

RADICAL THEOLOGIES



THIS SILENCE MUST NOW SPEAK

*Letters of
Thomas J. J. Altizer,
1995–2015*



EDITED BY MIKE GRIMSHAW



Radical Theologies

Radical Theologies is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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This Silence Must Now Speak: Letters of Thomas J. J. Altizer, 1995–2015

By Thomas J. J. Altizer and edited by Mike Grimshaw

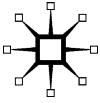
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LETTERS OF THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER,
1995–2015

THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER

Edited by
MIKE GRIMSHAW

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Series Preface

Radical Theologies encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

Radical Theologies reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as Rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.

Introduction

Mike Grimshaw

In 1966, in the midst of what become known as the “death of God” debate, Thomas Altizer stated: “If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.”¹ Altizer has spent the past half-century thinking, writing, talking, and debating just how we may understand the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first, in the wake of the death of God. As Mark C. Taylor describes him in his foreword to Altizer’s memoir: “Thomas J. J. Altizer is the last theologian. As such, he is the most God-obsessed person I have ever known.”² As the last theologian, Altizer has been determined to compel us to acknowledge that to live in the modern world is to have to continue to think through the death of God. A theologian of the death of God may sound an oxymoron to many, but Altizer is also a self-described *apocalyptic* theologian³—an apocalyptic that is simultaneously an ending and an absolute beginning. For Altizer the hope is that we can come to know the dark apocalypse embodied in a nihilistic world “as a joyous apocalypse, and one promising if not embodying an absolute transfiguration” (LDG 177).

What might it mean to think of Altizer as a theologian of transfiguration—a transfiguration of nihilism, a transfiguration of the world when the nihilism of the death of God opens us up to a new possibility, the transfiguration of hope? Central to this is naming the silence—above all naming the silence about God—and this is what gives this collection its title. It is a phrase borrowed from the letter of October 13, 2005, wherein Altizer names this as his new focus: the silence of the abyss of God. This is a theological and intellectual journey; in fact, for Altizer this has entailed a type of existential journey of the whole person into the encounter with what he names “the absolute darkness of the absolute nothingness of God,” and this involves a saying yes to God “and hence saying Yes to absolute darkness and absolute nothingness itself” (LDG 179). This is Altizer as theologian of *coincidentia oppositorum* and hence the last theologian, the theologian of the radical transfiguration in the abyss, in the absolute darkness, in the absolute nothing where we say Yes to God. As Altizer proclaims, by “naming the darkness of God

we precisely thereby name an ultimate transfiguration” (LDG 180). To be able to participate in this transfiguration, the theological “task is to name that darkness” (LDG 179), a naming as proclamation, a naming that is preached by the self-described “last truly Southern preacher” (LDG 181)—as all of those privileged to hear Altizer speaking publicly can surely agree.

Are these also therefore the letters of a preacher of the death of God? I would argue they often are: they are proclamations reminiscent of a sermon that declaim and name, that challenge and urge us, in a deeply Protestant fashion, to reflect as individuals on what we encounter, an encounter with the abyss that is, again in a truly Protestant fashion, that of the individual with the abyss of God. Altizer notes that a homiletic approach has been central to his theological work (LDG x), an approach manifest not only in his oral communication but, as experienced here, in his written letters.

Altizer is not only the last theologian, but also one of the last true intellectuals, a radical intellectual whose knowledge is the result of wide and deep reading across the disciplines of religion, theology, philosophy, history, and literature. His work reminds us that to do theology, to be a theologian, has required nothing less than an engagement with the history, thought, and expressions of Western culture itself. For that culture is the culture of the question of God, and more recently, the culture of the death of God.

Altizer is radical in two main senses: his work and thought take us back to the *radix*, the root in the Bible, in philosophy, in theology, and it is radical in the secondary sense that it proclaims an alternative, a necessary alternative, to what is taken to be normative. Central to this radical alternative is the work of William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom serve as the *radix* of Altizer’s theology, a radical theology that is also, as Altizer often notes, given full expression through the death of God as expressed and experienced in America. So Altizer is a radical theologian, a death of God theologian, the last theologian—and importantly, an American theologian. His theology could have arisen in no other place than America, an America that situates itself always in relation to—and often in competition with—the old world of Europe. An America open to the influence of Asia, an America that looks westward across the Pacific and so remains open to Buddhism in particular. An America that looks to Europe as a place of departure: as an old world and tradition transformed in the new world of America. Altizer is an American theologian who is open to the possibilities, both positive and negative, that are offered in America—and offered by America. This is a possibility for Western theology to remake itself anew, to rethink itself on what Altizer, in a letter of February 12, 2012, calls “the unique ground of America”; a society seeking to express itself through common speech and a common language. As Altizer identifies in this letter, furthermore, the death of God is in many ways centrally tied to America, a revolutionary America as expressed by William Blake in his epic *America* and as enacted in Herman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick*. This theme is a constant implicit presence in Altizer’s thought and letters: what is the abyss that confronts America, that confronts American society? Why in this most religious of modern nations is the death of God so centrally, and continually enacted—and yet often denied?

