
Original Voice, Original Sin: Friedrich Schelling, Self-Becoming, and the Implications for Aesthetic Theology

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The aim of this article is to introduce an alternative, aesthetic conception of theology as an ethos of thought whose truth and potency reside not in its correspondence to “the True” or “the Good” but in its capacity to draw attention and give voice to the self-creative capacity of life. Drawing especially on Friedrich Schelling’s dialectical history of God’s self-becoming, I will note the implications of theology speaking-itself versus simply being spoken or spoken about. As we will see, theology speaking-itself is both its original voice and its original sin—for indeed, theology (like Schelling’s God) is ultimately unable to live up to all that it demands for itself. Nevertheless, I will argue that theology’s lasting significance and vitality reside precisely in its being this failure and thus in its finitude and contingency. For it is thus that theology, masked though it is by transcendent ambitions, embodies the religious promise of a new creation, one that is always and only ever in the course of being created.

I

Religion, so goes the common wisdom, is *sui generis* and thus inherently distinguishable from modern secular culture. Edward Said, for example, asserts without so much as a supplemental argument that “beginning is basically an activity which ultimately implies return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment, *that beginning and beginning-again are historical whereas origins are divine.*”¹ Not content with Said’s simplistic privileging of the secular, Catherine Keller argues that

¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), xiii (emphasis added).

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theology, too, has classically abided by the same logic, albeit with a reversal of its binary fortune. According to traditional theology, she argues, the divinity of origin subordinates and ontologically precedes the historicity of “beginning,” thus securing “God’s unfettered sovereignty.”² For her part, Keller finds this notion of origin *ex nihilo*, the whim of a wholly autonomous omnipotent God, as problematic as Said’s secular reductionism:

This dogma of origin has exercised immense productive force. It has become common sense. Gradually it took modern and then secular form, generating every kind of western originality, every logos creating the new as if from nothing, cutting violently, ecstatically free of the abysses of the past. But Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation. Such a maneuver . . . was always doomed to a vicious cycle: the nothingness invariably returns with the face of the feared chaos—to be nihilated all the more violently.³

Of course, this tragic, absolute originality is not exclusive to theology proper. Indeed, the secular and the sacred can be seen to blur most clearly in the modern conceptions of the artistic genius and the avant-garde, wherein “the purer, the more abstract, the creativity, the more fully it replaces the divine originality, the freedom of a creator *a se*, unconstrained by creaturely interdependence.”⁴ On this issue Clement Greenberg is even more explicit: “It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at “abstract” or “non-objective” art—and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not a picture—is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similar or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself.”⁵

Arising from, and perfect unto, itself and its own purpose, absolute (or divine) originality has made an indelible claim on our understanding of beauty, art, and truth.⁶ It is, however, a claim that, before we can proceed further, we must vigorously challenge.

² Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 159.

³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 1, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.

⁶ See Immanuel Kant on the work of art as “self-propagative” and organic “purposiveness without purpose,” in his *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 218–31.

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In contrast to origins, be they divine, secular, or both at once, beginnings are an exercise in learning how to lose.⁷ Indeed, when we attempt to think *beginning* and *theology* together, the loss at first may seem irreparable. The decision to begin, to exist, Keller counsels, is one of profound, inevitable violence and guilt: “A cloud of missed possibilities envelops every beginning: it is always *this* beginning, *this* universe and *not* some other. Decision lacks innocence. Around its narrations gather histories of grievance: what possibilities were excluded?”⁸ In the face of the unthinkable absolute singularity that beckons us to begin, the decisions we make cut us off from all the other decisions and stories that might have been enacted or narrated with the best of intentions.⁹ And yet, what if the so-called “undecidable” violence of these theological beginnings is not merely a description of infinite ethical uncertainty but rather, at its most primordial, the intensity of an active albeit necessarily repressed condition for the creative possibility of beginning at all?

