolution of the social order. Yet Žižek puts a distinctive Lacanian gloss onto this account of the longing for completeness: The object of desire is not accessible in any mystical dissolution of the self, which is nearly indistinguishable from death (as is the case for one reading of Dionysius exemplified by Thomas A. Carlson),[46] nor is it impossible to attain and yet incessantly anticipated (as for Derrida). Rather, it is inaccessible because the subject or the social order deliberately seeks not to access it. The subject works out a way to "avoid the impasse constitutive of desire by transforming the inherent *impossibility* of its satisfaction into *prohibition*." Individuals and societies convince themselves that they would be able to attain satisfaction if only it were not for the rules of the social order in which they live or the abjected figure who represents the hindrance to social harmony.[47]

Even in his earliest work, Žižek sets up desire in opposition to the death drive.[48] Žižek talks about the death drive not only in terms of the lack at the heart of the subject but also in terms of an excess. In striking parallel to the classical Christian account of creation ex nihilo, the traumatic cut that brings the subject into being is inexplicable: It cannot be accounted for in the terms of the symbolic order that comes into being with the subject in an attempt to bring harmonious order after the initial violent splitting. As such it is not just a lack in meaning but also an excess over meaning.[49] Žižek talks about this cut in Kantian terms as the "nonpathological" moral act." Because it comes before the systems of law and meaning, it cannot be explained or justified in those terms, and so it has the form both of the Kantian moral act—done purely out of duty, with-

out regard for its consequences or meaning—and also of the Kantian notion of radical Evil—which again is done purely for its own sake.[50] Thus, the human world of meaning, consequences, and teleology is underpinned by a meaningless act performed purely for its own sake, without regard for its consequences. The name for the teleological world of meaning, consequences, and teleology, the quest for success, is desire; the name for the meaningless, compulsive, purposelessness that underlies it, the celebration of failure, is the death drive. Desire is economic; drive is that which both ruptures and founds economy, the condition of both possibility and impossibility of any system of meaning. The death drive is thus both terrible and purely ethical. This account of the constitution of reality also has consequences for Žižek's understanding of time and history: Linear, teleological desire, aiming consciously at the reintegration of the lost object and unconsciously at its endless deferral, is associated with time and with historical progress; circular, repetitious drive, which simply circles around the hole at the center of being is associated with eternity.

The notion of the "second death" (taken from de Sade via Lacan) plays a crucial role in Žižek's theorization of the death drive. For Žižek, the first death is "natural death," straightforward biological death, and the second death is "absolute death," symbolic death, where a person "dies" socially, the social account of their life being neatly wrapped up.[51] The two deaths do not necessarily occur simultaneously, or even in the same order. It is possible to "die" symbolically before dying biologically: This is what happens to Antigone in Sophocles' play of the same name, whose insistence on burying her brother in the face of the law means that she excludes herself from the symbolic community, dying symbolically before she does so biologically. Traditional horror-story figures such as zombies, ghosts, and vampires, however, die biologically without dying symbolically. In both cases, there is an "undead" space between the two deaths, which Žižek identifies with "the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of the symbolic order."[52] This space between the two deaths is, therefore, associated both with the death drive and with the possibility of social and political transformation. The occupant of this space can be either sublime (like Antigone or the Christian saint) or horrific (like the zombie). At this point, where the traumatic core of history and culture is directly confronted, it is possible to radically disrupt the symbolic world that attempts to conceal the trauma, the point of failure at its heart. Crucially, although Žižek never acknowledges this, the place between the two deaths is also the position occupied by the slave, according to Orlando Patterson, whose *Slavery and Social Death* argues that slavery involves three characteristics that mark the enslaved person as socially dead: coercion, natal alienation (the inability to

form socially recognized kinship relations), and generalized dishonor. As I show, this oversight on Žižek's part is not incidental but indicative of broader failures in his work to reckon with the central and constitutive role of slavery (and the anti-blackness with which it is coextensive) in constituting the European legacy that Žižek valorizes. As Patterson argues, "Slavery is associated not only with the development of advanced economies but with the emergence of several of the most profoundly cherished ideals and beliefs in Western history."[53]

Žižek uses the language of persistence and inertia to talk about drive in terms of a position that a person might take within the symbolic order. The Christian saint, for example, "occupies the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object"—that is, the place of the object that promises both the completion and the dissolution of the symbolic order—and "enacts no ritual, he conjures nothing, he just persists in his inert presence. . . . In her persistence, Antigone is a saint."[54] Yet this passive insistence is precisely the point of the act that transforms the social order. It is "the opposite of the symbolic order: the possibility of the 'second death,' the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted."[55] It is historical materialism in Walter Benjamin's sense, able to "*arrest*, to *immobilize* historical movement and to *isolate* the detail from its historical totality,"[56] suspending "the linear 'flow of time'"[57] and creating a "point of rupture which cuts into historical continuity."[58] It is an act of "withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,'"[59] an act of "annihilation, of wiping out" that undoes the symbolic order, creating a "traumatic incision" that makes it possible to reorder the social world.[60] It is the withdrawal from the social order that makes change possible, and this shift corresponds to the process that takes place at the end of analysis, where the analysand realizes that the analyst does not have the answer to her questions: "His desire has no support in the Other. . . . The authorisation of his desire can come only from himself."[61] It is only when the subject ceases to look to the Other for the answer to the question of desire, seeks to worry about what the Other wants from her, that she is able to move from desire to drive and hence to the transformation of society. This transformation is also the shift from desire as the striving for "impossible fullness" to the drive that "turns failure into triumph"; in the drive, Žižek argues, "The very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own."[62]

In sum, then, for Žižek the social order is structured according to the same pattern as the individual consciousness, with a traumatic gap at the heart of its being. Both subject and society are structured as "a failed

Whole."[63] Fantasy covers over this gap with a sublime representative of social harmony, which promises success, and the abjection of a scapegoat, which is blamed for the impossibility of harmony, for society's failure. It is the way that ideology engages the desire of its subjects that makes it so powerful and intransigent, and it is only drive—the monomaniacal, obsessive re-marking of the trauma at the heart of society—that makes it possible for individuals to withdraw from the social order and so to re-work it.

The move from desire to drive is the shift from the failed attempt to attain impossible Oneness, the subjective or social form of the Neoplatonic return to the One, to failure *as* the goal, to the celebration of incompleteness and imperfection. Žižek's early work suggests that liberal democracy can function according to something like this logic of drive,[64] but as the cracks in this position become increasingly evident, he turns to the more fundamental question of "how a social order is founded in the first place" and this, in turn, entails a turn to ontology.[65]

Ontology and the Death Drive

Žižek's work can be divided into two major periods, with a transitional period taking place around 1993–96.[66] The transition from the first to the second period of Žižek's work is marked by an intense engagement with Schelling, quantum physics, and (Badiou's version of) Christian theology. During this transition, Žižek moves away from support for democracy and toward the desire for a more radical or revolutionary disruption of the existing order and—crucially—begins to connect his account of the nature of human desiring, both individual and social, to an account of the nature of the material world as such. Žižek's account of desire and drive, then, leads him eventually to develop an account of eros and ontology that, I argue, remains faithful both to many of the productive tensions that have characterized the Christian tradition in Dionysius's wake and also to some of the more troubling aspects of this Dionysian legacy.

In attempting to give an account of individual and social transformation, Žižek is ultimately driven by the logic of his own thought to address the question of the structure of material reality as such. In doing so he repeats the characteristic move of Dionysius's work, bringing together an account of human being and desiring with an account of the structure of the material world more broadly. For Dionysius, everything that is begins in the One, emerging into multiplicity and difference before ultimately returning to the God from whom it came, a process driven throughout by the eros of both God and the created world. For Žižek, however, everything that is begins in a nothingness which is not-quite-One, driven to be

fruitful and multiply not by desire, the impossible longing for completeness, but by the drive that insists on and rejoices in failure, in antagonism and incompleteness. The rest of this chapter explores Žižek's account of the ontology of the death drive, exploring the ways in which Žižek's ontology of failure allows him to reconfigure the central Dionysian problematics of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universality.

The Indivisible Remainder is a key text in Žižek's move toward articulating the relationship between the nature of human desire and the nature of the material world as such, and it contains Žižek's first significant engagement both with Schelling and with quantum physics.[67] The combination of Schelling and quantum physics enables Žižek to argue that the whole of material reality shares the Lacanian-Hegelian structure of the ruptured whole.[68] Žižek says in the introduction to *The Indivisible Remainder* that the true problem of politics is "not how can we undermine the existing order, but *how does an Order emerge out of disorder in the first place?* Which inconsistencies and splittings allow the edifice of Order to maintain itself?"[69] What Schelling and quantum physics have in common, for Žižek, is precisely this model of a fundamentally disordered world out of which emerges "an inconsistent, fragile balance."[70] This is not the first time that this model has been hinted at in Žižek's work, but it is the first time it is so clearly described. Much of his subsequent work is devoted to the elaboration of this ontology.

What material reality has in common with the individual and society is essentially the structuring role of the drive. In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek asserts that his bringing together of Lacan, Hegel, and Schelling into what Adrian Johnston calls a "transcendental materialism"[71] rests on the recognition of something that other versions of materialism overlook: "a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive." The drive is not only the key to understanding materiality, Žižek claims, but also "the very core of modern subjectivity," to what Žižek describes as Hegel's "underlying problem . . . that of love."[72] After an intense engagement with Schelling in *Indivisible Remainder,* it becomes clear that, for Žižek, Schelling functioned as a "vanishing mediator," making it possible for Žižek to return to Hegel and read him differently: It is not Schelling but Hegel who represents "the peak of the entire movement of German Idealism." Although both "the middle Schelling and the mature Hegel" described an inconsistency in the ground of being itself,[73] only Hegel made the connection between ontology and epistemology, transposing the inherent limitation of human knowledge into an inherent limitation of materiality itself.[74] For Hegel, Žižek argues, everything comes from nothing; although "this nothing is not the Oriental or mystical Void of eternal peace,

but the nothingness of a pure gap," the rupturing of the economy of material being (as I discuss in more detail later, this reference to the "Orient" is indicative of broader problems with Žižek's appropriation of Hegel's racist and colonial account of religion).[75] The central concern of Hegelian dialectics is, Žižek argues, "to demonstrate how every phenomenon, everything that happens, fails in its own way, implies a crack, antagonism, imbalance in its very heart."[76]

Crucial to Žižek's ontology of drive is the claim that materiality can be self-generating because effects always exceed their causes. Žižek draws here on quantum physics to illustrate and support his claim, citing as an example of this principle the electron, whose "mass consists only of the surplus generated by its movement, as though we're dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself."[77] Moreover, Žižek argues, this excess of the effect over its cause leads to a strange (psychoanalytic or Benjaminian) temporality in which an effect retroactively becomes its own cause. Again, here Žižek invokes contemporary science, particularly the work of biologists such as Lynn Margulis and Francisco Varela, whose account of autopoiesis holds that biological organisms "bootstrap" themselves into existence by (to use Hegelian language) positing their own presuppositions. It is the temporal loop involved in autopoiesis that gives entities their independent ontological existence. Everything that exists is structured along the lines of the ruptured economy; everything emerges, in a Hegelian way, from the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable contradiction, the failure at the heart of all being, and as each thing comes to ground itself via the paradoxical temporal loop that governs drive, it comes to exist independently.[78] In contrast to the classical philosophical assumption that unrealized potential is a mark of ontological imperfection, Žižek suggests that "incompleteness is in a way *higher than completion*";[79] newness and emergence are not ruptures with but ruptures within the existing order. This is an ontology of failure in which "Things 'materially exist' not when they meet certain notional requirements, but when they *fail* to meet them—material reality is as such a sign of imperfection."[80]

What Žižek arrives at, then, is a three-tier ontology in which everything that exists is structured as an intrinsically incomplete economy, organized around three key antagonisms: the antagonism of the material world (quantum incompleteness), the antagonism of the individual self (gender and sexuality), and the antagonism of the social order (class struggle). Although—as I argue—this ontology is in many ways extremely compelling and productive, it also, in certain crucial respects, fails.[81] First, there is no space in Žižek's thought for thinking race except as a displacement

of class struggle. This means that he fails to take seriously the importance of racialization and white supremacy within contemporary politics, and fails to recognize the ways in which his own work inherits and repeats white supremacist, orientalist, colonial, and racist tropes. Second, Žižek offers no framework for theorizing the interaction of these three ontological tiers. This means that, for example, gender and sexuality are only ever important for him insofar as they function to constitute individuals as individuals, in relation to their own desire, never as, for example, issues of class struggle, as related to questions of the division of labor and the distribution of wealth. Third, although Žižek often recognizes in some sense that each of these ontological tiers is itself internally diverse—so the development of the material world, for example, is driven both by the dialectics of quantum uncertainty but also by the dialectics of individual biological organisms bootstrapping themselves into existence—this ontological complexity is never properly theorized. Žižek never discusses what it might mean, for example, to think the relationship between the aspects of the material world described by quantum physics and those described by biology. Again, the problems with this incompletely theorized ontology become clearest at the political level, where Žižek's insistence that each society is driven forward by its own internal antagonisms coupled with his Eurocentric view of world politics means that (as I have argued in more detail elsewhere) he cannot imagine that non-European societies might have their own dialectical logic of development.[82]

Freedom and the Death Drive

Žižek's ontology of the death drive, like Dionysius's Neoplatonic ontology of eros, has numerous consequences for the way that he thinks about the key themes of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universality. Because of the language of necessity and compulsion that characterizes Žižek's discussions of the drive, and because of the traditional association of Marx and Hegel with a view of history as the inevitable unfolding of a necessary process, it can seem as though the notion of the drive is simply a denial of freedom. Yet the possibility of freedom is one of the reasons why Žižek's account of materiality as a ruptured economy is so important to him. Freedom, failure, and the drive are entangled with one another. For Žižek, "*Trieb* is freedom—or, at a minimum, it is the contingent material condition of possibility for the emergence of full-fledged autonomy."[83] Much as with eros for Dionysius, the death drive enables Žižek to reconcile freedom and necessity by articulating "a state in which activity and passivity,

being-active and being-acted-upon, harmoniously overlap (the paradigmatic case, of course, is the mystical experience of Love)."[84]

Because the drive is a feature of the material, the individual, and the social, it functions in different ways at different levels. At all levels there is a sense that it simply is how things function. At the material level, physical laws, processes, and entities come into being according to the logic of the drive. In *Less Than Nothing* Žižek argues that the Higgs particle can be read as the *objet petit a*, "the cause disturbing the symmetry of the vacuum . . . the cause of the passage from nothing (the vacuum, the void of pure potentialities) to something (actual different particles and forces)."[85] At the individual level, the *objet petit a* is "a 'necessary by-product' of the instinctual body getting caught in the web of the symbolic order"[86] such that "the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition."[87] In contrast to desire, which is "an intentional attitude, drive is something in which the subject is caught."[88] Similarly, the drive can be seen to function at the level of the social: Although the symbolic order comes into being as a result of the actions of individual human choices, it comes to have a logic of its own, to exist as an entity which is totally dependent on individual humans continuing to sustain it in being, yet which also has existence independent of them. Thus, for example, Žižek argues that capitalism is propelled by drive, "the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction" such that "the capitalist drive belongs to no definite individual."[89]

Yet there is another crucial sense in which for Žižek the drive is not simply something that happens. Žižek opposes his account of freedom both to "scientific naturalism (brain self-conscious, Darwinism . . .)" and to "discursive historicism (Foucault, deconstruction)."[90] Contra scientific naturalism, the material world cannot be understood as a closed system of causation within which perfect predictability would be theoretically possible. Contra discursive historicism, although it may be that every disruption to the system arises from the internal logic of that system, this does not mean that every disruption is already accounted for, already contained within the system. Existing networks of power can give birth to the cause of their own destruction, to that which will exceed, transform, or overcome them. Like the subject and the symbolic order, materiality works, for Žižek, on the feminine logic of the non-all, where effects always exceed their causes. It is in this non-all gap in the economy of causation that freedom is located: Every effect has its causes, but it can never be entirely accounted for in terms of those causes.[91] This logic of excessive causation does not only account for human freedom but also means that human freedom itself

is excessive: "We created our world, but it overwhelms us, we cannot grasp and control it."[92]

In terms of the subject and the subject's freedom, this means that the act that brings the subject into being, while in one sense the free choice of the subject, is also a choice the subject makes before he or she is able to consciously decide for himself or herself. This "founding gesture of consciousness, the act of decision by means of which I 'choose myself'" is a "vanishing mediator," the traumatic point on which the subject's attempt to fully grasp herself or himself will forever founder and fail.[93] Precisely because the act is a break with causality, with teleology, with existing systems of meaning and materiality, it is irrational, unjustifiable, both an excess over and a gap within existing economies. It is a moment of creation ex nihilo, and for this reason exists—as with eros for Dionysius—as a paradoxical conjunction of freedom and necessity. It is a forced choice, a free act that can be undertaken only when it is treated as an inevitability. The act, for Žižek, involves the "identification of fate and freedom . . . assuming one's Destiny as the highest (albeit forced) free choice."[94] The way in which the subject becomes self-grounding, the way in which she or he comes to retroactively posit her or his own presuppositions is by the free enactment of her or his own fate.[95] Where for Dionysius eros functions to hold together freedom and necessity in both divine and human natures, for Žižek it is the death drive that plays this role.

Where for Dionysius the structural similarities between God's free, inexplicable act of creation and humankind's incomprehensible decision to sin bring creation and fall into uncomfortable proximity with each other, Žižek's ontology of drive responds to this problem by asserting that in the drive, good and evil paradoxically coincide. In "the pagan Cosmos," Žižek argues, the Good is understood in terms of homoeostasis, "cosmic balance," a hierarchy of being within which every member has and knows their place (this is, of course, one possible reading of the Neoplatonically tinged accounts of created hierarchy in the works of Dionysius, Aquinas, and numerous other Christian theologians). Evil, by contrast, is the interruption of this cosmic balance, "the excessive assertion of one Principle to the detriment of others."[96] And it is precisely evil in this sense which Žižek understands to be the basis of human freedom: "The very existence of subjectivity involves the 'false,' 'abstract' choice of Evil, of Crime—that is, an excessive 'unilateral' gesture which throws the harmonious Order of the Whole out of balance . . . an arbitrary choice of something trivial and insubstantial."[97] Žižek relates this discussion of evil to Kant's notions of radical evil and ethical duty, which (Žižek argues) are, despite Kant's own intentions, formally identical.[98] Both involve a decision made for nonpatho-

logical reasons, which means that the decision is treated as an end in itself rather than a means to an end: Both run, then, on the logic of drive rather than desire. But Žižek also takes the formal parallel between the Christian doctrines of creation and fall to mean that "Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of Being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others."[99]

For Žižek, then, it is desire rather than drive that represents a retreat from ethics. While drive *is*—it continues to circulate, regardless of subjective attitudes toward it—this does not mean that subjective attitudes are of no consequence. Much of the thrust of Žižek's thought is toward an account of what it means for human beings to shift their subjective position so as to encourage and enable transformation to occur. The paradigm for this shift is the end of analysis in the Lacanian system. The early Lacan holds that analysis ends at the point of subjectivization, which is the moment at which the subject "integrates into his symbolic universe . . . the meaningless contingency of his destiny."[100] On this account, analysis ends when the analysand is able to offer a fully meaningful account of her life; to understand previously inexplicable phenomena such as dreams or symptoms, and to give a coherent account of herself. But for the later Lacan, analysis ends at the point of subjective destitution: when the analysand "has to accept that the traumatic encounters which traced out the itinerary of his life were utterly contingent and indifferent, that they bear no 'deeper message.'"[101] This point of subjective destitution marks the end of the analysand's guilt, because it marks the point at which she comes to realize and acknowledge that there is no big Other: There is no external agency to pass judgment on the analysand or give meaning to her life. This is a Sartrean ethics of freedom in which there is nothing outside of the subject's own free choice which can be blamed either for her failure to do her duty (the subject cannot say, "I know I should do it, but . . . I'm simply too weak, such is my nature") or, on the other hand, for the actions he or she takes in order to fulfill her duty (nor can the subject say "the moral law imposed that act on me as my unconditional duty!").[102]

In all of this, the fundamental issue is that of the relationship between the subject and the Other. The problematic of drive and desire corresponds to the traditional Idealist reading of Hegel, which Žižek critiques: The idea that the final goal of human development is the integration of all reality into the single subject, such that the subject realizes that the subject is the object, that everything that exists is born out of his own self-relationship. Insofar as it is an ethical stance rather than simply an ontological reality, drive is concerned with how to resist the temptation of attempting to absorb the Other into the self. By refusing the temptation to answer the

question of what the Other wants with her own fantasy, the subject who fully assumes drive refuses to make the Other into a mere projection of her own split subjectivity. Žižek says that "it is love, the encounter of the Two, which 'transubstantiates' idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper."[103] It is precisely this process that is supposed to take place in analysis: The analysand first treats the analyst as the stand-in for the big Other, but comes eventually to realize that she alone is responsible for her own desire, that the analyst does not hold the secret to the meaning of her identity. In circling around the point of failure within herself, which corresponds to the failure within the Other, the analysand who successfully "traverses the fantasy" comes to embody a form of subjectivity that allows the Other to exist as Other, as an enigma even to itself, as a split being that can never be fully integrated into the symbolic universe. In ethical terms, this means that the subject must take responsibility for her own actions, without reference to an external standard of Law, thus escaping from the "dialectic of Law and transgression" and from guilt.[104]

Unlike Dionysius, then, Žižek both recognizes and fully endorses the formal parallel between God's excessive, unjustifiable act of creation and the excessive, unjustifiable human act of sin, positioning Christianity firmly on the side of excess and rupture rather than harmony and union. To be human is to be free, to be creative; and this freedom is not something at odds with the harmonious functioning of the material world but arises precisely from the intrinsically ruptured nature of materiality itself. We are free, Žižek says, "because there is a lack in the Other, because the substance out of which we grew and on which we rely is inconsistent, barred, failed."[105] Whereas desire hankers after an impossible harmony, the death drive—like the Christian God—seeks division, multiplicity, and difference.

When speaking of freedom, Žižek often makes reference to the "emancipatory" core of Christian theology. The history of Christianity, he argues, is one long reaction against this radical emancipatory core: "All the great theologians embraced the task of making Christianity compatible with a hierarchical social body."[106] This emancipatory possibility reemerges in "the universalist/secular project of modernity," in which, for example, the French Revolution emerges as an attempt to claim the participation of the French working class in the vision of the free, universal citizen-subject of liberty, equality, and fraternity. But this claim is a betrayal of Žižek's own dialectical logic. If the core of Christianity is its egalitarian vision of a community in which there is no longer male nor female, Jew nor Greek, but oneness and freedom in Christ; if the core of European modernity is that there is no longer male nor female, lord nor serf, but oneness and freedom in our shared humanity; then the properly Žižekian move is not to seek the lib-

eral inclusion of more and more people within this sphere of freedom but to recognize that the truth of freedom is the coincidence of opposites. The oneness of all in Christ is made possible by the constitutive exclusion of non-Christians—Jews, heretics, Muslims.[107] The oneness of all within Enlightenment humanism is made possible by the constitutive exclusion of what were considered nonhumans: Black people, slaves. "Without the gratuitous violence" of slavery, Frank B. Wilderson III argues, "the great emancipatory discourses of modernity—marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, sexual liberation, and the ecology movement—discourses predicated on grammars of suffering and whose constituent elements are exploitation and alienation, might not have developed."[108] A more faithfully Žižekian reading of political freedom would affirm the dialectical identity of freedom and slavery; perhaps something closer to Jared Sexton's discussion of natal alienation (the total destruction of the enslaved person's ties of kinship, a form of social death that locates the enslaved person between Žižek's two deaths) as characteristic of slavery and therefore also of Blackness: "What I am interested in is how *we are deracinated, and you can be too.*"[109]

Materiality and the Death Drive

Žižek's materialist ontology can usefully be understood in opposition both to the Christian appropriation of Neoplatonism and to the ontotheology whose critique lies at the heart of much contemporary philosophical engagement with apophatic theology. For Žižek, the material world is not a less perfect emanation from the perfectly simple principle of all being, such that distinction and multiplicity are marks of the created order's inadequacy, nor are materiality or the body weights that drag us down and hold us back from grasping the truth of being. Where Christian Neoplatonism begins with the all-encompassing One, tending to see creation as a fall away from the perfect simplicity of the One and redemption as the dissolution of differentiation and materiality back into Oneness, Žižek begins with an inconsistent Nothing, the emergence of materiality ex nihilo, imagining redemption—insofar as he imagines it at all—as a fragile work of construction. But Žižek's argument is that this constructive materialism is, in fact, the only properly Christian ontology; and here he cites G. K. Chesterton's assertion that "all modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls." (Although I agree with Žižek that his materialism really is a properly Christian ontology, inasmuch as anything at all can be said to be properly Christian, nonetheless, as I argue below, Žižek's claim that *only*

Christianity can give rise to such an ontology is both white supremacist and internally inconsistent.)[110] Nor is Žižek's materialism an ontotheology in the Heideggerian sense, seeking to ground Being itself in or on the divine nature such that God comes to function as metaphysical guarantee for the material world, as first mover or the ground of being. Instead, Žižek seeks to think materiality as something that comes to be self-grounding, which emerges out of nothing and comes to function as its own ground. This is, as John Milbank suggests, a form of nihilism,[111] albeit one that both describes itself specifically in relation to the Christian notion of creation ex nihilo and views nothingness as intrinsically unstable and therefore productive.

Where both Christian Neoplatonism in the Dionysian tradition and ontotheology oppose transcendence to immanence, Žižek folds the two into each other such that transcendence is immanence's own excess over itself, in which materiality transcends itself on account of its own internal rupture. In place of an account of the subject that contrasts the finitude of the material world with the infinity of that which transcends it, Žižek offers an account of materiality in which "the condition of the possibility of identity is, at the same time, its condition of impossibility; the assertion of self-identity is based on its opposite, on an irreducible remainder that truncates every identity."[112] In contrast to more static, extrinsic accounts of transcendence, Žižek's model for thinking the relationship between the real and the ideal places greater emphasis on time, seeing the development of the material world as the locus of the emergence of genuine newness, real freedom, and meaningful contingency. Everything is at stake in the progression of the ruptured economy of materiality. The world is also positioned as something that allows genuinely distinct beings to emerge and, at least potentially, to continue to diversify, in contrast to the tendency of both Christian Neoplatonism and ontotheology to see everything as tending toward sameness and identity. Things come to be their own origin, their own foundation in a way that, for Žižek, is potentially both creative and liberative, destructive and traumatic. This offers the opportunity to think love in terms of the drive, as a relating to otherness in terms of what it is in itself rather than the role it plays in our own narcissistic self-relation. This account of the nature of materiality also means that, for Žižek, nature is intrinsically revolutionary, inherently messianic in its structure, necessarily unfinished, incomplete.[113]

Žižek's account of human embodiment similarly sets itself up against the traditional Christian tendency to see the body as less real or less important than the intellect. Žižek's account of the body is perhaps best understood in the context of debates about the nature of the relationship between

human biology and symbolically formed subjectivity. Readings of Lacan tend to fall into two camps on this issue: One reading affirms the essential harmoniousness of life before the entry of the signifier, seeing the symbolic order as something that breaks into the peacefulness of mere biological life, forever unsettling it; another reading takes the complex interrelation of body and language in the human subject to exemplify the basic structure of reality itself. This debate is isomorphic with the Christian theological antagonism so clearly present in Dionysius's work around the question of the body and the soul, which is in turn complexly entangled with the question of the relationship between God and the world. Is the body a created good to be affirmed, or indelibly marked by sin such that we ought to deny it? If embodiment and changeability are constitutive of human being but not of God, what does it mean to seek to become more like God if not to become less embodied and less changeable? But the transposition of the economic problem that makes individual subjects and their relation to the world the problem instead of God and God's relationship to the world means that it is not, as for Dionysius, language-and/as- embodiment that divides and distinguishes one thing from another and ultimately from God, but language that divides and distinguishes one human being from another and each individual human being from himself or herself. Language is what separates and divides us both from the (m)Other and also from our own self, from our originary harmonious relationship with our body.

In contrast to Lacanians such as Adrian Johnston who claims that, for psychoanalysis at least, it is the realm of the signifier, of language, that is knowable, and that the body may be only inferred or dimly grasped through the gaps or conflicts within the symbolic,[114] for Žižek the structure of subjectivity reflects the structure of the world as such, and both body and mind function as part of the same ruptured economy. Žižek does at times draw on the language of the symbolic order as that which disrupts the body. In a reading of Lacan's graphs of sexuation in *Sublime Object*, Žižek says that "the pre-symbolic 'substance,' the body as materialised, incarnated enjoyment, becomes enmeshed in the signifier's network. . . . The body survives as dismembered, mortified."[115] But Žižek also suggests, in the same passage, that it is language that is disrupted by the body:

> As soon as the field of the signifier is penetrated by enjoyment it becomes inconsistent, porous, perforated—the enjoyment is what cannot be symbolised, its presence in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies in this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of the lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency.[116]

Elsewhere, Žižek argues that the symbolic order is that which relates to the body as its own excess, "a repulsive tic/protuberance that sticks out from the (human) body, disfiguring its unity."[117] Body and language are thus related within the subject as "the difference between the human and the inhuman excess that is inherent to being-human."[118] The subject comes into being at the intersection of the body and language, and is both internally inconsistent and located at the juncture between the internal inconsistencies of the body itself and of language itself. The disruption of the body by the symbolic order is figured as the cut of castration which, Žižek argues, takes a different form in different societies and their associated forms of subjectivity. In pagan tribal societies and in Judaism there is a literal cut—circumcision, tattooing, piercing, etc.—which marks the body in such a way as to gain access to the symbolic order; in postmodern society, with its increasing virtualization, Žižek argues that "the postmodern 'neo-tribal' cut in the body" functions not to gain access to the symbolic order but to gain access to the body itself, "to designate the body's resistance against submission to the socio-symbolic Law."[119] This paradoxical relationship of body and language as one another's point of excess/lack is, of course, signified by the phallus, which "designates the juncture at which the radical externality of the body as independent of our will . . . joins the pure interiority of our thought . . . and, in contrast, the point at which the innermost 'thought' assumes features of some strange entity, escaping our 'free will.'"[120]

At the same time, Žižek argues that what is radical about Lacan is not his assertion of the subject's inherent impossibility but his claim that "the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed out, by a fundamental impossibility." Crucially, it is the inconsistency of the Other that allows the subject to relate to the Other without total absorption into the Other: The lack creates "a breathing space" for the subject.[121] Žižek's account of the body as ruptured by language is saved from what he would consider to be the phantasmic notion of a prelinguistic, harmonious body by his assertion that the subject arises precisely out of an inherent impossibility within materiality itself. The subject, then, *is* the body insofar as the body is dismembered by language, and it *is* language insofar as language is disrupted by the body. The subject emerges at the point where both language and the body break down. The two are each other's paradoxical opposite, related by a parallax shift or as the two sides of the Möbius strip;[122] they interact in ways that problematize any attempt to keep them apart. As for Lacan, the materiality of language is crucial in Žižek's work. Where Lacan emphasizes the way that the materiality of words functions to subvert the intentions of the subject, Žižek repeatedly emphasizes both the

material consequences of language[123] and the embodied nature of symbolic identity and beliefs. The subject's innermost beliefs are not merely internal, linguistic, symbolic, but are "'out there,' embodied in practices which reach up the immediate materiality of my body," visible in the things a person does, or wears, or in the way they smell.[124] Žižek argues that the trauma that inaugurates the subject is not genetic, straightforwardly material, but "triggered by an external traumatic encounter, by the encounter of the Other's desire in its impenetrability"; and it is only this external shock that pushes the subject into language.[125] Yet at the same time, Žižek insists that "a pathological psychic process always refers to the real of some organic disturbance, which functions as the proverbial grain of sand triggering the process of the crystallization of the symptom."[126]

For Žižek, then, everything that *is* is material, including the desire to escape or to transform the material world and the body, because materiality itself is non-all, inherently incomplete, failed. Completeness and perfect union are neither possible nor desirable, except at the level of fantasy (to which, on this account, the most Neoplatonic elements of Dionysius's work would be relegated). Our struggles with and against the body, with and against our physical limitations, with and against language are not a refusal to make peace with our bodies, with nature, but are of a piece with the inherent antagonisms that constitute nature as such.

Feminist theologians have sometimes opposed the world-denying body-hatred of the Christian theological tradition with a theological affirmation of the world and of the body. Tina Beattie, for example, locates in modernity a profound hatred of the body, visible in the rise of pornography and cosmetic surgery, and in the destruction of ecosystems.[127] As I have written elsewhere:

> Beattie's solution is to refigure [the] association of lack with creation and plenitude with God such that the problem is not lack as such but the human refusal to accept lack as the condition of embodied and created existence. To sin is precisely for creatures to refuse the limits which make possible their very being and to desire instead the fullness and completion which belong to God alone. What results, however, risks becoming a curious mirror image of the problems which Beattie identifies in Thomas's work: not the misogynistic equation of finitude and embodiment with sinfulness, but the feminist affirmation of every aspect of human embodiment with created goodness.
>
> Human life has always been characterised by the struggle both with and against our bodies. In Genesis, to be human (*adam*) is to

be formed from the ground (*adamah*), and to be created precisely to work to transform the earth which is at the same time our bodies, ourselves. This work is perhaps always ambiguous: there is a thin line between the technological quest for mastery which sees the body and its limitations as enemies to be conquered, and the search for technological solutions which arises from the desire for liberation from the body's fallenness in order to enable a richer celebration of all that is good in embodied life.

When Christ was put to death on the cross, the earth shook, the rocks split, and the sky went dark. For all its graced goodness, the natural world bore no such witness to the murders of Michael Brown or John Crawford, of Tjhisha Ball or Angelia Mangum. What does it mean to be faithful to the bodies of those we love if not to confront the blank indifference of the depths of the sea and the storehouses of the snow and the rain in the face of their suffering, to face down the sun which shines alike on the just on the unjust, and to say with Jacob Taubes: "I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is"?[128]

What Žižek's antagonistic materialism offers to us is the possibility of repeating the antagonism of Dionysius's fraught relationship to embodiment, language, and the distinctness of creation differently—not as a struggle over whether or not to refuse or to make peace with embodiment, but to see the rejection of the body as itself a characteristic of embodiment, to see the struggle against material limitations as itself material.

Hierarchy and the Death Drive

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

First, then, in *Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek offers a categorization of the "three main versions of Christianity": Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. He describes the three, saying that Eastern Orthodoxy affirms "the substantial unity of the text and the body of believers"; Catholicism "stands for radical alienation: the entity which mediates between the founding sacred text and the body of believers, the Church, the religious Institution, regains its full autonomy"; and Protestantism affirms that "the only authority is the text itself, and the wager is on every believer's direct contact with the Word of God as delivered in the text . . . enabling the believer to adopt the position of a 'universal Singular,' the individual in direct contact with the divine Universality, bypassing the mediating role of the particular Institution."[129] This account is not only highly questionable as a categorization of actually existing Christianity,[130] but reflects a Hegelian and European-colonial account of historical development in which vertical progress toward God is transposed into historical progress toward truth, such that even as Žižek aligns himself with the "Protestant-Hegelian" notion of "a Whole kept together by the process of internal antagonisms" against the "Catholic" vision of "harmony" and "organic hierarchy"[131] he repeats the move by which Dionysius instantiates his vision of hierarchy and harmony. It is no coincidence, then, that his ordering of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy in descending order of preference repeats the orientalist "symbolic geography of eastern inferiority," which functions to exclude Europe's others (and also Slovenia's Yugoslavian others) from Western hegemonic power.[132]

Second, Žižek offers an inversion of hierarchy. For Žižek, the opposition of harmony and disruption also corresponds to the opposition of desire and drive. Hegemony, power, and hierarchy function according to the logic of desire, seeking to incorporate otherness and difference into harmonious oneness, in contrast to the excluded, oppressed, and abjected who, by virtue of their position, are much closer to the truth of the situation. This is particularly clear in terms of Žižek's discussion of masculinity and femininity. For Žižek, gender is the central antagonism around which human subjectivity forms. Žižek argues that human sexual difference is the contingent grafting of individual subjective incompleteness onto biological sexual difference. The sexual relationship is the primary locus for the individual quest for wholeness, and yet, as Lacan argues, "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship";[133] "'Man' and 'woman' together do not form a Whole, since *each of them is already in itself a failed Whole*."[134] For Žižek, the masculine and feminine positions are two different ways of relating to this failure; the masculine position is essentially the position of

desire, reducing women to the position of the *objet petit a,* the missing piece; whereas the feminine position is the position of the drive, functioning according to the logic of the non-all which recognizes that completion is impossible as the result of an internal obstacle.[135] The feminine position, then, is essentially the position of truth: woman is "*more subject than man*";[136] woman "is the subject *par excellence*."[137] It is not quite the case that women are necessarily more ethical than men, but the way in which they are positioned by the patriarchal social order means that it is harder for them to adopt the hegemonic perspective, and so easier for them to access the truth of the situation, to recognize that completeness is impossible.

If the sexual relationship is an externalization of the antagonism to individual subjects, then at the social level it is class struggle, which, for Žižek, is the "antagonism inherent in the social structure," and which is externalized as, for example, "the struggle between Aryans and Jews."[138] Yet at this level, for Žižek, it is not the group that functions as the fantasized obstacle to harmony that occupies the position of truth (e.g., Jewish people) but the group that represents the real antagonism at play, that is, the proletariat, who occupy the position of "privileged political agent," a privilege "grounded in the 'objective social position'" of this group.[139] Again, Žižek recognizes that a position of powerlessness does not necessarily imply insight into the truth of the situation: There is a difference between the social group as such, the "working class," and the social group as subjective position, the "proletariat"; yet the two are also closely related.[140]

For Žižek, then, the corollary of the phantasmic nature of most individual subjects and societies is that it is precisely those who are excluded from power who are closest to the truth of the situation. This is, unsurprisingly, a Marxist social ontology of class struggle; as such it represents a genuine break with the affirmation of hierarchy that Caputo is unable to escape entirely, and a thorough affirmation of the subversive aspects of Dionysius's account of the structure of human relations against his notion of hierarchy as the mediation of illumination. But Žižek again fails to fully confront the implications of this claim for his own argument, in part because the absence of a structuring role for Eurocentrism, colonialism, and white supremacy within his work means that he cannot think race as anything other than a distraction, and so cannot confront the possibility that their racialized and excluded others might represent the truth of both the Christian and the European legacies. For Žižek non-Europeans not only fail to register (as Hamid Dabashi argues)[141] as thinking subjects, but barely even exist except insofar as they have been subsumed and surpassed by Christianity and by Europe.