Altizer's radical theology is also therefore a political theology, a radical theology that calls for a new beginning, a new beginning inaugurated by the death of God. In these letters certain names reappear: Blake, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Milton, Levinas, and throughout the thought of D. G. Leahy. Altizer's theology is positioned in an ongoing conversation, debate, and argument with all of these names. So there is a conversation in these letters not only with those receiving the letters but also, crucially, with those thinkers of whom he writes within the letters. The net of Altizer's mind and knowledge is cast far and wide: looking back to the ancient Greeks, engaging with what can be termed radical Catholicism, and discussing ballet, theatre, literature, culture, and politics in the broadest sense. These letters are the expression and example of what theology could and should be, a theology that is inclusive in its engagement with the expressions of human life, thought, and culture. For in these letters Altizer reminds us that theology, especially radical theology, is nothing less than a continual reflexive and critical yet celebratory engagement with all of life and its possibilities. Nothing is outside the scope of theology and theological discussion. But also, in these letters, Altizer provides a crucial reminder that to attempt to do theology, to attempt to think and write theologically, to attempt to enter an understanding of modern life through the death of God, demands a deep and wide engagement with the intellectual and cultural expressions of modern life, with all that has contributed to it. This may seem an impossibility; yet, as Altizer eloquently demonstrates, theology is centrally a task of reading, thinking, and writing—ever writing one's thinking out in new ways. Furthermore, theology is undertaken in a conversation, in an engagement with others who are likewise grappling with these questions. It involves questions far more than answers, critique far more than assurance, an honesty and emotion too often kept hidden and discouraged within the walls of institutions.

Felix Pryor, in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Letters*, observed: "Those who are able to write good books are usually the ones best able to write good letters. They are at home in the medium."⁴ Thomas Altizer is certainly at home in these media: in the medium of books and articles, and here, in the medium of letters. For the past 20 years he has made assiduous use of the possibilities of the internet to circulate e-mails in which his thought has been expressed in a manner that is conversational, prophetic, inquiring, and often homiletic. He has written over 300 letters to friends and colleagues in a series of meditative essays and mini-essays on religious, theological, political, and philosophical matters that are central and vital to our contemporary era. It is from this wider body that this smaller, representative collection has been selected.

These letters exemplify new possibilities for engaging in and with radical theology. Written for the internet age, they have been circulated among a broad circle of radical thinkers across North America, Europe, and the South Pacific, and so serve as the ongoing ground for a series of conversations. In this regard they are an innovative medium for doing theology in communicative dialogue: they model a deliberately inclusive manner of sharing radical thought. It has often been thought that the internet would end the age of the letter. These letters, of and for a wide generation of scholars, demonstrate the exciting possibilities for global epistles that the internet enables. It was once thought, similarly, that the decline of the letter

would be a consequence of the rise of the telephone, and of course there are many conversations and discussions that occur on the telephone that once would have been put down on the page and circulated back and forth.

Yet the internet has seen a return to the letter in a way that transcends both these older formats of communication. As Brian Schroeder, one of Altizer's correspondents, commented, these letters remind "a generation that there is a dying world of intellectual correspondence that can be as important as published writings for thinking through critical questions."⁵ In this Schroeder identifies a central element of these letters: they reveal Altizer thinking through critical issues in communication with a fellowship of friends and likeminded scholars. These are proclamations of intent, insights and questions; discursive essays on issues that Altizer has been thinking his way through. They range in length from essays thousands of words long to far briefer ones of hundreds of words that raise a point of immediate interest and critical insight. Above all they are communications as the thinking through of critical questions. In these we are introduced again—and in a new format—to one of the formidable intellects of the last century of thought and theology. Altizer was and remains extraordinarily widely and deeply read. He is a scholar and an intellectual engaged in a world of words and ideas, ranging freely from the past into the present, from the present applied critically to the past.

It is important to realise that in the main this is not correspondence as traditionally understood in the age of the letter addressed to a single recipient. Even in the past, the handwritten (or typewritten) letter, while addressed to a singular recipient, would oftentimes be circulated to a wider circle of acquaintances—either whole or as partially quoted in subsequent letters to others. So letters have often operated as a medium to proclaim a message to a wider network of recipients.

The roots of this are evident to all who are conversant with the biblical tradition. The history of Christianity in particular is replete with letters—from those canonized in the New Testament, to those of the church fathers, to those of theologians both orthodox and heterodox, to those of reformers and heretics. The letter has a central role in Christianity from the advent of modernity in the Reformation. The printing press enabled the letter as proclamation and call for radical reform to be widely circulated. There are also the epistles of pastoral and institutional authority.