The thinking about creativity—how it emerges and is sustained in living discourse—inevitably (although perhaps unknowingly) begins with a question: What is the character of creativity? I wish to suggest in what follows that this question is a fundamentally theological one. When we dare to think about the character of creativity theologically, a transcendental analysis insofar as we are thinking about the absolute beginnings and endings that condition our understanding and, thus, when the questions we ask in and of our inquiry proliferate beyond their neo-Platonic and Kantian tethers, how do we begin at all?¹⁰ Indeed, as Schelling phrases the question, why is there something rather than nothing?¹¹

From his earliest days as a teenage philosopher, Schelling’s philosophical reflections were informed by his theological concerns. By the early 1840s, however, while teaching at the Berlin lectern that made

⁷ See Bradley A. Johnson, “Playing Poker with Pascal: Theology in the American Casino,” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 6, no. 1 (December 2004): 65–85.

⁸ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 160.

⁹ Compare Jacques Derrida’s description of the ethical dilemma at the core of religious and secular responsibility and decision making in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant defines the “Transcendental Analytic” in the First Critique as “the hitherto rarely attempted *dissection of the faculty of the understanding* itself, in order to investigate the possibility of concepts *a priori* by looking for them in the understanding alone, as their birthplace, and by analysing the pure use of this faculty. This is the proper task of a transcendental philosophy” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith [New York: Macmillan, 1929], 103 [A65–66; B90–91]).

¹¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *System der gesamten Philosophie und der Naturphilosophie insbesondere* (1804), in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling’s Sämtliche Werke*, 10 vols., ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61), part 1, band 6, 6:155.

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Hegel famous, his theological bend had become even more apparent. Here, as recorded in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, he described to his students the aim of what he called positive philosophy: “I do not begin with the concept of God in the positive philosophy, as former metaphysics and the ontological argument attempted to, but I must drop precisely this concept, the concept of God, in order to begin with that which just exists, in which nothing more is thought than just this existing—in order to see if I can get from it to the divinity.”¹² The aim of Schelling’s positive philosophy was truly ambitious: namely, to develop a philosophically viable religion by radically reengaging and refuting the ontological proof of the existence of God (in the spirit of Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*) and in the process reinterpret the historical and mythological development of Christianity.¹³ As Andrew Bowie notes, “It was not least Schelling’s failure to achieve this latter aim that led to many of the valid aspects of the later philosophy’s being ignored.”¹⁴ To what extent, we wonder, might it be possible to say that Schelling’s lasting theological insight—“that philosophy cannot arrive at a conceptually determinate *prius*”—actually emerges from the failure of his ambition?¹⁵

As early as 1804, in his *Philosophy and Religion*, Schelling had already introduced the problem that would beset him the rest of his career and still faces us today:

There is no constant transition from the Absolute to the real, the origin of the world of the senses can only be thought as a complete breaking off from absoluteness, by a leap. If philosophy is to deduce the origin of real things in a positive manner from the Absolute, then there would have to be a positive ground in the Absolute. . . . Philosophy only has a negative relationship to things that appear, it rather proves that they are not than that they are. . . . The Absolute is all that is real: finite things, on the other hand, are not real; their ground cannot lie in a *communication* of reality to them or to their substrate, which would have emanated from the Absolute, it can only lie in a *move away*, in a *fall* [*Abfall*] from the Absolute.¹⁶

What makes this explication of the Absolute so theologically profound

¹² F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in K. F. A. Schelling, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling’s Sämtliche Werke*, part 2, band 3, 13:158.

¹³ For one of the best assessments of Schelling’s late philosophy, see Andrew Bowie, “Introduction,” in F. W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 181.

¹⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie und Religion* (1804), in K. F. A. Schelling, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling’s Sämtliche Werke*, part 1, band 6, 6:38.

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is the materialistic spin Schelling ultimately puts on its most fundamental terms in his largely unfinished masterpiece, *Die Weltalter* (Ages of the world, 1811–15). The question he poses here is that at the core of the Absolute: Where to begin?