Universalism and the Death Drive

The notion of divine simplicity means that Dionysius envisages everything that is both beginning from and returning to union with God, but the emphasis of Žižek's work is not on union but on separation. Even nothingness is not at one with itself but inconsistent and antagonistic, and every identity is riven by internal conflict, by failure. The drive is the logic of borders, of separation between things, of that which shatters and disrupts economy. And yet Žižek repeatedly argues that this logic of separation and disruption is precisely the logic of Christianity itself, citing in support of this claim G. K. Chesterton's discussion of the logic of the Christian doctrine of creation:

> Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces. . . . This is the intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity; that for the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian it is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. The world-soul of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it. . . . All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls.[142]

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

Similarly, what constitutes universality for Žižek is not the universal participation of all things in the single, simple source of all Being but precisely the rupturing of all things, the fact that every identity is constituted by an internal inconsistency. What is universal is failure. And yet this does not lead Žižek to the sort of resignation or refusal to take sides that deconstructionist Christianity often evinces. What is universal is the problem, the conflict, which constitutes the struggle at the heart of every identity.[143] Each cultural iteration of the difference between men and women is a particular attempt to grapple with the universal problem of sexual difference, which in turn is ultimately the universal problem of the incompleteness of every individual. Every society is a particular attempt to resolve the class struggle which constitutes society. For Žižek, this means two things. First that, as above, what is universal to every particular identity

is what is excluded.[144] Second, that what is at stake is the meaning of the universal. Žižek speaks about the "concrete universality" which is the totality of every attempt to grapple with a particular problem.[145] The concrete universality of class struggle is the totality of human history; the concrete universality of the Bible is "the totality of its historically determined readings." And because what happens later can change the meaning of what comes before, this means that *everything* is at stake in the struggle for the way in which the universal problem will be imperfectly articulated in this particular instance.[146] To struggle to read the Bible in a particular way now, for example, is to have a stake in what it will come to mean universally, eternally. The universal, then, is neither safe (as for Milbank) nor hopelessly unattainable (as for deconstructionist Christianity). Nor, crucially, is it a colonizing universal: "Concrete universality," Žižek says, "does not concern the relationship of a particular to the wider Whole . . . but rather *the way it relates to itself*, the way its very particular identity is split from within."[147] What is universal, ultimately, is failure; but what matters more than anything is how we fail.

The problem is, however, that Žižek's account of universality is nonetheless profoundly shaped by the colonizing model of universality that derives from the Christian tradition to which Dionysius contributes so decisively and develops, by Chesterton's time, into the Eurocentric, supersessionist, and ultimately white supremacist narrative according to which true universality emerges slowly from paganism, develops into Christianity and the ideology of Christendom, and eventually sheds Christian particularity to attain its pure form, free of all particularity. Žižek wants to see the development of both Christian theology and European thought as monolithic, driven only by their own internal logics and (as I've argued elsewhere in more detail), much like Dionysius's inability or refusal to recognize the ways in which Christian theology is constituted by its others, he does not acknowledge the existence of multiple struggles, multiple histories, which cannot be accounted for as though they are one.[148] There is class struggle and there is gender; but there are also particular nations, tribes, regions, and workplaces. The particular history of European secularism, Christian mission, and Western colonization means that, for all their complex historical and structural entanglements, the struggles over what it means to be European and what it means to be Christian are themselves not one, but multiple.

In contrast to Dionysius's Neoplatonic account of eros and ontology, Žižek's materialist ontology of failure is one in which both desire and being are irreducibly particular and contingent. It is precisely out of the cracks in

being that make unity impossible, out of the failure of every identity, that newness is generated. Division is a good in itself, not merely something to be undone in order to return to union with God; and the desire for union is itself a false and unrealizable dream. Materiality is not the dead weight that threatens to drag down human culture, but the ruptured and therefore fertile ground that opens up the possibility of relationship and gives birth to language, culture, and abstract thought. But as I've argued, although there are numerous ways in which this account promises to be more fruitful than other contemporary readings of apophatic theology, this does not mean that Žižek's thought is without its own failures, and its own entanglements with the failures of Christian theology. What Žižek offers us, I am suggesting, is not a way out of Christianity's failure so much as resources that might help us confront and take responsibility for our part in and our formation by those failures.

4

The Gift and Violence

Both ancient and contemporary discussions about the nature of desire and ontology (and the relationship between the two) have been driven by economic concerns. Both the relationship between God and the world and that between the individual and the world have been conceived as economic problems, as have the questions of freedom, evil, creation, and teleology. The centrality of the economic question to the discussion of ontology and desire is particularly apparent in the debates that have taken place around the nature of "the gift," and so it is no surprise to see that many of the figures, themes, and even publishing venues of debates about "the gift" are familiar from discussions of negative theology and the Dionysian legacy. This chapter explores the debates between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion over the nature of the gift and examines Slavoj Žižek's relationship to these debates, before going on to explore the theme of violence, which—as I argue—is a key term in Žižek's work for the economic problem of the gift.

These attempts to grapple with the idea of the gift are both structurally and thematically related to discussions of Dionysius and his legacy. The problem of the gift consists, essentially, of the economic problem of gratuity. For a gift to be truly a gift, the argument goes, it must be given for no reason, with no expectation of return; and it must be received as something unexpected, unearned, with no obligation to repay. The gift must therefore escape two sorts of circular logic: the logic of economy (of credit and debt) and the logic of causality (of cause and effect). The logic of econ-

omy is circular because it operates as a system of exchange, of payment. If one person gives a loaf of bread to another, they must repay the giver in full, either by giving a loaf of bread in return at some later date or by giving something else equivalent in value. The accounts must be balanced: Everything must be paid for. It difficult to conceive of how any gift might escape this circle of economy. If one person gives a loaf of bread to another, this gift is likely to impose a sense of obligation on the recipient. Either the recipient will feel obliged to return the favor at some point in the future, or the recipient will respond to the gift with gratitude, which is in itself a kind of payment, an acknowledgment of a debt incurred. The logic of causality is similar but subtly different: If one person is to give to another a gift that is truly free, it cannot be for a particular reason, because it is owed to the recipient or because the donor wants the recipient to be indebted to the donor. There has to be something unnecessary, inexplicable, or excessive about the gift in order for it to be gift; it must be gratuitous. These questions of economy and causality in turn arise only when the gift is present, recognized as a gift: It is not possible for someone to feel a sense of obligation until the recipient recognizes that they have been given a gift.

The economic problem of causality in particular is structurally homologous to the theological problems of creation and of human freedom, as discussed above.[1] The problem of creation is the problem of how to understand the divine decision to create as excessive and free; the problem of human freedom is the problem of how to understand the human decision to sin as unjustifiable and ungrounded. So the debate about the gift revolves—like the debate about apophatic theology—around questions of circularity, economy, causality, presence, excess and lack, success and failure. It is a question that is deeply entangled with theology both in terms of its origins and its implications.

Derrida, Marion, and the Gift

Much of the contemporary debate concerning the gift arises from Derrida's and Marion's reflections on Heidegger's and Husserl's phenomenological discussions of "givenness." The dialogue between the two on the connected themes of phenomenology, negative theology, and the gift culminated in the discussions they had over the course of a 1997 conference at Villanova University, organized by John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, titled "Religion and Postmodernism" and subsequently published as *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*.[2]

For Derrida the gift is, like deconstruction or death, one of the many names for the point at which economy is ruptured. The gift is that which

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

In *Given Time*, Derrida argues that every gift involves three elements: a giver, a gift, and a recipient. In order for a gift to take place, there can be no reciprocity, and this means that the gift cannot be recognized as a gift, because as soon as a gift is recognized as such it obliges its recipient to repay the debt incurred by accepting it. It must, therefore, be forgotten, and this links it to the forgetting that Heidegger names as the condition of Being. Being is not a being, and time is not temporal: Both are nothings, not-things, and so we say not "time is" or "Being is," but *es gibt Sein* ("it gives Being"), and *es gibt Zeit* ("it gives Time").[3] It is impossible for the gift to be present, Derrida says, and yet it is equally impossible to think economy without assuming an originary gift, an initial groundless giving that sets the process of exchange in motion. The gift is the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of economy and so also of narrative. Narratives are provoked by events, and both event and gift "interrupt the continuum of a narrative that nevertheless they call for, they must perturb the order of causalities . . . bring into relation luck, chance, the aleatory . . . if the event of the gift must remain unexplainable by a system of efficient causes, it is the effect of nothing."[4] This chanciness of the gift is caught up with the wonder, the *thaumazein*, which for Plato is at the origin of philosophy, the pleasure of encountering the other.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida draws on Heidegger's discussion of human life as essentially Being-toward-death. For Heidegger, it is above all death that constitutes the subject as a responsible individual. No one can die my death for me; no one can take my death away from me. As the figure for that which is uniquely mine, death becomes for Derrida a figure for my own responsibility before the other and hence for the problem of ethics. The self comes into being around the concern about death, and this concern for death "is another name for freedom" and is thus related to "responsibility."[5] Derrida structures his account of the gift of death around Søren Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, which encapsulates some of the key problematics that, for Derrida, are associated with the problem of the gift and of death. Abraham responds to God's call by his willingness to put his son to death. His responsibility to God means that he is absolutely irresponsible with respect to anyone else: not only to Isaac, whom he is prepared to kill, but also to the world around him in

the sense that he is unable to justify his decision in terms that make sense in the context of the community to which he is responsible. Derrida argues that this ethical dilemma is one in which each one of us finds ourselves at all moments: There is, he argues, "no longer any ethical generality that does not fall prey to the paradox of Abraham."[6] Ethics is always particular and individual. In choosing to act ethically to some, we choose to abandon others to death: In choosing to feed some, we choose not to feed others, such that "I am responsible to any one . . . only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others." Furthermore, Derrida argues, "I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other."[7] Because of the individuality and unjustifiability of our ethical acts, there is no guarantee that they will be rewarded: We must give with no guarantee of reward, like Abraham who "is in a relation of nonexchange with God."[8]

Interrogating the Gift

Derrida's most important interlocutor on the question of the gift is Jean-Luc Marion, and their debate over the nature of the gift is isomorphic with their disagreement over the meaning of Dionysius' description of God as *hyperousios*, above or beyond being. Marion's earliest discussions of the gift are found in *The Idol and Distance*, an extended meditation on Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Here Marion describes the emanation of creation and its return to God in terms of the transmission of the gift. In creating, God creates the distance between Godself and the created order that makes the gift possible: God retreats in order to make way for the passage of the gift from God to creation.[9] Each member of the hierarchy receives the gift insofar as they pass it on to those lower in the hierarchy. Receipt of the gift is limited not by the generosity of the gift but by the capacity of each member of the hierarchy to become a gift to others.[10] Marion's later work claims to be phenomenological rather than theological, although there has been controversy over the extent to which theology continues to order his phenomenological work. Here he argues that Husserl's reduction to the object (the attempt to think about objects as they actually appear to us rather than as mediated by the ways in which we have learned to think about them) and Heidegger's reduction to Being (the attempt to think about being as it appears to us, rather than as mediated by the various ontologies that normally form our experience of the world) should be supplemented by a third reduction, the reduction to givenness, which precedes both object and being. The reduction to givenness "brackets transcendence, in all its senses—God too of course" and "delivers the given from any demand

for a cause by letting it deliver itself, give itself."[11] To speak of the gift, therefore, can "provide at least the outline of a noncausal, nonefficient and finally nonmetaphysical mode of givenness."[12]

There are three key aspects to Marion's phenomenological work on the gift: first (as I have already described) his attempt to link the gift with phenomenological givenness; second, his idea of the "saturated phenomenon"; and third, his argument that it is possible for the gift to appear phenomenologically if one (or more) of its three elements are bracketed out. Marion's concept of the saturated phenomenon hinges on the claim that it is possible to have intuitions that are impossible to articulate not because of their absence but because of their overwhelming, excessive presence.[13] On the bracketing of elements of the gift, Marion agrees with Derrida that the moment the giver, the gift, and the recipient are made present the gift evaporates, disappears into economy. But, Marion argues, it is possible to describe the gift phenomenologically by bracketing out one or two of these three elements. Thus, for example, it is possible to give a gift without implying a recipient: by giving to an enemy, who will not accept the gift, or to an anonymous recipient via a large charity. It is also possible to receive a gift without being aware of the giver, such as in an inheritance from a now-dead or unknown relative. And it is possible for a gift to be given in such a way that it is impossible to identify the nature of the gift itself: what is given, for example, in the ceremony that inaugurates a president?[14] Marion claims that this bracketing of one or more of the three points of presence within the giving of a gift makes it possible to describe the gift without falling prey to Derrida's critique.

As with the question of the nature of the God who cannot be named—who escapes, founds, and/or interrupts economy—the debates around the gift draw together several key questions. First is the question of who or what it is that interrupts economy (and which economy it is that is interrupted); second, the question of the possibility or impossibility of the gift; third, the question of the relation of birth and death to economy and the gift; fourth, the question of whether the gift is that which exceeds or is lacking from economy; and fifth, the question of the relation between the gift and metaphysics. This section explores each of these points in turn, arguing that Marion and Derrida formulate the problem of the gift both in terms of the question of which economy it is that is ruptured and in terms of the nature of the gift. However, it is Derrida whose account is best able to grapple both with the complex questions of power that arise from the question of the gift and with the complexities of the originally theological concerns from which the question of the gift arises.

Who Gives the Gift?

One of the (often unacknowledged) points of disagreement between Derrida and Marion is over the nature of that which escapes or disrupts the circle of economy. For Marion, the economy that the gift disrupts is primarily the economy of human mastery: the human attempt to comprehend the world, to grasp it.[15] But what exceeds and disrupts this human economy is the divine economy, figured as a Neoplatonic economy of emanation and return wherein what circulates is the gift. Instead of mastering, the subject must acknowledge that they are mastered. The narcissistic economy of the individual subject is disrupted by their inscription into a broader economy within which they have a part to play, a duty to fulfill, a debt to repay.[16] Yet the consequence of this figuring of the gift is that Marion is unable to conceive of the gift, the rupturing of economy, as anything but benign. That this is problematic becomes especially clear in Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon*, in which love is figured as mutual "penetration,"[17] and the bodies of the lovers are made loving precisely by their "nonresistance" to the other's approach.[18] Yet (as I have argued elsewhere),[19] Marion at best glosses over the danger of such an erotic encounter becoming a locus for violence or abuse, and at worst seems to actively facilitate such violence. For Marion, the ideal figure of the erotic receptivity he advocates is Christ, "whose face [is] definitely living, irresistible for having known *not* to resist anything, even the worst death."[20] This problematic account of receptivity takes a particularly Dionysian turn in Marion's *God without Being*, which argues that the Eucharist and theology are inseparably related to each other such that, because the authority for Eucharistic celebration resides ultimately in the bishop, so too does the authority for theological reflection. Just as the Eucharist may (in the Roman Catholic Church to which Marion belongs) be celebrated only by those who remain in communion with the bishop, so too "a teacher who speaks . . . without, even against, his bishop, absolutely can no longer carry on his discourse in an authentically *theo*logical site."[21] For Marion the affirmation of the gift as that which disrupts the narcissism of the individual is ultimately the affirmation of hierarchy.

For Derrida, however, the primary problem is not narcissism but freedom, not the desire for mastery but the evasion of the responsibility that comes with finitude. The cut that accompanies birth is the cut that opens the subject up to others and hence to language. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida riffs on the phrase "*tout autre est tout autre*," which can be translated both as "every other is absolutely other" and also as "every other is every

other." The otherness of God and the otherness of other subjects are closely related to the point of indeterminacy, and both are in turn are related to the subject's own self-otherness, to "the secret" at the heart of the subject, which is both the blind spot in their own subjectivity, their innermost core, and also the place where they are called by the other, by God.[22] The responsibility to which the subject is called is no less ambiguous and paradoxical. We are responsible to "the other who calls to us, places demands on us, without ever becoming immediately visible or knowable."[23] But the ethical decisions the subject makes must be made to some degree in isolation from the other. We can never be sure what the other demands of us, in what our responsibility consists; and we can never fully foresee the consequences of our own ethical actions. Only the subject can bear ultimate responsibility for their actions: This is, Derrida argues, the aporia which constitutes responsibility as such.[24] The gift of death is the assumption of responsibility for the other, which both remains inextricably connected with the other, with economy, and yet also transcends it. For Derrida, then, the danger is not so much that the individual will attempt mastery of the world in which they live as that they will evade responsibility for their own decisions. This is why, as Caputo points out, for Marion debt "enters into the very definition of the gift, while for Derrida debt is poison to the gift."[25]

Can the Gift Be Given?

The impossibility of the gift is another point on which Derrida and Marion differ. For Derrida, the gift is never present: It is known only as already past or as impossibly futural. This is in part a structural necessity: The gift is "not impossible, but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible."[26] As that which ruptures the economy of time, it cannot be made present; as that which breaks apart economy, it cannot be integrated into economy; as the figure for death, the limit of the subject, it forever escapes the subject's grasp. Just as *différance* opens up the space for language, so the impossible gift opens up the space for ethics. The gift cannot be given if its return is guaranteed; for Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to be a gift, there can be no assurance that it will be rewarded. What Abraham gives can only be returned to him on the condition that he has "renounced calculation" and given with no expectation of return.[27] There is still an economy—Isaac is returned and Abraham is rewarded for his sacrifice—but this economy can exist only as ruptured, with a crucial moment of undecidability, which requires faith, risk, absolute expenditure. Thus, for Derrida, the gift is impossible to pin down; it cannot be made present; and yet, somehow, human speech and being and temporality all depend on the im-

possible gift. Here John Caputo's preference for the language of messianicity misses something harder to articulate in Derrida. It is not simply that "the impossible is like a Messiah whose very structure is never to appear in the present and who, by thus deferring his appearance, keeps the future open."[28] The gift is not simply a figure for an unknown future but is the condition of the possibility as well as the impossibility of the present. Derrida says,

> I tried to precisely displace the problematic of the gift, to take it out of the circle of economy, of exchange, but *not* to conclude, from the impossibility for the gift to appear as such and to be determined as such, to its absolute impossibility. . . . It is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such. But I never concluded that there is no gift. I went on to say that if there is a gift, through this impossibility, it must be the experience of this impossibility, and it should appear as impossible.[29]

Marion's account of the impossibility of the gift is more straightforward. The gift occurs, is possible, and can be encountered as the gift. Derrida's conditions of impossibility "simply prove that what was studied did *not* deserve the title *gift*."[30] Instead, the gift is simply an excessive experience that overwhelms our abilities to comprehend it, an experience of "bedazzlement, of astonishment . . . an event that we cannot comprehend but nevertheless we have to see." This experience may not be graspable, but it occurs frequently and mundanely in "death, birth, love, poverty, illness, joy, pleasure, and so on. We see them but we know our inability to see them in a clear manner."[31] Again, where Derrida's concern with the impossible has to do with the possibility of human freedom, Marion's emphasis is on the impossibility of human mastery.

The Gift of Death or the Gift of Life?

Because of the phenomenological roots of the problem of the gift, Derrida in particular persistently associates it with death. Death stalks the gift: To give to one person is to deal death to others; to love others is to "hate and betray" them, to "offer them the gift of death."[32] To give a gift is to put the other at the mercy of the giver: "Something happens to him in the face of which he remains . . . defenseless, open, exposed."[33] And yet this problematic of the gift and death also carries within it, at least implicitly, the idea of birth, of creation. It is only birth that opens us up to the possibility of death, and it is birth (which we do not ask for and cannot control) that places us in the midst of the situations within which we must take

responsibility. Birth throws us into a family and a society that shape which others we encounter and which we do not; in this situation we are, by virtue of our relationships of interdependency with others, already giving death before we are even able to assume the responsibility for doing so. This theme of birth, of creation, is present only implicitly in Derrida's discussion of the gift but is more thoroughly explicated elsewhere in his work. His concern, he acknowledges, is always with the question "of the originary complication of the origin of an inaugural divergence that no analysis could *present, make present.*"[34] Like the gift, like death, birth determines the subject's identity, yet the subject can never master it. Derrida also talks about the birth of the subject in terms of circumcision, "the cut that happened to him before he can remember, which opened his identity to an otherness before all memory and knowledge."[35] This cut of circumcision is in turn related to the foundation of the law, whose foundation (much like the foundation of the law in Žižek) is "neither legal nor illegal," but a "violence without ground."[36] The gift is, for Derrida, thoroughly bound up with both birth and with death.

In contrast, Marion affirms the hope of eternal life and so remains superficially untroubled by death, just as he is unconcerned by the notion of the gift's impossibility. Yet violence and death lurk just below the surface of his account of love: Love begins in self-hatred,[37] progresses to "hatred of the other,"[38] encounters the face of the other that is marked out as a human face precisely because "it alone calls for murder and makes murder possible,"[39] and climaxes in a total receptivity to the other's erotic advance, which is exemplified by Christ, whose face is "irresistible for having known *not* to resist anything, even the worst death."[40] The apparently peaceful economy of desire and the gift that Marion describes in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, whose vision (as Marion himself argues) marks all of his phenomenological work, is thoroughly entangled with violence and death.[41] Yet, unlike Derrida, Marion either evades the question of the complex entanglement of the gift with violence or is led by his understanding of the gift and reciprocity to arguments which are as implausible as they are disturbing, such as his claim that seduction is worse than rape because "it tears from the other even . . . consent."[42]

Is the Gift Present?

As well as its complex relationship with life and death, with otherness and singularity, the gift is also bound up with the problematic of excess and lack. On the one hand, the gift necessarily exceeds the economy of ordinary human interactions, the individual's attempts to comprehend the

world. It is gratuitous; it is undeserved and impossible to repay. It exceeds "mastery and knowledge." "History," Derrida says, "depends on such an excessive beginning."[43] The gift is not only excessive on the part of the giver; it is also excessive in that it "puts me in relation with the transcendence of the other." What is given is that which is in excess of the subject, and it is given to the other who exceeds the subject's comprehension. But, on the other hand, the gift is also crucially related to lack. The excess that surpasses the circle of economy is not a positive entity, but a gap, a rupture, a lack: "It is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such."[44]

This question of the gift's relation to excess and lack is a key point of disagreement between Derrida and Marion. Caputo describes the difference between the two precisely in terms of the difference between excess and lack. For Marion, the gift is too present; it is dazzling. For Derrida, the gift is never present; it is blindness.[45] This difference is in large part a difference of appearance, of phenomenology. In conversation with Marion, Derrida says that "it is not that the gift is impossible but that it is impossible for it to appear as such." By contrast, Marion argues that "we can have experiences in excess of words." The two positions are close and yet importantly distinct. Derrida says that "if deconstruction is interested in the excess . . . it is not an excess of intuition. . . . What I am interested in . . . is precisely this experience of *the* impossible. This is not simply a nonexperience."[46] The difference here is the difference between *agape* and *khōra*, and yet is also a difference between Derrida's and Marion's understanding of the relation between the economy of the subject and the economy of language. For Marion, that which escapes language can nonetheless be experienced by the subject, because it is in excess of language. In contrast, for Derrida, that which escapes language also escapes the subject such that when language is ruptured it is the subject's experience, the subject who is ruptured. If there is that within the subject that escapes the constraints of language, then that excess remains nonetheless ungraspable, unknowable by the subject.

What Is the Gift?

Both Marion and Derrida discuss the gift in relation to metaphysics. For both, metaphysics is inescapably bound up with the figure of the circle. Derrida says that "the representation of time as a circle" is "one of the most powerful and ineluctable representations . . . in the history of metaphysics."[47] To speak of the gift is to attempt "to avoid speaking of Being";[48] it is to be encircled, besieged by the circle while constantly attempting to escape it. To "desire the gift" is to "desire to interrupt the circulation of the

circle."[49] Yet for Derrida this perpetual attempt to escape the circle of metaphysics via the gift is the best we can hope for: "There is no way in which we can simply wash our hands of metaphysics."[50] What lies beneath the circulation of economy is not "the Idea of the Good," "true Capital" or "the true Father" but "a copy of a copy," a "phantasm."[51] The gift is neither natural nor artificial.[52] Perhaps, Derrida says, we should suspend "the old opposition between nature and institution . . . nature and convention, knowledge and credit (faith), nature and all its others."[53]

Marion is similarly concerned with escaping metaphysics. Phenomenology is valuable precisely insofar as it offers a way out of metaphysics, insofar as the reduction to givenness makes possible "the suspension of exchange," breaking with "the four forms of causality that economy, in its metaphysical regime, follows."[54] The gift is "the Present Without Presence"; it is "not present" but in such a way that we can infer that "it neither has to be nor has to subsist in presence in order to give itself."[55] Yet what Marion claims to uncover in this reduction to givenness is both the subject, understood as "a gifted, he whose function consists in receiving what is immeasurably given to him," and a form of "intergivenness,"[56] which (it transpires in *The Erotic Phenomenon*) is best described as "love": a love that "lacks neither reason nor logic; quite simply, it does not admit reason or logic other than its own."[57] This "reason and logic" of love basically means that to love and be loved, one person must love another person relentlessly and without reason and also accept unresistingly the advance of the other. As Marion's phenomenology inevitably ends in the appeal either to God or to the possibility of God, it is hard not to feel that this is simply a reinscription of economy such that love is owed to God on account of God's having first loved and created everything and everyone. If anything, Marion's desire to escape economy means that (as I have also argued above) he persistently evades troubling questions of power, obligation, and violence.

The Gift: In Summary

Although Derrida's and Marion's accounts of the gift remain in many ways close, the two thinkers diverge on two key issues. First, whereas for Marion the human economy is disrupted by the divine economy in which the gift circulates, such that the central ethical task is for the subject to relinquish mastery, for Derrida it is precisely this desire to relinquish control and hence responsibility that is dangerous. Subjects can never entirely know themselves, let alone the needs or desires of those around them, yet it is precisely this necessary incompleteness of understanding that demands the radical assumption of responsibility. To some extent this difference reflects

Derrida's and Marion's different philosophical backgrounds. Marion remains broadly within the classical Christian metaphysics wherein the relationship between God and the world provides the basic problematic of human understanding and action, whereas Derrida begins with the relationship between the subject and the world. Yet when it comes to the question of ethics, it is Derrida who is better able to confront the difficult questions of violence and power at play in the question of the gift.

The second difference between the two is on the question of presence. Whereas Marion seeks to give an account of the gift as overwhelmingly present, invisible only insofar as it is too much for human finitude, Derrida's account is more complex. It is not simply that the gift is yet to come, that it is present as a lack whose fulfillment is to be longed for but eternally postponed. It is also, like the paradoxical figure of the *khōra*, not quite the ground of being, but the space within which being comes to ground itself. It is the condition of possibility and impossibility of language and existence, neither straightforwardly excess and lack nor both. Again, here, it is Derrida's account that seems to come closest to the complexity of the gift. Marion claims that the aporias of the Derridean problematic simply imply that the problem of the gift is incorrectly formulated. Yet his own account of the gift outside of the horizons of Being and objectness functions to reinstantiate the gift at another level of discourse while rendering him unable to confront the potential violence of the encounter between gifted subjects. Moreover, what Marion misses in his dismissal of the Derridean formulation of the problematic of the gift is precisely its proximity to the classical theological formulation of the problems of both creation and fall. Here again, it is Derrida who most fully acknowledges the tensions of the theological accounts of economy that his work both inherits and transforms.

Žižek, Derrida, and the Gift

Žižek engages occasionally, albeit significantly, with the question of the gift, which he associates with Derrida. Moreover, Derrida functions throughout Žižek's work as a reference point for his own account of the ways his work is in both continuity and discontinuity with continental philosophy more generally. To discuss Žižek's understanding of the gift, then, it is helpful to consider both his specific interventions on the topic of the gift and the relationship between his work and Derrida's in more general terms. Here I set out briefly the way Žižek positions his own work in relation to Derrida, before exploring the ways in which his erotic ontology of failure represents a transformation of Derrida's problematic of the gift.

Although Žižek can be scathing about "deconstructionists" (or, as he refers to them in *Parallax View*, "the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects"),[58] he takes Derrida's work seriously. He frequently acknowledges the proximity of their ideas while maintaining, nonetheless, that a crucial difference divides them. This difference is, essentially, the difference between desire and drive.[59] Žižek makes reference to the "Derridean problematic of the gift" on several occasions,[60] but it is *Metastases* that contains his most extensive account of the gift and that, moreover, exemplifies both the similarities and the differences between the two thinkers. First, Žižek suggests that although Derrida badly misreads Lacan, nonetheless if "we set aside major confrontations and tackle the problematic nature of their relationship . . . a series of unexpected connections opens up."[61] The Lacanian symbolic order is founded on an "excessive act," a "*first move*" that is "*by definition, superfluous*."[62] As a result, it is always haunted by the specters that indicate that the system itself is founded on "a debt that can never be honoured," which "bear witness . . . to the fact that this order exists 'on credit'; that, by definition, its accounts are never fully settled."[63] This structure of the symbolic order makes it possible to connect Lacan with Derrida's discussion of the gift in *Given Time*.[64] Yet rather than recognizing this parallel, Derrida sets up an opposition between the gift and the Lacanian symbolic order, which he reads as a closed economy. As a result, Žižek argues, he is unable to see the way in which, in his own work, the gift represents a heterogeneous element. In contrast to the infinite deferral of *différance*, the gift is, rather, "presence itself in its ultimate inaccessibility."[65] This difference between Žižek and Derrida is only a "minimal difference,"[66] the almost imperceptible difference of the parallax shift. And yet for Žižek it is the difference between the melancholic quest for impossible satisfaction and the playful affirmation of impossibility, the shift from the masculine logic of the exception that grounds the Law to the feminine logic of the non-all, the "feminine ontology" of newness and possibility.[67] It is, that is to say, the difference between desire and drive.

Who Gives the Gift?

For Žižek, every economy is ruptured—in fact, is constituted by its own failure—but although the rupture between the individual subject and the society, systems of language, and others to whom the subject relates is important, what is most important is the rupture internal to the subject. The subject's self-relation is the primary locus for the problem of the gift. Something similar is true with both the material world and the social or-

der: What ruptures economy is not something outside of economy but economy itself, which comes into being around a central antagonism. Thus for Žižek, contra Derrida, the point of Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* is that Abraham is forced to choose not "between his duty to God and his duty to humanity" but "between the two facets of duty to God, and thereby the two facets of God Himself."[68] Ethical decision is not between the competing demands of the people (or cats) around us, but arises from the conflict internal to the demand itself.

Žižek also suggests that the problem with Derrida's work is that, despite his appeals to radical responsibility, he continues to assume some external standard of ethical behavior: "Derrida's notion of 'deconstruction as justice' [seems] to rely on some utopian hope that sustains the specter of 'infinite justice,' forever postponed, always to come, but nonetheless here as the ultimate horizon of our activity."[69] Derrida remains within a theological economy, albeit one whose closure is perpetually deferred. By contrast, the demand of Lacanian ethics is that any such reference to an economy of right and wrong must be abandoned: "Renouncing the guarantee of some big Other is the very condition of a truly autonomous ethics."[70] Crucially, for Žižek, it is the structure of the material world itself that makes possible such a radically responsible aneconomic action: "Acts are possible on account of the ontological non-closure, inconsistency, gaps, in a situation."[71]

Can the Gift Be Given?

The parallax shift by which Žižek's work is distinguished from Derrida's is exemplified by Žižek's reading of Derrida's notion of identity. For Hegel, Žižek argues, "Identity is the surplus which cannot be captured by predicates—more precisely . . . identity-with-itself is *nothing but* this impossibility of predicates."[72] It is precisely here that Hegel and Žižek differ from Derrida: "*This* is the step that the Derridean 'deconstruction' seems unable to accomplish. . . . What eludes him is the Hegelian inversion of *identity qua impossible* into *identity itself as a name for a certain radical impossibility*."[73] Again, the distinction between Derrida and Žižek is that between desire and drive, between the longing for an impossible completion and the affirmation of impossibility, failure, as generative.

This subtly but crucially different conception of identity means that where, for Derrida, the gift is never present, the impossible never quite takes place (even as it remains in some sense the original condition of possibility itself), for Žižek "*miracles do happen*,"[74] "the impossible *does* happen."[75] This is for Žižek the necessary correlate of the claim that no system is ever

entirely complete. The impossible is that which cannot happen within the existing contours of the system, but the act that is made possible by the death drive functions precisely to redefine "the rules and contours of the existing order."[76]

The Gift of Death or the Gift of Life?

As for Derrida, so also for Žižek death and life are not always easy to distinguish. The impossible act that is Žižek's equivalent of the gift is enacted from the place between the two deaths, the place of both the undead and of immortality. The undead zombie comes for Žižek to represent economy itself—it is, Žižek argues, an exemplary figure of the Hegelian notion of habit, the element of human being that consists of "mindless routine," the unconscious reliable functioning of human life, which is the basis for the radical disruption that constitutes human freedom.[77] It is this notion of habit that Žižek explicitly compares to "the logic of what Derrida called *pharmakon*, the ambiguous supplement which is simultaneously a force of death and a force of life."[78] As for Derrida, so for Žižek: Death and life run up against each other so closely as to seem at times almost indistinguishable.

Is the Gift Present?

Žižek takes Derrida's reading of Husserl to be exemplary of "post-structuralist deconstruction, with its emphasis on gaps, ruptures, differences, and deferrals, etc."[79] What is characteristic of any "differential order" is the fact that "the absence of a feature is itself a positive feature."[80] And yet any such order is also characterized by a feature that is a pure surplus, an excess such that, for example, "every name is ultimately tautological: a 'rose' designates an object with a series of properties, but what holds all these properties together, what makes them the properties of the same One, is ultimately the name itself."[81] For all Derrida's complex evocation of the thematics of excess and lack, presence and absence, what distinguishes his work from Žižek's is that "Lacan reunites in one and the same concept what Derrida keeps apart." Where Derrida sets up the supplement in opposition to identity, as undermining its center, for Lacan and so for Žižek (this is, Žižek argues, "Lacan's implicit 'Hegelian' move") the two are identical.[82]

What Is the Gift?

Žižek praises the way Derrida critiques philosophical attempts to escape metaphysics by showing how they remain within the very metaphysical pre-

suppositions they are seeking to escape. This is, he says, "Derrida at his best."[83] But Žižek also offers two criticisms of Derrida's understanding of metaphysics. First, where Derrida critiques Foucault's claim that the cogito is founded on the exclusion of madness by arguing that madness, an excessive moment of decision, is precisely what founds the subject,[84] setting up a persistent tension between this moment of madness and the reasonable metaphysical systems to which it gives birth, for Žižek this opposition needs to be transformed.[85] The conflict between madness and reason is an antagonism internal to reason. The act of domesticating excess into ordered and reasonable systems is itself the moment of madness. Reason and unreason, metaphysics and its outside, are dialectically identical.

Second, Žižek argues that Derrida is not always able to remain faithful to his own assertion that there is no accessible outside of metaphysics. While maintaining "that the very attempt to directly break out of the circle of logocentrism has to rely on a metaphysical conceptual frame," he also "treats writing and difference as a kind of general ontological category."[86] Again, Žižek offers a dialectical twist to the Derridean problematic. Instead of keeping the economy of metaphysics open by appeal to an endlessly deferred completion, Žižek suggests:

> One *defines metaphysics itself as the desire to exit a field of containment*, so that, paradoxically, the only way to truly exit metaphysics is to renounce this desire, to fully endorse one's containment. How then are we to get out of this impasse? A reference to Kierkegaard is pertinent here: the New is Repetition, one can only retrieve the first Beginning by way of a new one which brings out the lost potential of the first.[87]

Žižek and the Gift: In Summary

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

Where for Derrida the gift is that which disrupts identity, making its closure impossible, for Žižek's ontology of drive, the gift is the antagonism that constitutes identity. For Derrida, failure is inevitable but regrettable; for Žižek it is constitutive and generative.

Žižek's materialist ontology of drive (which is, crucially, an ontology of failure) enables him to understand the gift as always already internal to economy, as constitutive of economy. However, although Žižek does occasionally make explicit reference to the gift, it is far from his favored term for the nature of that which ruptures economy. Žižek's privileged name for this agent or event of rupturing is, rather, violence; and it is around this notion that some of Žižek's key ideas come into sharpest relief.

Violence

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

Violence is an important theme in contemporary discussions of the gift. For Derrida the two are connected in part by way of the relationship of the gift to death. For the one who receives the gift, the gift is violence: "He is . . . poisoned by the very fact that something happens to him in the face of which he remains . . . defenseless, open, exposed. . . . Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift."[88] Both the gift and violence have a relationship to Derrida's central figure of the ruptured circle. In his essay on Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence,"[89] Derrida takes as his central concern the question, "What difference is there between, *on the one hand*, the force that can be just, or in any case deemed legitimate . . . and *on the other hand* the violence that one always deems unjust?" He argues, furthermore, that "discourses on double affirmation, the gift beyond exchange and distribution, the undecidable . . . are also, through and through, at least obliquely discourses on justice."[90] This association of gift and violence is one of the grounds on which John Milbank criticizes Derrida in

particular and "secular" thought more generally, arguing (in what sounds like a deliberate echo of Derrida's language) that "from the outset the secular is complicit with an 'ontology of violence,' a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force."[91] To argue, as Derrida does, that "'difference' has now become the sole 'transcendental'" is, for Milbank, to claim that ontological difference "must itself be characterised by a rupture . . . a kind of primordial violence."[92] This violent ontology is in contrast to Dionysius's Christian ontology of participation in which "goodness is fundamentally a gift or an emanation."[93]

In Žižek's work violence functions as (among other things) a privileged figure for that which ruptures economy. The violence of Žižek's rhetoric is one of the aspects of his work that is most frequently criticized, by both his secular and his theological readers. For John Gray, Žižek's thought simply is violent: "A celebration of violence is one of the most prominent strands in Žižek's work."[94] For Simon Critchley, Žižek's work has at its core "an obsessional fantasy. On the one hand, the only authentic stance to take in dark times is to do nothing. . . . On the other hand, Žižek dreams of a divine violence, a cataclysmic, purifying violence of the sovereign ethical deed."[95] For Milbank the problem is Žižek's failure to adopt the Christian and Dionysian notion of evil as privation and his insistence on understanding it as a "positively willed denial of the good."[96] This renders him unable to understand the subtleties of the relationship between evil and violence,[97] and in turn the difference between gift and violence.[98] For Marcus Pound, the problem is that Žižek's "sanctification of violence undermines what is truly revolutionary . . . within Christianity: its outright refusal of violence" (an assertion that would, of course, be rather surprising to many if not most Christians throughout history).[99] Pound argues that, as a result of Žižek's assertion that every identity is grounded on a violent cut, on "the sacrifice/expulsion of the imaginary thing . . . for Žižek there can be no symbolic action that has not been paid for by 'murder.'"[100]

As I argue over the course of this section, all of these critiques of the place of violence in Žižek's work fall short in different ways insofar as each relies on a particular misreading of Žižek. Yet Žižek himself bears some responsibility for these misreadings of his own work, which are caused in part by two key problems with his violent rhetoric: the multiplicity of analytically distinct notions which he terms "violence" and by his delight in the worst kind of reactionary contrarianism, coupled with a failure to engage seriously with important work in feminist, queer, and Black theory, resulting in a failure on his part to see the ways in which his own work reproduces, rather than disrupts, the logics of sexism, heteronormativity, and white supremacy.