These letters of Altizer therefore arise in the context of a deep history of the theological letter, the letter as theological document and expression, the letter as theological conversation and act of inclusion across a dispersed community. They offer a theology of immediacy and reflection, of both the time in which they are written and for our rereading again, anew. They set forth theology as first and foremost the act of communication, arising from a desire to exchange ideas, to engage with the recipients the topical questions and insights, the proclamation and prophetic impulse that abide at the heart of Altizer's life and work. This collection provides a new form of theology, the theology of e-letters, theology as internet epistle that circulates across time and space in an inclusive manner, drawing together a new community, truly a theology of transfiguration.

A Note on the Text

The letters were selected from the body of over 300 letters generously made available by Altizer and various of his correspondents. In considering how to proceed I had to decide between making thematic selections and grouping these in separate chapters or topic headings or undertaking a selection that allowed the central narrative flow of Altizer's thought to be expressed. I chose the latter course and so the letters selected occur in chronological order. This I believe preserves the integrity of Altizer's undertaking in writing these letters. They arose as expressions of his thought over almost 20 years. In reading these in chronological order we gain a far more honest engagement with how and why Altizer wrote the letters than we would if they were grouped in themes that disturbed the chronological order of composition.

Of those that I considered including, I contacted all the correspondents in question requesting permission to publish the letter. All but one agreed. The final selection is mine and mine alone; in this I sought to provide an accessible and wide-ranging coverage of the ideas and discussions included in the larger body of work. The footnotes are also my work, undertaken to provide further information for those who might not be familiar with Altizer's work and the names, events, and ideas in these letters. In working on the footnotes I was struck again at the breadth of Altizer's theology. Some names I have left without footnotes, believing that those reading this collection will be at least familiar with such figures and the broad nature of their thought.

In completing this work I thank Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder for their generous encouragement and assistance. They have had the privilege of knowing and working with Thomas Altizer far longer than I have—yet they have been extremely supportive of this project and for this I want to thank them.

Finally, this collection is of course the work primarily and ultimately of Thomas Altizer. Without his writing of these letters, his willingness and generosity to allow them to be edited into this collection, this project would not have come to fruition. It has been a privilege to work with one of the most original and brilliant theological minds of the past century. My first meeting with Thomas Altizer was a central inspiration for inaugurating the Radical Theologies series. I am delighted that it has enabled his voice to be heard anew.

Letter 1

To Brian Schroeder* (October/November 1996)

Dear Brian,

I am deeply grateful for your gift of *Altared Ground*,¹ not only rejoicing in its publication, but grateful for the power of the book itself, which exceeds my expectations, but confirms my deep confidence in you. First let me express my delight not only in the title but in the titles of your chapters²; these give expression to both an integral and an essential movement, one which has a dramatic power, and yet like most Greek tragedy fails to reach either a resolution or an ending. I am tempted to say that nothing is more alien to the Greek mind than either true ending or true beginning, and while this is the universal pattern of eternal return, here you are bold enough to identify the eschaton as a fundamentally Greek concept. And in conclusion you state that the distinction between eschatology and apocalypse lies at the very heart of this book. What can this mean?

Let me begin with your all too paradoxical title. You can write (on p. 134) that for Levinas the face is the thing in itself, the *Altared Ground* of God, this following an earlier point that the renunciation of alterity is the continual kenotic movement of the Infinite, which humbles itself in its revelation as the trace of itself, citing Levinas to the effect that the original trace is the nakedness of a “face that faces,” and in the face the Infinite is revealed in all its glory and defencelessness. Frankly I can’t imagine anything further from Judaism than this; here iconoclasm is truly reversed, or is this the revelation of a “past that was never truly present,” occurring in the irreducible alterity of an *anarchy*, an eschatological signification without context (p. 66)? This is just how I have always understood Levinas, so I can resonate with your question as to whether there is any historical concreteness at all in Levinas, and can fully accept Derrida’s criticism of Levinas; yet nevertheless I can reverence Levinas for carrying ethical thinking to its final or eschatological conclusion, wherein it becomes so abstract that it loses all point of contact whatsoever

with actuality—unless for Levinas there is only one historical actuality, and that is the Holocaust itself. Surely only the Holocaust could make possible an apprehension of violence itself as an absolute violence, and of history itself as an absolute violence, and a violence inevitably following from everything we have known as a post-Platonic thinking and consciousness.

I am tempted to say that there is nothing more missing from this book than Levinas himself, his thinking is almost always presented as a reaction—above all to Hegel—but beyond that to everything we have known as thinking and history, and one enormous power of this is to unveil the illusion of everything which we have known as the ethical. Here you rightly correlate Levinas and Nietzsche, but in this domain Nietzsche is a real figure and thinker, whereas Levinas and his thinking never become concretely or actually meaningful. Even his Jewish identity is veiled, and while we do gain some concrete sense of his early reaction to Heidegger, and a far fuller sense of his reaction to Hegel, he nevertheless remains a kind of surd, and perhaps his thinking is ultimately a surd, an ultimately voiceless speech, or a contemporary *sunya* or void. Is that what most deeply attracts you? Now if the absolutely other is the other person, and if the distinction between the absolutely other and the other person collapses in the ethical significance of the face, is not that significance an eschatological significance without a context, and therefore one calling forth face itself as a voiceless presence, and one visible only in its absolute invisibility or absolute absence? Yes, this is a Derridean criticism, but now I find that inescapable, and just as everything that Levinas speaks of as face has always been invisible to me, I now sense that this is absolute necessary and inevitable.