Schelling's "creation myth," as Judith Norman appropriately calls it, begins in the primal chaos of "potencies."¹⁷ In the first potency, which Schelling calls "A = B," the being of primordial Freedom (A) can only be realized as Absolute Indifference (B)—or, as Schelling calls it, potentiality In-Itself.¹⁸ The In-Itself of Freedom qua Absolute Indifference cannot tolerate any positive, developmental content and, moreover, is itself only in a "will-to-contraction" that wants nothing outside of itself. In the second potency, however, the will-to-contraction that wants nothing is necessarily betrayed by a "will-to-expansion" that actively wants this "nothing" (AW, 176–78).¹⁹ With "predicative being" established by this drive to differentiation (e.g., the Fichtean necessity of "not-A" for the assertion of "A"), the Absolute unity of the first potency in turn becomes a negative, resistant force. Unable to break the deadlock, the will-to-contraction and will-to-expansion are thus united in the third potency of rotary repetition—the primordial madness of necessary conflict that Slavoj Žižek graphically describes in his commentary on Schelling: "He repeatedly dashes himself against His own wall: unable to stay within, He follows His urge to break out, yet the more He strives to escape, the more He is caught in His own trap. Perhaps the best metaphor for this rotary motion is a trapped animal which desperately strives to disengage itself from a snare: although every spring only tightens the snare, a blind compulsion leads it to make a dash for it again and again, so that it is condemned to an endless repetition of the same gesture."²⁰

With regard to this impasse, the problem of beginning is not that of Idealism (or at least Idealism typically understood), whereby the Ab-

¹⁷ Judith Norman, "The Logic of Longing: Schelling's Philosophy of Will," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2002): 91–92. To avoid possible confusion, Norman explains, it is helpful to remember, "in a sense, the potencies really are identical, but appear under different powers (hence the term 'potency'); their differences consist not in their compositional structure so much as which aspect they manifest. (To state the case in terms of Schelling's formulae, the potencies are all A. The first potency . . . posits the one essence (A) in concealment; the second potency, (A²), posits the essence (A) in expansion, and so forth)" (92 n. 5).

¹⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 2nd version, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 131–33, 143. Unless noted otherwise, my citations of *Ages of the World* are from the second draft; hereafter cited in the text as AW.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 23. I am indebted to Žižek for coining the terms "will-to-contraction" and "will-to-expansion" in his description of Schelling's potencies.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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solute In-Itself sans determinate phenomena is somehow ascertained, be it mystically, philosophically, or eschatologically. Rather, for Schelling, it is the far more material “flesh and blood”²¹ question of how and why the Absolute split from itself in the first place.²²

Schelling’s resolution to the deadlock results in a conception of self-creation that is far more profound than the more commonplace liberal notions of freedom, self-becoming, and/or self-expression. He appeals to the necessity of an unknowable “primordial deed,” from which the subject contracts (in the double sense of “condenses” and “catches” [as though a disease]) its contingent consciousness and being (AW, 123–24).

That primordial deed which makes a man [*sic*] genuinely himself [*sic*] precedes all individual actions; but immediately after it is put into exuberant freedom, this deed sinks into the night of unconsciousness. . . . For man [*sic*] to know of this deed, consciousness itself would have to return into nothing, into boundless freedom, and would cease to be consciousness. . . . Likewise that will, posited once at the beginning and then led to the outside, must immediately sink into unconsciousness. Only in this way is a beginning possible, a beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning. For here as well, it is true that the beginning cannot know itself. That deed once done, it is done for all eternity. . . . If, in making a decision, somebody retains the right to reexamine his [*sic*] choice, he [*sic*] will never make a beginning at all. (AW, 181–82; cf. *PI*, 50–52)

The crucial matter here is that the deed is accomplished in the “beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning”—which is to say, that which is done as the very foundation of the present is eternally (i.e., always already) done; moreover, it belongs to a past that was itself *as such* never present. The free subject (namely, God) that emerges from the maddening deadlock of the rotary drive, via the primordial deed, effectively speaks itself into Existence. Indeed, for Schelling, it is only in “the Word,” or deed, that God and humanity *are* at all. Prior to the Word of God and thus prior to the “disclosure” of Creation and Existence as such, there is only “the will that wills nothing,” the nonsubjective Dionysian void and inert indifference of absolute freedom (AW, 132). The groundless deed, however, is the actualization of absolute potentiality and freedom. In this unconscious act that always already precedes and conditions self-creativity, the free subject is witness to and necessarily represses the *Ungrund* (the Non-

²¹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith* (1809), trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 26, 30; hereafter cited in the text as *PI*.

²² Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 14.

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ground, Void) of Absolute Indifference.²³ In short, then, prior to the Word, God, as the Absolute In-Itself, does not exist (*AW*, 149–50, 156).

Schelling is not ultimately interested in identifying a noumenal thing-as-such that lies beyond the rotary motion or primordial deed. Instead, he is consumed by the melancholic (and thus creative) implications of “the incomprehensible *base of reality in things*, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground” (*PI*, 29).²⁴ One does not divine the external limit of reality by way of reason, mystical silence, or eschatological solicitation. The basis of reality is incomprehensible not because it is epistemologically inaccessible. As discussed above, it is incomprehensible because it is the pure void of Absolute Indifference, the actualization of which is necessarily repressed. When the Ground is both the very condition of and the inherent, constitutive excess of reality, the very bases and media of subjective self-presentation and self-assertion of wholeness and/or sovereignty are always already perverted from within. Thus, we find the explosive theological implications of Schelling’s thinking. For here the *sine qua non* eternal of God, the Absolute from which humanity emerges, only *is* inasmuch as it “contracts” its (finite) existence in the act of creative freedom, the decisive moment of “eternity in time” that thus opens time and represses the egoistic madness of its Ground.

For Schelling, the answer to this question lies in the crucial difference between desire and love. At the heart of the insane cyclical movement that precedes the beginning of being and time is “pure craving or desire,” that is, the desire for or addiction to the In-Itself of con-

²³ “It is a well-known fact that nobody can be given character, and that nobody has chosen for himself the particular character he bears. There is neither deliberation nor choice here, and yet everyone recognizes and judges character as an eternal (never-ceasing, constant) deed and attributes to a man both it as well as the action that follows from it. Universal moral judgment thus acknowledges that every man has a freedom in which there is neither (explicit) deliberation nor choice [*Grund*]. . . . But most men shy away from this freedom that opens like an abyss before them, just as they are frightened when faced with the necessity of being wholly one thing or another. . . . They feel themselves crushed by this freedom, as by an appearance from an incomprehensible world, from eternity, from a place entirely devoid of any ground at all [*Ungrund*]” (*AW*, 175–76).

²⁴ According to Schelling, the failure to own up to the “deep, unappeasable melancholy of all life” provoked by the general insanity at the heart of reality and reason is symptomatic of the walking dead and indicative of a “dead intellectual” (F. W. J. Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 3rd version, trans. Jason Wirth [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000], 103). As Wirth points out, Schelling’s point is not to advocate “an utter surrender to madness” but that “Reason remains at the disposal of madness, enchanted by it, humbled by it, continuously solicitous of it, but not such that this drunken ground annihilates Reason” (“Introduction,” in *Ages of the World*, 3rd version, xiv). Compare Richard Kearney’s instructive discussion of melancholia and creativity in his *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 163–78.

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tractive identity (*PI*, 32). The rotary drive, then, can be thought of as desire In-Itself—unactualized in the “subjectless” fury of the Absolute, in which there is only the indifferent flux of Freedom but no free Subject as such. With the “eternally past” advent of the Word, the subject that emerges is free only inasmuch as it is not completely itself; it is, rather, an embodied spirit, marked by finitude, death, and decay. Indeed, it is spirit made ravenous flesh: “The spirit is consequently nothing but an addiction to Being. . . . The base form of the spirit is therefore an addiction, a desire, a lust. Whoever wishes to grasp the concept of spirit at its most profound roots must therefore become fully acquainted with the nature of desire . . . for [desire] is a hunger for Being, and being satiated only gives it renewed strength, i.e., a more vehement hunger.”²⁵ Constituted as a free subject by virtue of its inherent lack of self-presence, the desirous-Self cannot be finally satisfied. On the contrary, in the parlance of psychoanalysis (whose debt to Schelling is often forgotten), its desire, embodied in history and subjectivity, is “always and by definition unsatisfied, metonymical, shifting from one object to another.” Be careful of what you wish for, so the saying goes, because you just might get it. To fulfill the desire for wholeness is to cure the addiction to Being, which sends the self-creative subject back into the rotary motion of nothingness and non-being. As such, on this point the psychoanalysts are right: “I do not actually desire what I want. . . . What I actually desire is to sustain desire itself, to postpone the dreaded moment of its satisfaction.”²⁶

