

VICTOR E. TAYLOR

York College of Pennsylvania

ALTIZER'S DERRIDA: APOCALYPTIC SPECTRALITIES

If every specter, as we have amply seen, is distinguished from spirit by an incorporation, by the phenomenal form of a quasi-incarnation, then Christ is the most spectral of specters. He tells us something about absolute spectrality. Stirner himself would be ready to grant him the singularity of this transcendental privilege. Without this incarnation, would the concept of incarnation have any sense at all, any historical chance? Jesus is at once the greatest and the most "incomprehensible of ghosts" (*unbegreiflichste Gespenst*).<sup>1</sup>

God appears hand in hand with the reappearance or resurrection of a pure trace which is the opposite of God. Indeed, the very namelessness of that trace is a decisive sign of its integral relation with the namelessness of God, for both are absolutely and totally unnamable, an unnameability which places them in at an absolute distance from everything which we have known as language, consciousness, and history.<sup>2</sup>

Here I take some interpretive liberties with the definition and use of the concept of spectrality as it relates to the works of Jacques Derrida and Thomas J. J. Altizer – especially with regard to the latter, who does not use the specific term in his theological writings. First, a specter is a figure of excess that can be identified only partially or incompletely – as exemplified by the Derridean "visor effect"; and second, a specter is a relentless and disruptive appearance in the space of language, history, philosophy, and, in this particular context, theology.<sup>3</sup> For Derrida, the specter has a trace or remainder function – it paradoxically occupies a space that is unoccupiable; it defers and differs. The specter haunts the depths and origins of a tradition, an ideology, and/or any state of affairs – this largely defines Derrida's neologism, *hauntology*: "to haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 202.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, "History as Apocalypse," in *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Carl A. Raschke (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> My book *Christianity, Plasticity, and Spectral Heritages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) provides an extended analysis of spectrality in the context of Derrida and Christianity.

is a conjuration."<sup>4</sup> While specters and spectrality are not part of Altizer's critical vocabulary, the underlying concept clearly is. What is a God that is "absolutely and totally unnamable" and dead if not a specter? Something that is "named" by being unnamable or an "incomprehensible ghost"?

Altizer and Derrida do not arrive at spectrality or the concept of spectrality via the same intellectual path or even similar paths . . . except for a shared expedition through Hegel, whose power of negation provides them with the problems of the "end of history" and absolute "negation." In the case of Altizer this spectral path leads to what Lissa McCullough refers to in her introduction to *The Call to Radical Theology* as "apocalyptic disruption" – the neither fully transcendent nor fully immanent God.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, it is God as différance. Is it, then, a Nietzschean or modernist nihilism that brings Altizer and Derrida together? Yes and no. That there is no transcendental control over the world leaves us either in despair or in hope. Nothing "outside the text," in the context of Altizer's Derrida, is the empty space of God; however, like Derrida, the empty space for Altizer creates a subsequent new space for possibility – for meaning and understanding. This space of possibility becomes the promise of a new world in which we could live, a world from a world disrupted by the advent of an apocalyptic arrival. For Altizer, as stated in "Adieu: The Call to Radical Theology," this future possibility is our theological condition:

While I do hope that I have at least written fragments of theology, perhaps they are fragments in a Kierkegaardian sense, which means that they have an enormous potential, even if one wholly beyond the power I have been given. But there is another and deeper sense in which our theological condition is truly unique, for despite the necessity for theology of a communal ground, such a communal ground now appears to be impossible for any genuinely theological thinking, and impossible if only because of the advent of a truly new world, a new atheological world, a world wholly divorced from everything that we have known as a theological ground, a literally godless world, and this despite that new "God-language" which appears to be everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

Just as a specter haunts the past, present, and future by disrupting a taken-for-granted state of affairs (think of Prince Hamlet), the apocalyptic event as the death of God, "divorces" a world from all that we have known as a ground. Has not Prince Hamlet, for example, through his ghostly father's

---

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 202.