Classifying Violence

As discussed earlier, for Žižek (as for both Derrida and Dionysius), creation necessarily involves distinction. Both the individual subject and society as a whole are brought into being by the creation of a boundary: a cut that is both an internal fissure and a division between the self and others. In the case of the individual, it is only as the subject is separated from her mother and begins to speak that she is able to have a conscious sense of selfhood and individual identity. Yet the language that enables this sense of a distinct identity itself comes from outside, entangling the subject's sense of self with others and with the symbolic order. In the case of the symbolic order, the cut is the establishment of the law, which is, of necessity, itself unjustifiable from within the system of meaning it establishes. In the case of both the subject and the symbolic order, Žižek figures this creative cut as violent because it escapes the control of the being which it founds and forever disrupts simple self-relation. Žižek's account of violence must be located within this narrative of creation as the disruption of economy.

In his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Žižek offers two typologies of violence that focus, respectively, on the ways violence is manifested and on its economic functions. His first typology (of the manifestation of violence) identifies a division between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is the violence that can be straightforwardly attributed to a particular agent: the man who hits a woman, the gang who beat up a queer person, the police officer who shoots a Black teenager. But Žižek argues that this subjective violence can be understood only within the context that enables and encourages it, the context of objective violence. Objective violence in turn breaks down into two categories, symbolic and systemic violence. Systemic violence is the violence caused by the ordinary functioning of existing political and economic systems: the violence of perpetually rising house prices in London, which uproots families or renders them homeless, or the tightening of border controls, which results in the deaths of those trying or unable to migrate. Symbolic violence is the violence that inheres in the boundaries created and marked out by the symbolic order: for example, racial classifications which mark some people as more valuable than others and expose those racialized as nonwhite to different kinds of subjective or systemic violence. Up until this point, we might take "violence" to mean *harm*: primarily, harm done to human beings. But symbolic violence is also related to the very fact of language itself: When a particular act is assessed as violent, this judgment is always made against the background of a particular account of what everyday, "normal," non-

violence is. It is the imposition of this standard that is, Žižek argues, the most violent act of all. Here, "violence" may include harm but primarily refers to the aneconomic nature of the emergence of the symbolic order. The decision to understand the world in this way rather than another way both ruptures and brings into being the economy of causality and meaning. Violence is manifested then as subjective and objective; and objective violence in turn can be either systemic or symbolic.[101] Violence may refer to harm but may also refer to a specific economic function.

This economic function comes to the fore in Žižek's second typology of violence in which he draws, like Derrida, on Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Benjamin identifies three varieties of violence: law-founding violence, law-maintaining violence, and "pure revolutionary" or "divine" violence. To these three, Žižek adds a fourth: "simple" criminal violence.[102] This taxonomy of violence breaks down into two pairs: law-maintaining violence and simple criminality both belong within the existing social economy; law-founding violence and revolutionary violence are aneconomic, disruptive, and creative.

Law-Founding Violence

Law-founding violence is the act of founding the law itself, the imposition of the symbolic order, the cut that both creates and divides, that creates by dividing. The cut is both creative and violent in the sense that it is arbitrary, dividing the social field, throwing it forever out of balance and making completeness forever impossible. Because there is something essentially arbitrary in the dividing up of the world symbolically in one way rather than another, any given order is, according to Žižek, "a violent imposition which throws the universe out of joint."[103] Žižek explicitly ties his account of a founding, excessive, groundless cut that founds the world and renders it forever incomplete to the figure of economy in Derrida's work.[104] But "the Freudian name" for that which can never be fully integrated into the universe of meaning to which it gives birth is "*trauma*."[105] It is the act of creation ex nihilo, a moment of the rupturing of economy: It is freedom.

Law-Maintaining Violence

Once the symbolic order has been established, law-maintaining violence is the coercion employed by the existing order to maintain its authority and stability. It consists of both the explicit coercion of a society's legal system and the implicit coercion of the social stigma attached to those who challenge or subvert the existing order of things. Law-maintaining violence

takes three forms. First, it is the ordinary functioning of the coercive elements of the state apparatus: the police or the judiciary.[106] Second, it is the exceptional coercion employed in a state of emergency, when special powers are granted to the forces of state coercion in order to restore the ordinary functioning of the law that is threatened by revolutionary violence. Citing Benjamin in the context of the post-9/11 "war on terror," Žižek argues that this exceptional exercise of law-maintaining violence is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the normal rule of law.[107] Third, Žižek implicitly includes in this category of law-maintaining violence what he dubs the "way of the superego"[108] or the obscene supplement/underside of the law.

Essentially, Žižek's claim is that the founding violence of the law lives on in officially illegal but unofficially tolerated sets of behavior. Examples include Nazi atrocities, which "everybody knew, yet did not want to speak about aloud,"[109] or, in the Catholic Church, the "counterculture" that made possible the widespread sexual abuse of children by priests.[110] In American society, it can be seen in the lynching of Black people by the Ku Klux Klan[111] or in the brutal or humiliating practices of hazing at American colleges and high schools (which Žižek sees mirrored in the abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib).[112] The community bound together by shared submission to the Law is also, more deeply, bound together by shared complicity in its inherent transgression.[113] For this reason, the obscene supplement to the law represents one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in the process of social change.[114] Hence, Žižek suggests, sometimes the most effective political tactic (violent in the sense that it is disruptive) is to suspend this obscene underside of the law. As an example, he cites Saint Paul's claim that Christians should value one another not according to their social status but in terms of their role within the community of the church. This is not a complete rejection of the symbolic order, as is clear from Paul's exhortations to Christians to obey the law, but rather obedience to the letter of the law coupled with the hard work of resisting the abjection of those who are socially outcast, which the law implicitly demands. Žižek argues, therefore, that "*the proper Christian uncoupling suspends not so much the explicit laws but, rather, their implicit spectral obscene supplement.*"[115]

Simple Criminal Violence

Simple criminal violence belongs within this context of the symbolic order that is founded and maintained by violence. It is the violence to which law-maintaining violence reacts but which never poses a really radical threat to the law itself.[116] This category includes not only ordinary criminality but

also the sort of aimless violent protest that Žižek sometimes designates *passages à l'acte*: the violence that expresses impotent frustration rather than poses any meaningful threat to the system as a whole.[117] The *passage à l'acte* can take various forms. It can be seen in the ideological displacement of anger away from its true object onto a proxy or a scapegoat. This is the case, Žižek argues, with the atrocities of Nazi Germany, which "*did not go far enough*": Although impelled by a hatred of bourgeois society, Nazi anger was displaced instead onto the Jews as scapegoats, missing its true target and so descending into law-maintaining violence, reasserting rather than challenging the existing order of things.[118] Or it can be seen in aimless violence that expresses impotent frustration. This is, Žižek argues, what happened in the Paris riots of 2005[119] and the London riots of 2011,[120] which, he says, made no real demands and posed no real threat to the established order of things. Moreover, although there are clear differences between these aimless riots and fundamentalist terrorist acts of violence, Žižek argues that terrorism remains within the framework of *passage à l'acte*, essentially an expression of self-destructive impotence rather than a real challenge to the existing order of things.[121]

Here I want to note that, while Žižek's structural account of simple criminal violence has its uses, his identification of particular acts and events with simple criminal violence is often wrong—in part, again, because his failure to account for the structuring role of white supremacy and imperialism in contemporary politics, and in part because of simple inattention to the historical actuality of particular political events. In *Disparities*, for example, Žižek collapses divine violence and *passage à l'acte* together in his discussion of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, which followed the police shooting of the teenager Michael Brown, a key moment in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.[122] Where in *Violence* these categories are crucially distinct, here they falter. This is in part because of Žižek's shaky grasp of events, presenting the Ferguson protests as "'irrational' violent demonstrations with no concrete programmatic demands," although in fact protesters made a number of clear and tangible demands, including the demand for prosecution of Officer Darren Wilson, who shot Michael Brown. But this shaky grasp of events itself emerges from Žižek's failure to recognize the central role of white supremacy in contemporary Western society, suggesting that "the police effectively functions more and more as a force of occupation, something akin to Israeli patrols entering the Palestinian territories on the West bank," as though America was not founded on settler-colonialism, as though the police did not emerge in America out of slave patrols.[123] Likewise, Žižek's analysis of European anti-Semitism understands it only as a displacement of class hatred, failing to account

for the deep historical entanglement of anti-Semitism with racialization, of slavery and colonialism with the emergence of capitalism, and of the Holocaust with the techniques of genocidal violence developed first in European colonies.

Revolutionary or Divine Violence

Finally, Žižek talks about revolutionary violence. Only revolutionary violence—the "'impossible' act" that "takes place in every authentic revolutionary process"—can radically disrupt the existing order of things in such a way as to make space for a new order to emerge.[124] Revolutionary violence is crucially related to the death drive and to freedom. It is deeply theological, relating to the themes of death, creation, love, grace, and to the notion of the act that finds its archetype in the radical reordering of the world which took place in early Christianity.[125]

Walter Benjamin also describes this revolutionary violence as "divine violence," setting it up in opposition to the "mythic violence" that founds the law.[126] Mythic violence founds the law, creates guilt, threatens, and is bloody. Divine violence destroys the law, expiates guilt, strikes, and is lethal but bloodless. Divine violence purifies those upon whom it is visited not only of guilt but also of law. It can destroy, Benjamin argues, "goods, right, life, and suchlike," but never "the soul of the living," suggesting that it places those upon whom it is enacted in what Žižek would describe as the space between the first and the second deaths. The biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill" is not, then, absolute, but an injunction that can be contravened only by those who are prepared to assume the responsibility for doing so themselves. Divine violence cannot be justified in terms of its impact on the victim, but only in terms of its impact on God and on the violent persons themselves. Because it is extralegal, it is difficult if not impossible to pass judgment on the question of whether particular acts of violence are divine or mythic.[127] Divine violence interrupts the economy of the law: It cannot be justified from within the coordinates of the existing situation, and it opens up the possibility for new things to emerge.

Divine Violence

Žižek takes the concept of revolutionary/divine violence from Benjamin, but there are two respects in which his account of divine violence differs from Benjamin's. First, in terms of its relationship to mythic or law-founding violence: As will become clear, for Žižek the two are less straightforwardly opposed to one another than Benjamin claims. Second, Benjamin

discusses violence primarily as a social or political issue. "Critique of Violence" focuses on violence as an issue of law and justice, in conversation with the Western liberal tradition for which societies come into being as an agreement between individuals to cede their right to violence to the state, which in turn comes into being precisely as a monopoly on violence, as the sole arbiter of whether violence is justified. For Benjamin the law is defined as a set of agreements about when violence is and is not legitimate (so a legal contract, Benjamin says, confers on each party the right to resort to some kind of violence against the other if they break the terms of the contract).

"Critique of Violence" takes as its central concern the question of violence as a political tactic, and it is clear that, for Benjamin, the ultimate goal of political struggle is to work toward a political system that is nonviolent, which does not rely on the law of talion or the threat of violent coercion inherent in legal contracts. This is possible, for Benjamin, precisely because "there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of 'understanding,' language."[128] For Žižek, of course, this escape from violence into language is not possible (though the construction of a nonviolent social order might be). Here he follows Derrida's reading of Benjamin, which took Benjamin's notion of violence and extended its meaning such that it no longer applied merely to physical force (or the threat of physical force) but to language itself.[129] Yet where Derrida limits the notion of the justice that is founded on, maintained by, and disrupted by violence to the realm of the human (that is, to the realm of language specifically),[130] Žižek's connection of the structure of language with the structure of the material world as such means that violence becomes, for him, an ontological feature of being as such.[131] This raises important questions about whether such a generalized notion of violence can have any analytical purchase whatsoever. I discuss this issue later, merely noting for now that the account of divine violence that Žižek takes from Benjamin is modified in these two respects: its relationship to law-founding violence, and its scope.

Divine Violence as Drive

How, then, does Žižek relate Benjamin's notion of divine violence to his work as a whole? First, and most crucially, Žižek makes a connection between revolutionary violence and the drive. Like the death drive, revolutionary violence relates to the disruption of economy, the moment when one dies to the law.[132] It is the assumption of absolute responsibility outside of the authorization of the big Other.[133] As in both Benjamin's discussion

of revolutionary violence and Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard, divine violence as drive involves the assumption of absolute responsibility by the person who acts, beyond any possibility of justification by the symbolic order. Divine violence is also related to creation: It is, Žižek says, "a *creationist* act, a radical intrusion of the 'death drive': erasure of the reigning Text, creation *ex nihilo* of a new Text by means of which the stifled past 'will have been.'"[134] The existing symbolic order is wiped out, and a new order is initiated, which changes not only the future but also (and here Žižek cites Benjamin again) the past. Žižek specifically refers to this revolutionary emergence of newness as "creation *ex nihilo*," arguing that his is a "creationist materialism" where teleology is not given from the beginning but conferred only retroactively.[135] But divine violence is creative precisely as an act of refusal, of destruction, undertaken not straightforwardly in order that something else might come into being but for its own sake, a "liberating end-in-itself."[136] For Žižek, the necessity of the radical transformation of the symbolic order means that we cannot imagine what it is we are creating from within the confines of the existing symbolic order. The act of divine violence has to be, as Lee Edelman says of the queer negativity he finds in the Lacanian death drive, less an act of hope than the "abortion" of reality, the absolute negation of the existing order of things "in order to begin again ex nihilo," the insistence that "we do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future."[137] Divine violence, Žižek says, "*doesn't serve anything, which is why it is divine*."[138] I have argued that Žižek fails to recognize the structuring role of white supremacy in contemporary capitalism; along similar lines, James Bliss argues that "the 'whole network of symbolic relations' that Edelman rejects in the name of the queer are foreclosed a priori for the Black" such that "the *position* of Edelman's queer," negating absolutely the symbolic order, "is Black."[139] We might then consider the possibility that the distinction that Benjamin makes between the law-maintaining violence of the political general strike and the divine violence of the proletarian general strike also corresponds to the distinction Frank Wilderson makes between the demand of the striking worker, "that productivity be fair and democratic," and the demand of the slave, "that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratisation."[140]

As for Christian theology in general and Dionysius in particular, creation for Žižek involves division. Divine violence breaks open two economies: the economy of the symbolic order and the economy of the imaginary order. The symbolic order is disrupted in three different ways. First, the individual who enacts divine violence is separated from the symbolic or-

der; second, the individuals upon whom divine violence is enacted are separated from the symbolic order; and third, the symbolic order itself is divided up along new lines.

First, then, the revolutionary act is made possible by the individual's withdrawal from the symbolic order. On several occasions, Žižek describes this withdrawal in explicitly theological language. In *Fragile Absolute*, the individual's withdrawal is a Pauline death to the law.[141] In *Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek describes the crucifixion in terms of Christ's withdrawal from the symbolic order. On the cross, Žižek argues, Christ moves from relating to others to a self-relation in which he "turns the act of violence back on himself, sacrificing himself (thus breaking the endless vicious cycle of reaction and revenge, of the 'eye for an eye'). In this way he already enacts universality: he becomes universal in his very singularity, acquiring a distance from his particularity as a person among others, interacting with them."[142] It is in this sense that violence is "divine": because it is action without justification from the big Other, from any external standard (much like the decision of Abraham that Derrida discusses in his account of the gift).[143] Whereas the *passage à l'acte* is the expression of the individual's impotence in the face of the big Other, divine violence is the expression of the big Other's impotence in the face of the individual.[144]

But, second, the act of divine violence also seeks to alter others' relationship to the symbolic order. It "purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law,"[145] forcing them out of the grasp of the symbolic order. Moreover, divine violence as drive involves a relationship to a particular object, person, or cause that has been put in the place of the lost object around which the drive perpetually circles. This means that whatever is chosen to stand in the place of the lost Thing is itself violently separated from its previous position in the symbolic order.[146]

Third, all of these disruptions within the symbolic order lead to the disruption of the symbolic order itself. Because the act of divine violence necessarily resists incorporation into the symbolic order, its enactment forces a reworking of existing frameworks of meaning. Precisely because it is undertaken for its own sake rather than for some particular standard of good or to produce some particular meaning, it results in a reordering of existing standards of good or of meaning.[147] The particular is elevated to the universal, restructuring the world around itself: So the Christian elevation of Christ to the universal means that the world is no longer divided into Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free but instead into Christian and non-Christian. This is the basis of Žižek's objection to "identity politics," by which he really means "the liberal politics of inclusion," which seeks to broaden the horizons of the existing order to include those who

are currently excluded from it, in contrast to a genuinely revolutionary movement that would claim instead that the oppression of a particular group represented a universal truth about the existing order and would seek, as a result, to totally restructure the existing order of things around that group. Ironically enough, this is precisely the radical political approach of the Combahee River Collective, which first coined the term *identity politics* (this lazy dismissal of "identity politics" is, of course, symptomatic of the broader weaknesses of Žižek's thinking about issues of race).[148] As a result, one criterion for assessing whether or not a particular movement is revolutionary is whether it "undermines the coordinates of the very system from which it abstracts itself."[149]

But it is not only the symbolic order that is disrupted by divine violence. The revolutionary act also has implications for the imaginary order. Whereas the symbolic order is the external social and political economy within which the subject is positioned by others, by the Other, the imaginary is the subjective and ethical economy that positions everything else in relation to the subject's own narcissistic self-relation.[150] Crucial to the act of divine violence is, for Žižek, the rupturing of the imaginary relationship between the subject and the world around her, which catches up everything that exists into the economy of the subject's own self-relating. To relate to others beyond the law is to "love our neighbour not merely in his imaginary dimension (as our *semblant*, mirror-image, on behalf of the notion of Good that we impose on him) but as the Other in the very abyss of its Real."[151] To act according to the death drive is to resist the temptation to project one's own imaginations onto the others, and instead to recognize them as genuinely other, unknowable, and flawed.[152] It is only the rupture, the absolutely unbridgeable gap between the subject and the other that makes ethics, the act, possible at all.

All of these disruptions, it must be noted, are possible because the symbolic and imaginary orders are already divided. The revolutionary act is made possible because no economy is ever complete in itself. Divine violence does not aim at perfect harmony (which would mean death) but at the recognition of the gap, the antagonism, the failure at the heart of every society and every individual. Žižek criticizes Levinasian ethics on this basis: It is not enough, he says, to aim for an encounter with the Other that will expose our shared humanity and so make it possible to live harmoniously with the others. This account of ethics fails to recognize the inhumanity at the core of every subject's being, the gap within the subject that forever resists meaning and harmonization.[153] Freedom is, Žižek argues, "not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance." To be reconciled with the Other is not to

obliterate the difference between us but to fully acknowledge the irreducible gap not only between myself and the other but within my own being.[154]

Manifestations of Divine Violence

Žižek argues that it is crucial to identify particular events as manifestations of divine violence: To fail to do so is, he argues, to succumb to "obscurantist mystification."[155] Yet curiously he does not make use of the particular example Benjamin offers—the proletarian general strike (summed up, Benjamin suggests, by "the abortive German revolution" of 1918–19), turning instead to a series of fictional and individualized examples such as Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, who refused either to do his job or leave his place of work, until the whole organization was forced to relocate;[156] Nicole Kidman's character Grace in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, who kills the neighbors who have been abusing her;[157] and the eponymous biblical Job, who refuses to accept his friends' attempt to make meaning out of his suffering.[158] Žižek also cites Gandhi's civil disobedience and boycotts as an example of a passive yet radical challenge to the existing order of things.[159] Although divine violence may take the form of passive resistance it is, Žižek argues, fundamentally active: "It imposes, enforces a vision, while outbursts of impotent violence [i.e., *passages à l'acte*] are fundamentally *reactive*."[160]

Perhaps the prime example of the act of revolutionary violence that reorders the world is, Žižek argues, the crucifixion of Christ, which marks the birth of Christianity. This centrality of the cross is due in part to the influence of Hegel and Alain Badiou on Žižek's work, but relates also to his insistence that it is in Christianity that a true universality that cuts across all divisions of gender, race, or social status first emerges.[161] For Žižek, the incarnation and crucifixion are not only exemplary instances of the Event, but *the* paradigm of the Event, of the death of God (i.e., the big Other), which characterizes the act of divine violence.[162] As I have argued elsewhere, in making these claims Žižek ahistorically identifies the Christian legacy (deriving primarily from Christ and St. Paul) with the European legacy (deriving from Ancient Greece), and betrays his own commitment to the ontological claim that all identities are internally ruptured such that any social order, including non-Christian and non-European traditions, contains within itself the resources for its own transformation.[163] We might, then, usefully read the crucifixion as *an* example of divine violence, but to read it as *the* example of divine violence is to be led astray from the ontological implications of Žižek's work (as Žižek himself is) by

Eurocentric and white supremacist narratives, to be idealists rather than materialists.

Divine Violence as Love

Christianity also provides Žižek with a model for the ethical attitude that goes along with divine violence, an attitude that Žižek variously characterizes as love, *agape*, and grace. Žižek's account of love resembles Derrida's advocacy of giving in such a way that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.[164] Having elsewhere drawn a parallel between psychoanalysis and the Christian notion of love beyond the law,[165] Žižek argues that, in the context of the psychoanalytic relation, the money paid by the analysand to the analyst must be understood as money for nothing, pure gift. Only then does the analysand receive back

> that for which there is no price—the *objet petit a*, the cause of desire, that which can emerge only as a pure excess of Grace. The vicious circle of thrift is thus doubly broken: the patient does something totally meaningless within the horizon of the capitalist logic of consumption/accumulation, and receives in exchange the pure surplus itself.[166]

This love beyond the law requires a disconnection from the social order: hence Christ's assertion in Luke 14:26 that to follow him is to hate one's own family. To love beyond the law is to hate the symbolic order and so to hate others insofar as they remain within that order: For this reason, real love may resemble cruelty.[167] Love is that which disrupts economy, which threatens harmony.[168] Love is a rupture; it is the nothing that makes everything else incomplete.[169]

Elsewhere, Žižek talks about Christian *agape* in more positive terms, as the move from the contraction of withdrawal from the symbolic order to "boundless *expansion*," freedom and self-realization in relating to others beyond the symbolic order and hence beyond the law, accepting others in all their imperfections and saying "Yes! to life in its mysterious synchronic multitude."[170] But this freedom is hard work: "Christian charity is rare and fragile, something to be fought for and regained again and again."[171] There is no big Other to guarantee stability or ensure success. Such communities do exist, Žižek argues, but usually not for long. As examples, he adduces the settlements run by Sendero Luminoso, a Peruvian Maoist guerrilla group in the 1990s (which was destroyed by external forces),[172] and both Stalinist communism[173] and Christianity, which (Žižek argues) betrayed their own revolutionary potential. To live in the new community of love is to live in "the emergency state of a permanent revolution."[174]

The Violence of Love

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

There is clearly a danger here that Žižek is expanding the scope of "violence" so widely that it becomes analytically useless. Yet in some ways that is precisely what he wants to do. His discussion of violence is, in part at least, a ground-clearing exercise: an attempt to sideline the question of whether political tactics are violent (and therefore unethical) in favor of the question of what sort of action really disrupts the existing order so as to enable the emergence of newness. Both of the aneconomic pair of law-founding and revolutionary violence (which is where Žižek locates the possibility of newness and transformation) may involve death, injury, or destruction, but do not necessarily do so. Rather, these forms of genuinely disruptive violence are "violent" for three reasons: first, because they are unjustifiable from within the existing economy of meaning and law; second, because they disrupt the existing order of things; and third, because they escape the control of those upon whom they are exercised. Both law-maintaining violence and simple criminal violence belong to the order of economy, of desire; both law-founding violence and revolutionary violence belong to the order of the aneconomic, the gift, and the drive. Just as, on Žižek's reading, the Christian doctrine of creation functions as the "Evil" that disrupts the harmonious functioning of economy, so too in Christianity "it is love itself that enjoins us to 'unplug' from the organic community into which we were born." Christianity "*is*," for Žižek, "the violent intrusion of Difference."[175]

With this in mind, it is possible to see the ways in which those who criticize Žižek's violence variously miss the mark. John Gray's attack is easiest to dispense with, based as it is on what Žižek rightly describes as a "crude misreading of my position."[176] What Gray fails to grasp in Žižek's work is that, far from extolling violence in the sense of "mass murder" or "mass killing and torture on a colossal scale,"[177] the violence that Žižek's work ultimately endorses is, rather, "the violence in which no blood has to be

shed," the disruption of the existing order whose transformation in no way depends on—and can well be hindered by—bloodshed.[178]

Simon Critchley's critique of Žižek deserves more attention.[179] Critchley correctly points out that Žižek intends to argue that "our subjective outrage at the facts of violence . . . blinds us to the objective violence of the world."[180] But his central critique, that Žižek "leaves us in a fearful and fateful deadlock" such that "the only thing to do is to do nothing" is more problematic. Critchley criticizes Žižek's reading of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," arguing that what "Žižek misses, and I suspect he misses deliberately," is that Benjamin appeals to language as the locus of a possible nonviolent resolution of conflict.[181] Unlike Žižek, Benjamin does not understand human life as utterly entangled with violence, and Critchley sides with Benjamin against Žižek, arguing that the reason Žižek neglects this Benjaminian affirmation of the possibility of nonviolence is that he wants "Bartlebian inertia, on the one hand, and the sexy excitement of the prospect of a dose of ultra-violence, on the other."[182] Critchley goes on to explain that, in contrast to Žižek, he advocates nonviolence while recognizing that the quest for this nonviolence might on occasion necessitate violence. He quotes Levinas in support of his claim that "to open oneself to the experience of transcendence, to the pacific itself, is violence."[183] What Critchley misses about Žižek's reading of Benjamin is the way in which Benjamin's text is taken up into the broader concerns of Žižek's project. Although Žižek does explicitly address the question of language as a potential locus of nonviolence in *Less Than Nothing*,[184] several years after his disagreement with Critchley, it is clear even at this point in his work that for Žižek (in part following Derrida's reading of Benjamin) language, the symbolic order, *is* violence. Critchley simply misunderstands the way in which Žižek uses the term *violence*, as well as that Žižek's use of Benjamin is not simple exposition but an attempt to incorporate certain of Benjamin's ideas into his own system of thought. Where Critchley's critique has more purchase is on the question of political action: In contrast to Benjamin, for whom divine violence is exemplified by a very specific kind of political action, the proletarian general strike, Žižek's political theorizing tends to be abstracted from actually existing political organizing, and his analysis is at its weakest when applied to particular historical events and struggles. This is for two reasons: first, because he tends not to pay much attention to what is actually going on in these particular instances; and second, because the systemic evasion of questions of race that enables his focus on the European and Christian legacies leaves him ill-equipped to recognize the possibility that race is, in fact, a central antagonism of the contemporary political configuration in the West.

The problems with Milbank's critique of Žižek ought by now to be familiar. In criticizing Žižek's violence in the name of an ontology of peace, Milbank misses the explicit connections Žižek makes between the Christian notions of both creation ex nihilo and love. As I have argued, these connections are not arbitrary or unjustified but have deep roots in the Christian tradition, particularly in the ambiguity that arises from the isomorphism between God's initial act of creation and the initial human act of sin that constituted the fall. For Žižek it is precisely the notion of the Good as a harmonious balance, an ontology of peace, that Christianity radically challenges.

Marcus Pound's critique demands more serious consideration. Pound acknowledges that Žižek's account of divine violence attempts to break out of the economic logic of sacrifice, citing Žižek's argument in *Totalitarianism* that the point of the crucifixion, along with many of Christ's ethical teachings, is to "disturb—or, rather, simply *suspend*—the circular logic of revenge or punishment."[185] Pound argues that, for Žižek, it is the ""religion of the cut"," associated with trauma and the death drive which, precisely by destroying, becomes "the moment of—or possibility for—creation."[186] However, Pound argues, Žižek "remains locked in the very retributive system he is part of,"[187] insofar as (on Pound's reading) the cut that inaugurates the subject is a sacrifice made to stave off the "uncontrollable violence" of the Real.[188] This is "what leads Žižek to defend divine violence rather than make the metacritical shift and resist violence in toto."[189] Pound assumes here that violence is always sacrificial, always economic, whereas for Žižek the point is precisely that both economy and the gift are violent in different ways. In refuting Marion's account of the gift, Žižek argues that it is precisely Christianity's rejection of sacrifice that opens up the possibility of divine violence. Divine violence is not, as Pound suggests, "the Old Testament wrath of God";[190] it is what arises precisely when "the stabilizing role of scapegoating" is removed, opening up "the space for a violence not contained by any mythic limit."[191]

Although the critiques leveled at Žižek on account of the violence of his rhetoric miss the subtleties of his account and thus fail to understand the nature and function of the notion of violence in Žižek's work, some of the blame for these misreadings must be attributed to Žižek himself. Žižek's use of the notion of "violence" to speak about social transformation is in part deliberate provocation—although the obvious outrageousness of claims that Hitler was not violent enough or that Gandhi was more violent than Hitler ought to tip his readers off that there is something more complex at stake than might initially appear.[192] Yet provocation is

not enough to explain the two real difficulties with Žižek's account of violence. The first is the way in which Žižek's (rather Derridean) combination of a discussion of the violence of the symbolic order with Benjamin's classification of subjective violence in relation to economy risks generalizing the notion of violence to the point of uselessness, obscuring the specificity of the aneconomic violence that Žižek wants to advocate. The second is Žižek's failure to reckon with certain key aspects of the violence that constitutes the contemporary Western symbolic order—especially the central role of white supremacy, but also the social and political (as opposed to the individual subjective) functioning of gender and sexuality.

5

Divine Violence as Trauma

We live in apocalyptic times, the end-of-history optimism of the happy '90s thrown radically into question by a series of economic, political, and ecological crises. Slavoj Žižek is fond of quoting the saying that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," and at the heart of his discussions of divine violence is the desire to imagine the end of capitalism *as* the end of the world, the destruction of the global order based on the extraction and circulation of capital. But apocalypticism has always been plagued by false prophets, misreading the signs of the times, and calling down destruction not on the world as a whole but on their own followers.

This chapter seeks then to test the spirits and to address key questions about Žižek's divinely violent ontology of failure: first, how to specify the difference between "good," aneconomic violence and "bad," economic violence, and, second, a broader question about how to address the limitations of Žižek's analysis when it comes to accounting for the complex intersections of gender, class, and white supremacy in the systems and structures whose ordinary violence Žižek wants to interrupt. This chapter addresses both issues in turn. First, I argue that the divine violence Žižek advocates might be usefully understood in relation to the psychoanalytic notion of trauma; I draw on Marcus Pound's discussion of trauma and the Eucharist to reflect on the implications of this claim for theological accounts of Christian identity. Second, I explore the specifically gendered nature of Žižek's violent rhetoric via three key feminist thinkers: Grace

Jantzen, Julia Kristeva, and Marcella Althaus-Reid. Jantzen's work highlights the complex relationship between destruction and creation in Žižek's account of traumatic violence. Kristeva's account of the abject enables a consideration of the place of disgust and horror in drive. And Althaus-Reid suggests that a theology of failure would be a queer materialist theology that understands its own identity and that of the church as grounded on Christ as both cornerstone and stumbling block, the inherent antagonism that is its condition of possibility and impossibility, which means that theology exists not despite but as failure. Finally, I will draw on three key discussions of sexuality, race, and theology to address some of the key weaknesses of Žižek's analysis. Lee Edelman's queer theoretical work on Jacques Lacan and futurity begins to elucidate the relationship between sexuality, politics, and divine violence. Frank Wilderson's afropessimist work suggests that antiblackness is the truth of the European legacy whose universality is so central to Žižek's political project. And Linn Tonstad's queer systematic theology suggests the abortion of the church as a key task for a materialist theology of failure.

Violence and Trauma

Although Žižek draws his language of violence from Walter Benjamin and the analysis of structural and linguistic violence found in the work of Jacques Derrida and his peers, his gleeful affirmation of violence in its transformative aspects is of a piece with the general tendency of his work toward "scandalous provocation to received theoretical pieties."[1] For Žižek, the contemporary Left is defeated precisely insofar as it has "accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy," renouncing "all serious radical engagement" in the face of political philosophy that warns that any such attempt at political transformation leads inevitably to the "horrors of the Gulag or Holocaust."[2] The solution, Žižek argues, is "fearlessly to violate these liberal taboos: *So what* if one is accused of being 'anti-democratic, 'totalitarian' . . ." or, we might add, violent.[3] Žižek's rhetorical deployment of the language of violence serves two distinct purposes. First, it enables him to translate his Lacanian-Hegelianism into an account of political action, drawing on Benjamin's taxonomy of violence to explain what sort of political intervention he advocates. Second, it allows him to respond to those who would dismiss political movements such as Stalinism or the French Revolution on the grounds of their violence, by demonstrating the violence of apparently peaceful systems or political movements.[4]

There are two key problems with Žižek's affirmation of violence. First is that his evident enjoyment in scandalizing his listeners often leads him

not to a radical disruption of liberal mores but to the worst kind of lazy, reactionary contrarianism. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, Žižek's "challenges" to "political correctness" tend to rely on the assumption that "liberal multiculturalism—and its 'politically correct' premise of respecting the others' difference—is hegemonic," ignoring the ways in which the fantasy of Western society as tolerant and inclusive relies on the inherent transgressions of "racism, violence and inequality."[5] Žižek repeatedly dismisses all kinds of political struggles by engaging with them only insofar as they can be reduced to liberal demands for inclusion in the existing order of things and never insofar as they demand a radical restructuring of the existing social order. He is happy, for example, to deride Deaf activists' celebration of deaf culture (he doesn't want to make cheap jibes, he assures us, spending a paragraph on cheap "slippery slope" jibes such as "Why not Stupid Nation, brutally oppressed by the academic lobby?"), and to use them as an example of the way that all human communities work by elevating "a lack into a distinguishing feature of collective identification"; but it does not occur to him that the point of such activism might be precisely to throw radically into question the framework of "ability" on which the social order relies.[6] This failure on Žižek's part can be addressed fairly straightforwardly by reading him against himself: The problem with Žižek's digs at political correctness is not that they are too violent, but they are not violent enough—or, to be more precise, that they reinscribe the violence of the existing social order rather than disrupting it. The second problem with Žižek's account of violence requires more subtle handling. Because Žižek seeks both to generalize the notion of violence to the point at which it can no longer be used as a means of dismissing particular political actions and to use the term *violence* to designate a very specific sort of political intervention, the subtleties of his argument are often lost on his readers. I want to suggest that Žižek's account of violence can be clarified by a return to the Lacanian language of trauma to specify the nature of the political act that corresponds both to drive and to genuine political transformation.[7] This move also makes possible a consideration of the theological implications of Žižek's work via a discussion of Marcus Pound's *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, which proposes a theological reading of the Lacanian notion of trauma.

Trauma

The psychoanalytic notion of trauma originates with Freud, who describes as traumatic "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield."[8] Trauma is, as Jean Laplanche and

Jean-Baptiste Pontalis point out, an economic concept: Trauma is that which disrupts the subject because it is too much, too excessive to be contained by the subject's internal economy. Trauma functions as a shock to the subject, a violent cut or wound. Over the course of his work, Freud comes to understand trauma first as essentially sexual in nature and second as something that is not merely an external attack on the subject but which exists precisely as the conjunction of internal and external forces.[9] Freud explicitly connects this subjective experience of trauma to broader social processes: Just as trauma can be repressed, only to reemerge at a later date, so too can world-changing ideas such as Darwin's theory of evolution undergo a period of latency before exerting their full transformative effect on society.[10] Trauma is, for Freud, explicitly connected to the death drive, which is precisely the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in defiance of the pleasure principle.[11]

For Lacan, trauma plays a crucial role in both the birth of the subject and the analytic cure, because it forces open the economy of the subject, making possible radical change. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, trauma is fundamental to the psychoanalytic cure that seeks, as Marcus Pound argues, "to re-traumatise the patient" in order to open up the possibility of a reordering of the subject's identity.[12]

Žižek on Trauma

Žižek does occasionally refer to revolutionary violence as traumatic,[13] although he tends to favor the more general, less analytically precise notion of violence or the language of the "act." What is gained from the notion of trauma as opposed to violence, though, is a much clearer emphasis on the aneconomic function of revolutionary violence. Trauma is that which interrupts the ordinary course of things, derailing the homoeostasis of the pleasure principle.[14] It is radically contingent, which is to say that it is not caught up in the economy of necessity (the mechanical interaction of cause and effect) and that it does not make sense—it cannot be integrated into the economy of the symbolic order, of meaning-making.[15] It cannot be explained or justified; it cannot be predicted or controlled either in its emergence or in its consequences. Trauma is the impossible that takes place. Trauma is radically ambiguous, both fascinating and horrifying. Žižek associates trauma with the place "between the two deaths"; this gap at the heart of being "can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters."[16] Trauma functions according to the logic of the parallax or the Möbius strip, existing only as a gap, an empty space whose contours can be determined

only from its impact on the symbolic order around it;[17] yet it is also the unchanging "hard kernel" at the core of social and individual reality.[18]

Because trauma is, in psychoanalysis, that which founds the subject, the language of trauma emphasizes the relationship between the act and the contradiction or failure which is already present in the existing order of things. Although there is a sense, for Žižek, in which the act comes as if from outside the existing order (this is one reason why the language of "divine violence" makes sense here), his ontological commitments mean that what transcends the existing order is the existing order itself. What occurs in the act is the confrontation of the symbolic order with its own internal contradiction, which is at the same time its own condition of possibility. For this reason, trauma is also strongly associated, for Žižek, with truth. What happens in trauma is, in part, the disruption or dissolution of the fantasy that papers over the cracks in the economy of the subject or the symbolic order. If, for example, the anti-Semitic fantasy-figure of the "Jew" as the cause of social antagonism were to collapse, the society structured around this fantasy would follow suit, as the existing order was forced to confront the truth that the antagonism was internal to it.[19] Truth, Žižek says, is not a static transcendence to which we seek to gain access. Rather, it is that which we encounter in trauma.[20]

Žižek also draws a connection between the Benjaminian retroactivity of revolutionary historicity and the Freudian notion of "deferred action," the idea that the traumatic event becomes properly traumatic only after the fact, in light of the new symbolic order that it brings into being.[21] This means that, unlike violence, trauma is not strongly associated with any particular sort of action. In the same way that the Freudian model of dream interpretation relies not on the possibility of a universal schema for translating dream-symbols into dream interpretations but on the attempt to understand the significance of images and words within each subject's particular symbolic economy, so an account of trauma relies on an understanding of the meaning of a particular action or event within its particular context. An event that is traumatic in one symbolic economy might be entirely insignificant in another, and so the notion of trauma emphasizes that it is the economic function of a political intervention that is important. This idea is implicit in Žižek's account of violence but is often lost because of the multiple ways Žižek tries to rework the notion and the tendency of his commentators to jump too quickly to the assumption that Žižek's idea of violence is the same as their own.