Now you already know how deeply I disagree with your political interpretation of Hegel, but let us examine its apocalyptic form, as when you state that the apocalyptic vision of Spirit rests on the establishment of a universal and total State (p. 70). Let us leave aside the question of whether such an interpretation could be supported by even one text of Hegel's and inquire into its understanding of apocalyptic, since you declare that the distinction between eschatology and apocalypse is so central here. If we follow Levinas and understand eschatology as a relation with a surplus always exterior to the totality, or to an infinity transcending totality, nonencompassable within a totality and yet as primordial as totality, and yet as a "beyond" of history drawing us out of the jurisdiction of history, and doing so by an ultimate judgment calling forth our full responsibility, then there is certainly nothing Greek in such an eschatology, nor anything truly messianic either; rather, this understanding of eschatology is characteristic of the pre-exilic prophetic oracles. For here Levinas does take seriously the ancient prophets as you do not, and if we follow Levinas here, would we then understand apocalypse as totality itself, or as historical totality, or as an absolutely immanent transcendence, or as the total presence of the "Kingdom of God"?

Thereby, as you know, I understand both Hegel and Nietzsche as purely and absolutely apocalyptic thinkers, but I do not here see how you understand apocalyptic. One way to do this, which you never employ, is to understand *eschatological* in this sense as Jewish or Judaic and *apocalyptic* as Christian, thereby allowing us to see that there is a deep conflict between Judaism and Christianity. I recognize that

this is a tactic that you must refuse, but then I remain baffled by your understanding of apocalypse, unless you want to understand it as being purely Hegelian. This takes me back to your "BackGround," where you state that the predominant tendency in Western thinking has been to construe the Absolute or Ultimate either as illusion, nothingness, or phantasm, or as radical exteriority. Now if Hegel is the former, a truly postmodern interpretation, and Levinas is the latter, is the former apocalyptic and the latter eschatological? While I missed this in "HyperGround," perhaps it was there in your assertion that the task confronting contemporary thinking is the formulation of new nonfoundationalist conceptions of ground and Godhead, where the challenge is the determination of the Absolute either as one that allows for the possibility of a genuine once-and-for-all beginning that would be synonymous with the fullness of knowledge, grace, and salvation, or as the absolutely other that conditions all knowledge and ethics on the very basis of its ineffable transcendence and radical alterity. The former apocalyptic and the latter eschatological? Is Levinas's interpretation of the metaphysical One as ethical social multiplicity, as a nontotalizing thought, which is offered here as the decisive insight of twentieth-century philosophy, an eschatological One which is absolutely other than "the concept of apocalypse which dominates classic metaphysics or ontotheology" (p. 141)? Is this that One calling forth a discourse with the Other as discourse of God, and does this alone make possible the true task ahead for thinking and action, which is the "continual production of divinity" (p. 147)?

Admittedly this is a cryptic conclusion, or perhaps no conclusion or ending at all, but is that necessitated by an eschatological ground, and an eschatological ground that can only be real as a totally nonapocalyptic ground? But is Levinas's thinking a continual production of divinity? Or is "production" only an eschatological witness and thinking, and one made possible only by a purely pagan apocalypse or totality, an apocalypse that in our time has become a purely nihilistic apocalypse, but perhaps precisely thereby is now calling for the deepest possible eschatological witness and thinking?

Yours with deep gratitude,
Tom

P.S. Will you visit me this summer? I hope so!

Letter 2

To Brian Schroeder (December 5, 1996)

Dear Brian,

I was extremely impressed with your last letter responding to my response to *Altared Ground*. Yes, you do have a genuine theological mind, which is extremely rare today, and perhaps one crucial ground of your academic difficulties. Let me begin this response by speaking of a crucial historical difference that lies between us, and that is whether or not the Greek philosophical mind, and more specifically Plato, truly apprehended what we have subsequently known as the transcendence of God. I join the common position in seeing this as perhaps the greatest difference between Plato and Neoplatonism and in maintaining that transcendence is alien to classical Greek thinking, and even perhaps above all absent from the later Plato. Now as far as I know, and admittedly I am out of touch, there is no scholarly exegesis which finds such transcendence in Plato, with the exception of Eric Voegelin,¹ whom I thought stood alone here, just as he did in his great project of establishing a full coincidence between Athens and Jerusalem. While Platonic thinking is certainly grounded in transcendence, this is a transcendence in some fundamental continuity with the realm of becoming, and not a transcendence that is pure or absolute transcendence alone. I also join the common position in believing that an absolute transcendence first dawns in Israel, but not until the prophetic revolution of the eighth century BCE, so that it is indeed absent from the earlier traditions of Israel that you mention. Thus I believe that an absolute or pure transcendence in its origin is uniquely biblical, having no true or full parallels elsewhere in the world, and this is the transcendence which is the deepest ground of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and inevitably the incorporation of Greek philosophical thinking into these traditions evoked ultimate controversies, but it is in the Catholic and the Orthodox Christian traditions alone that Greek thinking was absorbed into orthodoxy, and as a Lutheran you know full well what an ultimate offense such orthodoxy is to a biblical Christian.