<sup>5</sup> McCullough writes: "Altizer emphasizes that apocalypse not only puts an end to the old, it catalyzes the utterly new, creating an opportunity (*portus* = access, port) for transfiguration, for all things breaking away from the known, the given, and becoming transformed: a newness of the world that signals as well the newness of an unnamed anonymous God and the newness of ourselves. Thus Altizer understands the world-transfiguration of our time as the apocalypse of world, humanity, and God in one overwhelming coup of absolute transformation. God is no longer in 'heaven' or anywhere transcendent or apart but is – if anywhere – here, caught up in this transfigured 'chaosmos' of a neither-immanent-nor-transcendent reality" (Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. and with an introduction by Lissa McCullough [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012], ix).

<sup>6</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 134.

appearance, been separated from his known world and, subsequently, from his once presumed future? This comparison fits well with Altizer's recognition of a "new atheological world," which is separated from itself not simply by the death of God or, for Hamlet, death of a father, but by the "advent" of an irrevocable "adieu" in the present and future that no longer takes its cue from the previously known world. This "adieu" also is a self-alienation of God in/as kenosis, which Slavoj Žižek sees as the foundation for an atheistic *Christomimesis*.<sup>7</sup>

Apocalypticism and spectrality, then, or Altizer and Derrida, share in two distinct theo-philosophical procedures — one a farewell and the other a welcome. First, they vacate/say good-bye to an originary and determining space; and, second, in the absence of the previous, they open/welcome a new world of possibility. Altizer refers to this as the work of "atheology" in the context of a godless or "radical Neoplatonism," which he attributes to the thought of Levinas and Derrida specifically.<sup>8</sup> He writes that, "this truly is a radical theological thinking, but one wholly remote from the actualities of our world."<sup>9</sup> It is important to clarify here that as radical as Levinas and Derrida may be for Altizer he will insist that this thinking be a thinking "about God" . . . in whatever form.<sup>10</sup> This is important to note since, for Altizer, "about God" remains the essential link to theological thinking, which is why he often references writers such as Blake, Melville, Kafka, and Joyce. The death of God takes place within a (Christian) theological and historical space and is "real." The reality of God's death makes the transfiguration of the material world possible — literally, for Altizer.

For Altizer's Derrida or Derrida's Altizer the apocalypse is also spectral; it is haunted not only by the past but also by the future, the future of possibility without an imposing, present totality or Godhead. Nevertheless, for Altizer,

---

<sup>7</sup> This theme is discussed at length in my *Christianity, Plasticity, and Spectral Heritages* (2017) and succinctly summarized recently in Slavoj Žižek *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019): "This is why the unity of man and god is enacted in Christianity in a way which fundamentally differs from the way of pagan religions where man has to strive to overcome his fall from god through the effort to purify his being from material filth and elevate himself to rejoin god. In Christianity, on the contrary, god falls from himself, he becomes a finite mortal human abandoned by god (in the figure of Christ and his lament on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"), and man can only achieve unity with god by identifying with this god, god abandoned by himself. Therein resides the basic experience of Christianity: a Christian believer does not rejoin god directly, but only through the mediation of Christ — when Christ experiences himself as abandoned by god-father, a believer identifies his own alienation from god with the alienation of god (Christ) from himself, so that the very gap that separates him from god is what unites him with god" (21).

<sup>8</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–35.

<sup>10</sup> Altizer writes: "Yet they cannot be reversed by a thinking taking us wholly outside of history and consciousness, as does every genuine Neoplatonism today; nor can they be reversed by a thinking refusing to think about God, or refusing to think about God in a contemporary language. No, we are impelled to think about God, and to think about God by way of our own horizon and world, and even if this will inevitably call forth a horror religiosus, that horror is now inescapable for us" (*The Call to Radical Theology*, 135–36).

God or “about God” must remain linked to theological thinking and vice versa. This for Altizer, again, is the point through which our humanity passes—our Tillichian ultimate concern. Something similar could be said of Derrida insofar as the hauntological/spectral is that which we must think through—the absence or trace or exorcism of an ontology or metaphysics of presence. It is possible to think God directly into this point of “commerce” (the *khora*), but, from my perspective that simply installs a new or revived negative theology. It is rather the inability to think God back into this foundational space that creates the Altizer-Derrida link, with a thinking *about* God and not a thinking *back* to God or a recovery of God as a slightly more distant Archimedean point for theological leverage.