Furthermore, because trauma is about a confrontation with an antagonism already present in the economy of the subject or of the social order

and because it receives its significance only after the fact, trauma is not in itself necessarily redemptive. Trauma confronts individuals or the symbolic order with the truth about themselves, the unbearable antagonism or failure at the heart of their identity. At this point everything is at stake, contingent on the way that the existing economy responds to this trauma. Once the existing economy is disrupted, the question is whether the new order that emerges will function according to the logic of desire (reestablishing a fantasy that will paper over the cracks at the heart of being) or drive (fully assuming its own inconsistency and embarking on the arduous work of love). So trauma is a moment of truth and of freedom, but for Žižek it is most essentially about opening up the possibility of transformation and new creation. It does not guarantee the emergence of goodness.[22]

The notion of trauma is a useful tweak of Žižek's account of violence, enabling a distinction to be made between the acts of violence that merely perpetuate existing economies and the acts of creation that disrupt, transform, and exceed them. It also preserves what Žižek adds to Derrida's account of the gift: a sense of the possibility of real political transformation, albeit with a clear awareness of the riskiness of such transformation. Both Žižek and Derrida have been criticized, particularly by John Milbank, for being obsessed with death, violence, and impossibility. What I have tried to demonstrate here and in previous chapters is that these themes in their work, though crucial, are only one aspect of their common concern with the disruption of economy, which is also an attempt to think creation ex nihilo. The theme of ontological peace risks falling into a Neoplatonic account of redemption that sees all things dissolved back into One from which they came. By contrast, the notion of creation as trauma evokes the founding moment of Christianity: Jesus's death on the cross, at the time—whatever it later came to mean—meant the absolute failure of the Christian project, its utter negation. Trauma is not the promise of fulfillment or the guarantee of redemption, but a radical disruption that takes place as refusal, negation, and risk; it is the nothing out of which a new creation may—perhaps—emerge.

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

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

Trauma, then, is the notion that I am proposing as a way out of the first problem with Žižek's account of violence: its tendency to lose analytical precision as a result of Žižek's double systematization of violence into subjective and objective violence and into Benjamin's categories of law-founding, law-maintaining, and divine violence. The notion of trauma makes it possible to retain Žižek's challenge to those who object to revolutionary acts on the grounds of their violence (namely, that the distinction between violence and nonviolence is neither simple nor obvious) while maintaining a distinctive language for the sort of violence Žižek wants: traumatic violence, the act that confronts individuals or social orders with their inherent failure in order to disrupt their smooth economic functioning and open up the possibility of transformation. Violence is everywhere, for Žižek. Trauma is ever-present as the disavowed foundation of being, the possibility at the heart of any economy, but is encountered only rarely, in the fleeting moments when an action (or inaction) effectively suspends the normal functioning of economy.

Trauma and Theology

Marcus Pound's reading of Lacan in *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* serves as a useful reference point by which to consider the implications of Žižek's notion of trauma for Christian theology. Pound argues that the psychoanalytic notion of trauma ultimately derives (via Søren Kierkegaard and

Martin Heidegger) from theological accounts of the incarnation, and that the Eucharist can therefore fruitfully be conceived in terms of trauma. He suggests that the Eucharist traumatizes its participants both by inviting them to identify as the perpetrators of Christ's violent death and also by identifying the mundane, contingent particulars of bread and wine with the absolute, with God, opening up the way for a reordering of the symbolic world.[29] The Eucharistic liturgy is thus a "theological therapeutic,"[30] and the ecclesial community formed around the Eucharist is, for Pound, "uniquely" able to do what Freud always intended for psychoanalysis to do: "to bring together the social and the private in the community."[31] Pound's work offers some valuable indications of the possible implications of Žižek's account of trauma for theology. Four things, though, are worth remarking on here: first, the relationship between trauma and transformation; second, the place of transference in this theological reading of trauma; third, the question of the relationship between the Eucharist and the church as an institution and a body; and fourth, the question of trauma as social.

First, then, it is clear from both Lacan's and Žižek's accounts that no action or situation is guaranteed to force a transformative, creative traumatic encounter. Although trauma is present at the heart of any symbolic order or individual subjectivity, both thinkers are clear that the process of being brought face to face with this trauma does not necessarily imply the re-traumatization of the subject. Žižek lists "three possible reactions of the subject to the intrusion of psychic traumatism: its assumption into the psychic apparatus, the disintegration of the apparatus, [or] the refusal of the apparatus to take into account the traumatic occurrence."[32] Only the second of these options corresponds to the reordering of the symbolic world that Pound considers the desirable result of trauma. The encounter with a traumatic antagonism cannot guarantee transformation: The best that analysis or political action can do is to create a situation in which such an encounter might take place. There is an element of risk inherent in the notion of traumatic reordering that Pound never addresses. "The Eucharist only works," he argues, "if God breaks (*trauma*) into time, *every* time, and it is not simply celebrated as an act of remembrance."[33] But it is hard to imagine what it would mean for the individual or the ecclesial economy to be radically reordered on a weekly basis, or even once a year (in line with the Eucharistic obligations imposed by the Catholic Church).[34]

A Žižekian account of trauma, then, might suggest that the church be understood as a community built around the central antagonism that is made present in the Eucharist. The task of liturgy (and of church life more broadly) would be, then, to create the conditions that make possible the confrontation with this foundational trauma.[35] Here too the ambivalence

of Žižek's notion of trauma is crucial, and is, by and large, glossed over by Pound. Trauma is violent; it is destructive; it is death as well as life. For all that a theological account of the Eucharist as trauma might understand the Eucharist as the (or even *a*) locus for the emergence of new life, this possibility cannot be separated out from the recognition that the Eucharist can function and has functioned not only as divine but also as law-maintaining violence. Pound cites William Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*[36] as evidence that "the Mass *is* political";[37] Cavanaugh argues, via a discussion of Pinochet's Chile, that the "Eucharist is the church's response to torture, and the hope for Christian resistance to the violent disciplines of the world."[38] Where torture functions as a means whereby the state disciplines the bodies (social and individual) of its subjects, effecting, as it does so, "the very creation of individuals,"[39] Eucharistic practices "gather the church into the true body of Christ, and thus constitute the scripture of bodies into an economy of pain and the body which stands directly counter to that of torture."[40] Yet although Cavanaugh declares himself aware of the imperfections of the actually existing church,[41] *Torture and Eucharist* is marked by a persistent evasion of the historical association of torture with the Eucharist. Cavanaugh's claim that "torture is essentially an anti-liturgy" to which "the Eucharist provides a direct and startling contrast"[42] glosses over the historical symbiosis of torture and Eucharist—not only in the practices of the Spanish Inquisition[43] and the long and brutal history of European anti-Semitism,[44] but also in the recent history of Latin America within which Cavanaugh situates his discussion. Cavanaugh's narrative of the Eucharistic practices that functioned to resist the torture of Chileans looks rather different read alongside, for example, the connections Marcella Althaus-Reid draws between the formation of individuals according to particular gender norms by the bodily practices of the Eucharist in Argentina and the gender discipline at work in the torture practices of the military junta.[45] In contrast to Cavanaugh's claim that the Eucharist is formative of a "true social order,"[46] Althaus-Reid argues that, although there is a "subversive version" within the practice of the Eucharist, there "is no solidarity in holy communion . . . At its best, the sacramental ceremonies in the churches work as acts of exemplary colonial orderings."[47] As with the Žižekian act, then, perhaps the best we can say of the Eucharist is that it *might* function as trauma; it *might* be the occasion for the birth of the new; and that, moreover, if we are to speak about the Eucharist as the locus for the encounter with Christ, we must also speak about it as the locus of torture, as the locus of class oppression, patriarchal control, and white supremacy. In the Eucharist, we eat and drink judgment against ourselves.

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

Related to this issue is, third, the location of trauma within the church. Pound's equation of the Eucharist with trauma relies on the theological equation of the Eucharist with Christ.[48] But it is not the Eucharist alone that Christian theology speaks of in these terms. In both scripture and tradition, the whole church is also understood as the body of Christ.[49] Nor is the Eucharist the only sacrament or the only liturgical practice associated with the incarnation.[50] Žižek says that "what we believers eat in the Eucharist, Christ's flesh (bread) and blood (wine) . . . goes on to organize itself as a community of believers."[51] If trauma is to be theologically understood in terms of the incarnation, then to speak theologically about trauma would seem to demand a broader account of the place of trauma within the life of the church.

Finally, Pound's work raises the question of who or what is traumatized in the Eucharistic encounter. Although Pound claims that Christianity is "uniquely able" to bring together the social and the individual (this claim regarding Christianity's uniqueness falls into the same traps as Žižek's Eurocentric universalizing of the Christian legacy) and that "the ecclesial context of the Eucharist ensures a communal setting prior to the individual," he continues to talk as though it is primarily the individual economy that is reordered through participation in the liturgy: It is "the self" that is a "never-ending task."[52] This is understandable as a reading of Kierkegaard and Lacan, both of whom focus on individual transformation. However, for Žižek it is not only individuals but also societies and communities that are essentially historical and revolutionary, constantly transformed through the encounter with the traumatic antagonism or failure that constitutes their identity. A Žižekian understanding of trauma would pave the way for an understanding of the church itself as an economy brought into being around the constitutive antagonism that is Christ.

On several occasions, Žižek refers to the central trauma of Christianity as a *skandalon*, the Greek word meaning "stumbling block" or "of-

fense," which is repeatedly used by Christ in the gospel narratives to refer to himself: "Blessed is he who is not offended [*skandalisthē*] at me."[53] Žižek describes the Christ of his account as "the traumatic *skandalon* of the Christian experience," to whom he is ultimately more faithful than Christian orthodoxy in general and John Milbank in particular.[54] What if, Žižek asks along with Thomas Altizer, "the entire history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions, is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection?"[55] But it is clear for Žižek that, however systematically it is evaded, however much the church has historically sought to pacify it, this central trauma of the person of Christ is also that on which Christianity's identity depends. 1 Peter 2 brings together the imagery of Christ as stumbling block, a stone of offense, with the image of Christ as cornerstone of the church:

> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:
>
> > "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."
>
> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,
>
> > "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"
>
> and
>
> > "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall [*skandalou*]."[56]

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

church, this miserable creature." Christ cannot be disentangled from the failure of the church.

Violence and Creation

Some of the difficulties of Žižek's language of violence for speaking about transformation can be resolved, then, by resorting instead to the psychoanalytic language of trauma to specify the violence that Žižek advocates, the Benjaminian divine violence that radically unsettles the existing order of things, opening up the possibility of transformation and the emergence of the new. But there remain questions about the relationship between violence and creation in Žižek's thought, and there are reasons to be troubled by Žižek's violent rhetoric. Mandy Morgan is not alone in being "troubled as a feminist reader about [Žižek's claim] that there is always something shocking, something violent, in any declaration of love."[57] Indeed, the emphasis in Žižek's work on the language of violence and horror raises a series of concerns that are specifically gendered. This is true even on Žižek's own terms, as the distinction between desire and drive is for Žižek the distinction between the "masculine" and the "feminine" subjective positions. This section brings Žižek's account of the violent emergence of the new together with several thinkers who foreground questions of gender, violence, and creation. The opposition Grace Jantzen sets between the deathly symbolics of Western philosophy and the natal philosophy she seeks to bring to birth is ultimately unsustainable, yet brings out the strains of newness which are often latent in Žižek's work. Julia Kristeva's account of the abject enables a reconsideration of Žižek's emphasis on "vulgarity, horror and impurity."[58] Finally, Marcella Althaus-Reid's queer materialist theology offers resources for working out the theological implications of Žižek's ontology of failure.

Natality and Trauma

Grace Jantzen seeks precisely to challenge the rhetoric of violence in Western philosophical thought, drawing on many of the same thinkers as both Dionysius and Žižek. Where for Žižek, violence and creation are inextricably connected, Jantzen focuses precisely on disentangling the two. A recurring argument, which she began to elucidate systematically in her final work, *Foundations of Violence*, is that the Western symbolic is obsessed with violence, death, and masculinity at the expense of beauty, natality, and femininity. She argues that Western thought is preoccupied with death and that "this preoccupation with death shows itself in destruction and violence,

in a focus on other worlds and in the degradation and refusal of beauty in this one, in fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience, and sexuality."[59] Jantzen traces the opposition of natality and death through the history of Western thought, arguing in favor of a rejection of the symbolics of death in favor of the symbolics of natality. I will follow her argument through her engagement with Greek philosophy (particularly as represented by the opposition of Sappho and Plato), psychoanalysis (especially Freud), and contemporary theorists of the problem of violence and distinction (Hent de Vries, Regina Schwartz, and René Girard), exploring the ways in which her work intersects with and diverges from Žižek's, and the way her distinction between creativity and natality ultimately undoes itself.

Jantzen's *Foundations of Violence* locates the origins of the obsession with death that she criticizes in classical Greco-Roman thought, attributing to Plato a key role in the genealogy of death and violence. For Jantzen, natality belongs on the side of embodiment, gender, sociality, and possibility, whereas mortality is associated with disembodied, genderless rationality, atomistic individuality, and destruction.[60] She locates these oppositions within what should, by this point in the book, be a familiar set of problems: ontology, desire, freedom, economy, and embodiment. Jantzen's critique of Plato is strongly reminiscent of the Lacanian problematic of desire, drive, and the narcissistic economy of the individual, and of what Žižek refers to as "the standard reading of Hegel as an 'absolute idealist.'"[61] Because, Jantzen argues, for Plato the ultimate goal of human life is unity with the One, progress for the individual means the progressive transcendence of particularity and embodiment.[62] Yet it is Plato's connection of human progress with beauty that undermines his account of the ascent to the One, Jantzen argues, as inescapably caught up as it is with the themes of beauty and femininity.[63] This ambiguity in Plato's thought is most clearly visible, for Jantzen, in his complex engagement with the work of Sappho. Jantzen argues that where Plato is the thinker of beauty and of love as the absorption of all things into the One, as progress toward sameness, generality, and the erasure of difference, Sappho is the thinker of love in terms of multiplicity, difference, and particularity. In Plato's *Symposium*, desire begins with the beautiful beloved only to move upward in a process of progressive abstraction, away from embodiment and particularity into the eternal, universal Form of Beauty. As a result, Jantzen argues, Plato "founds love on beauty, and thus must hold that beautiful bodies are interchangeable." By contrast, "Sappho founds beauty on love," holding that love for the particularity of the beloved person leads to the recognition of her beauty.[64] Beauty in the beloved is not a pale imitation of a universal principle

of beauty but is always inextricably bound up with individuality and hence with materiality and change. This more Sapphic account of beauty is visible, Jantzen argues, in Plato's later work, *Phaedrus*, where eros is described as "passionate desire for a fragile particular person" and there is "no suggestion . . . that this passionate love for a particular person should be transcended or overcome . . . the individual, not the ideal form, is the object of love."[65] Jantzen's opposition between mortality and natality, violence and beauty, thus relies on the same distinction that Žižek draws between desire and drive: the contrast between reducing the beloved to a means toward unification, wholeness, and completion, and loving the beloved in and as incomplete and particular. Like Žižek, Jantzen grounds this distinction in the same conjunction of themes that occur in mystical theology: ontology, materiality, and desire.

Although Jantzen's initial distinction between violence and creation would seem to function as a critique of Žižek, on a closer reading of Jantzen's work it becomes clear that the two share some crucial concerns relating to questions of ontology, desire, and materiality. Jantzen draws on psychoanalysis as a resource for her account of the Western philosophical relationship to death and violence and also critiques it as part of that same account. For Jantzen, Freud sees human nature as intrinsically bound up with aggression, violence, and death. Freud's account of the birth of the subject as predicated on loss of union with the mother is figured as matricide. The subject, once separated from his or her mother, longs to be reunited with the mother, yet also fears this union because it would mean the end of his or her individual existence and hence death or descent into psychosis.[66] Again, this notion of the Platonic return to the One is figured in terms of death and destruction, and this means that, for Freud, death is central to birth and to life itself. In particular, Jantzen singles out for criticism Freud's notion of human subjectivity as constituted by the relationship of eros and the death drive. She argues that Freud's death drive, described as the desire to return to a state of homoeostasis, is inextricably bound up with the desire for the mother, and the womb fundamentally associated with the tomb[67] (obviously on Žižek's Lacanian reading of Freud this would constitute a critique of desire rather than drive). For Freud, then, Western civilization relies on the repression of the mother, of birth, of the body, and this repression gives rise to a violence and aggression that Freud sees as inescapable.[68] But, Jantzen argues, this figuring of birth and death is the result of the Western fixation on death rather than a necessary association: "*Not all separations are deaths; and not all deaths are murders.*"[69] She argues that separation can be figured as creative rather than as violent. Separation is not death, but the giving and receiving of new life, the

emergence of multiplicity and particularity. For Jantzen, the solution to Freud's troubling association of femininity, beauty, and birth with aggression, violence, and death is to clearly distinguish between life and death, birth and destruction, beauty and horror—to reject death, destruction, and horror in favor of embodiment, natality, and beauty.

In "New Creations," Jantzen seeks to clarify this distinction between violence and beauty by engaging with the accounts of violence offered by Hent de Vries, Regina Schwartz, and René Girard, all of which she considers to be ultimately inadequate.[70] However, Jantzen herself never offers a definition of violence. Instead, she relies heavily on defining it in opposition to what it is not: Violence is about lack rather than plenitude, about imitation rather than newness.[71] It is on the side of death rather than life, destruction rather than creativity; it shows itself in "a focus on other worlds and in the degradation and refusal of beauty in this one, in fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience, and sexuality."[72] Yet even as she defines violence in terms of its opposition to creativity, there are numerous places in her work where this essential distinction is problematized. This is most clearly the case in the discussion of Christian martyrdom that comes toward the end of *Foundations of Violence*. Jantzen argues that the early Christian martyrs offered a natal alternative to the deathly symbolic of Rome. "Ironically," Jantzen says, "it was in order to bring newness into the world that they had to die."[73] She argues that in the midst of the gladiatorial spectacles, whose purpose was to demonstrate the virile authority of the Roman Empire, the martyrs undermined this show of power by their disregard for death, destabilizing as they did so the gendered account of Roman power as active by refiguring their passive suffering as active resistance. The martyrs "claimed victory," Jantzen argues, "not by escape from death but by triumph *within* death."[74] Their "identification with Christ's suffering and death" was intimately bound up with "their hopes for eternal life."[75] Here especially, Jantzen's attempt to maintain both the mutability of notions of life and death and the stark opposition between the two becomes hopelessly unsustainable.

Jantzen's work and Žižek's work converge and diverge, then, in numerous and sometimes surprising ways. Jantzen is fundamentally a thinker of distinction, of duality: She seeks to draw a clear line between violence and natality in order to valorize natality and condemn violence. Žižek, by contrast, refuses to accept this neat separation of the beautiful and the ugly, the natal and the deathly. Central to his account of transformation is the idea that divine violence, the source of newness and liberation, comes from the place of those who are excluded and made less than human, from those who occupy a place "between the two deaths," the place of monstrosity,

sublimity and spectrality. For Žižek, this place between the two deaths is the place of both excess and lack; of birth and death; of the drive, which is both the Freudian death drive and also the figure of eternal life within his thought.

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

Žižek expresses disgust for specifically feminine embodiment on more than one occasion (describing tulips as "some kind of . . . vagina dentata" . . . "inherently disgusting"[76] and telling a *Guardian* interviewer that his earliest memory was of "My mother naked. Disgusting."),[77] and his discussion of his former wives is often straightforwardly misogynistic—the mother of his child is "the bitch who claims to have been my wife."[78] This sense of revulsion seems to extend to his feelings about his own body, especially in interviews, in which, although the obviously performative nature of Žižek's self-presentation means that what he says about himself cannot be taken entirely at face value, a sense of distaste pervades his discussions of sexuality and embodiment.[79] In one interview he says that his most embarrassing moment was "standing naked in front of a woman before making love," and that, following a minor heart attack "I started to hate my body: it refused to do its duty to serve me."[80] He describes his conviction that his sexual partners must share his sense of disgust at his bodily fluids.[81]

Yet although Jantzen positions herself clearly on the side of the body, the natal, the feminine, and Žižek displays, on several occasions, a troubling sense of revulsion toward embodiment, it is difficult not to conclude that it is Žižek's work, in its complexity and ambiguity, its refusal to allow the separation of violence and creation, death and birth, which takes materiality most seriously. All of this is not to endorse, however, Žižek's de-

light in the language of violence and his queasy disgust toward other people and their bodies. Reading his work in the light of Jantzen's critique of the violent symbolics of Western masculinist philosophy highlights (in some ways precisely because of her tendency to oversimplify) the difficulties with Žižek's often brutal rhetoric, and the ways in which it can function to re-inscribe the symbolic violence of the existing social order.

Julia Kristeva: Trauma and the Abject

To further elucidate the relation between creation and destruction in Žižek's work, it is valuable to explore it alongside that of Julia Kristeva, whose work on the "the abject" discusses the complex interrelationship of beauty and horror, newness and death at the intersection of the subject and the other. Like Jantzen, Kristeva foregrounds issues of sexual difference and embodiment in her work, taking (as Žižek does) the question of sexual difference to be fundamental to broader questions of difference in general, of materiality and embodiment, and of the particular and the universal. Roughly speaking, where Jantzen seeks to clearly distinguish between natality and necrophilia in order to valorize natality and attack necrophilia, Kristeva focuses her attention on the points at which distinctions break down, on ambiguity and fluidity as the points at which identity may be remade and transformed. Žižek differs from both of these thinkers insofar as where Jantzen and Kristeva focus their attention in different ways on the differences between the self and the other, mother and child, he prioritizes an ontological monism within which it is the subject's difference from itself, its internal rupture, that precedes any differences between the self and others. Yet because what happens in Žižek's work is not a denial of difference but a transposition of difference inward into each individual, this opens up the possibility that the discussions of difference, of violence and creation, which occur in Jantzen and Kristeva can be transposed into a Žižekian register, allowing their attempts to think difference and its relationship to violence and creation to illuminate and challenge Žižek's work.

Žižek engages Kristeva in ways that indicate that he recognizes their differences, but that despite this, her work offers concepts and language that can be put to work within his own philosophical framework. On a couple of occasions, Žižek mentions Kristeva along with Luce Irigaray, treating the two together as thinkers who assert the reality of a feminine essence or substance outside of "masculine," phallic discourse and who seek to speak from this excluded position.[82] On these occasions, Žižek is clear that his own account of sexuation stands in opposition to both Irigaray and Kristeva, asserting that femininity is merely a different relation to the

same fundamental antagonism that is constitutive of masculinity. Similarly, Žižek rejects Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic—a distinction, roughly, between words and the nonlinguistic, affective dimension of language—precisely because of the way that this opposition is sexed, and because of the way that Kristeva takes the semiotic to have existence independent of the symbolic, rather than functioning as the inherent excess of the symbolic.[83] Yet he often makes use of Kristeva's notion of the abject, which he associates with the moment of confrontation with the inherent antagonism at the heart of identity.

For Kristeva, the abject is that which is expelled from the subject or from society in order to constitute identity. It returns in the excremental (the threat to identity that comes from outside the subject) and the menstrual (the threat to identity that comes from within).[84] Žižek describes the political tactic of "identifying with the symptom"—naming that which is excluded from the symbolic order as the truth of the order as a whole—as identification with the abject.[85] The abject is the obverse of the sublime fantasy which fills out the gap in the existing order of things, what the sublime turns into once it is directly confronted.[86] Therefore "properly Christian love" is love for others *as* abject;[87] and the end of analysis in Lacan's later thought is described in strikingly Kristevan terms as the "confrontation with the 'Black Sun' of the Real Thing."[88]

So how does the question of the relationship between life and death play out in Žižek's work? For Žižek, the sublime and the abject, life and death, beauty and horror are all inextricably linked to the traumatic antagonism, the point of failure at the heart of identity. Hence both are related to desire and drive (the two basic subjective relationships to that antagonism) and to fantasy and the *objet petit a* which are both located at the point of failure within the economy of the subject or the symbolic order. Žižek's account of the sublime is taken from Lacan, who combines Freudian sublimation with the Kantian sublime, arguing that the sublime is the result of the process of shifting the libido from the impossible void at the heart of being to some "concrete, material object of need,"[89] which "materialises the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other . . . designated, in Lacan, by the German word *Das Ding*, the Thing."[90]

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

of the subject is also a rupture in the economy of cause and effect, the primary fissure around which the themes of the sublime and the abject converge is not that between the subject and the mother, but the gap that constitutes the subject's freedom. The "true monstrosity," Žižek says, "is the abyss of freedom."[91]

There are two ways, then, that Žižek seeks to think the relationship between the sublime and the abject: according to desire and according to drive. In desire, the sublime represents the dream of perfect enjoyment for the subject, while the abject (also the obscene, the monstrous, the horrific) is blamed for the absence of perfect enjoyment.[92] Both the sublime and the abject are located within the gap at the heart of identity, which is also the place "between the two deaths." Žižek says that "this gap can be filled in various ways; it can contain either sublime beauty or fearsome monsters."[93]

But it is not simply that the crack at the heart of being can be papered over either with the beautiful or with the monstrous. What is good and beautiful very easily becomes what is awful and horrific. Because that which occupies the place of the sublime is obviously inadequate, once it is too closely approached it reverts into the horrific. Žižek explains this by way of reference to Courbet's painting *L'origine du monde*, which, he argues, brings to an end the attempt of traditional realist painting to elevate the female body to the position of the sublime object. The painting (which was owned by Lacan) focuses on the exposed genitalia of the torso of a woman whose face is left out of the picture. By "*directly depicting* what previous realistic art merely hinted at as its withdrawn point of reference," Courbet accomplishes "(to put it in Kristevan terms) the reversal of the sublime object into the abject, into an abhorrent, nauseating excremental piece of slime."[94] There is nothing that can fulfill the promise of the fantasy, that can offer wholeness to the subject unless it is the dissolution of the subject itself.

From the perspective of desire, the horrific is more fundamental than the beautiful because, from the perspective of the symbolic order, trauma is a radical threat: the threat of death, of dissolution. Desire rests on the belief that the sublime object really is sublime, is adequate to the place it fills.[95] Desire strives for completeness but is secretly terrified by the possibility of attaining it, of finally acquiring the lost object. The completeness that desire strives for is deeply bound up with the dream of *self-possession*: the fantasy of being able to perfectly grasp oneself, of incorporating everything that is into the smooth running of the economy of cause and effect. What takes place in the constitutive gap at the heart of identity is precisely the disruption of this self-possession. One aspect of this disruptive horror is human freedom. "The true monstrosity," Žižek says, is "the abyss of human freedom,"[96] the basic incompleteness of the world that makes free

acts possible, the opening that makes space for human agency. It is this freedom that makes human beings themselves monstrous, "marked by a terrifying excess which . . . is inherent to being-human."[97] The disgust we feel for the horrific, the monstrous, the abject is, for Žižek, "disgust at *drive* at its purest."[98] What is interesting here, in light of Jantzen's argument, is that in some senses it is precisely the evasion of death that makes the confrontation with trauma so horrific. The sublime body, as thought according to desire, is "indestructible," "excepted from the vital cycle."[99] Death is perhaps the ultimate instance of that which we cannot control, which disrupts the smooth flow of things, the violent intrusion into the homoeostasis of ordinary life.[100] Because death is evaded, it comes back as a specter, a monster, to haunt and to terrorize us.

Although Žižek's first English-language publication argues that "beyond fantasy," where the drive belongs, there is "no yearning or any kindred sublime phenomenon,"[101] he later describes himself as being at this point "caught in the ethics of pure desire."[102] His subsequent work clearly articulates the relationship of drive to the sublime. The sublimity of the drive emerges, for Žižek, precisely in and through the confrontation with the abject, through the acknowledgment of the radical incompleteness and failure which is constitutive of identity. He describes the shift from desire to drive as the shift from *idealization* to *sublimation*. Idealization "blinds itself to the other's weaknesses . . . to the other *as such*, using the beloved as a blank screen on to which it projects its own phantasmagorical constructions. By contrast, true love accepts the beloved the way she or he is, merely putting her/him into the place of the Thing, the unconditional Object." The sublime understood according to drive does not escape the possibility of death and destruction, but is "the *work* of love," occurring in "miraculous but *extremely fragile* moments" in which "another dimension transpires through our reality."[103] It is "always partial, an island of fragile order."[104] Drive does not deny the place of history and change but occurs precisely at the point of transformation, of the unsettling of the existing order of things. It is "the hard and arduous work of repeated 'uncoupling.'"[105]

As for Kristeva (and contra Jantzen) the beautiful arises precisely out of the horror of new birth, out of the sticky, slimy fluids which slip between our fingers even as we try to cling to them, to bring them into order. To love our neighbors is to love them not in the imaginary (imposing our own idea of what is best for them) or in the symbolic (as "the abstract symbolic subject of Rights") but in the Real, as "radically evil, capricious, revolting, disgusting . . . in short, beyond the Good."[106] Yet Žižek's work also hints that from the perspective of drive the disgusting ceases to be disgusting and becomes instead merely ordinary. In *On Belief*, Žižek says that the sub-

lime is not the idealized figure, which, upon too close an approach, becomes "a repulsive hag," but occurs when the sublime "transpires through the utmost common details of everyday shared life . . . in common everyday acts like washing the dishes or cleaning the apartment";[107] it is the "'ordinary' object elevated into the 'dignity of the Thing.'"[108] Drive is comic, Žižek argues, insofar as it asserts the identity of "the sublime and the everyday object."[109] He connects this to the doctrine of the incarnation, arguing that in this doctrine Christianity rejects the idea of a perfect, transcendent God beyond the world in favor of a notion of the divine as that which "shines through Christ, this miserable creature."[110] It is only when the fantasy of perfection is abandoned that real love is possible.[111]

Žižek directly equates this moment of abandoning the fantasy with death. Love beyond the law, the sublime according to the drive, is opened up as a possibility by the confrontation with "Death," by which Žižek means "not merely the passing of earthly life" but the severing of ties with the symbolic order, which occurs in the act, the wiping clean of the slate, to make space for new possibilities.[112] New life is deeply bound up with death. Because Žižek's ethics requires a withdrawal into self precisely in order to make room for the other person outside of our own subjective fantasies, the ethical relation requires both the confrontation with the abject, which is, for Kristeva, so central to the transformation of the subject (although the abject is primarily the antagonism within ourselves rather than the boundary between the self and the other), and the establishment of difference, which is so crucial for Irigaray.

For Žižek, then, to love according to desire is to believe in a false vision of purity and perfection, under which inevitably lurks the obscene underside, the horror of the abject, the disavowed monstrosity that is the truth of fantasy (this is a claim about individual perception but also about social and political praxis—that the desire for impossible purity gives rise to horrific acts of violence against those seen to threaten it). Contra Jantzen, the more that life and death, beauty and monstrosity are separated, the more insistently the repressed returns and the more the beautiful reverts to ugliness. To love according to drive is to confront imperfection and incompleteness in all of their grotesque materiality, in their particularity, and to the moments of beauty and grace that arise from and within them. In drive (Žižek implies but does not explicitly state), horror and obscenity are deprived of their power and become less important than the sublime, which can be glimpsed in their midst.

Finally, it is worth noting here that the abject and the grotesque, the horrific and the monstrous that belong with it, are specifically gendered terms.[113] Although Žižek expresses disgust for embodiment in general, and

feminine embodiment in particular, his work relentlessly returns to the themes of the monstrous, the grotesque, and the obscene—as well as to femininity—as crucial to truth and transformation. As Sarah Kay suggests, feminists "probably can't claim" Žižek, or at least not without some real trepidation, "but they may nonetheless be able to use him."[114] This is, in part, the intention of this book. As I will argue, Žižek's work can be read as a project parallel to the queer theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid's "(God) in the name of vulgarity, horror and impurity,"[115] an attempt to begin thinking about the existing order from the assumption that what it excludes and abjects is its innermost truth.

Trauma and Theology

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

Like Žižek, Marcella Althaus-Reid describes her work as a "materialist theology."[116] Where Žižek seeks to reconfigure the entire Western philosophical tradition around his materialist account of ontology and desire, the target of Althaus-Reid's critique is nothing less than the entire body of Western systematic theology. She argues that the logics of heterosexuality, systematic theology, and colonization are inextricably bound up with one another insofar as they all rely on the exclusion of the Other in the name of the rejection of "vulgarity, horror and impurity."[117] Although liberation theology asserts that God can only (or at least primarily) be known through the divine revelation in history, it shies away, she argues, from acknowledging that this claim demands a willingness to perceive God's revelation even in that which escapes the safe bounds of traditional systematic theology, particularly in transgressive forms of sexuality: "The revelation that occurs in intimate acts, in the perceived chaotic history of intimate human relationships in history, has been systematically marginalised and silenced by a highly idealistic sexually hegemonic theological project, heavily dependent on a colonial model." Although liberation theology has, for Althaus-Reid, largely been co-opted by Western systematic theology and (not coincidentally) by capitalism, she argues that it can redeem itself through a "kenotic Queer model" according to which (in a strikingly Žižekian turn of phrase) "God's divinity depends on God's own presence amidst the sexual turbulences of human beings' intimate relationships, whose knowledge is the knowledge of the excluded queerness in Christianity."[118] Althaus-Reid argues that it is precisely the desire of systematic the-

ology to preserve the notion of salvation as the place of what Derrida describes as "the safe and sound, the unscathed . . . the immune,"[119] which gives rise to what Žižek would call an obscene underside, "the trace of fetishism . . . of bondage." Transgressive sexual practices, Althaus-Reid argues, reveal the truth of the fantasized image of purity and perfection to which systematic theology clings.[120]

Instead of this problematic attempt to maintain clear boundaries and to cling to purity and a notion of an uncontaminated Christianity, Althaus-Reid advocates materialist theologies (the plural being crucial to her argument here) that begin not with generalities but with the specificities and contradictions of Christianity as it is lived by individual people and communities, which "have their starting points in people's actions, or sexual acts without polarising the social from the symbolic,"[121] which understand the kingdom of God as "multiple and changing," composed (not unlike Lacan's account of the "montage" of heterogeneous elements that constitute the core of the subject) of "a juxtaposition of elements which do not belong."[122] In particular, she seeks to rewrite theology "from the margins of society, the church and systematic theologies"[123] by paying attention both to the lives of those who are excluded from theology's account of Christian identity and to the obscene underside of official church teaching. As for Žižek, it is among the excluded, the abjected, and the disavowed that the truth of the church's identity is to be found, from here that the community of the church can be radically transformed.

Like Žižek, Althaus-Reid draws on the biblical imagery of offense, of the stone that causes stumbling: Her queer theology aims "to scandalise, that is, to be a stone on the road to force theologians to stop, fall down, while pausing in their pain and thinking during the pause."[124] Jesus "as mediator between humanity and God . . . is *punctum*, disturbance, scandal." Steven Shakespeare points out that Pierre means "rock" and suggests that, in the work of Althaus-Reid, "the stone, Pierre, becomes a stone of stumbling, not a rock on which to build the church."[125] I want to suggest, rather, that the two possibilities are not opposed but in fact necessarily implicated, two perspectives separated merely by a parallax shift. Shakespeare, reading Althaus-Reid alongside Thomas Aquinas, argues that the Eucharist is constituted by "a rupture, a rupture that is internal to its very constitution as a sign," that "scattering and decay" are "not just the accidental trappings of an unsullied word, but the condition of its possibility" and so also "the condition of its impossibility."[126] For God to be made flesh in the Eucharistic elements is to be exposed to the possibility of all of the many corruptions of those elements that are listed in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*: The consecrating priest may die or go mad; the Eucharist may

be poisoned either accidentally or on purpose; the cup may be spilled; the sacraments vomited up after consumption; or the elements may be left too long and become lost, be eaten by mice, or begin to decay. "All sacraments," says Shakespeare, "are diseased sacraments."[127] On my reading of Žižek's account of the pure and the impure according to desire and to drive, then, Marcus Pound's account of the Eucharist as trauma seems to remain stuck in the logic of desire, whereas Shakespeare's kenotic queer reading of the Eucharist functions according to the logic of drive. "All sacraments are diseased sacraments," and yet it is precisely in and through this corruption, this failure, that grace is encountered.