I feel embarrassed in saying these things, of only because they are so conventional, but I simply do not know where they have been truly challenged, except, of course, by catholic thinkers. Does Levinas challenge this position? Where? And does Levinas believe that eschaton is a fundamentally Greek concept? Where does he show that it is Greek thinking that apprehends the primordial radicality of transcendence? And what is the relationship between a primordial transcendence and the eschaton? Eastern Christian thinking can know the apocalypse as a return to a primordial eternity or transcendence; is Levinas within such a paradigm of eternal return, and is this true of you too? I cannot believe it, and cannot do so if only because you are deeply Nietzschean, and thus committed to an eternal recurrence that is the very opposite of eternal return. And how is the eschatological dimension one of height? Does eschatological for you simply mean transcendent? Is it fundamentally a spatial rather than a temporal category? This is surely an odd employment of the word *eschatological*, and it will inevitably create confusion. But if *eschatological* for you and for Levinas is most deeply the assumption of the infinite responsibility imposed by the “other” on the “same”—one calling humanity out of the jurisdiction of history or the “totality”—surely such responsibility is nowhere found in Plato, or even within that Christian thinking that has fully absorbed Greek philosophical thinking. Even Leo Strauss² finds a polarity between Athens and Jerusalem here, and I find it extraordinarily difficult to believe that Levinas could think that there is a Greek philosophical ground for what he calls forth as the Infinite. If so, why is an Infinite so fully absent from ontotheology? Or so fully absent from that Heideggerian thinking which intends a radical deconstruction of ontotheology? Here, I think, lies the deepest difference between Heidegger and Derrida, a difference that Derrida philosophically learned from Levinas.

As I have said many times, a deep difference I sense between my generation and yours is what I apprehend as an absence of a historical consciousness in younger thinkers, and even in many who are only a bit younger than I am, such as Bob Scharlemann.³ True, such an absence can make possible a new thinking, one that you promise in understanding the “face” as the locus of the trace of the infinitely other, and if the face is the *altared ground* of God, then does this truly make possible the meaningfulness of the nontheoretical eschatology of the will to power? If so, I think that you will be forced to belie or transcend any language about subject or subjectivity, or else you will wholly lose a Nietzschean ground. Now if the paradox of eschatology is the nonsimultaneous incommensurability that appears in the face, a face that at bottom is the will to power in a Nietzschean sense, this is surely one way in which to apprehend the face apart from the subject, or to know the face as the very “other” of the subject, an other that is truly a trace of the infinitely other. Yet I sense a Pauline ground here, one knowing and even first calling forth a pure dichotomy deeply within the subject or the “I,” a dichotomy between *sarx* and *pneuma*,⁴ or between sin and grace, or even between old aeon and new aeon. This is apocalyptic—and yes it is Hegelian, too, so I presume that you would resist it—but is it possible either to know or to apprehend a nondichotomous or nondialectical infinite responsibility?

I sense that you are most deeply called to ethical thinking, one surely present in Levinas, and perhaps in Levinas alone among truly contemporary thinkers. This I presume is why Levinas is making such a deep impact today, but you are surely rare in understanding how this demands a radical transformation of our ethical thinking, one unveiling the profoundly nonethical ground of all our given ethical thinking, and one simultaneously unveiling the profound necessity for a genuinely theological ground for ethical thinking itself. But surely a theological ground demands a calling forth of God, one which Levinas himself surely does, yet is this possible for you? And possible for you as a genuine Nietzschean, or a genuine witness to a uniquely Nietzschean will to power? Is it possible for you to understand the Will to Power as the absolute immanence of God, an absolute immanence wholly reversing everything that we have *known* as transcendence? Could the true eschatological be an absolute transcendence of transcendence, one which is simultaneously an absolute transcendence of immanence, too, so that if totality is either a pure transcendence or a pure immanence, the truly eschatological is a transcendence of every possible totality, hence it is the death of God and the death of the subject at once, but only that simultaneous death makes possible an infinite responsibility.

This I believe is the deepest ethical question, the very meaning of responsibility, or the very possibility of responsibility, and above all for us the very relation of responsibility to totality. If you must refuse every possible Hegelian *Aufhebung*⁵, or every negation which truly preserves what it negates, is responsibility as such, or an infinite responsibility, a negation of totality wholly shattering every possible totality, or inevitably dissolving totality in a moment of infinite responsibility? This I think is deeply Nietzschean, but it is a responsibility or a Yes-saying that is impossible apart from the death of God, or the death of transcendence itself, or at the very least the death of every transcendence that our history has known.