Thinking the death of Death as a “true” theological thinking means thinking spectrally or apocalyptically. Thinking the death of God is—as Altizer alludes<sup>11</sup>—Ishmael’s encounter with the whale; it is a new world captured in the story told after the event (drama):

The drama’s done. Why then here does any one step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck. . . . So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main.<sup>12</sup>

For Melville, as particularly emphasized by Altizer, life ironically floats on death or, in the case of Ishmael, a coffin. What rises up from the death of the whale and the death of God is an ineluctable spectrality (object or event). The catastrophe leaves behind a “creamy pool” or a viscous plane bringing depth to a surface and a surface to a depth. To think this is to think the possibility of a “self-alienated God” and a self-annihilated God. Altizer, again in “Adieu: The Call to Radical Theology” refers to his work as a voyage, a theological voyage in which he confronts the *horror religiosus*.<sup>13</sup>

Here not only does everything flow into everything else, but everything is everything else, and is everything else through that death of God which is the transfiguration of God, and therein the

---

<sup>11</sup> Altizer observes: “In the Enlightenment, God as God becomes manifest and real in consciousness as an empty and vacuous Supreme Being, that very God fully released by the French Revolution, whom Blake named as Satan. This is the God whom Melville epically named and enacted as Moby Dick, and it is the advent of the wholly self-alienated God which is an essential ground of the triumph of full modernity, an advent unveiling a pure dichotomy at the very center of Godhead itself, as so fully realized both by Hegel and by Blake” (*The Call to Radical Theology*, 121).

<sup>12</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York: Norton, 1967), 470.

<sup>13</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 135.

transfiguration of everything whatsoever. This is the New Jerusalem we have been promised, but it can occur only when we have made our adieu to God, or rather only when we accept that adieu to God which Godhead itself has given us in this apocalypse.<sup>14</sup>

Like Ishmael's account of survival after the Pequod's decimation on the high seas, Altizer's voyage comes after the event or drama of God's death; it is a voyage in which the world subsequently is re-sorted after an apocalypse initiated by a self-alienating and self-annihilating God. Furthermore, it is a theological and an existential voyage that has been given as a gift from a Godhead that has allowed, through its death, to let "everything to flow into everything else" – the "creamy pool" of a "New Jerusalem" perhaps. In this sense, it is a haunting gift . . . a spectral gift in which a transfiguration of "everything whatsoever" occurs. This, I will argue, is an Altizerian "spectrality," a conceptual and material (ultimately theological) space in which an apocalyptically driven *new world* is affirmed and, following Derrida, deferred.

Before American theologians like Charles E. Winquist, Carl A. Raschke, Edith Wyschogrod, and Mark C. Taylor invested their critical efforts in "deconstructionist theology," and later "postmodern theology" more widely understood, there was an initial and significant engagement with the work of Jacques Derrida. Described on the dustjacket as "the manifesto of a new, radical generation of theologians," *Deconstruction and Theology*, published by Crossroad in 1982, appeared as one of the first substantive encounters between continental philosophy of religion and Derridean deconstruction – three years after Carl A. Raschke's first articulation of the "contact" in 1979 with a book entitled *Alchemy of the Word*.<sup>15</sup> The *Deconstruction and Theology* volume marked a turning point in the field insofar as the leading continental or nonanalytic-aligned scholars took up the theological implications of what would be poststructuralist thought. Altizer's contribution to the volume, entitled "History as Apocalypse," addressed Derrida's analysis of logocentrism and *différance* directly.

In his opening sentence Altizer states that "theologically, it would not be amiss to identify the deconstruction movement as a contemporary expression of demythologizing, and particularly so if we were to follow Derrida and conceive 'the logos' to be de-constructed or de-centered as God's infinite understanding."<sup>16</sup> From this point, Altizer proceeds to summarize Derrida's "project," which he observes "presumes that 'absence' is older than 'presence' or history, even if this presumption cannot occur until the end of history, for Derrida believes quite simply and literally that the absolute knowledge realized in modernity is the 'closure if not the end of history.'<sup>17</sup> This, for Altizer, places Derrida within the scope of apocalyptic thinking, with an emphasis on demythologizing and de-centering the Godhead. The absence

---

<sup>14</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 141–42.