As with the notion of trauma, this logic cannot be confined to the Eucharist alone: The church too, this body in which the Eucharist organizes itself "as a community of believers,"[128] is inescapably implicated. The church is no more immune than are the Eucharistic elements to "defections, infections, poisoning, forgetting, dropping, spoiling, corrupting and vomiting."[129] Christ cannot be grasped except in and through the ruptures, the failures of the church.

Trauma and the End of the World

Because Žižek's work asserts an isomorphism between the structure of the individual subject and the structure of the social order, the question of desire, drive, and trauma is a question both about how we as individuals ought to relate to ourselves and one another and about how society as such should be organized. For Žižek, the question of gender plays out primarily at the level of the individual, of psychoanalysis; the central antagonism of the social order is class. As I have indicated previously, one of the weaknesses of Žižek's three-tier ontology is his inability to recognize the ways in which each ontological level is both internally differentiated and entangled with other levels such that, for example, questions of gender and sexuality are bound up not only with our individual sense of self but also with political questions such as the division of wealth and labor. In this section I explore Žižek's work in relation to key thinkers who, drawing on theoretical resources similar to those Žižek draws on, have paid more careful attention to the complex intersections of the individual and the social—and to the question of race, which Žižek's work fails to account for. Lee Edelman's account of "sinthomosexuality" offers us resources for thinking the entanglement of gender and the social order. Frank Wilderson's account of antiblackness as the ontological foundation of the Western symbolic order enables us to rework Žižek's Eurocentrism into a demand for the end of the world. Finally, Linn Tonstad's (Edelman- and

Althaus-Reid-inflected) apocalyptic trinitarian theology offers resources for imagining divine violence in relation to Christian identity.

Against Reproduction

Several debates in queer theory have focused on the opposition of hope and negativity—or, we might gloss, violence and natality. Two of the key figures within these debates, who have explored the question of gender, sexuality, and the social order more carefully than Žižek—while drawing on many of the same resources, from Lacanian psychoanalysis to *Kung Fu Panda*—are Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman, who offer two very different visions of failure and the disruption of the existing social order. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* advocates that we learn both from children and from children's films to practice failure in order that we might learn to "discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a limit, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery."[130] Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* takes aim precisely at the figure of "the Child" as the fantasy of social and political wholeness; it advocates instead a politics of queer negativity, of the refusal of "reproductive futurity": "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capitals ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop."[131]

Halberstam argues that in the face of a heteronormative capitalist society that values success and disparages failure, failure itself becomes a mode of resistance. He invokes a number of strikingly Žižekian themes—the low culture of Pixar films, the death drive, and revolution—but ultimately ends in opposition to Žižek, particularly on the question of the proper interpretation of *Kung Fu Panda*.[132] For Halberstam, the radical potential of animated films lies in the fact that animation is always "the image of change and transformation itself" such that it always tends toward queerness: "Most animated films for children," Halberstam argues, "are antihumanist, antinormative, multigendered and full of wild forms of sociality."[133] No surprise then, that Halberstam objects to Žižek's argument that *Kung Fu Panda* exemplifies the functioning of contemporary ideology. Halberstam argues that for Žižek, Po (*Kung Fu Panda*'s protagonist) resembles George W. Bush or Silvio Berlusconi: "by rising to the status of world champion without either talent or training, he masquerades as the little man who tries hard and succeeds, when in fact he is still a big man who is lazy but succeeds anyway because the system is tipped in his favor."[134] This is actually a misreading of

Žižek, for whom *Kung Fu Panda* exemplifies not the power of privilege, but the way that contemporary ideology functions through ironic distance. However much the film makes fun of the classic kung fu narrative of a young fighter who wishes to become a kung fu master, ultimately discovering that he is, in fact, destined to succeed, it nonetheless ends up reinscribing precisely that narrative, but with more jokes. The myth of a chosen sacred warrior persists. Likewise, however much we might see the election of Bush or Berlusconi (or, we might add, Trump) as exposing the inherent absurdity of the myth of the president as a great man, however ludicrous these men appear, they wield, nonetheless, precisely the same power as those who occupied their roles with more dignity. We might read Halberstam's reading of *Kung Fu Panda* in a similar way—in celebrating the fluidity, movement and perpetual transformations of animated films as liberatory, Halberstam is mistaking the shift from one form of social control to another (from the disciplinary societies of Fordism to the control societies of late capitalism) for freedom.

Edelman's *No Future* focuses on what he terms "sinthomosexuality," the threat to the social order represented by the insistence of the death drive. Sinthomosexuality comes, in a context in which heterosexual reproduction is seen as essential to the reproduction of the social order, to be associated with homosexuality and with those whose structural role places them in proximity to homosexuality. Halberstam's critique of Edelman echoes Jantzen's critique of the masculinity of violence as opposed to the femininity of natality. Edelman "always runs the risk of linking heteronormativity in some essential way to women, and, perhaps unwittingly, woman becomes the one who offers life, while queerness links up with the death drive."[135] We should resist, Halberstam argues, the nihilism that "always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction."[136] We are back, then, to the association of masculinity with violence and femininity with birth and life, which is also a return to the individual fantasy figure of the woman as the one who will complete the (implicitly) masculine subject and to the political fantasy of women as mothers, guardians of the home, tasked with social reproduction—that is, not only with keeping their children alive but with ensuring that their children will grow up to ensure the reproduction of the symbolic order, with all of its necessary violence.

It is not surprising then, that Halberstam ignores Edelman's discussion of one of Žižek's favorite female figures of the divine violence of the death drive: Antigone. Edelman opposes his reading of Antigone as a figure of sinthomosexuality, of the embodiment of the death drive, to Judith Butler's Antigone, a figure of liberal inclusion, which demands not that we confront the antagonism at the heart of the social order but that we widen its

bounds to include more people, that we make it (like Halberstam's Pixar films) more multiple, fluid, and adaptable.[137] For both Edelman and Žižek, then, women can figure as well as embody the death drive. What Edelman grasps but Žižek does not, however, is that heteronormativity and reproductive futurity are deeply bound up not only with the contemporary constitution of individual men's subjective fantasies but also with the constitution of the social order as such. If we look for a feminine figure of the drive, then, it cannot be to women in their social and individual fantasy role as mothers but to women insofar as they come to figure a threat to motherhood and the social order. As Silvia Federici has shown, as long as capitalism has existed, certain women have long been positioned as deadly threats to the reproduction of the social order.[138] The witch—that is to say, the (figure of) the postmenopausal woman, the queer woman, the promiscuous woman, the powerful woman, the heretical woman, the midwife—is perhaps the best candidate for the feminine figure of the sinthomosexual. Positioning the Wages for Housework campaign as continuing the struggle waged from the position of the witch, Federici says that "we want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create what will be our sexuality which we have never known. . . . We want money for each moment of it, so that we can refuse some of it and eventually all of it."[139] The parallels with the divine violence of Benjamin's proletarian general strike, characterized by "the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work," are no accident.[140]

The End of the World

This particular configuration of queer negativity and the revolutionary refusal of both work and reproduction brings us into proximity with a number of important discussions about racism, antiblackness, and Afropessimism.

James Bliss has responded to suggestions by both Halberstam and queer theorist José Muñoz that we should reject Edelman's refusal of hope and of futurity because to refuse the future is only possible for those who have reason to hope in the future, and therefore for white people. As Bliss concedes, it is true that *No Future* is marked, by and large, by an evasion of questions of race. Yet what is useful in Edelman's account is precisely "his reading of queerness as a structural position," a structural position that is not, however, "the un-raced (read: white) queerness he imagines it to be . . . while the experience, the archive, and the politics of Edelman's queer are white (and soundly and appropriately critiqued for this reason), the position of Edelman's queer is Black."[141] If, as Black feminists such as Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter have argued, contemporary Western society is

built on the exclusion of Blackness from the sphere of humanity, and this exclusion is "ontologically prior to and productive of the back-slashed pairing gender/sexuality," then "the structural position of the Black woman is not (yet another) political position, but what Slavoj Žižek calls a universal singularity."[142] As Spillers argues, the formations of gender and class that come into being with the emergence of capitalism and the transatlantic slave trade locate gender "within the confines of the domestic" to which white women are assigned in this period; but by being positioned as property rather than as persons, enslaved people are located outside of the gendered public/private divide, such that slavery entails a process of "ungendering."[143] Despite Žižek's disavowals of "identity politics," then, it is the Combahee River Collective which most clearly grasps what it would mean to overthrow the symbolic order from the position of this universal singularity: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression."[144]

One of the thinkers whose work Bliss draws on, Frank B. Wilderson III, ties the claim that Blackness is the structuring outside of the Western symbolic order specifically to a critique of Lacan's account of the symbolic order and of Gramsci's account of the struggle against hegemony. In *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* Wilderson argues that the Slave/Black is the constitutive outside of the Human, the "ontological position . . . against which Humanity establishes, maintains and renews its coherence."[145] The violence of slavery is the violence that founds the Western symbolic order and thereafter, as the West extended its colonies around the world, of the apparently universal category of the human on which "the great emancipatory discourses of modernity" are built.[146] Although Lacanian thought operates at the level of the symbolic order, at the level of language, and therefore at the level of the struggles that constitute gender and class, Wilderson argues that what Lacanian thought cannot grasp is that the exclusion of Blackness operates at the level of ontology, creating the sphere of humanity within which the symbolic order and its associated struggles come to be. Drawing in part on Orlando Patterson's account of slavery as social death[147] (which, as I have argued above, fits Žižek's description of the place "between the two deaths"), Wilderson argues that if we are to fully grasp violence not merely as contingent but as constitutive of the world, then we must side ultimately not with Lacan but with Frantz Fanon, whose diagnosis of "the structural, or absolute, violence" that "is a condition of Black 'life'" and is "uncannily" connected to the Lacanian real, leads him to call for "the end of the world."[148] Likewise, in "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil

Society," Wilderson argues, essentially, that the difference between the law-maintaining violence of the political general strike and the divine violence of the proletarian general strike is the difference between the demand made by workers—for whom violence is "ideological and contingent"—and the demand made by Black people—for whom violence is "ontological and gratuitous."[149] "The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic," Wilderson argues, but "the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratization."[150]

Žižek repeatedly argues in favor of "Eurocentrism." "Politics proper," he says, "always involves a kind of short circuit between the universal and the particular; it involves the paradox of a singular that appears as a stand-in for the universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body. . . . This identification of the nonpart with the whole . . . is the elementary gesture of politicization."[151] Yet Žižek's own appeals to the "European legacy" all too often fall into precisely the kind of liberal politics of inclusion he elsewhere decries. He argues, for example, that the West should welcome migrants on the condition that they agree to adopt Western values. This failure to follow through on the logic of his own thought is especially visible in his dismissal (following Susan Buck-Morss) of the "wonderfully absurd gesture" by which the 1804 Haitian constitution declared all Haitian citizens to be Black. Rather than, as he suggests, a "strategy to contain the radical-emancipatory dimension of the Haiti revolution," this move is in fact isomorphic with the Žižekian-Lacanian insistence that it is the feminine, not the masculine, subject position that is truly universal, precisely insofar as it is not-all.[152] Following Wilderson, then, I want to suggest a more properly Žižekian Eurocentrism. If the world we inhabit is one centrally constituted by the legacy of European universalism, and that universalism is itself constituted by the violent exclusion of Black people, then only the insistence that the violence of antiblackness is the truth of the European legacy opens up the possibility of truly revolutionary change, of divine violence, of the end of the world—by which I mean the end of the social order founded on the universal European values of freedom, equality, and solidarity, which depend for their coherence on the social death of Black people.

The Abortion of the Church

What does divine violence mean in the context of Christian theology? Something like this seems to be suggested by Linn Tonstad's recent call (in her groundbreaking *God and Difference*) for an "apocalyptic temporality that establishes the church as a site of an abortive relation to time rather

than as a sign of fidelity to the temporal continuation of identity in relation to the handed-over body of God."[153] Drawing on Althaus-Reid's critique of the heteronormative logic of Western systematic theology and on Edelman's demand for the refusal of futurity as the only way to confront the shattering logic of the death drive, Tonstad argues that the church "must refuse both its own and society's (this is an analytic, not a material, distinction) reproductive urges, for the church properly symbolizes the negation of the stability and viability of the symbolic order." Instead, in fidelity to its own "constitutive, founding logic: the imminent expectation of the advent," it must live in hope for "the return of the lost body in the transformation of the entire cosmos."[154]

The core of Tonstad's argument is an attempt to disentangle the God-world relation from the male-female relation so as to think the Trinity outside of the logic of heterosexism. To do this, Tonstad emphasizes the radical discontinuity between God and the world, and argues that core theological concepts ought, understood properly, to reflect this rupture. Trinitarian relations should not, for Tonstad, be taken as an analogue for human or ecclesial relations, nor divine personhood as an analogue for human personhood. There is much here that is of use to the theology of failure I am proposing, but as I have demonstrated throughout this book, the insistence on the otherness of God from the world can—and often does—enable weaponized apophaticism, reaffirming the absolute goodness of the source of ecclesial authority and thereby offering a way out of confrontation with the corruption of the church, which cannot be disentangled from its being as such.

To speak of God at all as Christians, to offer or to refuse analogies, to be silent about God, all of these are done inescapably from within the world, from within the church; so I want to suggest that Tonstad's account should be read via a parallax shift that locates the disjunction between theological language and the divine *within* the church. In seeking to locate God radically outside of the logics of heterosexism and patriarchy that have historically characterized Christian theology, Tonstad renders God "the safe and sound, the unscathed . . . the immune," refusing Althaus-Reid's insistence that "God's divinity depends on God's own presence amidst the sexual turbulences of beings' intimate relationships." Although the relationships among the Christian doctrine of God, ecclesiology, and political theology are rendered complex by the slow death of Christendom and the ongoing attempts of secular Western politics to emancipate itself from Christianity, nonetheless these three are inextricably entwined: To speak of the Christian God is to speak of the church is to speak politically. If negative theology is to escape the logic of weaponized apophaticism,

secretly grounding the kinds of political claims it seeks to deny (such that, for example, Christianity is not, at its core, heterosexist) then its consequences must be identical with a materialist theology that insists that there is no outside of or other to the world, no guarantee of its meaning or resurrection, however discontinuous. Unless everything is at stake in our struggle over the meaning of Christianity, we cannot fully assume responsibility for our role in that struggle.

If we are to rewrite Christian theology from the position of Christianity's excluded, abjected, and disavowed others, then we must begin not only with the excluded queerness, the nonreproductive clitoral logic to which Tonstad appeals but also with Christianity's excluded doctrinal others—Jews and Muslims, heretics and witches. No simple fidelity to the Christian tradition is possible—the Christian tradition is too various, multiple, fragmented, and internally antagonistic. We cannot abort Christianity's sexual propriety without also threatening the reproduction of its doctrinal propriety. When Tonstad says that systematic theology must be "schooled by radical feminist, womanist and queer thinkers," she is also arguing that we must betray Christianity by fidelity to its constitutively excluded others.[155] There is no faithful account of God that is not also a betrayal; nor is it possible to escape the corruption of the church. To paraphrase Jared Sexton's discussion of the inescapable imbrication of interracial relationships with obscene racist fantasies, it is not a question of whether we can escape the racism, the misogyny, the subjective and objective violences of the Christian tradition, "but rather of how one inhabits an unavoidably corrupted context for which there is no outside."[156] Only by fully confronting the violent exclusions by which Christianity has constituted itself, by insisting on the truth that is revealed from the position of the whore, the witch, the heretic, or the slave might we aim at the divine violence, which—to paraphrase Edelman—may well take the form of figuring Christianity's abortion.

To speak of the end of the world—the erasure of distinctions, the termination of history, the cessation of reproduction—is to return, once again, to the central problematics of mystical theology—to the structural homologies between creation and fall, consummation and death. Likewise, to speak of the abortion of the church is to anticipate the eschaton in which the particular task of the Christian faithful is rendered obsolete. In the mystical darkness of unknowing, even the distinctions between incompleteness and completeness, destruction and creation, begin to fail. Let us return, then, to Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, and consider what it might mean to repeat it differently, unfaithfully, indecently, according to Žižek's materialist account of desire.

6

Mystical Theology and the Four Discourses

In this chapter I suggest that a rereading of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* through Jacques Lacan's four discourses illustrates how a Žižekian ontology makes possible a materialist reading of apophatic theology and Christian identity. Slavoj Žižek's work offers the possibility of repeating Dionysius differently, under the aegis of a Žižekian materialism within which apophatic theology is the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of cataphatic theology. In such a materialist theology, Christian identity can be understood according to the logic of drive: that is, not as a commitment to a particular set of answers or a particular vision of harmony, but precisely as the commitment to a particular problem, the problem of what it means to be faithful to Christ. This problem is never an abstract theoretical question but is always incarnated in the body of Christ, the church. Such an understanding of Christian identity would demand that (white) theology struggle against its desire to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, and seek instead to love the world around it in all of its sublimity and horror. This account of theology is one that betrays certain aspects of the Christian tradition in the name of faithfulness to others; like all such attempts, it risks reincorporation into theological respectability so as to ensure Christianity's reproduction. It aims neither at completing nor surpassing theology, but at infidel fidelity, at failure.

This chapter begins with a recap of the key elements of Dionysius's Neoplatonic Christianity, and in particular of the structure of Dionysius's

Mystical Theology. It discusses, briefly, the structural parallels between Dionysius's and Žižek's ontologies in order to explain why a Žižekian rereading of Dionysius is both possible and potentially valuable. Žižek's most extensive discussions of the structure of both possible and existing communities rely heavily on the Lacanian schema of the four discourses, which offers an account of the way that desire functions in the context of language and community. The bulk of this chapter consists of a rereading of the *Mystical Theology* through the lens of these four discourses. For Dionysius, there is a deep connection between the epistemological and the ontological claims of theological language. This parallels Žižek's materialist reading of Lacan, which affirms the interrelationship of the structure of material reality and the nature of human language.

For both Dionysius and Žižek, questions of completeness, unity, immanence and transcendence are utterly fundamental. Moreover, there are striking parallels between the four Lacanian discourses which (particularly on a Žižekian reading of Lacan) set out the ways in which these key terms are configured and the four forms of theological language presented in Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*. As such, they offer a useful way into imagining how theology might be transformed by an encounter with Žižekian materialist ontology and illuminated by his central distinction between desire and drive.

Mystical Theology

As discussed in Chapter 1, much of the originality and significance of Dionysius's work lies in his bold synthesis of Christian theology and Neoplatonism, drawing connections between the structure of human desire, the nature of language, and the being of the created world. Just as creation emanates from and returns to God, utterly dependent for its being on the divine, so too with human language, which begins not with human particularity or agency but with the divine gift of Scripture. It is desire that binds the ecclesial community to this divine economy. As I have suggested, this Neoplatonic inheritance has been, at best, ambiguous for Christian theology, which has struggled to offer an account of materiality faithful to the affirmation of the created world implied by central Christian doctrines such as the original goodness of creation and the incarnation of God. The influence of Neoplatonism means that theology tends to function according to a logic of incorporation, where everything that exists is comprehended by and reabsorbed into God, a closed economy that assures the mastery of the divine over difference and multiplicity. These tendencies to value the ideal over the material, the universal over the particular, and the

hierarchical over the disruptive are deeply connected to the kyriarchical structures of the Western Christian tradition, which has repeatedly, both in theory and in practice, sided with the rich against the poor, and with the strong against the weak. All of these tendencies are visible in Dionysius's own work, for example in his refusal to countenance the possibility of a challenge to authority from those in positions of lesser authority. Many remain visible in contemporary theology that engages with apophatic theology via continental thinkers such as Jacques Derrida.

Two things are suggestive of the possibility of repeating Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* via a Žižekian materialism. First, there are deep conflicts within Dionysius's texts between his commitment to the existing consensus of Christian theology and the metaphysics of Neoplatonism. These suggest the potential for reconfiguring Dionysius's work according to an alternative metaphysics. Second, there are clear structural parallels between Žižek's synthesis of Lacan and German idealism and the Neoplatonic Christianity of the Dionysian corpus. These suggest that Žižek's work might provide resources for such a reconfiguration.

For all the far-ranging and profound influence that Dionysius's synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism has had on Christian theology, the system that emerges is not without its profound internal tensions. Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* offers an account of the erotic transformation of both theological language and the individual person toward God, which bears clear parallels with much Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. But where the erotic education of Plato's *Symposium* (for example) begins at the most material point, the body of a beautiful young boy, and works upward and away from both particularity and materiality, for Dionysius the starting point is with God, with "the most appropriate" and therefore least material names, so that theological education takes in both emanation and return.[1] Moreover, although the divine names (which correspond for Dionysius to each stage of the emanation of theological language) largely fit within the standard Neoplatonic schema according to which things become more particular, more material, and more various the further they emanate from the One, Dionysius places the trinity and the incarnation alongside the most abstract names of God. The first of the divine names includes not just oneness and threeness, but the Fatherhood and Sonship of God, the doctrine of the Spirit, and the claim that Jesus was God.[2]

The ambiguous relationship between Neoplatonic ontology and Christian theology in Dionysius's work is clearly exemplified by recent discussions of the relationship between Dionysius's apophatic theology and contemporary continental philosophy. In light of Dionysius's pivotal role in the conjunction of Neoplatonic ontology with the Christian tradition,

there is an irony in the fact that it is precisely the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology that results in the recent return to Dionysius. And yet, as I've argued, there is enough ambiguity and antagonism in Dionysius's work for it to be susceptible to these rereadings.

This brings us to my second claim: that the structural homology between Dionysius's and Žižek's work makes possible a repetition of the former via the latter. As discussed previously, Denys Turner argues that the language of eros is valuable to Dionysius because it addresses two of the key tensions within his attempt to reconcile Christianity and Neoplatonism: the problem of creation as a free act and the problem of how God can act "outside" of Godself.[3] Both of these problems are essentially problems of economy: How can the cycle of cause and effect be ruptured? How can a given economy give rise to that which is genuinely new? For Dionysius, the language of eros makes it possible to resolve, or at least sustain, these tensions between freedom and necessity, oneness and differentiation. In love, Turner argues, we are both free and compelled, united and differentiated. Dionysius's erotic theology is, he argues, "the dialectics of the divine *eros*."[4] For Turner, eros allows us to "transcend the last differentiation of all: *the difference itself between unity and difference*."[5] I hope that it is clear by this point how close this position is to that of Žižek's materialist ontology of desire, particularly in the extent to which it escapes the Neoplatonic ontology of participation by asserting that the difference between unity and difference is itself a distinction that is internal to language, to the created world. The problems of creation, freedom, and distinction, and their relationships both to the limits of language and to the nature of the material world are fundamental to both Dionysius's and Žižek's projects. Both turn to philosophical accounts of the nature and structure of desire in order to address them. The difference between (Turner's reading of) Dionysius and Žižek is *precisely* the difference between the "standard" reading of Hegel's work—where dialectics means the reconciliation of contradiction in a higher unity—and Žižek's reading of Hegelian dialectics—which sees contradiction not resolved so much as internalized so that, say, freedom is the internal contradiction of antagonism, difference the internal contradiction of unity.[6]

In some ways, then, Žižek's project is actually closer to Dionysius's than is the work of Derrida and his interlocutors. Where Derrida and deconstructionist Christianity draw on Dionysius's work in the hope of escaping ontotheology, Žižek seeks to address the ontotheological problem by articulating a more antagonistic ontology. Where Derrida problematizes ontotheology by driving a wedge between language and being, Žižek argues that the impossibility of language *is* the impossibility of being. He

more radically rules out the possibility of "God" functioning as the ground of being by locating immanence and transcendence within being itself. God cannot be that which grounds or ungrounds being; if we are to speak of God at all, it can only be as that which we love in a particular community: for theology, in the church. What we give ourselves up to is not God as the ground of our being but the work of love in and through Christ-as-the-church.

Dionysius's Mystical Theology

There are four stages in Dionysius's account of the mystical progress toward God. Dionysius begins with "the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology":[7] God is three and one; God is Father, Son, and Spirit; God became incarnate in Christ. Subsequently, theological language broadens out in order to speak about God using every possible name, proliferating in such a way as to reflect the diversity and multiplicity of the created world: Theology speaks of the "forms, figures, and instruments proper to [God] . . . of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses."[8]

But eventually a turning point is reached; theological language overreaches itself and in its excess begins to seem implausible. So the denials begin: God is not air or stone, drunk or angry; God is not life or goodness, threeness or oneness, Father or Son. And then, finally, the denials themselves are denied, and language begins to collapse in on itself, as Dionysius draws on the language of paradox, contradiction, and impossibility. God is neither being nor nonbeing; neither error nor truth; God is beyond assertion or denial. There are four stages, then: naming, proliferation, denials, and then the collapse of denial itself. It is this fourfold schema that I will bring into dialogue with Žižek's Lacanian schema of the four discourses.

The Lacanian Subject

Thomas Lynch describes the four discourses as "the closest [Lacan] comes to charting the nature of ideology."[9] In Žižek's hands, this potential is more fully exploited. The four discourses "constitute one of the primary systematic elements of his thought,"[10] and function not only as the basis for "a new typology of the different modern regimes,"[11] but also as, more important, the model for the ultimate goal of his political work: a "sociality based in *drive* rather than desire,"[12] in which "the subjective, engaged stance" offers "the key to a true, autonomous politics without any support in the big Other."[13]

In the discourses, which are structured diagrammatically using mathemes (the algebraic symbols that Lacan uses to describe the overarching structures of the subject and the relationships between subjects), Lacan seeks to lay out the four basic structures according to which human social relations are arranged. Despite the language of "discourse," Lacan is clear that what is crucial here is not primarily the particular language and speech that each discourse contains but the basic configuration of the relationships between subjects.[14] These discourses are, unsurprisingly, of great interest to Žižek and surface repeatedly throughout his work.[15] Although they emerge relatively late in Lacan's work (they are first discussed at length in his 1969–70 *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*),[16] they draw together many key elements of his earlier work. The discourses are articulated as a single framework occupied by four terms, which rotate around the framework in order to generate the four discourses. I begin by setting out the four terms that take their place in the basic framework of the discourses, before explaining the framework itself and subsequently examining each of the discourses in turn, and in relation to Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*.

S_1, S_2, $\mathcal{S}$, and *a*

In one sense at least Neoplatonism, the biblical account of creation, and Lacanian psychoanalysis coincide: For all three, things are brought into being by a moment of division. The One becomes the Many; the formless void becomes dark and light, land and sea; the subject is named, catches sight of himself or herself in the mirror and is forever after unable to be a simple self-identical unity. For Lacan, creation occurs by virtue of an inexplicable moment of decision: A baby is named, and the subject comes into being; a man is declared king, and the state is born. The Lacanian name for this instance that grounds a new order is the master signifier, which is designated by the symbol S_1. Lacan's favored example of such a master signifier is the Name of the Father, the self-grounding claim made by God to Moses the first time that he ascends the mountain (which is, of course, *the* fundamental narrative motif of mystical theology): "I am who I am."[17]

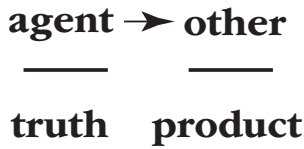
Because, for Lacan, both the individual subject and the social order are primarily beings of language, what is generated by the initial act of creation is yet more language. The individual and the social order begin to speak about themselves, to generate discourses about who and what they are, like the plants of Genesis that, once brought into being, begin to produce seed "according to their kinds."[18] These chains of language that come into being are designated by the Lacanian symbol S_2, which stands for

knowledge. But what comes into being does so as the result of a division, and so remains internally divided. The systems of meaning and knowledge generated can never be entirely comprehensive, perfectly self-contained, because they are founded on a moment of non-sense, the master signifier.

Thus the Lacanian symbol for this subject is a crossed-out S ($\not{S}$), the divided subject that never fully coincides with itself, which is never simply self-contained. What divides the subject is both a lack—something missing from the subject—and an excess—something that always escapes the subject's grasp. This gap is filled in with objects of fantasy: both desired objects that the subject thinks will complete it and reviled objects that the subject perceives as the barriers to its completion. This is the role of the *objet petit a*, the *a*.

The Four Discourses

There are four terms, then, in the Lacanian account of the constitution of language and the subject: the master signifier, knowledge, the divided subject, and the *objet petit a*. Lacan sets out four possible configurations of these four elements of identity; these four configurations are the four discourses. Each discourse consists of the four terms—S_1, S_2, $\not{S}$, and *a*—occupying four positions: agent, other, product, and truth. The basic social relation constituted by the discourse is the relationship between the agent and the other, and this upper half of the discourse represents the conscious aspect of the relationship. The lower half of the discourse is the relationship's unconscious aspects, and consists of the truth of the discourse—the unconscious but fundamental factor that motivates the agent—and the product of the discourse—that which is the actual (though not the intended) outcome of the relationship between the agent and the other. The relationship between the agent and the other is motivated by the desire for wholeness but always fails, because to achieve wholeness would be to obliterate distinction and therefore to undo creation itself.



The Lacanian schema generates four discourses. Beginning with the master's discourse and rotating this structure by 90 degrees at a time (what Lacan calls a "quarter turn"),[19] it generates, successively, the university dis-

course, the hysteric's discourse, and the analyst's discourse, which, Lacan says, correspond to four different social phenomena: "governing, educating, protesting and revolutionizing."[20] These discourses are bound up with desire, with lack;[21] but also, importantly, with drive, which is, according to Lacan, "here, where something is taking place between you and what I am saying."[22] Of these four discourses, the master's, the hysteric's, and the university discourse are all structured according to the logic of desire: All assume the possibility of an impossible wholeness and cling to the fantasy of completion. Only the analyst's discourse represents drive, the traversing of the fantasy, the acknowledgment of the inevitable failure of both the individual and the social order. Only the analyst's discourse is the discourse of love.[23]

In Žižek's work, the four discourses undergo two transformations. First, in the context of Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian materialism the structure of human subjectivity and society is grounded in the structure of the material world itself. It is not only human being that is intrinsically ruptured but all being: Everything that is emerges out of the intrinsic incompleteness, the failure, of nothingness itself. In this sense, Žižek's reading of Lacan brings the four discourses closer to Dionysius's account of the relation of human desire and language, which is intrinsically bound up with the Neoplatonic ontology of the nature of the created world, emerging into multiplicity from divine simplicity. Second, Žižek draws out the political implications of the four discourses. He elaborates Lacan's four discourses—and his relatively sparse gestures toward particular political configurations—into a complex account of ideology and the ways in which human desire is caught up into the political functioning of different societies.

The Four Discourses and Dionysius's Mystical Theology

In what follows, I discuss the structure and function of each of the four discourses. I argue that, by mapping Lacan's four discourses (and their Žižekian elaborations) onto the four forms of theological language in Dionysius's mystical theology, it is possible to repeat Dionysius differently, and in so doing to think theology according to a Žižekian materialism of incompleteness rather than the Neoplatonic logic of analogy that underpins so much systematic theology. The circle described by the four discourses or the four forms of theological language is one that both Dionysius and Žižek acknowledge can be repeated over and over again: for Dionysius in the ecclesiastical repetition of the Eucharistic liturgy,

which can be seen in the background of the *Mystical Theology*'s structure; for Žižek in the process of the forming and reforming of both individual subjectivity and social identity around their constitutive antagonisms. For both thinkers the final stage is crucial, representing an eschatological hope not for static or straightforward completion, but for a radical shift in the relationships among the subject, the community, and the function of language.

Although I elucidate the relationship between Lacan's mathemes and the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return in greater detail throughout my discussion of the four discourses, it is worth briefly describing the key contours of the relationship between the two here. Whereas both Neoplatonism and Platonism tend to reduce difference to the same, to abstract the general from the particular, to absorb everything into the One, psychoanalysis is, as Paul Verhaeghe argues, "the science of the particular."[24] Verhaeghe argues that by shifting from the Freudian use of Greek myths, art, and literature to explain his theories to more abstract, bloodless symbols and diagrams, Lacan is increasing the degree of abstraction involved in psychoanalytic metapsychology precisely in order to increase its ability to reckon with the complexity and particularity of individuals and cultures. What Lacan is interested in is the "formal structures" into which the particularities of the world become organized. These metapsychological structures offer a framework for engaging with the particularity of the individual subject or the particular social context, but by no means imply that, as for Neoplatonism, these particularities will eventually be subsumed into universality. For psychoanalysis, the particularities that define the individual will always be specific to that individual. What is at stake is, rather, the way that they are structured, the way that the individual relates to his or her own irreducible incompleteness. As Žižek argues, Lacan's later work shifts from "the unity of conceptual thinking (in)to the duality of *matheme* and *lalangue* . . . mathematical or logical formulae and schemes [and] the explosion of word-play and other forms of poetic discourse."[25] There are few linguistic features so particular as wordplay, as evidenced by the copious translators' notes that litter the translations of Lacan's seminars into English, painstakingly explaining the untranslatable puns on which his discourse hinges.

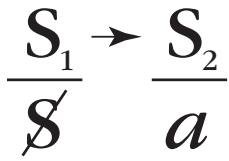
Although both the Neoplatonic pattern of emanation and return that underlies Dionysius's work and the progressive rotation of mathemes that generates the Lacanian discourses suggest a set and perhaps inevitable progression, neither model is in fact quite so prescriptive. For Dionysius, the hierarchy by which individuals ascend toward God is impossible to circum-

vent and must, for the good of all concerned, be strictly maintained. Yet although the scale of being is rigidly fixed, the direction in which individuals travel is less so: In *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius speaks about "the possessed, that is, those who have turned away from a life conforming to divine examples and have adopted instead the ideas and character of abominable demons" and of those who have simply "abandoned a sacred way of life."[26] Although the overarching schema of Dionysius's hierarchies suggests that progress is somehow inevitable, this is clearly not (at least in the short term) always the case.

The ordering of the Lacanian discourses is yet more complex. Lacan says that the structure of the discourses does not necessarily require that they be discussed in any particular order, although "historical reasons" give the master's discourse a certain priority.[27] The analyst's discourse in particular emerges in some way every time there is a shift from one discourse to another.[28] This ambiguity is taken up in different ways by Lacan's interpreters. Verhaeghe locates the master's discourse first in terms of the genesis of the subject, "because it founds the symbolic order as such, presenting us with a formal expression of the Oedipal complex and the constitution of the subject."[29] It is also the first discourse of the analytic relationship, not because every analysand arrives in analysis and immediately engages in the master's discourse,[30] but because once transference begins, it is the master's discourse that necessarily comes first, subsequently progressing to the analyst's discourse or regressing to the university discourse.[31] By contrast, Mark Bracher places the university discourse first,[32] though he also speaks about the discourses as circular rather than progressive as, for him, the analyst's discourse simply generates a new master signifier, albeit one that is "a little less oppressive."[33]

Žižek affirms the priority of the master's discourse, but, although he refers to earlier manifestations of the discourses, he suggests that all four discourses originate with modernity.[34] His account of the relationships of the four discourses varies somewhat throughout his work. At one point he suggests that the hysteric's and the university discourse are the two possible results of the master's discourse, each undermining it in different ways, and that the analyst's discourse represents the hope of a genuine transformation out of the destructive logic of capitalism.[35] Elsewhere, he suggests that the master's, hysteric's, and university discourse are three varieties of dysfunctional response to the "analyst's act," three ways of disavowing it.[36] But throughout, he consistently affirms the master's discourse as in some sense the first discourse and the analyst's discourse as the hoped-for goal of social and political transformation.

The Master's Discourse



I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology. I have shown the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be one and then triune, how Fatherhood and Sonship are predicated of it, the meaning of the theology of the Spirit, how these core lights of goodness grew from the incorporeal and indivisible good, and how in this sprouting they have remained inseparable from their co-eternal foundation in it, in themselves and in each other. I have spoken of how Jesus, who is above individual being, became a being with a true human nature.

—Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*

Let us begin, then, with the master's discourse. The agent of the master's discourse is the master signifier, the person or concept who founds the existing order for no other reason than the position they occupy.[37] The master's discourse can be seen at work in the relationship between master and slave (and in the modern European invention of (white, rich, property-owning) Man as sovereign individual, which emerged along with racial chattel slavery),[38] in the sort of analytic relationship in which the analyst is assumed to know all of the answers to the analysand's problems, in the sort of theological or ecclesial contexts that place great store by notions of infallibility. It is the relationship in which the parent demands obedience of the child purely "because I say so." It is the discourse of the law, of the God who says, "I am what I am," "It is so because I say it is so,"[39] the discourse of "I am the Lord your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me."[40] For Žižek it is exemplified by absolute monarchy, "the first figure of modernity that effectively undermined the distinct network of feudal relations and interdependences . . . the 'Sun King' Louis XIV, with his '*l'état c'est moi*';[41] by fascism, which is a reactionary "return to the figure of the Master-Leader";[42] and also by much Christian theology.[43] The master's discourse is driven by desire, by the idea that "knowledge can make a whole."[44]

The master's discourse describes the structure of the Oedipus complex and hence of castration, which is why it is associated with the birth of the subject. As discussed above, Žižek sides with those readers of Lacan who affirm the priority of the master's discourse, describing it as "the first, 'founding' discourse in the Lacanian matrix." He draws a comparison be-

tween this claim that all discourse is initially structured according to the master's discourse, as "authoritarian" and Derrida's claim that "every discursive field is founded on some 'violent' ethicopolitical decision."[45]

The first of Dionysius's forms of theological speech, which begins by speaking about God as Father, Son, and Spirit, of God made flesh in Jesus,[46] can also be read in terms of the master's discourse. The central terms of Christian doctrine are, in many senses, simply given to us. They come to us from outside, as Dionysius emphasizes when he asserts that *all* of the names with which it is acceptable to name God are given in scripture.[47] Here Dionysius's Christianity is in interesting tension with his Neoplatonism: Whereas the Neoplatonic schema of being would suggests that the notions that are "most appropriate" to speaking about God are those which are most abstract, most immaterial, Dionysius's appeal to the importance of scripture and the incarnation pushes against this tendency.[48] What could be more particular than the flesh of Christ, than the assertion that God "became a being with a true human nature," a single individual in a specific historical and geographical context?[49] What is more particularly Christian than the appeal to the authority of the Bible? What could be less abstract, less unified, than this collection of disparate texts, a multiplicity of forms, the strange product of very particular cultures, of singular individual writers and communities? What gives Christianity its unity, what grounds the identity of the church is not the generic act of creation, the groundless commandment, "Let there be light," nor even the monotheistic assertion, "I am who I am," but the claim that God became human in the person of Jesus. It is on this irreducibly specific claim that Christianity grounds itself, that theological speech begins.