Such a responsibility could be understood as nihilism, which you seem to do when you accept Nietzsche's affirmation of the necessary inevitability of nihilism to be the first truly modern affirmation of the eschaton. Here you are apparently deeply distant from Levinas, but thereby contemporary in a way that Levinas cannot be, and perhaps this is a genuine way to a truly contemporary ethical thinking, calling forth ethical thinking as nihilistic thinking, and nihilistic if only because it demands a negation of totality, and above all a negation of the totality of a uniquely contemporary postmodernity. If there truly is a postmodern thinker, that could only be Nietzsche, unless it is most recently D. G. Leahy, and this is a thinking most manifestly or most clearly negating all possible ethical thinking, or every thinking in which there is a subject of the ethical act, or in which there is any subject or subjectivity whatsoever. Here, the ancient Greeks can exercise a spell upon us as they did upon Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, for they were innocent of what we have known as the subject, a subject which is even absent from the highest moments of Greek sculpture, and even from Greek tragedy with the possible exception of Euripides, just as Greek philosophy is innocent of the pure subject of thinking, a pure subject which was

only discovered by Descartes. Perhaps such a pure subject is what most deeply makes eschatology as you understand it impossible, so that Nietzsche is our first modern eschatological thinker, even if this is a thinking ending modernity itself, and ending it by dissolving the subject of thinking. But can we also understand Nietzsche as our only purely eschatological thinker? Is that, indeed, how you understand him?

Tom

Letter 3

To D. G. Leahy*
(January 17, 1997)

Dear David,

In response to your letter of January 10, I find that my earlier concerns are only deepened. Even if your letter is genuinely enlightening, nevertheless I am still not able to understand what you might possibly mean by otherness, and the genuineness of otherness, simply by the affirmation that it is not compatible with either “ownness” or “intrinsicness.” If the Very First absolutely displaces intrinsicality, so that intrinsicality is absolutely ended, how could otherness of any kind then be possible? This only deepens the problem of evil, or dissolves it altogether. Yet I gather from your few comments on evil that you confine it to a history that is already ended, for even if you say that evil is quite real world-historically, and that a modern self–other dichotomy is itself an embodiment of evil, then if such modernity and such history have come to an end, is not evil itself now wholly unreal? Now it is true that this is a deep problem for all apocalypticism, or for all full apocalypticism, and I do not see how you can escape it, and particularly so if you refuse to become open to the problem or the mystery of evil in the Godhead. Once again the problem of what you mean by an absolute nothingness comes forward, and if you will not abandon the horizon of scholasticism, you must do far more with scholasticism’s identification of evil and nothingness.

Indeed, in this letter you do something which is new to me, and extraordinarily precarious, in identifying the absolutely new language with the language of I AM and the language of Jesus. I believe that this is one of your most vulnerable points, and particularly so insofar as you refuse modern critical and historical language as a language that has come to an end. True, this occurs in a purely Christian mystical language, but that, too, is a language that you refuse, even as you also refuse anything that is manifest as an imaginative language. Now if essential continuity with all previous forms of thought or species of language is precisely what is denied

here, how can you claim a continuity with the language of the Bible, unless this is understood in something like a purely mystical sense? Once again the deep problem of the relation between apocalyptic and mystical language, or primordial and apocalyptic language, arises, and if you are claiming that an absolutely new language coincides with biblical language, or the deepest or purest biblical language, is this a language that is wholly silent and unheard apart from the full and final advent of the Very First? If so, what then happens to Catholic tradition?

This problem is only deepened by what you say about the language of Jesus. Yes, I think we can say that this is an absolutely common and an absolutely new language, one that I can thereby only understand as a *coincidentia oppositorum*,¹ but in refusing any such possibility, how can you be open to such language, or does your understanding of the language of Jesus have no continuity whatsoever with *anything* that previously was understood as the language of Jesus? For example, must you wholly distance your understanding from all biblical scholarship? Is everything that we have known as biblical scholarship and biblical exegesis now absolutely ended? Is all such understanding the expression of a subject or a self that has now ended?

Here another deep problem presents itself, one that as far as I know you have not dealt with, but one that I believe is absolutely essential to your thinking. For if subject or selfhood has now ended, is it possible to understand that ending without understanding the origin or beginning of selfhood and subject? Let Nietzsche once again stand as a model, for he fully conjoins an understanding of the ending of subject or *ressentiment*² with an understanding of its beginning, and it is precisely his understanding of the origin of repression or the “bad conscience” that makes possible his understanding of its ending. In a far more complex and comprehensive form, this is true of Hegel, too, and if Hegel understands the Incarnation as the absolute and final inauguration of the full actuality of self-consciousness, a self-consciousness that is finally and only absolute Spirit, this is a self-consciousness that precisely thereby is a kenotic consciousness, one undergoing an ultimate death or self-negation, a kenotic self-negation that alone makes possible both its origin and its fulfillment or consummation. Yet despite your ultimate centering upon absolute beginning, an absolute beginning that is an absolute ending, your thinking appears to be wholly closed to an understanding of the origin or beginning of that which is now ending or has ended. Once again I am reminded of a primordial language, and most purely a Buddhist language, one in which no actual or real beginning is possible, or one in which omega is quite simply and only alpha, and if this is the language of Eastern Christianity, or of a purely mystical Christianity, is it not thereby a language that is coincident with your own?