<sup>15</sup> Carl A. Raschke's *Alchemy of the Word* was published in 1979 by Scholars Press and was revised and republished in 2000 as *The End of Theology* by Davies Group Publishers. This work is the first extended analysis of the engagement between deconstruction and continental philosophy of religion in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> Altizer, "History as Apocalypse," 147.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

referenced by Altizer also speaks to Derrida's concept of hauntology *avant la lettre* and relates the empty space produced by this deconstruction as the consequence of God's self-alienation. Throughout the essay Altizer's grafts his death of God theology onto Derrida's work, leaving very little space of separation between his theological insights and what he calls "Derrida's project." The point of this essay is to suggest that Altizer's assumption is not unwarranted, *mutatis mutandis*, especially given the later Derrida's work on hauntology and spectrality.

Apocalyptic spectrality, therefore, is more than just a coincidental thematic resonance one finds between a death of God theologian and a deconstructionist/poststructuralist philosopher/theorist. Altizer's final mentions of Derrida occur on the last page of the essay and four pages previously. Directly prior to these final two references Altizer reiterates in detail his framework for a death of God theology, which he situates in the context of a Jewish to Christian nihilism: "a pure nihilism [that] is released in history, and not simply released in history, but consummated in history, a consummation which brings history to an end."<sup>18</sup> The remaining question, therefore, is, how does Derrida figure into the closing paragraphs of "History as Apocalypse"?

Ready with his reading of *différance* as the concept/process by which any notion of centrality, foundation, or full presence is radically eliminated from history, Altizer focuses on Derrida as a figure who knows that the "nostalgia" for such a plane of reference is "hopeless" and "unrealizable."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Altizer adds, the basis for such a nostalgia is not a plenum but an "absolute emptiness" that is at the core of western history. In this example, *différance* allows for a more radical self-alienation of a unified subject and this becomes consistent with the "advent of the postmodern world [that] embodies a final and eschatological end of history."<sup>20</sup> I will argue that this "final and eschatological end of history" is spectrally apocalyptic in that the nostalgia for plenitude is both marked by an absolute emptiness as well as the ghost of a lost presence. This maintains the differing and deferring element of *différance*—God or the nostalgia of and for God differs in/from itself and simultaneous defers itself. Theology, here differing and deferring, continues to be "about" God, as Altizer proclaims.

The case for apocalyptic spectralities rest on a "cloning" of texts and a critical reading back from a later Derrida to the emergence of deconstruction in theological studies in the early 1980s. The *différance* in the death of God and the death of God in *différance* are ineluctably spectral and apocalyptic insofar as both attempt to account for the radically new and that which has been irretrievably lost and nevertheless (paradoxically) carried forward in its spectral formation—differed and deferred. This also prefigures the Derridean archive as that which is always being added to and yet simultaneously incomplete. Altizer's God perhaps is enduringly "archival" and still witnessed as the "creamy pool" suspending Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* or Kafka's endless castle or the wounds of D. H. Lawrence's man who died or, finally,

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 173.

the deconstructing voyage we are on each day that, as Tom would say, we  
"remain alive."

Derrida's new book is more than an intervention; it wishes to be a provocation, first and foremost of what he calls a new Holy Alliance whose attempt definitively to bury Marx is here answered by a call for a New International. Derrida reminds a younger generation of the . . . . Two final chapters then offer rich readings of passages in Marx specifically related to spectrality. Chapter 4 returns to the Communist Manifesto and the Eighteenth Brumaire, not least in order to suggest Marx's own ambivalence with respect to spectrality as such; while the last chapter examines Marx's critique of Stirner and transforms the conventional view of commodity fetishism, whose dancing tables now strongly suggest poltergeists as much as they do items for sale on a shelf.