But two things are concealed by the discourse of the master. First, what is concealed is the truth of the discourse: the divided subject. The master is himself (the master is archetypally masculine) incomplete. Your father does not have all of the answers; the analyst does not know the truth of your desire; Christians do not have a perfect copy of the biblical text or access to a theological tradition without contradiction or antagonism. The Eucharist cannot escape—is in fact dependent on—the threat of impurity. As Žižek points out,[50] Lacan specifically equates the master's discourse with the philosophical discourse of ontology,[51] which Lacan seeks to disavow in his own work, arguing that "nothing is less certain than the existence of a world."[52] What is problematic here is not the attempt to speak about being per se but the appeal to "a prediscursive reality," the failure on the part of the speaker to recognize the role of their own speech in creating the reality they are speaking about:[53] In Žižek's words, "Ontology is constituted by the misrecognition of how its enunciation brings about its propositional content."[54] But where Lacan tends to deny that there is any

place for ontology within his psychoanalytic project, suggesting that both God and "being" are effects of language, Žižek's response to this failure of philosophy is to propose a reading of Lacan in tandem with Hegel in order to articulate an account of the structure of language as intrinsically bound up with the structure of material reality. The concealed truth of philosophical ontology is the divided subject, the philosopher, who creates the world she seeks to master. What is needed, for Žižek, is not a total rejection of ontology but an ontology which has gone through the fantasy and come to recognize its own essential incompleteness.

The second thing concealed by the master's discourse is excess enjoyment: the transgression that is generated by attempts to maintain the fantasy of wholeness. For Žižek it is no surprise that those who assert most vigorously the purity of the church and the adequacy of its teachings are so often those who both delight in the abjection of those who challenge this narrative of perfection and simultaneously fall short of it.[55] Even in Dionysius's work, his rigidly hierarchical understanding of theological language is inseparable from a hierarchical ecclesiology that relies on the abjection of those outside the church. Although Dionysius explicitly espouses an account of evil as privation, arguing that it "destroys and debases" but cannot produce "being or birth," that it "neither is nor confers being,"[56] in his discussion of the structure of the ecclesial community, the language he uses to speak about "the possessed," whom he describes as "held fast by opposing charms . . . exposed to the very worst power," belies this model.[57]

The University Discourse

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\not{S}}$$

> I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God. And I feel sure that you have noticed how these latter come more abundantly than what went before.
>
> —Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*

When the master's discourse begins to fail, one route out of its internal contradictions is the university discourse.[58] Instead of authority grounded only in itself, the agent of the university discourse is knowledge itself. This is the discourse of the "neutral expert," of the schoolteacher, the bureaucrat, and the management consultant. Persons who occupy the place of knowledge do so on the understanding that their own particular subjectivity never intervenes, that they function simply as the neutral representative of objective truths.[59] Knowledge pursues the elusive *a*, that which eludes it, convinced that it will eventually be able to complete itself. It is the pursuit of ever more information in the belief that once knowledge is complete it will be possible to attain perfect efficiency, total control, and absolute certainty. Mark Bracher argues that the university discourse is in some sense our basic experience as beings of language: We are subjected to an external system of knowledge and belief and compelled to make sense of ourselves within it. For Lacan, the discourse of the university is particularly associated with higher education under capitalism: students function for the university both as the means of production and as the surplus value it generates.[60] For Žižek, it is particularly characteristic both of the "bureaucratic 'totalitarianism'" of Stalinism[61] and of contemporary capitalism, "the expert rule of bureaucracy," in which, for example, the "market expert" can advocate "strong budgetary measures (cutting welfare expenses, etc.) as a necessity imposed by his neutral expertise devoid of any ideological biases."[62]

Dionysius's second form of theological speech—the proliferation of language so that every name of every created thing is used to speak about God—can be understood in terms of the university discourse. *The Divine Names* is the text that most closely correlates to this stage of Dionysius's progression of theological language, and it is no coincidence that it is also the text of his that most closely resembles a systematic theology. Theology begins from a set of basic texts and terms, from certain particular commitments, and produces knowledge in response to them: commentary, exegesis, systematic theology.[63] This is the mode in which theology is spoken about as the "Queen of the sciences," as it seeks to bring all human knowledge under its rule. In Dionysius's *The Divine Names* even evil itself is contained and domesticated within the structure of theological discourse.

It is perhaps here too that the allegorical hermeneutic that Kevin Hart considers a key aspect of the "mystical economy" is to be located.[64] The allegorical reading of scripture, with its scrupulous attention to the tiniest details of the texts and its persistent attempts to draw them into the narrative of the church community, seeks "mastery of textual differences,"[65] and so, at least on Hart's Derridean reading, is deeply bound to the metaphysics

of traditional Christian theology. In this attention to the materiality of the text, the allegorical hermeneutic bears comparison with the psychoanalytic practice of interpretation that gives weight to slips of the tongue and to pauses. But Hart also argues that, from the perspective of deconstruction, both the Philonic allegorical hermeneutics that predominates in mystical theology and Hegel's dialectical hermeneutic of history are "examples of 'metaphysics.'"[66] Both operate on a totalizing narrative that seeks to absorb all difference into sameness.

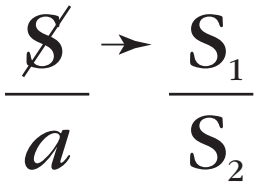
Again, two things are concealed here. First, the truth of the discourse—the master signifier, the irrational, totalitarian demand—is disavowed. Knowledge, the agent of the university discourse, believes itself to be a power grounded in a rationality that is universally accessible, but the truth is that it is at work in service to an irrational master. The university discourse, with its explicit reliance on "so-called objectivity," is exemplified by the scientific tradition inaugurated by Descartes, who is able to guarantee the foundations of his intellectual system only by appealing to God[67] (although Lacan also acknowledges the possibility of a better sort of science that corresponds to the hysteric's discourse).[68] Lacan speaks about the university as the servant of the demands of capitalism, and Žižek argues that Lacan's *Seminar XVII* on the four discourses must be read in the light of the revolutionary events of 1968, which he takes to represent the shift from capitalism in the form of the master's discourse to a capitalism legitimized by the university discourse.[69] This is a shift from explicit ideological struggle to the reign of "post-political administration."[70]

The second thing that is concealed in the university discourse is the product of the discourse: the divided and alienated subject. The more that knowledge proliferates—the more it seeks to comprehend and capture its subjects—the more the subject is alienated. The university discourse produces the cynical citizens of bureaucratic socialism, or the frustrated and resentful subjects of the Research Excellence Framework. This frustration and alienation are not, however, revolutionary. As Renata Salecl argues in her discussion of the Communist education system, "Irony and distance enable preservation of absolute power and prevent a real revolt."[71] The university discourse props up the master's discourse; theological production can work against, rather than for, transformation. "The more you know, the more you will hesitate."[72]

But the university discourse is unstable. As Hart points out, among the great Christian patristic writers, "It was only those who followed the allegorical hermeneutic who developed negative theologies."[73] For Dionysius it is precisely the proliferation of theological language that begins to expose the flaws inherent to any and all speech about God: Although "high-

flown shapes could well mislead someone into thinking that the heavenly beings are golden or gleaming men," "the crassness of the signs" that emerge as theological language proliferates "is a goad so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things."[74]

The Hysteric's Discourse



> The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible . . . It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time.
>
> —Dionysius, *Mystical Theologyy*

The real possibility of transformation begins to emerge with the hysteric's discourse. This is the discourse of protest, of refusal, of the divided subject who refuses the existing narrative or the present order of things.[75] It is bound up with the acknowledgment of the impossibility of the sexual relationship.[76] Žižek argues that the Kantian transcendental turn, in its prohibition of the philosophical claim to have access to the thing-in-itself, marks a shift in the structure of philosophical discourse from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the hysteric.[77] He argues that, whereas the master's discourse and the university discourse operate according to the logic of the masculine exception, the hysteric's discourse is feminine in its refusal of any narratives of harmony and completion, in its relentless assertion of the non-all.[78]

As the feminine discourse of protest, the hysteric's discourse remains caught up in the logic of desire: Although it is characterized by a refusal of the way things are, it still relies on the hope of fulfillment. In the student revolutions of 1968, Lacan notoriously said to his protesting students "You demand a new master; and you will get one." The hysteric recognizes that there is something wrong with the way that things are, but has not yet given

up on the fantasy of wholeness. The divided subject still directs her demands at the master signifier, hoping for answers.[79] What the hysteric wants is a new master, and what is produced is not real transformation, but only more knowledge. Žižek repeatedly associates the hysteric's discourse with the contemporary logic of capitalism insofar as it is constantly remaking itself, incorporating potentially transformational excess into its regular functioning.[80]

The hysteric's discourse correlates to the first movement of Dionysius's negative theology, in which all the richness of theological exposition and discussion is rejected: No, says the hysteric, this is not who God is; these words are not adequate. This is where apophatic theology begins, and it is worth noting here Kevin Hart's discussion of the relationship between various terms associated with apophatic theology. First, Hart distinguishes between "the *via negativa,* a religious programme of practices by which the soul progressively denies all that is not God in order to become one with God, and negative theology, the discourse which reflects upon positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God." Next, he connects negative theology, apophasis, with both *aphairesis* (which means "abstraction") and *analysis*, which Hart defines as "the way of successive abstractions."[81] This fits comfortably with the notion that the ascent to God is one of progressive sameness and unification, a move away from the grotesque particularity of the material world to the pure perfection of the Platonic forms. Yet, as Žižek points out, analysis is not the process of abstraction, of things coming increasingly to conform with what is universal, but precisely the process of breaking a whole down into its component parts.[82] Analysis is separation; so it is possible here to read Dionysius against himself. What if it is positive rather than negative theology that moves toward unification? What if it is the proliferation of theological language that seeks to incorporate everything into theological discourse, into God, and apophatic theology that refuses this logic of absorption in favor of the affirmation of difference? What is negative theology if not precisely the separation of the world from God such that both the world and God can be seen as ends in themselves, things in themselves, the liberation of God from the world and the world from God? Hysteria refuses to accept anything that occupies the place of the *objet petit a* as the thing that will complete me, and so it opens up the way for the position of drive, which begins to value other things for what they are in themselves, outside of their function within my own narcissism.

The concealed truth of the hysteric's discourse is the surplus, that which escapes the master signifier. The hysteric is driven by the recognition that something is wrong, that something does not fit. The *a* is what stands in

the place of the real, which is both the excess and the lack within the symbolic order, the point of antagonism internal to any system. At its best, Lacan suggests, "good" science functions in service of this truth.[83] The hysteric's discourse produces more knowledge: Although huge amounts of data are produced in service of the university discourse, it is the hysteric's discourse that expands the bounds of knowledge and generates new ways of speaking about the world. Again, what is produced here is not sameness or unification but diversity.

The hysteric's discourse represents a series of crucial shifts within the overarching structure of the four discourses. First, it represents the shift from the masculine logic of the exception, which grounds the existing order (which is, as Pound points out, the logic of ontotheology),[84] to the feminine discourse of the not-all. In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek proposes a unified theory of the four discourses and the Lacanian account of sexuality, equating the master's and the university discourse with masculinity and the hysteric's and the analyst's discourse with the non-all. Whereas in the master's and the university discourse the master signifier is present as agent or truth, in the hysteric's discourse the master signifier takes the place of the other. The agent of the hysteric's discourse demands that the other play the role of master signifier, but this relationship is one of impossibility, and so the discourse remains forever incomplete. Likewise, in Dionysius's schema, it is at this point that the adequacy of language begins to be seriously questioned. It is here that the denials, the negations begin.

The hysteric's discourse also marks a shift in the relationship between individual and community. It is the only discourse in which, in the analytic context, it is the analysand who takes the position of the agent or, in a pedagogical context, where the role of the teacher and the student switches so that it is the student who interrogates the teacher. There are two interesting parallels here with Dionysius's work. First, insofar as Dionysius's schema is shaped by the Neoplatonic model of emanation and return, the beginning of negation marks the point in the *Mystical Theology* at which emanation shifts into return and hence the point at which "creation" ceases and creaturely agency begins. Second, given Dionysius's emphasis on the sufficiency of biblical language for theological speech, this is also the point at which theological language ceases to be something purely given. The denials that Dionysius enumerates constitute a refusal precisely of the adequacy of what is given to the individual from outside, by God. To say that God is not one or triune, good, wisdom, or power is to refuse the names that have been given to the theologian *by God*. If there is any space for human agency in Dionysius's thought, it begins here, with resistance. It is possible, then, to read Dionysius's injunction to Timothy to ensure that

the *Mystical Theology* is withheld from those who are unworthy of it not as merely an instantiation of Dionysius's troubling emphasis on the unquestionability of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but as a recognition that, while what is *passed down* is dependent on hierarchy, the ascent to God itself requires a more radical acceptance of responsibility on the part of the one who would ascend.[85]

Lynch argues that the hysteric's discourse is often visible in liberation theology. Liberation theology, then, would be the point at which those who have been dominated by the colonizing narratives of systematic theology in its collusion with Western power begin to resist. And yet, as Lynch argues, this initial refusal of existing narratives is not sufficient in itself. It remains caught in the desire for the master signifier;[86] it risks remaining at the level of the liberal politics of inclusion, demanding not the transformation of the system that oppresses it but merely recognition from and incorporation into that system. This is essentially the argument of Marcella Althaus-Reid, who argues that liberation theology failed insofar as it remained in the logic of systematic theology and became incorporated into the logic of capitalism.[87] For Žižek, Lacan, and Dionysius alike, then, the hysteric's discourse is not sufficient. Although it opens up the space for newness by resisting to accept the adequacy of the world as it is, this simple refusal is not enough.

The Analyst's Discourse

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\not{S}}{S_1}$$

> Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.
>
> —Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*

For Žižek the analyst's discourse alone represents genuine transformation—not exactly completeness or success, but a shift to engaging in

the world in a way that is neither phantasmic nor narcissistic. The analyst's discourse is the discourse in which the fantasy of wholeness is abandoned. Its subject is the *a*: the missing object that is also an excess, that disrupts any dream of completion or perfect control. It is the point at which the social relation shifts from desire to drive. The agent here is not the teacher who has all the answers but the one who forces the other to acknowledge and confront his or her failure, his or her incompleteness. The one who occupies the place of the analyst is, Lacan says, "destined to become a loss, to be eliminated from the process."[88] Žižek points out that, in the analyst's discourse, the social link itself relies not on the master signifier but on the "creaturely excess." It is not a community founded on solidarity with a pitied and pathetic figure of the victim, because insofar as a person or group is considered the victim they are not outside of the existing order of things but precisely and definitely incorporated into it, defined by their subservience to power. Rather, it is organized around the terrifying and sublime excess that escapes the social order as it is: the woman, the enslaved person, the psychoanalyst, or Christ on the cross, precisely insofar as they are inhuman, excessive figures of sublime horror. As an example of what this analytic community might look like, Žižek cites the church insofar as it is a Eucharistic community, gathered around the body of Christ, "the undead substance which redeems us and guarantees that we are raised above mortality."[89] The analyst's discourse is also the discourse of desire outside of the law, free from the superego injunction to "Enjoy!"[90]

Over time, Žižek becomes progressively more insistent on the centrality of the analyst's discourse to political transformation. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* he talks about the analytic discourse as "a state of undecidability, previous to the 'quilting' of the discursive field by a Master Signifier,"[91] a description that is suggestive of potentiality but implies that in order for this potential to be realized there must be a shift back to the master's discourse. In *Tarrying*, Žižek suggests that it is possible for "the critical intellectual" to remain in the analyst's discourse even while the rest of the world shifts back into a new master's discourse. He argues that the shift from one discourse to another (which Lacan says always opens up the possibility of the analyst's discourse) is the moment at which the intellectual can step out of the existing order of things and into a relationship to the master signifier that recognizes "its 'produced,' artificial, contingent character."[92] But this distance from the master signifier, the act that founds a new order, is neither the cynical distance of the subject of the university discourse nor the negative refusal to accept the adequacy of the existing order coupled with the demand for a solution that characterizes the agent of the hysteric's discourse. Rather, this position is the insistence of drive on

the necessity and productivity of antagonism and incompleteness. It is because of the failure of identity—the failure that is identity—that radical transformation, the end of the world, is possible.[93]

Although the analyst's discourse is structurally the inverse of the master's discourse, the two are in many ways similar. Žižek claims that every new order is founded by a master's discourse, the imposition of a master signifier. He asserts repeatedly that transformation begins with transference. There must be some figure around which the sense that there is something wrong with the existing order coalesces so as to transform local objections into a universal and devastating critique of the present system.[94] And yet the act that arises from this transferential relationship is the analyst's act, the traumatic divine violence that is separated from the law-founding violence of the master's discourse only by a hair's breadth. The difference, Žižek says, is the difference between the analyst and the pervert. Both the analyst and the pervert play the role of the *objet petit a*; what distinguishes them is simply that "the pervert *knows* what the other really wants" whereas the analyst "while occupying this place of supposed knowledge, keeps it *empty*."[95] This is the difference between desire and drive: between elevating the beloved to the place of the sublime object, maintaining the fantasy that he or she really can fill it out, and acknowledging in full his or her imperfections and inadequacy of the beloved yet putting him or her in the place of the sublime object regardless.

The truth of the analyst's discourse is knowledge: both his or her knowledge of the structure of desire in general and his or her knowledge of the divided subject, the other, in particular. The agent cannot use this knowledge directly, but it can help him or her understand how best to encourage the other to confront the fact that he or she does not have the answers.[96] The analyst can function as the stumbling block for the analysand only by paying close attention to the particularity of the situation, just as all Žižek's discussions of the means by which the existing order might be disrupted are meaningless without attention to the specific structure of this particular order. Knowledge functions here not as a means of control, incorporation, or unification, but to facilitate the separation of the analyst from the analysand, the transition of the analytic relationship from one of desire to one of drive. In contrast to the hysteric's discourse, what takes place in the analyst's discourse is not simply a separation between the agent and the other but a new sort of relationship. The analyst remains crucial to the analysand not because they fulfill or fail to fulfill a role in the analysand's narcissistic fantasy but precisely because, by refusing to be incorporated into the fantasy of wholeness, they force the analysand to recognize the

analyst as genuinely other and therefore to recognize his or her own incompleteness.

What is produced in the analyst's discourse is a new master signifier, one for which the divided subject acknowledges responsibility. What makes this discourse different from the others is that it represents the full acknowledgment of the incompleteness of both knowledge and the subject. Lacan says that the "analytic discourse completes the 90-degree displacement by which the three others are structured," but, for all that, "it doesn't resolve anything."[97] It is all too easy to slip back into the master's discourse so that the cycle of discourses begins again. But there is a small, fragile hope that it might be possible to found a community that functions according to this mode of discourse, recognizing its own incompleteness and failure. Lynch argues that, despite Žižek's critiques of "the master signifiers of our age . . . his work never makes the turn beyond this interrogation," that he never quite manages to move from the hysteric's to the analyst's discourse.[98] Žižek effectively acknowledges the truth of this claim, conceding that psychoanalysis itself has failed, repeatedly, to build a community that functions according to the analyst's discourse. But, nonetheless, he insists that "the fight is worth pursuing," and cites the Pauline church as an example of what this analytic community might look like, living in a permanent state of emergency, suspending all of their social ties.[99] Žižek claims that the central task of *Less Than Nothing* is the attempt to "articulate the space for a revolt which will not be recaptured by one or another version of the discourse of the Master."[100]

According to Žižek, Alain Badiou proposes an alternative to Lacan's typology of the four discourses which replaces the analyst's discourse with the discourse of the mystic.[101] The mystic's discourse is the point where we are confronted with an unnameable Event that can only be betrayed by being spoken about. Both Badiou's discourse of the mystic and Lacan's discourse of the analyst correspond, therefore, to the final stage of the trajectory of Dionysius's mystical theology. The difference between them expresses a tension that is present both within Dionysius's own account and within the Christian mystical theological tradition more generally. Žižek argues that what distinguishes the Lacanian analyst's discourse from Badiou's discourse of the mystic is that where, for Badiou, the fourth discourse is "the isolated position of the psychotic immersed in her/her *jouissance* and, as such, not a discourse (a social link) at all . . . the consistency of Lacan's entire edifice hinges on the fact that a fourth *discursive* position is possible," which relates to the central impossibility of all identity not simply as a failure but as "positive and productive," generative and creative.[102]

What becomes visible in contrasting these two accounts of the desired goal of human transformation are the tensions within the Christian mystical tradition (and within traditional Christian theology more generally), which struggles to conceive of desire as occurring *within* a community, which cannot but see the progression toward God as a progression away from materiality and praxis, which tends, despite its best efforts, to see the love of God and love of neighbor in competition with one another. As Dionysius says, the ultimate hope of the individual in pursuit of God is that eventually language "will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable."[103] Yet Dionysius's account does not end simply in the absorption of the individual into God—although some of his work suggests this model—but with a shift from upward ascent to an endless circling around God.[104] Similarly, the analyst's discourse is not simply silence but a form of speech that is "structured by impossibility." Here, I think, it opens up the possibility of understanding theology in terms of a mystical community structured around the impossibility of naming that upon which it is founded. There are parallels here with Mary-Jane Rubenstein's argument that the *Mystical Theology* "shatters the myth of individualism," arguing that access to God is possible only through the abandonment of "that self which 'knowledge' constitutes, and the way to abandon the self-as-knowing is to make knowledge *fail*. . . . And since the structural integrity of the self is dependent upon the 'God' it knows, apophatic discourse proceeds by mobilizing (and thereby destroying) all conceptions of the divine."[105] Similarly, Rubenstein discusses the work of Meister Eckhart, arguing that for him "the persistent mobility of desire" unhinges "the stasis of 'knowledge'" which prevents "the reformation of the epistemological 'self' and 'God,'" a description that strikingly resembles Žižek's account of trauma.[106] To love, then, is to be an obstacle for one another. It is to be, as Christ is to the church, a stumbling block, an offense, and yet also a foundation stone. This is not simply to condemn theology to uncertainty, to hesitation, or to silence. Žižek claims that the key feature of "the great works of *materialist* thought" is that they are "*unfinished*." They seem, he says, to "tackle the same nodal problem again and again . . . although they ultimately fail, their very failure is theoretically extremely productive."[107] There are parallels here with the way that the Christian apophatic insistence on the ultimate failure of all systematic theology coexists with the cataphatic delight, nonetheless, in its fruitfulness, its proliferation. To think theologically according to the logic of drive, of failure, is, after all, to suggest that the created world runs not on the logic of law, debt, justice, and economy, but on the logic

of antagonism, of the excess of grace that breaks economy open not despite but *as* failure.

To reimagine Christian theology according to a Žižekian ontology, then, would be to understand it as failure. To love the church cannot be to appeal to a notion of transcendence as an idealized realm that can ground a theological logic of colonization, purification, and incorporation. A theology of drive would be a theology that works with a notion of transcendence as that which disrupts the boundaries of what is from within, which interrupts the reproduction of the same, which is—like both birth and abortion—traumatic, risky, the meeting place of life and death, the sublime, and the horrific—and yet also always at risk of reincorporation into sameness. If the church is the body of Christ, then it is, like all bodies, inherently incomplete, founded on an impossible antagonism at its core. To love it must be to love beyond the Law, to love it in its imperfection, its incompleteness, its ordinariness, and its monstrosity.

If theology can relinquish the desire to conquer everything, to assimilate all thought into itself, then perhaps it can be freed to love everything, to love those around it in all of their grotesque materiality, their beauty and horror, to acknowledge the independent value and the coherence of its others and to allow itself to be unsettled, challenged, and transformed by its encounters with them. Here, in what Dionysius calls the "brilliant darkness," is where theology founders, dies, and might, just might, be born again.

Conclusion: Theology as Failure

I have argued that Dionysius's coupling of Neoplatonism and Christian theology gives birth to an account of ontology and desire whose internal contradictions are as important to his theological heirs as the constructive arguments that he makes. Particularly problematic for Dionysius's descendants are the structural homology of creation and fall (which in turn implies the structural homology of redemption and death); the simultaneous affirmation and denigration of the material world; a problematic association of hierarchical power with goodness; and a tendency to see truth as straightforwardly converging onto Christianity such that it becomes difficult to acknowledge the indebtedness of Christian theology to that which is foreign to it. These antagonisms are crucially implicated in Christianity's long history of—among other things—colonialism, racism, and misogyny.

Whereas the central concern of "postmodern" thinkers in general and Jacques Derrida in particular is the economy of the relationship between the individual and the world—for Dionysius, God and the world—these tensions remain, transposed into a different economic register, and are reflected in recent theological engagements with continental philosophy. Discussions of the relationship between Derrida's work and apophatic theology highlight the ways in which Derrida continues to grapple with the problems of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism. In failing to recognize the ways in which Derrida's work is both faithful to many of the central concerns of apophatic theology and also a creative reworking

of key theological concepts, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to repudiate Derrida with what is, effectively, a form of theology stripped of many of the subtleties of earlier theological accounts of transcendence, arguing instead for a strong form of an ontology of participation that exacerbates many of the problems inherent in Dionysius's Neoplatonic-Christian synthesis, a "return" to the crudest ontology of Christian imperial power. Conversely, deconstructionist Christianity takes up Derrida's work not to grapple with the problem of decision so important to his thought, but in order to soften the hard edges of classical Christian ontology, favoring an ontology of connection, uncertainty, and multiplicity perfectly suited to the soft power of Western neocolonialism.

By contrast, Slavoj Žižek's work represents an attempt to move beyond both Dionysius and Derrida via a conflictual materialism. In bringing together the Lacanian account of desire with Hegel, Schelling, and quantum physics, Žižek repeats Dionysius's original marriage of desire and ontology according to a materialism that emphasizes incompleteness, contingency, and disruption. On Žižek's account, the Neoplatonic model in which human desire is teleologically directed toward the reabsorption of distinction into oneness is to be understood as an impossible fantasy, in contrast to the difficult work of love, which correlates to the Freudian death drive, rejecting the narcissistic desire to absorb everything into oneself in favor of the affirmation of difference, division, and decision.

The ways in which Žižek's work offers resources for a reconfiguration of theological accounts of ontology and desire are made visible by a reading of two economic problems—the gift and violence—via Žižek's materialist ontology. Žižek's account of the gift is separated from Derrida's only by the parallax shift that marks the distinction between desire and drive. Whereas Derrida's discussion of the gift expresses a longing for a completeness that will never arrive, Žižek seeks to celebrate incompleteness as the condition of existence. Fully affirming the structural homology between creation and fall, Žižek positions Christianity on the side of evil, rupture, and violence against the good of harmony and peace. Love, creation, and transformation all belong, for Žižek, on the side of violence.

Yet although many critiques of Žižek's violent rhetoric miss the mark, his account of violence is genuinely problematic: first, insofar as it lacks precision, and second, insofar as his work fails to adequately theorize the role of gender, sexuality, and race in the symbolic orders that he wants to disrupt. The first of these issues may be resolved by an appeal to the psychoanalytic notion of trauma, which allows both for a clearer account of the way in which Žižek understands transformation and for a consideration of the implications of Žižek's work for theology. The second can be

addressed by reading Žižek alongside feminist, queer, and Black thought in order to articulate an account of identity *as* failure, as constitutively impure, incomplete, and internally inconsistent, which in turn makes it possible to imagine a materialist theology whose identity is constituted by Christ as both cornerstone and stumbling block, that on which the church is founded and that on which it founders and fails.

This account of ontology and desire, of identity as failure, makes possible a materialist reading of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* according to the Lacanian four discourses, as an account of the transformation of ecclesial life from desire to drive. Žižek refuses the attempts of postmodern philosophers and theologians to escape metaphysics and instead deals with the question of ontotheology by developing an ontology that refuses the necessity of an originating principle from which the created world emanates and returns, locating transcendence within immanence so that God can no longer be thought as the ground of being but as that which is loved within the constitutive failure of the church to be faithful to Christ.

Like all theologies, this account of Christian identity is a contextual theology; like most contextual theologies that go under the name of "systematic," it grapples with an inheritance of white Western Christianity. More specifically, I have taken as my focus the context of the intersection of Christian theology and continental philosophy around the question of their shared relationship to the Christian mystical theological tradition. Whereas Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler aim to uncover the possible paths by which continental philosophy of religion might liberate itself from its overdetermination by Christian theology,[1] I have sought to imagine a model of Christian theology that might respond to this struggle by relaxing its hold on the philosophical, the secular, and its religious others. To further elucidate this vision of theology as failure, I want to return one last time to the four questions of freedom, materiality, hierarchy, and universalism. What sort of new theological life might emerge from this miscegenetic coupling of Dionysius with Žižek?

Freedom

In repeating differently Dionysius's conjunction of ontology and desire, I am also repeating Denys Turner's claim that it is desire that holds together freedom and necessity. For Turner, this analogy taken from human experience to figure the divine economy is never reflected back into the question of the human relationship to God—that is, Turner never addresses the problem of the structural homology between creation and fall. In contrast, I am suggesting that Žižek offers us a way to fully endorse the

isomorphism between God's love for creation and our love for Christ as embodied in the flawed and failing body of the church. What could be more irrational than the decision to love an institution so profoundly characterized by violence and destruction? What could be less inevitable than love for this stinking, decaying, seeping body? And yet here we are; here I am. The work of love for us is, perhaps, to freely choose our fate, and to learn to love Christ's body on earth, our body, not according to desire but according to drive. It is to labor to see the church in all its shabbiness, all its corruption, all its failures, and to love it as, not despite, these flaws. It is to refuse to be drawn by the fantasy of some lost perfection; of a perfectly liberatory historical Jesus; of an inerrant original text of scripture; of a patristic inheritance which has always already solved all the problems of the contemporary world; of a medieval Mass that so perfected language as to be its condition of possibility.

To love the church is to be willing to put it to death, to betray it in the name of what we love in it. It is to choose disruption over homeostasis, to confront the violence that inheres in the ordinary run of things, to refuse the lure of a peace that is not the presence of justice but the absence of disruption to our privileged lives. For us, in whose name the ordinary violence of the society we live in is committed, it is to refuse the temptation to distinguish between a pure and ideal form of Christianity to which we aspire and the oppressive and lethal Christianity of which we are a part. It is to stand under the judgment of Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership";[2] of James Cone, who said that "the Church . . . is an institution whose existence depends on the evils that produce the riots in the cities";[3] of Frantz Fanon who said that the church "does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor."[4] It is to gather up our hopes of redeeming ourselves, like the white girl who followed Malcolm X to Harlem and to ask with her, "Don't you believe there are any good white people? What can I do?" and to hear what he says to us: "Nothing."[5]

It is to go, like the rich young ruler who went to Jesus to ask what he must do to gain eternal life, and to hear that if we want treasure in heaven we must give away everything we have.[6] To love the church is to be willing to liberate the world from our domination and control. It is to recognize that Christ came not to bring peace but a sword, to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.[7] It is to realize that even a maternal understanding of the church, of its lineage and heritage, will not save us from what Jack Halberstam names the "ugly legacy of Oedipal models of generationality," that "the whole model of 'passing down' knowl-

edge from mother to daughter is quite clearly invested in white, gendered, and hetero normativity."[8] It is to recognize that all the genealogies in the world will not save us from the truth that the secular does not belong to us any more than a child is the property of his or her parents. It is to recognize that we ourselves are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were both faithful and unfaithful to God, who lied and who put at risks the lives of those for whom they were responsible. And it is to recognize that we are also of the line of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary; it is to ask ourselves, with them, whether our transgressive liaisons disrupt or enable the reproduction of kyriarchal power. It is to face up, with Dionysius, to the knowledge that when all is said and done, at the top of the mountain where we come, finally, face to face with God, what we know most of all about the divine is that "existing beings do not know it as it actually is and *it does not know them as they are*."[9] It is to say yes to the divine names that have been handed down to us; it is to multiply those names; it is to deny them; and it is, in the end, to be a stumbling block for one another and for God.

Materiality

The theological materialism I am proposing is one that neither fully affirms materiality nor seeks to escape it but which, in loving it, longs also for its transformation. Everything that is, is natural; except that nature itself is not natural, is "perverse," is always growing and changing, breaking down and starting up differently.[10] Nature is both lawmaker and transgressor; nature is always inconsistent and internally ruptured. To be human, then, is to be natural, to be "everywhere and always in revolt"[11] against our bodies, ourselves. We are our bodies; but our bodies are not-all; and so we grow and change; we struggle against the limits that constitute us. We struggle to conceive and we struggle against conception; to give birth and not to die while doing so. We long to love and be loved, to touch and to be touched; and we long to be liberated from those around us, from the touch of others. We feast and we fast. We cut our bodies to remove unwanted growths and to introduce new ones. We love our bodies, ourselves, exactly as they are, and so we seek their transformation at any cost.

Hierarchy

To recognize that inconsistency is the condition of both possibility and impossibility of any identity is to become free to relate to others not as the thing which can complete us or carry the blame for our incompleteness,

but as things in themselves. There is a danger here, of course. To recognize that what we see in those we have positioned as our other is in fact our own reflection is to risk a colonization all the more insidious for its subtlety. If the masculine subject was feminine all along, if the West was always Oriental, the white always Black, the orthodox always heretical, the Christian always Jewish or Muslim, what are we to do with these others on whose inert bodies we have built the house of our being? The answer Žižek suggests is an ethical monstrosity that seeks neither empathy nor understanding, nor even an attempt to switch positions and stand with the marginalized and the excluded, but instead a simple obedience to the others' demands. This is the ethical stance of the twins in Ágota Kristóf's *The Notebook*, who feed a starving man and yet refuse his gratitude; who urinate on the face of a German officer because he asks them to; who fill their closest friend's stove with explosives because she refused to feed a starving Jew.[12] It is the Christian ethics of Brother Juniper, the Franciscan monk who had to be kept away from church valuables because he could so reliably be counted on to give them away to the needy, who had to be ordered not to give away any more of his cloaks only to realize that this order could be circumvented by simply inviting the needy to take them off him. Can we give what is asked to those who demand it for us without narcissism, without self-congratulation, without tenderness? Can we learn to resist the temptation of the narcissistic economy that desires the return of everything into oneness and instead rejoice like G. K. Chesterton's God in "the separation of the universe into living souls" who do not belong to us and who owe us nothing?[13] Can we see in the suffering of those around us not an opportunity for the expansion of our territory but an imperative to give away even what we already have?[14] Are we capable of giving simply because we are asked, without burdening those to whom we give with our good intentions or with our guilt?

Universalism

The universal human subject is not, for Žižek, male; rather, individual subjects are brought into being around the question of gender. Likewise, the universal is not represented by those in any society who are most powerful, but by the class struggle around which every society comes into being. To be a Christian, then, is to be part of a community that is defined not by a particular figure of a perfect or ideal Christian but by the question, What does it mean to be faithful to Christ? It is to be engaged in the struggle to determine who Christ will have been. Žižek's work both acknowledges the central role that women have played in the constitution of

masculine identity and yet opens up the possibility that we might answer the question of gender in ways that do not require others to play the role of the inert matter against which we determine our universal subjectivity. Likewise, on an account of Christian identity as the community that forms around the question of what it means to be faithful to Christ, it becomes possible to hope that the church too will come to understand itself in relation to its own constitutive antagonism rather than in contrast to its others. Yet what is undertheorized in Žižek's own work is the question of how different identities intersect and overlap. What might it mean to be an individual, a Christian, a member of a nation-state, and a human being in an increasingly global world? We are individuals, and we are members of society; but we are never only those things.

This question is perhaps particularly acute for Christianity, increasingly unsure of its relation to the global political questions of empire and yet never quite satisfied to retreat to the privatized realm of the individual. Of course, the personal and the political are never so separate as Žižek seems sometimes to imply; sexuation and class struggle are deeply interconnected, and not simply because they represent the repetition of the same structure of the ruptured whole at different levels of being. To be a Christian is to occupy a curious position in the contemporary world, both progenitor of the universal self-conception of Western secularism and the embarrassing elder that this new world seeks to leave behind. Perhaps here, now, we ought to consider the possibility that our exclusion from the sphere of reason and universality might be a promising location for our struggle with the church in the name of the church, that is, in the name of its constitutive exclusions. What might Christianity become if we begin to think theologically from the position of the heretic, the witch, the slave?

This account of ontology, desire, and Christian theology suggests not only that completeness is impossible but also that purity is impossible. The internal rupture that both constitutes and disrupts every individual economic identity is also the rupture between the social economy of the relationship between the individual and others, language and the body, theology and philosophy, God and the created order. Theology can no more remain immune from its others than it can completely encompass them. Once there was no secular; and yet the genealogy of the church, of Christian theology, is constantly interrupted, contaminated, and enriched by the profane, the abject, and the horrific. Theology *is* failure; the task, then, is to fail better, to liberate our others in order to begin the difficult work of learning how to love them.

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped me fail better over the course of writing this book, and I am grateful to all of them. Marcus Pound was generous with his time, his books, and his enthusiasm. Gerard Loughlin's attentive reading of my work provoked me to greater clarity, both formally and substantially. Others to whom I owe a particular debt are Anna Williams, who planted the seed that eventually sprouted into this book, and Maggi Dawn, who has been an inspiration. Both formed me as a thinker in ways for which I am deeply thankful.

Much of this book was written at Durham University. I am grateful to Durham's Centre for Catholic Studies (particularly Tony Currer and Paul Murray), who provided crucial support and opportunities, and who went out of their way to assist and enable me and my work. Michael Thate has been an important friend, collaborator, and cheerleader; I am particularly grateful for his insightful comments on an earlier draft. Tommy Lynch and Josh Furnal have been generous and hospitable, and have helped me in important ways to understand my work in a broader context. Along with Roberto Alejandro, Bosco Bae, Anna Blackman, Ben Despain, Karen O'Donnell, Jo McKenzie, Susan Royal, and Charlie Shepherd, they have helped, encouraged, and challenged me.