I believe this problem is even related to your insistence that Aquinas did understand the death of God as having occurred in the Passion. For you reveal perhaps something essential about your thinking in speaking of Thomas’s understanding of the Person of the Incarnate Word, for in ST [*Summa Theologica*] III, his language is most deeply and manifestly drawn from the language of the “Damascene,” and if John of Damascus³ finally became the most influential of all Eastern theologians, he was so as a deeply Neoplatonic thinker, and it is his

Neoplatonic language that Thomas most fully employs in speaking of the Person of Christ. Observe this language:

As Damascene says, the Divine Nature is said to be incarnate because it is united to flesh personally, and not that it is changed into flesh. So likewise the flesh is said to be deified, as he also says, not by change, but by union with the Word, its natural properties still remaining, and hence it may be considered as deified, inasmuch as it becomes the flesh of the Word of God, and not that it becomes God.

(ST 3.2.1)

So it is that Thomas understands the crucifixion not as the death of God, but only as the death of Christ's carnal body, for Christ is wholly divided in his human and divine natures, for while Christ is God made man, and even God "truly humanized" (ST 3.2.6), the union of the divine and human natures is a union occurring only in the "person" or the individual substance of the incarnate Christ, and not one that is truly present in his passion and death. So that if the "thinking now occurring for the first time"⁴ also for the first time truly and finally thinks the death of God, this is not only not in continuity with scholasticism, but has no precedent whatsoever in scholasticism. But that raises the question of whether or not the full and pure understanding of the death of God that occurs here is an absolutely unique understanding, with no origin or history whatsoever, and if that is true, is the thinking now occurring for the first time an absolutely isolated or absolutely solitary thinking—or is it such if it is not, in fact and in actuality, the thinking of that absolute apocalypse that has already fully and finally dawned? But if so, and if the historical events of 1989⁵ are a decisive sign of that advent, is it here and only here that an understanding of that apocalypse is at hand?

Tom

Letter 4

To Lissa McCullough* (June 13, 1997)

Dear Lissa,

Once again I am employing a communication with you in an attempt to renew my writing. Let us presume that I can enter new seas by centering upon "Yes-saying," upon life rather than death, upon light rather than upon darkness. Hopefully by this time I have absorbed the Lutheran lesson that there can be no Christ of glory apart from the Christ of passion, and that it is precisely the Christ of glory and the Christ of glory alone who most reverses the gospel. It is true that we live in a time when joy or true joy is most invisible and unheard, so perhaps it is now a supreme theological task to call forth or give witness to an embodied joy, and perhaps the time has arrived to speak of the Resurrected Christ. So it is that I am now musing upon doing a book on the Resurrection, although it will have to be a book on death and resurrection, with the hope that now and for the first time I can center upon resurrection rather than upon death.

Yet I cannot escape the conviction that Gnosticism remains our supreme challenge, and insofar as it is here that we may discover our purest dissolution of death, the Gnostic threat remains inescapable. So I am tempted to begin with a chapter on the advent of death, and the ultimate advent of death, which could only be the advent or genesis of God, but I will veil that theme here, and concentrate instead upon the advent of an ultimate darkness that is the necessary arena to make possible a transfiguration that is an absolute Yes-saying or resurrection. Yes, the dialectical identity of crucifixion and resurrection remains fundamental in my thinking, but as you know all too well, thus far I have written forcefully only upon crucifixion, only upon death and darkness and not upon life and joy. If Augustine and Barth are our greatest pure theologians, nowhere is this more manifest than in their integral and even dialectical conjunction of sin and grace or damnation and salvation, and at no other point are we more deeply in need of truly new theological thinking today. Is it possible to achieve this in a new thinking about resurrection?

Now even if it is true that no classical theological motif is more muted in modern theology than is resurrection, all too significantly it is wholly absent in Schleiermacher's dogmatics, it is nevertheless true that it is a primal motif in the deeper expressions of the modern imagination, perhaps being wholly absent only in Melville¹ and Kafka,² just as it likewise is an ultimate and even absolute motif in the deepest expressions of modern thinking, with the inevitable exception of Kant, unless Kant's understanding of the sublime in the third critique is a modern reflection of resurrection. Perhaps it is Kant above all thinkers who impels us to face the necessity of a profound transformation of our theological language, one that no modern "theologian" has dared accept, and if the purest expressions of modern poetry, painting, and music have called forth an ultimate and final joy, even if a joy inseparable from its true opposite, such joy must be known theologically as resurrection, but precisely thereby as a resurrection from death. But the ultimacy of resurrection is inseparable from the ultimacy of death, and if it is precisely the latter that is the most pragmatic test of the theologian, perhaps the ultimate theological test is the challenge of speaking or evoking the ultimacy of life, or is so in our contemporary situation and world.