Outside of Durham, Pete Wolfendale gave me helpful feedback on several draft chapters, and Orion Edgar carefully proofread an earlier version of the manuscript. Raphael Cadenhead's enthusiasm on several occasions restored a sense of excitement to my work. Tina Beattie's, Ellen Armour's,

and Karen Kilby's incisive comments on an earlier version of the book helped me clarify my thoughts and develop my argument in important ways. Amaryah Shaye Armstrong, Alex Baker, Daniel Colucciello Barber, David Bell, Sean Capener, Alex Dubilet, Tapji Garba, Eric Daryl Meyer, Beatrice Marovich, and Marie Thompson have all profoundly shaped my thinking. Kate Tomas tutored me in the art of feminist eye-rolling and helped me with questions about the Inquisition. Matt Burdette pushed me to think more about both race and Protestants, and helpfully critiqued various sections of the thesis. Adam Kotsko was a generous and critical reader of multiple drafts; his insight and friendship have been invaluable. Anthony Paul Smith has been the source of much productive discomfort as well as detailed comments and suggestions on the text; I am indebted to his kindness and his refusal to let me pull my punches.

The Fordham team have provided invaluable support throughout. I am especially grateful to Tom Lay and Teresa Jesionowski. I would also like to thank Guido Mocafico for permission to use his image for the book's front cover.

Too many friends to mention have laughed, suffered, and celebrated with me over the course of researching and writing this book. Sam Morris in particular kept me going at several crucial points. Jim Higginson, however, bore the worst and encouraged the best of me throughout. I can't thank him enough. Of course, none of what I have written here can properly be said to be my own (everything belongs to everyone); nonetheless, I take responsibility for all of it.

Some parts of chapters 1 and 3 have previously been published as "Not Peace but a Sword: Dionysius, Žižek, and the Question of Ancestry in Philosophy and Theology," in *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God*, edited by David Lewin, Simon Podmore, and Duane Williams (London: Routledge, 2017), 245–57.

Notes

Introduction: Failing

1. G. W. F. Hegel uses the term "the Calvary of absolute Spirit" in the final paragraph of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 493. In *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993) Slavoj Žižek cites him, pointing out that the German for Calvary is *Schädelstätte*, literally "the site of skulls"; he connects this to Hegel's infinite judgment "spirit is a bone" (268).

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

3. Although I would take issue with John Milbank's desire to reinstate theology as a universal discourse that rules over every other branch of human knowledge, his thesis in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) that "the secular" emerges from and remains deeply entwined with theology is basically accurate. And yet with Smith and Whistler, I would resist the inference that Milbank draws, namely, that thought that begins with theology can never escape its determination by theology, will always be outdone by theology. To reject the notion of a pure origin, as this book does, is also to insist on the possibility that—as I argue later—effects may exceed their causes, that the end is not wholly determined by the beginning.

4. Smith and Whistler, "Editor's Introduction," 2.

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

6. Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 49–53.

7. Ibid., 56–64.

8. For a more extensive discussion of these claims, see Chapter 1.

9. Thomas A. Carlson, drawing on Heidegger, describes this as the shift from God as the ground of being to subjectivity as the ground of being (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 53–55.

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

11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989),161.

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

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

14. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 176. Žižek is not exactly justified in his claim that Paul replaces Judas—Acts 1:12–26 names Matthias as Judas's replacement.

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

16. So, for example, in *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), Žižek directly argues that fidelity *is* resurrection, and is necessarily preceded by the negativity of the death drive (837).

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

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

19. This reading relies on Žižek's materialist account of the example, which "remains the same in all symbolic universes, while the universal notion it is supposed to exemplify continually changes its shape, so that we get a multitude of universal notions circulating around a single example" (*Less Than Nothing*, 364), and on Žižek's claim that truth is made possible only by transference, that the dogmatic commitment to a particular figure is more fecund than the "neutral," "objective" discussion of a particular set of ideas, such as Lacan's

demand to his followers not for "fidelity to some general theoretical propositions but precisely fidelity to his person" (Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* [London: Routledge, 2008], 116–20).

1. Ontology and Desire in Dionysius the Areopagite

1. Sarah Coakley, while expressing reservations about the "post-Heideggerian" interest in Dionysius, acknowledges her own indebtedness to this "upsurge of interest" and suggests that "a post-modern access to pre-modern texts has allowed the reconsideration of a lost, transformative option in anthropology" (Introduction to *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 1, 6); Mary-Jane Rubenstein argues that deconstruction's reception of Dionysius is marked by a faithful infidelity that reads "him through, and against, himself" in a manner that reflects Dionysius's unsettling of his own claims ("Dionysius, Derrida and the Critique of 'Ontotheology,'" in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 208); and David Newheiser argues that Derrida's apparently anachronistic reading of Dionysius is more faithful to certain aspects of Dionysius's work than the supposedly more historically sensitive readings of Andrew Louth and Alexander Golitzin that "force Dionysius to fit a predetermined schema" (David Newheiser, "Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius," in *Reading the Church Fathers*, ed. Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow [London: T&T Clark, 2011], 29).

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

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

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

5. For example, Giorgio Agamben credits Dionysius's angelic hierarchies with the sacralization of both ecclesiastical and secular structures of power with ongoing consequences for political theology in the West (*The Kingdom and the*

Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011], 152–53); Bernard McGinn says that Dionysius's work was "the fountainhead of speculative mystical systems for at least a thousand years" (*The Presence of God: a History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1: *The Foundations of Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 158); and Denys Turner says that Dionysius "invented the genre" of mystical theology "for the Latin Church" [*The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)], 13).

6. Denys Turner, for example, argues that contemporary philosophy in general and Derrida in particular give undue weight to the *Mystical Theology* while neglecting the rest of the Dionysian corpus (Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, Introduction to *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 3–4, and Turner, "How to Read the Pseudo-Denys Today?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 [2005]: 428–29); this accusation is neither entirely just in its assessment of contemporary philosophy—as Newheiser points out ("Unforeseeable God," 61)—nor accurate in its attempt to portray the tendency to disproportionately engage the *Mystical Theology* as a recent phenomenon when in fact it dates back at least as far as the medieval Western reception of Dionysius, as Coakley points out (*Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 3).

7. Turner, *Darkness of God*, 11–12.

8. See, for example, Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 42.

9. For Dionysius's work, "One" is the first—and hence most appropriate—name of God, (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 138), an emphasis generally taken to derive, at least in part, from Plato's *Parmenides* as filtered through the works of Neoplatonists including Plotinus and Proclus (e.g., McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 32, 48, 58–59; Dillon and Wear, *Dionysius*, 10; Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* ([Dublin: Columba Press, 1994], 71).

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

11. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 874.

12. Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 47–70.

13. Ibid., 58. Turner describes these internal polarities as the "dialectics of eros" (56)**,** which is—in light of the concerns of this book with Žižek's

Hegelianism—an interesting choice. Although, unfortunately, by "dialectics" Turner really seems to mean nothing more than a "tension" or "paradox" (60), one of the central arguments of this book will be that a Žižekian reading of Dionysius really does make possible a dialectics of eros.

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

15. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 135, 137.

16. Dionysius, *Divine Names,* in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 84.

17. There are of course nuances to this Platonic account of the problem of human wrongdoing (for example, the discussion in the *Phaedrus* of the soul as charioteer seeking to manage the two horses, intellect and the passions (trans. Robin Waterfield [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 38–42), but in general Plato is relatively untroubled by the problem of evil and concerned primarily with the question of knowledge and ignorance.

18. "We do not hold that the luminary in anger pushes into the ditch someone who does not choose to look at it." Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 71.

19. Dionysius, *Divine Names,* 84.

20. Ibid., 85.

21. Ibid., 87.

22. Ibid., 92.

23. Ibid., 94.

24. Ibid., 96. This account of evil as privation is, of course, not unique to Dionysius; Augustine, for example, argues that "evil does not exist at all," but rather "all things that are corrupted serve privation of some good" (*Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 124–25).

25. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 141.

26. Dionysius, *Divine Names,* 85.

27. Ibid., 86.

28. I use the male pronoun here as Plato does because it is indicative of the gendered assumptions of Plato's thought and his persistent—though not entirely consistent—tendency to assume that men are better fitted for philosophical contemplation of the truth than women, a tendency that (as I discuss below) is inextricable from his privileging of the abstract and universal over the particular.

29. Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, trans. M. C Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49–50.

30. Here, though, it is worth noting Grace Jantzen's argument in *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*. vol. 1: *Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 193–221 (discussed in more detail in chapter 5) that, although on balance Plato sides with the universal and abstract against the particular and the material, there are elements of his work that disrupt this emphasis.

31. McGinn says, "The liberation that Plotinus strives for is a private and personal affair, as well as one that seems limited to a philosophical elite" (*Foundations of Mysticism*, 55); Grace Jantzen explicitly connects this to Neoplatonism's political context, arguing that Plotinus "turned away from the violence of the fragmenting empire to an eternal world, where beauty never decays" (*Foundations of Violence*, 342). This ethical and political aspect of Plotinus's thought is problematically absent from Eric D. Perl's *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), which focuses on the abstractly philosophical aspects of Dionysius's work to the exclusion of all else, missing the ways that, say, Dionysius's account of the relationship between the ontological structure of reality and the hierarchical structure of the church problematizes his reading of the cycle of remaining, procession, and return as "a dynamic, though non-temporal, 'motion' or 'process'" (35).

32. Plotinus, *The Enneads* vol. 1, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966), 3, cited in Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 351.

33. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.4.3, 181.

34. Dionysius, *Divine Names,* 92–93.

35. Ibid., 86.

36. Ibid., 76.

37. Ibid., 106–7.

38. See, e.g., ibid., 66–67; Louth suggests that this modification of Neoplatonic emanation functions both to emphasize the fundamental difference between God and creatures and to ward off the polytheism of much Neoplatonism (*Denys*, 84–85). Although I don't disagree with this suggestion, this direct relationship between God and creatures is also important insofar as it allows Dionysius to affirm the goodness of each created thing in its particular place in the created hierarchy, although he is unable to consistently maintain this affirmation. Although Alexander Golitzin overstates the extent to which Dionysius escapes the Neoplatonic distrust of materiality, he is correct here to argue that the direct dependence on God of the world is intended to give "permanent validity" to the created order (*Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite* [Thessalonika: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikôn Meleton, 1994], 164).

39. Golitzin, *Et introibo*, 164.

40. Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 244, 247, 255–56.

41. Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 160–62. Agamben also argues persuasively that this question is a problem not only because of the desire to affirm the persistence of the created world but because the Trinitarian economy becomes so entangled with the created economy that it becomes impossible to conceive of the former outside of the latter: "The Trinitarian economy was essentially a figure of action and government. It corresponded perfectly . . . to

the question regarding the state not only of God but also of the angels and the blessed after the world's end" (163).

42. Ibid., 162; Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 165.

43. Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 215.

44. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 113.

45. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 147.

46. Louth, *Denys*, 105.

47. Marika Rose, "The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (2013): 541–51. Denys Turner similarly suggests that "the stress of these tensions [between Dionysius's affirmation of hierarchy and of the direct dependence on God] will leave their mark upon the imagery which he left as his legacy to Western theologians" (*Darkness of God*, 48).

48. As Gavrilyuk points out ("Reception of Dionysius," 182), Golitzin is the major exception to this consensus, but this is largely because of his tendency to read back later Orthodox theology into Dionysius's work.

49. Although the term *hierarch* as a name for a bishop predates Dionysius's work, Dionysius is generally acknowledged to be the originator of the term *hierarchy*.

50. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243–364.

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

52. Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida," 205.

53. Jantzen, *Power, Gender*, 107.

54. Dionysius, Letter 8, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 274.

55. Ibid., 275.

56. Ibid., 272.

57. Ibid., 274–75.

58. Paul Rorem, Introductions to *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

59. Louth, *Denys*, 105.

60. Ibid., 104.

61. Ibid., 106.

62. Ibid., 101. It is the liturgy of the Eucharist with which Louth seeks to draw parallels, a liturgy which, for Dionysius, specifically requires the exclusion of those lower down the ecclesiastical hierarchy (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 210).

63. Louth, *Denys*, 132.

64. Ibid., 134.

65. Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 152.

66. Ibid., 153, 155.

67. "Having established the centrality of the notion of hierarchy, angels and bureaucrats tend to fuse" (ibid., 157); cf. also 158.

68. Ibid., 54. Agamben attributes this insight to Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* and argues that this gap between ontology and economy arises for Christianity and not paganism precisely because of the Christian doctrine of creation, which asserts the freedom of God in creation, thus introducing a crucial gap between God's being and action (55).

69. Anthony Paul Smith, "Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition: Weaponized Apophaticism and Gnostic Refusal," *Angelaki* 19, no. 2 (2014): 145–59.

70. Smith cites here Jean-Luc Marion, who claims (in *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 153) that the move beyond ontotheology implies that "*only the bishop merits, in the full sense, the title of theologian*."

71. Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida," 204.

72. Ibid., 206.

73. Ibid., 208.

74. Newheiser, "Unforeseeable God," 15.

75. Ibid., 18–20. Newheiser draws on this account of textual inconsistencies to suggest that Dionysius's hierarchies do not "achieve the assimilation of earthly to heavenly power that Agamben fears, for the earthly order decisively falls short of heavenly perfection" (19). I think this is overstating the case, as it is far from clear that these inconsistencies are intended by Dionysius; the strength of his rebuke to Demophilus would rather suggest that this is not the case.

76. Newheiser, "Unforeseeable God," 22.

77. Dionysius, Letter 8, 274.

78. Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida," 204.

79. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 202–3.

80. Golitzin, *Et introibo*, 167.

81. Newheiser, "Unforeseeable God," 21.

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

83. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

84. Charles Stang, "Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 12.

85. Stang acknowledges the novelty of Dionysius's synthesis when he asserts that, unlike earlier attempts to read Dionysius as *either* Christian *or* Neoplatonic, contemporary scholars realize "that 'pagan' philosophy was always being 'baptized' for Christian use" (*Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5), but nowhere addresses the possibility that Dionysius's own failure to acknowledge that this is what he is doing may have shaped earlier scholarly tendencies to see Christianity and Neoplatonism as mutually exclusive alternatives.

86. Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 197.

87. Paul Rorem, Introductions to *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 21.

2. Apophatic Theology and Its Vicissitudes

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

2. To name but a few, recent explorations of apophatic themes in the work of contemporary philosophers include Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), which deals with Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva; Amy Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray and the Mystical," *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (1994), 158–85, and "Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 145–61, and *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), which contains discussions of mystical and negative theology in Lacan (among others); and Jeffrey L. Kosky, "Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology: The Case of Emmanuel Levinas," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1, no. 3 (2000). http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/kosky.shtml.

3. This shift, which I trace here, is structurally connected to the shift Sylvia Wynter identifies within Western thought from the Christian—the subject of the church—to Man—the subject of the state—as the archetypal genre of the Human (Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human after Man, Its Overrepresentation," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

4. Having established the *cogito* as a certain foundation upon which to build his philosophical system, Descartes turns next to the idea of God to guarantee

the existence of material things: "I judged . . . that if there were any bodies in the world . . . their existence must depend on His power" ("Discourse on the Method," in *Key Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross [Ware: Wordsworth, 1997], 94).

5. This is essentially the argument of Christopher J. Insole's "Kant's Transcendental Idealism, Freedom and the Divine Mind," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 608–38, which suggests that this shift occurs specifically as a result of Kant's desire to make space for human freedom.

6. Mark A. McIntosh traces this shift to the twelfth century (*Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], 7), arguing that it resulted from the rise of scholastic theology and the increasingly intense focus in mystical theology on individual experience (63–65). Denys Turner tracks the same change in *The Darkness of God* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], as summarized on 252–73). Neither, however, acknowledge the crucial transformations in the constitution of race, gender, and class that occurred around this period and the ways in which the shifting locus of theological authority reflects and informs these changes.

7. See, for example, Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 326.

8. For example, Thomas Carlson traces the lineage of Dionysius via John Scotus Eriugena and Thomas Aquinas to Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, and from there via Eriugena and Böhme to German Idealism (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999], 156–57); John Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) consists of a detailed exploration of the relationship between Eckhart and Heidegger in particular; later Caputo argues that Hegel's "negative dialectics is the corruption [of] the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius (*The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* [Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013], 143). Derrida situates his account of Dionysius's apophatic theology with reference to Silesius, Eckhart, and Heidegger in "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices," trans. John P. Leavey Jr., in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 283–323.

9. For example, Bruce Holsinger's *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) traces the influence of medieval thought—including mystical and apophatic theology—on twentieth-century French philosophy, arguing in particular that this influence is importantly mediated through Georges Bataille and *nouvelle théologie*. Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy* explores the reception of Christian feminine mysticism by twentieth-century continental philosophy.

10. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ibid., 20.

13. Ibid., 6.

14. For example, John Caputo says that negative theology "is always on the track of a 'hyperessentiality'" whereas *différance* "is less than real" (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], 2; Rubenstein says that for Derrida, negative theology "ultimately services an ultra-positive theology" ("Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of 'Ontotheology,'" in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 196). Toby Foshay says that Derrida "refuses this 'analogy' and family 'resemblance' between negative theology and the discourse of deconstruction" ("Introduction: Denegation and Resentment," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 3); this latter is particularly odd given that it occurs in the book that first published Derrida's most nuanced and ambiguous account of apophatic theology, "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices," trans. John P. Leavey Jr., in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 283–323.

15. David Newheiser identifies references to Dionysius in Derrida's work as early as 1952, sixteen years before he wrote "Différance" ("Hope in the Unforeseeable God" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012], 59).

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

17. Ibid., 74.

18. Ibid., 79.

19. Ibid., 82.

20. Ibid., 85.

21. Ibid., 101.

22. Ibid., 104.

23. Ibid., 105.

24. Ibid., 102.

25. Ibid., 119, 130.

26. Derrida, "Post-Scriptum," 283.

27. Ibid., 284.

28. Ibid., 290.

29. Ibid., 291.

30. "Ibid., 311.

31. As Newheiser argues, Derrida's close readings of Dionysius are often more attentive to the particularity of his texts than those of "specialist" patristics scholars such as Andrew Louth and Alexander Golitzin (David Newheiser, "Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius," in *Reading the Church Fathers*, ed. Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow [London: T&T Clark, 2011], 29).

32. Economy is everywhere in Derrida's work. To give but a few examples of the theme, it can be found in "Différance," where Derrida says that *différance* must be thought "*simultaneously* . . . as the economic detour which . . . always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by . . . calculation and . . . as . . . the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy" (19; here Derrida invokes the Freudian notion of the death drive, which, as I argue in chapter 3, is crucial to Žižek's attempt to move beyond Derridean thought); in "How to Avoid Speaking," Derrida discusses the "economy" of apophatic theology (81); in "Post-Scriptum" he describes the desire for hospitality and the passage to the other as the desire to move "beyond economy itself" (318); in "Cogito and the History of Madness," philosophy's "attempt-to-say-the-hyperbole" is to be understood as "economy" (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [London: Routledge, 1978], 62); in "Violence and Metaphysics" (also in *Writing and Difference*), he describes language as an "economy of violence" (117); "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, 251–77 consists of a discussion of the theme of economy and its transgression in the work of Hegel and Bataille, and, as I discuss later in chapter 5, both *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]) and *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (trans. Peggy Kamuf [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]) are centrally concerned with the question of economy and its rupture. The theme of economy is similarly ubiquitous in secondary accounts of Dionysius's work: Stephen Shakespeare relates the key Derridean themes of impossibility, absence. and the gift to "the circle of economy," of giving and receiving (*Derrida and Theology* [London: T&T Clark, 2009], 161); John Caputo uses the notion of economy to set Derrida's work up in explicit opposition to Christian theology which appeals to an "economy of salvation" and an "economy of sacrifice," in contrast to Derrida's deconstruction which is precisely "not the business as usual of philosophy, providing foundations and making things safe" (*Prayers and Tears*, 44, 48); elsewhere he argues that for Derrida the gift entails "a kind of never-ending struggle against economy, eventuating in certain momentary *interruptions* of economy" ("Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 206); Carlson says that "for Derrida . . . the closed figure of the circle (especially as in the circular Being of Hegelian consciousness and language) returns over and again to establish an 'economy' that would threaten to annul the gift as gift" (*Indiscretion*, 14); Mark C. Taylor discusses Derrida's account of the law as an "economy of exchange" interrupted by "absolute altarity" (*Nots* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 86–87), and Hugh Rayment-Pickard closes his account of Derrida's theology with the claim that the key figure in Derrida's attempts to represent the impossible is the chiasmus, χ, which is to be understood specifically as "the "other' of the circle," which is the figure of the

completed economy (*Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003], 159, 136).

33. I expand on this claim over the course of this book, particularly in my discussion of Derrida and economy in chapter 4.

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

35. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 100.

36. For example, ibid., 122–30.

37. Ibid., 99.

38. Derrida, "Post-Scriptum," 284.

39. Ibid., 294.

40. There are, as a result, no visible anxieties in Dionysius's work about the relationship between words and the things named by them, or even about the ability of human hierarchical structures to reflect the ordering of being itself (see above, especially the discussion in 2.2.4 about Dionysius's understanding of hierarchy); rather, it is the ability of *the entirety of the created world* to represent or embody God that is thrown into question.

41. Although Derrida's early work tends to focus on close readings of texts and reflections on the nature of language and textuality, focusing on themes such as *différance,* his later work (including texts such as *The Gift of Death* and *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000]) deals increasingly with themes such as hospitality and justice**.**

42. See below, chapter 4, for more detailed discussion of this crucial Derridean question.

43. Newheiser, *Unforeseeable God*, 51; cf. also Shakespeare's discussion of the interplay of particularity and abstraction in Derrida's account of messianism (*Derrida*, 155–56).

44. Derrida, "Différance," 12, 9.

45. Foshay, "Introduction: Denegation and Resentment," 1.

46. In *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, trans. John P. Jr. Leavey (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 33.

47. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," 39–40.

48. Ibid., 51.

49. Ibid., 45.

50. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 88–89.

51. Ibid., 93, 94.

52. Ibid., 99.

53. Newheiser, "Unforeseeable God," 50–53.

54. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

55. Ibid., 18.

56. Ibid., 19.

57. Ibid., 18.

58. Derrida, "Post-Scriptum," 285. Cf. also *Given Time*, in which Derrida speaks of the "desire to interrupt the circulation of the circle," the desire to break open economy (8), and Shakespeare, *Derrida*, which argues that for Derrida "desire keeps the self open, wounded, exposed to the other, and God is known in and through this wound, through the vulnerability of the other's face" (143).

59. Richard Kearney, "Desire of God," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 11, 113.

60. These three were the editors of the Radical Orthodox book series that began with *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), and which represents the birth of Radical Orthodoxy as a movement or identity.

61. Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

62. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000).

63. Although, as Daniel Miller argues, this move away from Derrida is not simply a change of focus but a decisive *rejection* of those aspects of Derrida's work that Ward had previously sought to make use of in favor of the Radical Orthodoxy affirmation of the analogy of Being ("A Theo-Politics of the (Im) proper: Jacques Derrida vis-à-vis Graham Ward," *Political Theology* 12, no. 1 [2011]: 93–94). *Cities of God* opens with an attempt to position Ward's "analogical world-view" precisely in opposition to notions such as "Derrida's principle of iteration" (ix). Even here, however, Ward diverges from Pickstock and Milbank in key ways, including, for example, a marked rhetorical humility. *Cities of God* is, he says, "*an* attempt" [italics mine] to answer certain theological questions (ix, 1), the claim that it is possible "to learn" even from secular thinkers (3), the acknowledgment that, although his work draws on theological tradition, it is, nonetheless, "new" (9) and, perhaps most important, the recognition that "there is no pure theological discourse" (13).

64. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

65. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward claim that "the central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any other configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God" ("Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy" in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, 3); elsewhere Milbank

states that the "metaphysical" notions of "transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology . . . and the absolute reality of 'the Good' in roughly the Platonic sense . . . remain primary for a Christian theological ontology" (*Theology and Social Theory* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2006], 297).

66. For example, Catherine Pickstock critiques Derrida's account of Plato (in *After Writing*, 3–46) and Milbank critiques Derrida's account of the gift (in both "Forgiveness and Incarnation," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001], 92–128 and "The Transcendentality of the Gift: A Summary," in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* [Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2009], 352–63), but neither addresses his close and sensitive reading of Dionysius, even though Milbank repeatedly invokes Dionysius as the originator of the Christian metaphysics that Radical Orthodoxy advocates; Graham Ward's early and nuanced reading of the relationship between Derrida's thought and the theology of Karl Barth (in *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology*) is replaced (as Miller's "Theo-Poetics of the (Im)proper" argues) by a much clearer rejection of Derrida's work in the later and more Radically Orthodox introduction (written with John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock), to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*.

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

68. Milbank, "Forgiveness and Incarnation," 110.

69. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 409.

70. Ibid., 279.

71. "As Dionysius the Areopagite realized, God is superabundant Being, and not a Plotinian unity beyond Being and difference, he is also nevertheless, as Dionysius also saw, a power within Being which is more than Being, an internally creative power" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 431). This account of Dionysius is odd, as while it is true that Dionysius places Threeness alongside Oneness at the top of the hierarchy of names, he is also very clear that God "falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being" (*Mystical Theology*, 141), and makes no attempt to relate the multiplicity of God to the problem of creativity in order to overcome the problem of divine differentiation.

72. Milbank, "Forgiveness and Incarnation," 105.

73. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 238.

74. Ibid., 229.

75. Throughout Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* in particular, the two terms are persistently associated—see, for example, pages 6, 86, 88, 196, 301, 317.

76. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17.

77. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xvi.

78. Ibid., 422.

79. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 273.

80. See, for example, ibid., 18, 160; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 309, 312.

81. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 367.

82. Ibid., xix.

83. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, "Introduction," 3.

84. See, for example, my article "The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," in *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (2013): 540–51, which argues that John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock's reading of Thomistic theology (in their *Truth in Aquinas* [London: Routledge, 2001]) is able to depict it as fundamentally valuing the material world only by ignoring the deep tensions in Thomas's work (which in turn are very clearly in continuity with the tensions in Dionysius's work) between the desire to value the material world and the sense that progress toward God must entail progress *away from* materiality.

85. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xxviii.

86. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 11.

87. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 331.

88. Ibid., 434. It seems reasonable here to suggest that, as the two very different uses of Augustine indicate, this internally contradictory account of aesthetics is itself in profound continuity with the consistently troubled attitude of Christian theology to matters of materiality and particularity.

89. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 165–66.

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

91. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 261.

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

93. See, for example, John Montag SJ, "Revelation: The False Legacy of Suárez," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, 44–50, which describes how Thomas Aquinas "conforms his own understanding to the neo-Platonic hierarchical account of pseudo-Dionysius's and sets up Thomas's 'hierarchical scheme of revelation' in counterposition to Suárez" "false legacy"; and Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* which specifically advocates Dionysius's account of "hierarchic initiation" as implying a sociality inherent in the human pursuit of God, which is missing in Plato (408).

94. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 408.

95. Ibid., 422. This reasoning leads Milbank and Phillip Blond elsewhere to conclude that "inherited inequality is in part the result of social and economic injustice and in part the result of disparities of intelligence, skill and application"; what we need politically is "a more radical economic egalitarianism coupled with the recognition of a difference of roles and a hierarchy of excellence"——hierarchy once again arranging individuals along a single line of progress according to which "talent, fitness for a specific role, and a moral exercise of that role" are identical with one another (Phillip Blond and John Milbank, "No Equality in Opportunity," *Guardian*, January 27, 2010. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/27/inequality-opportunity-egalitarian-tory-left. Accessed October 22, 2017.

96. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 436.

97. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 234.

98. See, for example, Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

99. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 410. As Anthony Paul Smith argues, this means that Milbank's account of hierarchy is "so intimately connected with the notion of Good . . . that there is no recognizable difference between the hierarchy, which is the organization of power, and the Good itself" ("The Judgment of God and the Immeasurable: Political Theology and Organizations of Power," *Political Theology* 12, no. 1 [2011]: 76).

100. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 154.

101. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

102. Ibid., 382.

103. Milbank speaks of "a single *Western* history of 'ethics'" not to acknowledge the existence of other traditions or the particularity of his perspective, but simply to claim Greek philosophical thought unquestionably as a resource for Christianity—and not, we may infer, for Islam (ibid., 326).

104. Ibid., 6.

105. Pickstock, *After Writing*, xii. Bruce Holsinger describes *After Writing* as "the most . . . universalising appropriation of medieval theology among the Radically Orthodox" (*Premodern Condition*, 121).

106. Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 186.

107. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 176.

108. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Secularity and the Liberal Arts: Thinking Otherwise," *Immanent Frame*, 2010. http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/12/03/thinking-otherwise.

109. See, for example, Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *Nots*; Carlson, *Indiscretion*; and Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

110. John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

111. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 151.

112. Ibid., 55–57.

113. Ibid., xxiv. This claim is repeated in an interview in which Caputo says that "the apophatic theme in Derrida is displaced for me by something even more surprising, by the prophetic theme" (B. Keith Putt, "What Do I Love When I Love My God? An Interview with John D. Caputo," in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis [London: Routledge, 2002], 159).

114. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 6.

115. John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 151.

116. Ibid., 156.

117. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 256.

118. Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

119. Ibid., xvii.

120. Ibid., 164.

121. Ibid., 10.

122. Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

123. Ibid., 6. This focus on undoing historically specific forms of injustice is reflected in the work of An Yountae, a former student of Keller's, whose book *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitanism from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) draws the theme of the abyss as it recurs in negative theology into conversation with the theme of the abyss in the writing of decolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon. An argues that the mystical desire for union with God and decolonial thinkers' desire for reconstructing collective identity "share a common ground——or groundlessness?——in the abyss" such that reading the two together enables us to imagine a kind of poetics that "makes possible an open future and a relational self born from the wombs of pain and trauma" (5, 7).

124. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 246.

125. Ibid., 103.

126. Putt, "What Do I Love?" 164.

127. John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 6.

128. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 282.

129. Ibid., 288.

130. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 122.

131. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 28.

132. Ibid. I discuss Žižek's much-misread rhetoric of violence in greater detail in chapter 4; but the problem with Keller's critique of Žižek is not that

his rejection of "the Oriental attitude of nonviolence" (which, as his language suggests, is more Orientalist than materialist in its blanket dismissal of huge swathes of history and philosophy) is beyond criticism, but that she fails to recognize and engage with the substance of his claim: that while Buddhism valorizes "non-violence," it is in the name of precisely this "non-violence" that Buddhist rulers order armies to war and Buddhist warriors obey.

133. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 29.

134. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 88.

135. Derrida in Richard Kearney, "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 69.

136. Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 186–87.

137. For example, in *More Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo sets his own work up in deliberate opposition to "philosophers in general" who claim that particularity can be "stripped of what is proper to it and lifted up into the heavens of *eidos*, essence or universality" (4).

138. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xix.

139. Ibid., 68.

140. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 47–48.

141. Caputo says that the "worth and the value" of all texts lies in "the "passions" they arouse" (*Prayers and Tears*, 110).

142. Ibid., 73.

143. Ibid., 39.

144. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 257–58. Caputo's preference for the universal over the particular and the ideal over the material is also discussed by Robyn Horner ("Theology after Derrida," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 3 [2013]: 242), who argues that Caputo's work falls short insofar as it fails to grapple with the particular experience of the church. Jeffrey M. Dudiak ("*Bienvenue*—Just a Moment," in *Religion with/out Religion*, 12–13) questions the ability of Caputo's work to ground concrete acts of justice. Ronald A. Kuipers ("Dangerous Safety, Safe Danger: The Threat of Deconstruction to the Threat of Determinable Faith," in *Religion with/out Religion*, 25) who says that Caputo's "general, abstract" messianicity seeks to avoid falling "into any concrete *messianism*."

145. John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23.

146. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 157.

147. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 69.

148. Ibid., 45–46, citing "Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)," 69 and 85.

149. Ibid., 26, 28, 311.

150. Ibid., 18; Catherine Keller, "Cloud Precipitates," *An und für sich*, February 9, 2015 https://itself.blog/2015/02/09/cloud-precipitates-response-from-catherine-keller [accessed October 1, 2017]; Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 229.

151. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 247.
152. Smith, "Judgment of God," 73.
153. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.
154. Ibid., 288.
155. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 128.
156. Ibid., 129.
157. Ibid., 124.
158. Ibid., 75.
159. Smith, "Judgment of God," 75.
160. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 141.
161. This is what is at stake in one of Caputo's key disagreements with Žižek: Caputo argues that if capitalism could be reformed such that everyone had access to universal health care, human treatment, and so on, then there would be no need for Badiou and Žižek's demand for a different system (*After the Death of God*, 124–25); Žižek's response is to ask, "What if the malfunctionings of capitalism listed by Caputo aren't merely contingent perturbations but structural necessities?" ("Trouble in Paradise," in *London Review of Books* 35, no. 14, July 18, 2013. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n14/slavoj-zizek/trouble-in-paradise).
162. Keller, "Cloud Precipitates."
163. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 252.
164. Keller, "Cloud Precipitates."
165. Amaryah Armstrong, "Participation and Imposition: A Question for Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible*," *An und für sich*, February 16, 2015, https://itself.blog/2015/01/16/participation-and-imposition-a-question-for-catherine-kellers-cloud-of-the-impossible/. Accessed October 7, 2017.
166. Keller, "Cloud Precipitates"; Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 78.
167. As Stephen Shakespeare argues, for Caputo, "No single name, narrative or tradition can claim ownership of God" (*Derrida and Theology*, 297).
168. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 282.
169. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 77–83.
170. Ibid., 48.
171. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 163.
172. Armstrong, "Participation and Imposition."
173. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 62–63.
174. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 109.
175. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 49, 68.
176. Ibid., 122–23.
177. Ibid., 157.
178. Ibid., 141.
179. Ibid., 118.

3. The Death Drive: From Freud to Žižek

1. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVIII*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 7–64.

2. Ibid., 22–24.

3. Ibid., 14–16.

4. Ibid., 45–47.

5. Ibid., 64. Also important to subsequent discussions of the drive is Freud's "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 117–40.

6. Ibid., 121–22.

7. Charles Shepherdson, "The Elements of the Drive," *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997): 133.

8. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 38. See e.g.

9. Slavoj Žižek, "No Sexual Relationship," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 229.

10. See, for example, Grace Jantzen's discussion in "Death, Then, How Could I Yield to It? Kristeva's Mortal Visions" in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 120; or Luce Irigaray's account in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 53–55.

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

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

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

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

15. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 195 (italics mine), discussing Lacan's account of the Real and the formation of the subject in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 93.

16. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 26.

17. Ibid., 54–55.

18. Ibid., 62.

19. Ibid., 29–30.

20. Clotilde Leguil, "Lacanian Uses of Ontology," *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 23 (2011): 108, 112.

21. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 163–65.

22. Ibid., 168.
23. Ibid., 169.
24. Ibid., 156.
25. Lacan, *Écrits*, 105.
26. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: W. W. Norton, 1992), 139.
27. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 180.
28. Ibid., 242.
29. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 125.
30. This account closely resembles Derrida's account of the drive as that which "compels me to admit that my desire for good, for presence . . . not only cannot be accomplished . . . but should not be accomplished—because the accomplishment or the fulfilment of this desire for presence would be Death itself." (Jacques Derrida, "Necessity Is the Drive," *Umbr(a)* 1 [1997]: 165).
31. Bruce Fink, "Desire and the Drives," *Umbr(a)* 1 (1997): 36, 38, 41, 42.
32. Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 122.
33. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 206–7.
34. Ibid., 169–70.
35. Eric Rasmussen, "Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *electronic book review*, July 1, 2004, http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation.
36. This is clear as early as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (as is evident from the book's title), and remains true in Žižek's more recent work, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), which begins with the claim that the stakes of Žižek's reading of Lacan are "clearly political" (18) and ends with an appeal to "the communist horizon" (1010).
37. This convergence of Lacan and ideology critique is nicely encapsulated by the first section title of *Sublime Object*, Žižek's first book written in English: "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?"
38. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. (London: Verso, 2008), 99.
39. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 142.
40. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 47. As I discuss further in chapter 4, this account is very close in some—but, crucially, not all—ways to Derrida's understanding of the founding of the social order.
41. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 45.
42. Ibid., 106.
43. Ibid., 141–44.
44. Ibid., 142.

45. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 143–44.

46. In Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 254–60.

47. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 66–267.

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

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

50. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 203–9. It is this *valorization* of the notion of radical evil, precisely because of its formal parallels with Christian notions of creation, which John Milbank misses when he describes Žižek as interested in Kantian notions of radical evil out of the desire to explain suffering (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* [London: Routledge, 2003], 1).

51. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 149–50.

52. Ibid.

53. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

54. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 130.

55. Ibid., 147.

56. Ibid., 155.

57. Ibid., 157.

58. Ibid., 162.

59. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2008).50.

60. Ibid., 51, 53.

61. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), 72–73.

62. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 498.

63. Žižek, *Metastases*, 160.

64. See, for example, Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 165.

65. Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 7.

66. For more detailed discussion of this periodization, see Matthew Sharpe and Geoff M. Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), for whom this second period results from Žižek's engagement with Schelling, and is both politically regrettable and philosophically incoherent. See also Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, for whom this second period is crucially informed with Žižek's engagement with Badiou and hence with Christian theology, And see Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008), for whom Schelling is again central, enabling Žižek's development from a "transcendentalist" into a "dialectical materialist" thinker (16).

67. This initial engagement with quantum physics develops into an increasingly important interest on Žižek's part in the physical sciences generally, culminating in *Less Than Nothing*, in which discussions of quantum physics can be found alongside engagements with contemporary biology (157–58), neuroscience (715–36), and mathematical ontologies (807–14); although he continues to stress that quantum physics is "*the* scientific discovery which needs philosophical rethinking" (912).

68. This shift is particularly visible in Žižek's account of the difference between nature and culture and humans and animals. Before *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), he held that culture was made possible by the death drive which "perverted, derailed nature," marking "the radical break from natural instincts" and making possible the emergence of culture. The "human universe" is defined as "a break which introduces imbalance into the natural circuit" (*They Know Not*, 206, 209), although there are hints even here that this account is not quite satisfactory—Žižek appeals to Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion, which claim that the notion of Paradise, of a harmonious state of "idyllic fullness . . . is a retroactive projection, a way man (mis)perceives the previous, animal state" (*They Know Not*, 175). In *Indivisible Remainder*, however, Žižek explicitly repudiates the idea that the death drive is in some sense what distinguishes human beings from harmonious nature. Although both Hegel and Lacan hold that "man is 'nature sick unto death,' a being forever marked by traumatic misplacement . . . in contrast to an animal which always fits into its environment," the "true breakthrough of quantum physics" is that it "compels us to call into question" the myth of the absolute gap separating nature from culture. Nature itself is constitutively out of balance (218, 220).

69. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 3.

70. Ibid.

71. Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, xxvi. Although this is Johnston's coinage, Žižek endorses it as a description of his work in *Less Than Nothing*, 906.

72. *Less Than Nothing*, 6–7, 9.

73. Ibid., 13.

74. Ibid., 17.

75. Ibid., 38.

76. Ibid., 8.

77. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 22.

78. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 204–5, and an almost identical passage in *Less Than Nothing*, 157–58.

79. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 147—this occurs in a discussion of 1 Corinthians 13, in which Žižek argues that "the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God—that is, of ultimate perfection." Although this is not here intended specifically as a

comment on the *ontological* value of completeness, Žižek's ontological grounding of desire suggests that the two are, in fact, inseparable.

80. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 405.

81. For more discussion of this structure and its limits, see also my chapter, "Žižek and Radical Theology," in *Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 479–95.

82. Marika Rose, "The Christian Legacy Is Incomplete: For and Against Žižek," *Modern Believing* 57, no. 3 (2016): 267–79.

83. Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 106.

84. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 69.

85. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 144.

86. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 296.

87. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, xxvii.

88. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 297.

89. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 61.

90. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6.

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

92. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 244.

93. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 33–34.

94. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 20.

95. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 21.

96. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 119; see also Žižek, *Metastases*, 193.

97. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 96.

98. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 92; Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), 47.

99. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 282.

100. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 94.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid., 169.

103. Žižek, *Violence*, 27.

104. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 142.

105. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 263.

106. Ibid., 114.

107. As Daniel Boyarin argues in *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), and Sylvia Wynter argues in "Unsettling the Power of Being/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003).

108. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 20.

109. Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," keynote lecture, Terror and the Inhuman from Brown University, Providence, R.I., October 25, 2012 https://vimeo.com/52199779, quoted in Anthony Paul Smith, *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 194.

110. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Fontana Books, 1961), quoted in Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 39.

111. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 137–39.

112. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 152–53.

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

114. Johnston, *Time Driven*, 268–69.

115. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 136.

116. Ibid., 137. It is this complex interrelation of language and biology which Ola Sigurdson misses in his reading of Žižek on the death drive ("Slavoj Žižek, the Death Drive, and Zombies: A Theological Account," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 3 [2013]: 366).

117. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 84.

118. Ibid., 123.

119. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 371–72.

120. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 254.

121. Ibid., 137.

122. In *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), in fact, Žižek implies (via Badiou's distinction between "democratic materialism" and "materialist dialectics") that both the body and language are included under the category of the material, structured according to the logic of the non-all: Where democratic materialism holds that "*There is nothing but bodies and languages*," materialist dialectics concurs, but "adds . . . *with the exception of truths*" (381).

123. See, for example, his discussion of the relationship between symbolic violence and subjective violence in *Violence*, 1–2.

124. Ibid., 141.

125. Žižek, *On Belief*, 47.

126. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 308.

127. Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void—A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

128. Marika Rose, "This Body of Death," *Syndicate* 1, no. 4 (2014): 171–75.

129. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 28.

130. Žižek claims, for example, that in Catholicism "it is . . . considered a sin for an ordinary believer to read the text directly, bypassing the priest's guidance" (ibid.), and he seems to draw exclusively on the far-from-neutral

work of Vladimir Lossky for his account of Eastern Orthodoxy—see, for example, the list of references in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 101–2.

131. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 252–53.

132. Milica Bakic-Hayden and Robert M. Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkan': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (1992): 4.

133. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 34.

134. Žižek, *Metastases*, 159–60.

135. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 146–147.

136. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 114.

137. Žižek, *Metastases*, 122.

138. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 261.

139. Ibid., 277.

140. Ibid., 285. In some ways this parallels liberation theology's notion of God's preferential option for the poor: that those in a position of powerlessness rather than power are the locus of truth.

141. Hamid Dabashi, "Fuck You Žižek!" Zed books blog, July 2016, https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek. Accessed July 9, 2017.

142. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 130–31, cited in Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 39.

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

144. So, for example, "Christian universality is . . . a struggling universality, the site of a constant battle [it] *is formulated from the position of those excluded*, of those for whom there is no specific place within the existing order" (ibid.).

145. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 359.

146. For example, "Each solution not only reacts to 'its' problem, but retroactively redefines it, formulating it from within its own specific horizon" (ibid., 214).

147. Ibid., 362.

148. Rose, "Christian Legacy Is Incomplete."

4. The Gift and Violence

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

2. John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

3. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 20.

4. Ibid., 123.

5. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13–15.

6. Ibid., 78.

7. Ibid., 71.

8. Ibid., 96.

9. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 113.

10. Ibid., 168.

11. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 72.

12. Ibid., 74.

13. Similar ideas play out in Marion's disagreement with Derrida about the meaning of Dionysius's description of God as *hyperousios*, above or beyond being. To say that God is *hyperousios* is not, Marion argues, to inscribe God within the horizon of ontotheology, to subject the divine to the metaphysics of presence. Rather, it "inscribes us, according to a radically new praxis, in the horizon of God" (Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, 20–42. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 37).

14. Marion in Richard Kearney, "On the Gift: a Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 63.

15. As Thomas Carlson argues in a discussion of Marion's theology, "The idol is defined by the primacy of the human subject's intentional consciousness, while the icon would radically disrupt or reverse that primacy" (*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 194).

16. John D. Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 212–13.

17. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 125.

18. Ibid., 124.

19. Marika Rose, review of Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), *Theology and Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (2013): 158–60.

20. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 127.

21. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 153.

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

23. Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 133. John Milbank objects to Derrida's thinking of ethics with respect to this idea of the other's unknowability, arguing that Derrida assumes the absolute alienation of subjects from one another rather than their participation in a mutual economy of exchange and interconnectedness (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* [London: Routledge, 2003], 154). Yet Milbank himself pays lip service to the "surprisingness and unpredictability of gift and counter-gift" (156). As with his reading of apophatic theology, it seems that he is unable to sustain any meaningful affirmation of uncertainty or—as with Marion—to recognize the possibility of failure and violence.

24. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 60.

25. Caputo, "Apostles," 212.

26. Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

27. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 96.

28. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, "Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 8.

29. Derrida in Kearney, "On the Gift," 59.

30. Marion, *Being Given*, 81.

31. Marion in Kearney, "On the Gift," 75.

32. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 65.

33. Derrida, *Given Time*, 147.

34. Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xv. Although Derrida is referring here to Husserl, the passage nonetheless also describes Derrida's own central concerns (as Steven Shakespeare points out in *Derrida and Theology*, 21).

35. Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 15. It is interesting here that the cut which brings Derrida into being as a subject is the cut of circumcision rather than the cutting of the umbilical cord.

36. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, 3–67 (London: Routledge, 1992), as cited in Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 130–31.

37. "No one can love himself . . . because every man for himself finds, more original than the alleged self-love, self-hatred in himself" (Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 53).

38. Ibid., 38.

39. Ibid., 100.

40. Ibid., 127.

41. In his introduction to *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion says that the book "has obsessed me since the publication of *The Idol and Distance* in 1977. All the books I have published since then bear the mark, explicit or hidden, of this concern" (10).

42. Ibid., 153.

43. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 6.

44. Derrida, quoted in Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, 160–61.

45. Caputo, "Apostles," 206. For Caputo a theological reading of the gift must side with Derrida over Marion. If the gift is dazzling, he asks, how is it possible to know whether it is excess or defect? (Kearney, "On the Gift," 78). These two claims seem to be at odds with one another, though: Is Derrida on the side of lack, or on the side of the indeterminacy of whatever it is that ruptures economy?

46. Kearney, "On the Gift," 71–72.

47. Derrida, *Given Time*, 8.

48. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992),124.

49. Derrida, *Given Time*, 8.

50. Shakespeare*, Derrida and Theology*, 51.

51. Derrida, *Given Time*, 161.

52. Ibid., 162.

53. Ibid., 170.

54. Marion, *Being Given*, 76.

55. Ibid., 79.

56. Ibid., 322, 323.

57. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 217.

58. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 11.

59. Although Žižek engages frequently with Derrida's work, he pays next to no attention to Marion, and evidently considers the problem of the gift a specifically Derridean question. The exception to this general principle is *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (Boris Gunjević and Slavoj Žižek, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać [New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012]), in which Žižek uses Marion's unpublished essay "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice" (itself based on his "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift," trans. John Conley SJ and Danielle Poe, in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 122–43) as a way into a discussion of sacrificial logic, dismissing Marion's reading of the crucifixion in terms of gift as "convoluted and rather unconvincing" (54).

60. For example, Slavoj Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 48, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 58.

61. Žižek makes similar claims about Derrida's reading of Hegel, arguing, for example, that his work "systematically overlooks the Hegelian character of

its own basic operation" (Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* [London: Verso, 2008]: 32).

62. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), 193.

63. Ibid., 193, 194.

64. Ibid., 194.

65. Ibid., 195.

66. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 11.

67. Ibid., 199. In *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), Žižek describes Derrida's thought as "masculine" because of "the persistence, throughout his work, of totalization-without-exception" (742).

68. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 321.

69. Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005), 331.

70. Žižek repeats this argument almost verbatim in *Less Than Nothing*, 127.

71. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 309.

72. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 36.

73. Ibid., 37.

74. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 135. Žižek contrasts this claim to Derrida's belief that "the principal ethico-political duty is . . . never fully to succumb to the enthusiasm of a hasty identification of a positive Event with the redemptive Promise that is always 'to come'" (134).

75. Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 81. This is, again, in contrast to the Derridean "unconditional ethical injunction," which is "impossible to fulfil" (80).

76. Ibid., 81.

77. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 341.

78. Ibid., 342.

79. Ibid., 581.

80. Ibid., 582.

81. Ibid., 586–87.

82. Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 99.

83. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 327.

84. This is the argument of Derrida's "Cogito and the History of Madness" (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [London: Routledge, 1978], 31–63).

85. Žižek's most significant discussion of the debate between Derrida and Foucault is in *Less Than Nothing*, especially 327–33.

86. Ibid., 642.

87. Ibid., 897.

88. Derrida, *Given Time*, 147.

89. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236–52.

90. Derrida, "Force of Law," 6, 7.

91. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 6.

92. Ibid., 301–2.

93. Ibid., 365.

94. John Gray, "The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek," *New York Review of Books,* July 12, 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jul/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek.

95. Simon Critchley, "Violent Thoughts about Slavoj Žižek," in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from This Widening Gyre*, ed. Nathan Eckstrand and Christopher Yates (London: Continuum, 2011), 63.

96. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 1.

97. Ibid., 26.

98. Ibid., 156. See also Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), in which Milbank sets up a three-way opposition between his paradoxical account of difference, Derrida's "nihilistic" account of difference in which difference is "as much violent intrusion as offer of a free loving gift," and Žižek's dialectics (146).

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

100. Ibid., 45.

101. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), 1–2.

102. Žižek, *Iraq*, 158–60.

103. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 76.

104. See, for example, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2008), 118, where Žižek says that for Derrida in his later writings "every discursive field is founded on some 'violent' ethicopolitical decision."

105. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 98.

106. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 476. Benjamin's discussion of this law-maintaining violence suggests that he is referring primarily to what Žižek calls "subjective violence," but Žižek's tripartite account of violence as subject, objective and symbolic suggests a much wider extension of violence into something like a Foucauldian "micro-physics of power," where violence is exerted at every level of social interaction in order to form and maintain subjects in accordance with the law (*Less than Nothing*, 870).

107. Žižek, *Iraq*, 158.

108. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 142.

109. Žižek, *Metastases*, 55.

110. Žižek, *Desert of the Real*, 29; Žižek, *Violence*, 142–43.

111. Žižek, *Metastases*, 55.

112. Žižek, *Violence*, 147.

113. Žižek, *Metastases*, 55; Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006), 88.

114. Žižek, *Violence*, 143.

115. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 130.

116. As Chesterton says in *The Man Who Was Thursday*: "Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it" (Žižek quotes this in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 44).

117. This term crops up on numerous occasions in Žižek's work, and most commonly refers to a self-destructive outburst that emerges from frustration at one's own impotence, in contrast to the act proper, which expresses the impotence of the big Other (see, for example, *Violence*, 170: "All that changes between divine violence and blind *passage à l'acte* is the *site* of impotence").

118. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 123, 151.

119. Žižek, *Violence*, 68.

120. Slavoj Žižek, "Shoplifters of the World Unite," *London Review of Books*, August 2011. http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite.

121. Žižek, *Violence*, 68–69; "Shoplifters."

122. Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 374–79.

123. Ibid., 375.

124. Žižek, *Desert of the Real*, 27–28.

125. Revolutionary violence is, for Žižek, the violence of the Pauline "uncoupling" from the existing order, the violence "of the *death drive*, of the radical 'wiping the slate clean' as the condition of the New Beginning," which is "the direct expression of love" (*Fragile Absolute*, 127).

126. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 249.

127. Ibid., 252.

128. Ibid., 245.

129. For Derrida the discussion of violence, of force, is from the beginning bound up with language—Derrida delivered his paper in English "because it has been imposed on me as a sort of obligation or condition by a sort of symbolic force or law in a situation I do not control" ("Force of Law," 4).

130. Derrida argues that "one would not speak of injustice or violence toward an animal, even less toward a vegetable or a stone" ("Force of Law," 18).

131. However, although, on the one hand, Žižek argues that "the true breakthrough of quantum physics" is that it "compels us to call into question the . . . myth . . . of the absolute gap that separates nature from man" by demonstrating that those features that are deemed uniquely human, "the constitutive imbalance, the 'out-of-joint,' on account of which man is an 'unnatural' creature . . . must somehow already be at work in nature itself" (*Indivisible Remainder*, 218–20); on the other hand, he insists that there is something uniquely violent about language such that "humans exceed animals

in their capacity for violence precisely *because* they can speak" (*Less Than Nothing*, 870). This insistence on the uniqueness of language, however, does not imply an absolute difference of structure between language and material being: Language is an intensification of rather than a unique diversion from the basic organization of the material world (*Indivisible Remainder*, 220).

132. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 127.

133. Žižek, *Violence*, 172.

134. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 16.

135. Ibid., 161. Žižek makes roughly the same argument in *Fragile Absolute*, 127.

136. Slavoj Žižek, "*Concesso non Dato*," in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 253. Žižek specifies here that "a different (higher, eventually) standard of living is a by-product of a revolutionary process, not its goal)."

137. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 7, 9.

138. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 485 (italics original).

139. James Bliss, "'Hope against Hope': Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity," *Mosaic* 48, no. 1 (2015): 85–86.

140. Frank B. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 3 (2003): 230.

141. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 127.

142. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 267–68.

143. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 162.

144. Žižek, *Violence*, 170.

145. Ibid., 168.

146. Žižek, *They Know Not,* xlviii.

147. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 380.

148. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 208–11; Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 44–45; Žižek, *Desert of the Real*, 66. The *Combahee River Collective Statement* states: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity. . . . We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy" (1977), http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html.

149. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 409.

150. Ibid., 89; Žižek, *They Know Not,* 11.

151. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 111–12.

152. Žižek, *Violence*, 164; Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 127–30.

153. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 111–14.

154. Ibid., 282.

155. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 162, and Žižek, *Violence*, 197.

156. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 342, 382–83; Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 353.

157. Žižek, *Violence*, 192–93.

158. Ibid., 152–53.

159. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 475; a fact which John Caputo misses when he objects to Žižek's endorsement of Bartleby-politics, arguing that, unlike his weak theology, Žižek "hardly has Gandhi's non-violent resistance in mind" (*The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013], 161). Although Caputo is right to point out that Žižek is not always the most careful reader of his own work (e.g., *Insistence of God*, 147), this inattention appears to run both ways.

160. Žižek, *Violence*, 179.

161. This is why, as in the subtitle to *Fragile Absolute*, "the Christian legacy" is "worth fighting for." Adam Kotsko argues that Žižek's books on Christianity can all be understood as attempts to grapple with the claim in *Ticklish Subject* that "what we need today is the gesture that would undermine capitalist globalization from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire" (211, cited in Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology* [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 83).

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

163. Marika Rose, "The Christian Legacy Is Incomplete: For and Against Žižek." Modern Believing 57, no. 3 (2016): 267–79.

164. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 101.

165. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 153.

166. Žižek, *They Know Not*, xxxix.

167. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 126–27; Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 486–88.

168. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 121.

169. Ibid., 119, 146–47.

170. Ibid., 101–3. It is worth noting that this affirmation of the unknowable other sounds rather Derridean.

171. Ibid., 118.

172. Žižek, *Iraq*, 82–83.

173. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 285–86.

174. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 283.

175. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 121.

176. Slavoj Žižek, "Not Less Than Nothing, But Simply Nothing," on the Verso Books blog, July 2, 2012, http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1046-not-less-than-nothing-but-simply-nothing.

177. Gray, "Violent Visions."

178. Žižek, "Not Less Than Nothing."

179. Although Žižek describes it as "one of the lowest points in today's intellectual debate" (*Less Than Nothing*, 472), I would argue that Critchley's misreading is at least partly due to the lack of clarity in Žižek's own work.

180. Critchley, "Violent Thoughts," 61.

181. Ibid., 64.

182. Ibid., 65.

183. Ibid., 70.

184. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 870.

185. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2011), 49, cited in Pound, *Žižek*, 37.

186. Pound, *Žižek*, 38–39.

187. Ibid., 41.

188. Ibid., 46.

189. Ibid., 47.

190. Ibid., 48.

191. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 975.

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

5. Divine Violence as Trauma

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

2. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2011), 4.

3. Ibid., 3.

4. This applies equally to examples of which Žižek disapproves, such as capitalism (where the argument goes something like, "How can you dismiss Stalinism because of its violence when capitalism is *much more violent* than Stalinism ever was?") and those of which he approves (where the argument goes something like, "You say there's no need for violent revolution because Gandhi effected social change via peaceful means, but in fact Gandhi's peaceful political approach was itself *deeply violent*").

5. Sara Ahmed, ""Liberal Multiculturalism Is the Hegemony—It's an Empirical Fact"—A Response to Slavoj Žižek," in *darkmatter* 0 (2008), http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/02/19/"liberal-multiculturalism-is-the

-hegemony-—-its-an-empirical-fact"-a-response-to-slavoj-zizek. Accessed January 7, 2018.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 591.

7. Although Žižek does draw on Benjamin's taxonomy of violence, advocating divine violence rather than any other sort of violence, he is not consistent in his attempts to specify the sort of violence that he is speaking about.

8. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 18, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 29.

9. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 465–68.

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

11. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 24.

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

13. For example, Žižek talks about the "traumatic origins" of the Law (*The Fragile Absolute: or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* [London: Verso, 2000], 100); "the normal run of things" being "traumatically interrupted" (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* [London: Verso, 2009], 17); "the confrontation with the Real of brutal, traumatic violence" (*Lost Causes*, 64, particularly worthy of note because of the explicit connection Žižek makes between his notions of violence and trauma); and "the "unthinkable" traumatic core of pure love" (*Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* [London: Verso, 2012], 81).

14. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 89; Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2008), 48.

15. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 35, 192; Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 94.

16. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 150.

17. Ibid., 192, 191–93; Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), 31.

18. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 43, 147; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 102; Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 87; Žižek, *Metastases*, 90, 173.

19. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 193; Žižek, *They Know Not*, 196. "The ultimate traumatic Thing the Self encounters is the Self itself" (Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009], 90).

20. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 216; Žižek, *They Know Not*, 196. Žižek also says that "it is difficult, properly traumatic, for a human animal to accept that his or her life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and pleasure-seeking, but

that it is in the service of a Truth" (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* [London: Verso, 2002], 69–70).

21. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 221–22; Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006), 73–74.

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

23. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

24. Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

25. For example, Jones describes trauma as one aspect of what it means to "love in a world profoundly broken by violence and marred by harms we inflict upon each other" (*Trauma and Grace*, ix); for Rambo the "enigma of traumatic suffering" is the question of how "you account for an experience that was not fully integrated and, thus, returns? How can you heal from trauma?" (*Spirit and Trauma*, 2).

26. Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, xv.

27. Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.

28. Slavoj Žižek, "Why Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics on the Edge of Fear and Trembling," *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1.0 (2007).

29. Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 22.

30. Ibid., 171.

31. Ibid., 170.

32. Žižek, *They Know Not*, 154.

33. Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma,* xiv.

34. Žižek on occasion equates trauma with grace, such that it is not too much of a stretch to argue that his account of trauma provides resources for rethinking the relationship of nature and grace in the Eucharist. Žižek's ontology suggests a model of nature and grace as mutually constitutive, of grace as internal to nature, its point of rupture.

35. Pound does acknowledge something of the contingency of the traumatizing effect of the sacrament, citing Aquinas's assertion that "the effect of the sacrament can be secured if it is received by desire, and not in fact" (*Summa Theologiae* III.80.1) as his authority for the claim that "the disposition of the subject is absolutely central to the sacrament" (*Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 157), but he never addresses the question of how this claim might be reconciled with the affirmation that every instance of the Eucharist is traumatic. A Žižekian account of trauma as constitutively present yet only contingently confronted would go some way toward resolving this difficulty.

36. William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

37. Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 170.

38. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 2.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.,17.

41. Cavanaugh asserts, for example, that his argument "by no means assumes a heroic or perfectionist ethic; the church is always constituted by foolish and sinful people" (ibid.,14).

42. Ibid., 279.

43. Helen Rawlings's *The Spanish Inquisition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) makes it clear how entangled the Eucharist was with the practices of the Inquisition. She describes the importance of Eucharistic belief and practice to the Inquisition's attempts to root out heretics, including Muslims (77–78) and Lutherans (102); the importance of the *Edicto da fe*, a list of heresies, which was read out after Mass, urging congregants to denounce their friends and neighbors for heresy (30–31), and the daylong ritual of the *auto da fe* which "began with the celebration of Mass in the local parish church adjacent to the square where the ceremony would take place" (39).

44. As Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane's *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011) discusses, rumors of Jewish "theft and desecration of the Eucharistic host" were the ugly converse of the flourishing of "devotion to the Eucharist and the sacred power of the host" in the thirteenth century, a significant factor in the birthing of "the bitter legacy of anti-Semitism" (20, 119).

45. Marcella Althaus-Reid persistently describes both the liturgical formation of Latin American Catholicism and the political formation of Latin American political orders in terms of patriarchy, heterosexism, and the repression of "indecent" or transgressive theologies and sexualities; see in particular her discussion of kneeling and the Eucharist in *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7–22, and of torture and the military junta in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 186–88. Although Cavanaugh recognizes that, at least on some accounts "most of both tortured and torturers were Christians," he nonetheless sees torture as essentially alien to the character of the church, a threat to "the integrity of the body of Christ" (*Torture and Eucharist*, 256–57).

46. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 10.

47. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 92.

48. Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 159.

49. Including by Pound, who argues that individuals should be understood primarily in terms of their status "as a member of the enacted body of Christ" (ibid., 23).

50. Pound draws an analogy, for example, between his reading of the Eucharist as trauma and Christian accounts of the nativity (ibid., xiii–xiv).

51. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 289. I am not sure what to make of Žižek's use of "we" here.

52. Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, 170.

53. Matthew 11:6 and the parallel passage in Luke 7.23. It is not clear where Žižek takes this term from, but it is possible that it derives ultimately from Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) consists of an extended meditation on the use of the term *skandalon* in the Gospels. Kierkegaard's account has numerous intriguing parallels with Žižek's understanding of the *skandalon* of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, as for both Pound and Žižek, the offense of Christ is to do with the incarnation, with the juxtaposition of the divine and the human in Christ (*Practice in Christianity*, 94, 102). As for Žižek (though in contrast to Pound), Kierkegaard argues that Christendom systematically evades the traumatic confrontation with the offensive person of Christ (e.g., "Christendom has abolished Christ" [107]; "In established Christendom . . . every . . . possibility of offense is basically abolished" [111]). Although both Pound and Žižek rely on Kierkegaard at various points in their respective treatments of Christianity, neither explicitly engages with this particular text.

54. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 248. Here Žižek also seeks to reclaim Kierkegaard from Milbank's reading, arguing that the coincidence of opposites in God is not a peaceful reconciliation of difference in absolute transcendence but "the breathtakingly traumatic fact that we, human mortals, are trapped in a 'sickness unto death,' . . . that our existence is radically torn—and, even more, as Chesterton pointed out, that strife is integral to the very heart of God himself" (253).

55. Ibid., 260.

56. 1 Peter 2:4–8.

57. Mandy Morgan, "Sado-Masochism and Feminist Desire: The Other Measure of True Love Bleeds," *Theory and Psychology* 21, no. 4 (2011): 523.

58. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 36.

59. Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, vol. 1: *Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), vii.

60. Ibid., 37–38.

61. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 286.

62. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 39. There are clear parallels here with my own reading of Dionysius's Neoplatonism in Chapter 1.

63. Ibid., 184.

64. Ibid., 197.

65. Ibid., 209–10.

66. Grace Jantzen, "'Death, Then, How Could I Yield to It?' Kristeva's Mortal Visions," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 122.

67. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 17–18.

68. Ibid., 24–25.

69. Jantzen, "Kristeva's Mortal Visions," 124.

70. Grace Jantzen, "New Creations: Eros, Beauty, and the Passion for Transformation," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 271–90.

71. Ibid., 286.

72. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, viii.

73. Ibid., 329.

74. Ibid., 334.

75. Ibid., 336.

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

77. Rosanna Greenstreet, "Q&A: Slavoj Žižek, Professor and Writer," *Guardian*, August 9, 2008. http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/09/slavoj.zizek.

78. Decca Aitkenhead, "Slavoj Žižek: "Humanity Is OK, but 99% of People Are Boring Idiots,'" *Guardian*, 15 November 15, 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/jun/10/slavoj-zizek-humanity-ok-people-boring.

79. In one interview, Žižek says of Astra Taylor's documentary about him that "I was very careful that all the clues about my personality are misleading" (Katie Englehart, "Slavoj Žižek: I Am Not the World's Hippest Philosopher," *Salon*, December 29, 2012. http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher).

80. Greenstreet, "Q&A."

81. Aitkenhead, "Slavoj Žižek."

82. Žižek, *Metastases*, 151; Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 159–60. As I discuss in "The Mystical and the Material: Slavoj Žižek and the Reception of French Mysticism." *Sophia* 53, no. 2 (2014): 231–40, this is a somewhat problematic reading of Irigaray in particular.

83. Kristeva understands the "semiotic" as a nonsymbolic form of expression that "does not coincide with linguistic communication" ("Stabat Mater," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 [1985]: 143), the "affective, material dimension of language that contributes to meaning but does not signify in the same way as signs" (S. K. Keltner, *Kristeva: Thresholds* [Cambridge: Polity, 2011]).

84. Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 94–95.

85. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. (London: Verso, 2000), 224.

86. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 32–38.

87. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 111.

88. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 511. This seems likely to be a reference to Kristeva's book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

89. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 170.

90. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 9–10.

91. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 61.

92. Examples of the abject include the Lacanian figure of the "obscene, monstrous, rapist father," which "is itself a fantasy-formation, the ultimate guarantee that somewhere there is full, unconstrained enjoyment" (Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 75), and the figure of the Jew in anti-Semitism, who "is experienced as the embodiment of negativity, as the force disrupting stable social identity" (Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 199).

93. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 150.

94. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 36. It is hard not to see this hyperbolic language as indicative of Žižek's own attitude to feminine embodiment rather than as a simple description of Courbet's painting, which is unflinching but hardly lurid.

95. In a 2008 foreword to *They Know Not*, Žižek says of 1989's *Sublime Object* that it "misses" the "ridiculous inadequacy of the object" and so "remains caught in the ethics of pure desire" (xvii).

96. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 61.

97. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 22.

98. Ibid., 118.

99. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 149.

100. And as for Jantzen, the price to be paid for elevating the beloved object into the position of the sublime is the loss of its "pathological" particularity (e.g., in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, "his object choice, the woman, loses her "pathological" character and becomes a sublime Thing" [188]).

101. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 139.

102. In Žižek's 2008 foreword to *They Know Not*, xvii.

103. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 128.

104. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 265.

105. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 128.

106. Ibid., 111–12.

107. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 41.

108. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 279.

109. Žižek, *On Belief*, 92.

110. Ibid., 89.

111. Žižek, *Metastases*, 104.

112. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 153–54.

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

114. Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 76.

115. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 36.

116. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 6; cf. Žižek's description of his own work as "a materialist theology" in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 82.

117. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 36.

118. Ibid., 38.

119. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 2.

120. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 152.

121. Ibid., 146.

122. Ibid., 147.

123. Ibid., 4.

124. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 35.

125. Steven Shakespeare, unpublished paper "Into the Vomitarium: Diseased Sacraments in Black Metal and Queer Theology" (presented at the conference Thinking the Absolute, Liverpool Hope University, 2012).

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid.

128. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 289.

129. Shakespeare, "Into the Vomitarium."

130. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 120.

131. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 29.

132. *Kung Fu Panda*, directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson (Paramount, 2008).

133. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 181.

134. Ibid., 173.

135. Ibid., 118.

136. Jack Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5, no. 2 (2008): 2.

137. Edelman, *No Future*, 104.

138. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004.

139. Silvia Federici, "Wages against Housework (1975)," in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2012), 20.

140. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 246.

141. James Bliss, "Hope against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity," *Mosaic* 48, no. 1 (2015): 83–98.

142. Ibid., 88–89.

143. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 72.

144. Combahee River Collective Statement, quoted in Bliss, "Hope against Hope," 89.

145. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

146. Ibid., 21.

147. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

148. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 72

149. Frank B. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 229.

150. Ibid., 230.

151. Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 988–89.

152. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 471–72.

153. Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (London: Routledge, 2016), 19.

154. Ibid., 269.

155. Ibid., 288–89.

156. Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 178.

6. Mystical Theology and the Four Discourses

1. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 138.

2. Ibid., 138–39.

3. Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 50.

4. Ibid., 62.

5. Ibid., 63.

6. Although elsewhere Turner places more emphasis on the disruptive function of Dionysius's apophaticism, arguing that the negation of negations in Dionysius means that "the whole of creation is incomplete, 'self-subverting,' centred on an unknowable reality" (Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 271), bringing Dionysius yet closer to Žižek.

7. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 138.

8. Ibid., 139.

9. Thomas Lynch, "Making the Quarter Turn: Liberation Theology after Lacan," in *Theology after Lacan*, ed. Creston Davis and Marcus Pound (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 211.

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

11. Matthew Sharpe and Geoff M. Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 89.

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

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

14. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton, 2007), 12.

15. For example, the discourses are discussed in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 217; *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2008), 118; *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 68–70; *Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 376–77; *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 298–308; and *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 794–95.

16. Although an earlier version can be found in Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 645–68.

17. Exodus 3:14.

18. Genesis 1:12.

19. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 14.

20. Ibid., 166.

21. Ibid., 19.

22. Ibid., 16.

23. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973.*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 16.

24. Paul Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender: From Subject to Drive* (New York: Other Press, 2001), 17.

25. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 463.

26. Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 216–17.

27. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 20.

28. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 16.

29. Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 26.

30. Verhaeghe suggests, in fact, that the analysand may initially present his or her symptoms in either of the master's, the hysteric's, or the university discourse (ibid., 33).

31. Ibid., 42.

32. Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 115.

33. Ibid., 123–24.

34. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 298.

35. Ibid., 298–99.

36. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 377.

37. For example, Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 131.

38. *Seminar XVII*, 21. There are clearly echoes of Hegel's master-slave dialectic here, but Lacan also makes explicit reference to Plato's *Meno*, arguing that the basic operation of philosophy is "this extraction, I would almost say this betrayal, of the slave's knowledge, in order to obtain its transmutation into the master's knowledge" (22).

39. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 318.

40. Exodus 20:2–3.

41. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 298; see also Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, 91–92.

42. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 210; see also Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, 94, and Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, 61–62.

43. As Sharpe and Boucher point out (*Žižek and Politics*, 201–2), although their claim that Žižek's *preference* is for this sort of conservative theology is rather implausible, as I discuss elsewhere (Marika Rose, "Review of Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010]," *Political Theology* 13, no. 2 [2012]: 264–266).

44. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 31.

45. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 118.

46. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 138–39.

47. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 49. Something similar is indicated by Thomas Aquinas's argument that theology "takes its principles directly from God through revelation, not from other sciences" (*Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], Ia I.5).

48. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 138.

49. Ibid., 139.

50. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 113–14.

51. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 31. Lacan plays with the French homophones *Maître* (Master) and *m'être* ("to be myself").

52. Ibid., 30.

53. Ibid., 32.

54. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 114.

55. It seems reasonable to suggest that two of the ecclesiastical forms that most closely approximate the master's discourse are evangelicalism (particularly in its conservative and fundamentalist forms) and the Roman Curia (Lynch makes the connection between the master's discourse and the infallible proclamations issued by the Vatican in "Making the Quarter Turn," 214). It is no coincidence that both are associated in the popular imagination with both

punitive forms of discipline and with hypocrisy and scandal. Žižek is fond of referring to "Saint Paul's famous passage on the interconnection between Law and sin—on how the Law itself generates sinful desires" (*Fragile Absolute; or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* [London: Verso, 2000], 113), i.e., Romans 7:7, in which Paul writes "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law."

56. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 86.

57. Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 216.

58. Žižek describes the university discourse as "the hegemonic discourse of modernity" but also suggests that the university and hysterical discourse represent "two outcomes of the vacillation of the direct reign of the Master" (*Parallax View*, 297, 298).

59. Žižek suggests that, where the authority of lawyers and doctors is structured according to the discourse of the master due to the power that is bound up with their knowledge, the university discourse is about a particular sort of "'powerless' Knowledge" and can be seen at work in the faculties of law and medicine, as well as in the theological faculty (*For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* [London: Verso, 2008], 57).

60. Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language," 115–16. Fabio Vighi argues that the shift from the master's discourse to the university discourse implies "not merely the worker's spoilation of money (Marx), but most importantly of knowledge (Lacan)" (*On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* [London: Continuum, 2010], 48), suggesting a link between the university discourse and the rise of the "knowledge economy."

61. Žižek, *Iraq*, 156. Žižek argues that Stalinism "was the symptom of capitalism" and that this is why it failed.

62. Žižek in Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005), 142.

63. Or, as Aquinas puts it, "Christian theology advances from the articles of faith" (*ST* 1a 1.2). Lynch connects the university discourse to "the dominant practice of theology," by which he means academic theology insofar as it operates "in accordance with the decrees of the ecclesial authorities" ("Making the Quarter Turn," 217), more strongly connecting doctrinal and ecclesial authority; he also singles out Radical Orthodoxy's ontology of peace as particularly characteristic of this form of discourse (68). Žižek, however, suggests that this form of theology no longer dominates: Paradoxically, he argues, it is science that is "university discourse at its purest," providing "the security which was once guaranteed by religion," whereas "religion is one of the possible places from which one can develop critical doubts about contemporary society" (Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* [London: Verso, 2008], 446).

64. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 175.

65. Ibid., 114.
66. Ibid., 60.
67. Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 31.
68. Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 132.
69. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 30.
70. Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 267.
71. Renata Salecl, "Deference to the Great Other: The Discourse of Education", in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society,* ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 173.
72. Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 143.
73. Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, 179.
74. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, , in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 150.
75. Lynch argues that liberation theology tends to function according to the hysteric's discourse, protesting against ecclesial and theological authority without ever managing to escape it, preserving "the fantasy of both a past and a future characterized by wholeness. This wholeness is the knowledge of Christianity, the promise that it will one day be as it was" ("Making the Quarter Turn," 223).
76. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 33.
77. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 167.
78. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 795.
79. Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 29.
80. For example, see Žižek, *Tarrying*, 209; *Fragile Absolute*, 40; *Parallax View*, 297.
81. Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, 176.
82. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 299.
83. Fink, *Lacanian Subject,* 134–35.
84. Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 109–10.
85. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 135. Dionysius speaks about withholding mystical theology from "those caught up with the things of the world" and those "who claim [God] is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made." This seems tantalizingly open to the possibility of a Žižekian rereading, which sees the problem as one of the narcissistic absorption of the world into the individual's desire for meaning and completion.
86. Lynch, "Making the Quarter Turn," 220–22.
87. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25–27.
88. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 38.
89. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 121–22.
90. Ibid., 306.
91. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 121.

92. Žižek, *Tarrying*, 2.

93. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 165.

94. For example, see Žižek, *Parallax View*, 378, and the more recent, notorious "The Simple Courage of Decision: A Leftist Tribute to Thatcher," *New Statesman*, April 17, 2013. http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/04/simple-courage-decision-leftist-tribute-thatcher.

95. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 380.

96. Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 35.

97. Ibid., 54.

98. Lynch, "Making the Quarter Turn," 230.

99. Žižek, *Parallax View*, 306.

100. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 19.

101. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 164: Žižek cites an "unpublished course of 1997/98."

102. Ibid., 165.

103. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 139.

104. See, for example, Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 78, 106; *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 162, 165.

105. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003): 397. http://mrubenstein.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files//web2apps/webapps/wordpress/html/wp-content/blogs.dir/286/files//2008/11/unknown-thyself.pdf.

106. Ibid., 400.

107. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 6–7.

Conclusion: Theology as Failure

1. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, "Editor's Introduction: What Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?" in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 3–4.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *A Peace Reader: Essential Readings on War, Justice, Non-Violence and World Order*, ed. Joseph Fahey and Richard Armstrong (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992), 124.

3. James Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 11.

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 7.

5. Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 329.

6. Mark 10:17–22.

7. Matthew 10:34–36.

8. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 124.

9. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

10. Anthony Paul Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 5.

11. Anthony Paul Smith, "Nature Deserves to Be Side by Side with the Angels: Nature and Messianism by Way of Non-Islam," *Angelaki* 19, no. 1 (2014): 167.

12. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 301–2.

13. Ibid., 39.

14. I am thinking here, for example, of the deeply distasteful notion that the destruction of the welfare state is to be welcomed as an opportunity for the church, expressed on numerous occasions by Archbishop Justin Welby, as quoted in, e.g., John Bingham, "The Church Must Fill Void Left by Failing State, Says New Archbishop Justin Welby," *The Telegraph*, January 1, 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9839866/The-Church-must-fill-void-left-by-failing-state-says-new-archbishop-Justin-Welby.html.

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