Let me at this point pass on to more mundane issues. Despite the fact that we have long since known the deep importance of distinguishing resurrection from immortality, I am aware of no clear or decisive theological distinction between them, except insofar as it is a truly historical distinction. Now that we are aware of the deep importance of language, and hopefully equally aware that the very words "resurrection" and "immortality" are truly alien to a genuinely or fully modern language, we must become open to the challenge of this void, and recognize it as a positive and not simply negative challenge, one truly realized in our fullest language, even if that language is now theologically unrecognizable. Most simply stated, the challenge is of speaking of a death that is inseparable from life, and just as we have learned that "life" is only truly speakable through a language of "death," we must become open to a "resurrection" that is inseparable from "crucifixion," and one way to do this is through a "resurrection" that is wholly other than "immortality." Yes, theologically we have long known this, but we have not been able to speak it, or not in an overt or manifest theological language, or a theological language that has any real point of contact with our common language. Theologically stated, is it possible to speak or evoke a "death" that is fully and actually "life," but is so only insofar as it wholly dissolves everything whatsoever that we can know or imagine as "immortality"? At this point something happened on our trip to the South that had an impact upon me, that was my purchase of Herbert Grierson's anthology, *And the Third Day: A Record of Hope and Fulfillment* (1948),³ for despite the fact that this anthology contains a great many writers whom I revere, this very focusing upon immortality effects a pure nausea in me, as I am once again repulsed by a transformation of the Christ of Passion into the Christ of Glory.

Now if we follow Luther, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche at this point, we can know such immortality as a deep and profound offense, and not only an offense but a true reversal of life and joy, and precisely thereby a reversal of the gospel itself, a gospel here truly becoming "dysangel,"⁴ although this is perhaps only actually

so in the modern world. Let us attend to what is most manifestly “dysangel” here, is it not a language speaking life and life alone, an “eternal life” wholly silencing “eternal death,” but thereby and precisely thereby a language of death itself, a language of a death wholly silencing “life”? Thus if we can know such a language of life to be at bottom a language of death, is it possible to reverse such language in speaking of resurrection, as Blake⁵ and Nietzsche in their purest language surely did, and not simply to reverse it in our theological intention, but in the actuality of our language itself? Here, I am impelled to return to that New Testament language that I most revere, the Gospel of Mark and the genuine letters of Paul, attempting to become attentive to how these languages deconstruct or demythologize themselves, for then a gospel emerges that is the very opposite of anything that we can know as the kerygma of the church, as “resurrection” is the very opposite of “immortality,” and is so insofar as it wholly shatters our deepest longing, or our deepest innocence.

So to return to my initial problem, how do I begin? But how does the Gospel of Mark begin? For it begins with the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, thereby not only is it distanced from the gospels of Mathew and Luke, who can only know beginning as an eternal genesis or genealogy, even if it is here at one with the Fourth Gospel, and I have long been intrigued by the seeming if as yet uncomprehended parallels between the gospels of Mark and John. Certainly remarkable parallels occur in their enactments or renewals of the resurrection, for even if Mark minimizes the resurrection in his narrative, John, unlike Mathew and Luke, but paralleling Paul, wholly integrates the resurrection with the crucifixion, so that in neither John nor Mark, as opposed to Mathew and Luke, is the resurrection in deep continuity with the Hellenistic mystery deities and with all Gnostic visions of resurrection. Perhaps this is the very point at which the Fourth Gospel is most “realistic” in Auerbach’s sense,⁶ and even if this was a consequence of that profound conflict over Gnosticism that so deeply divided the Johannine community, the first epistle to the Corinthians is decisive testimony as to how a revulsion against Gnosticism led Paul to center upon the crucifixion, and if this epistle concludes with a vision of resurrection and of resurrection alone, that is a vision that is virtually inseparable from Gnosticism, and one also anticipating that profound and overwhelming belief in immortality that so dominated both the ancient church and Christendom itself.

So can I begin with a death that is a reflection of the gospel, and even a reflection of an authentic language of resurrection, a language of death that is finally inseparable from a language of life and joy? If I choose to begin with a language of the advent of death, can such an advent reflect the beginning of the gospel, a beginning that is an actual beginning, and not only an actual beginning but an ultimately actual beginning, a beginning that is absolute genesis? I see this as the challenge here, for if the gospel is a gospel of absolute genesis, is that a genesis that can be isolated from a language of death, and above all so if the advent of death is an ultimately actual beginning. The truth is that just as resurrection is inseparable from death, redemption is inseparable from fall, and an ultimate redemption inseparable from an ultimate fall. No one knew this more deeply than did Blake and Nietzsche, and I think that this is also true of Paul and the Fourth Gospel,