If desire is related to Schelling’s will-to-contraction and thus to the impossible singularity of one’s desire—its identity and wholeness—love is related to the will-to-expansion, the emergence of the free self that is not itself. The point is not as obscure as it may at first seem. Again, we need only think back to the insanity of the rotary repetition described above, where the pure will that wills nothing contracts being:

There were from the very beginning two different though not distinguishable aspects of the will that willed nothing. First, it was pure will in itself; but as such, it was also the will that willed nothing. Now only this second aspect has become a positively negating will; besides this, it still remains a pure will, and this quality of being a will cannot be destroyed. It is even impossible that another, opposed, will not produce itself in it, to the extent that it remains a will, and precisely because it became a positively negating will. This opposed will is one that actually wills itself as what-is, and as being; it is, in a word, an

²⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars,” in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F. W. J. Schelling*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 230.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “The Abyss of Freedom,” in *AW*, 80. Compare Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 114.

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affirming will, *a will of love that does not will nothing but rather wills something*. (AW, 169; emphasis added)

What Schelling comes ultimately to describe, then, is a “psychotic” God unable to tolerate any Otherness; such is the “fury of his egotism” that this includes, especially, any actualized notion of himself as either sovereign, free, or creator. The groundless deed, however, is “a will of love” and, as such, disrupts the contractive/desirous dominance of the egoistic Ground, thereby actualizing, in the Word, the Groundless, inexpressible potentiality and freedom that unites the contradictory potencies of will-to-contraction and will-to-expansion (AW, 129–30, 169–78).²⁷ The logic on display here is a paradox of (dialectical) materiality: “It is apparent that none of these—not the negating, not the affirming will, and not the merely potentially extant will that is their unity—is that absolute I of divinity as it was before the activation; but precisely because it is *none* of these and yet is all three, precisely thereby it appears as *actual*, as what is in principle inexpressible” (AW, 170). In other words, the God of Creation is not the Absolute In-Itself, the purity of indifferent and undifferentiated freedom. For God to create freely and thus to be sovereign, divine freedom itself must be actualized as such. It is only in the primordial deed that the Absolute actualizes itself as the free Creator-God and thus, in the process, represses the abyssal void and radical excess of Absolute Freedom.

If this autopoietic self-becoming is the quintessential act of love (AW, 137–38), it is also a kind of tragicomedy. For here, in becoming God, God is no longer *simply* God and thus no longer God in any kind of traditional Christian sense. In fact, in even more theologically scandalous terms, it is only in a kind of original sin (qua the decision to begin)—the Fall of God, as it were—that God *is* at all. This is because the God who makes reality intelligible, that is, the Creator-Sovereign God of our monotheisms, in the decisive act of love and creation relates to the “contracted” Ground of Being. Consequently, the God of Creation “is not God considered absolutely, that is, in so far as he exists; for it is only the ground of his existence. It [the Ground of existence contracted by the deed] is *nature*—in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct from him” (PI, 27). In short, after the

²⁷ “If the force of individuality were alone, there would be nothing but the eternal state of closing oneself off and being closed off. Nothing could live in this state, created things would be impossible, and the concept of a being of beings would be lost. For this force of self-ness or individuality in God is captured in that barbaric term *aseity*. This force is the white heat of purity, intensified to all created things, and would rage against every creature like ruinous fire, an eternal wrath that tolerates nothing, *fatally contracting but for the resistance of love*” (AW, 171).

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primordial deed, the quintessential, eternally past moment of love and freedom, the (contractive) desire for wholeness can only ever be frustrated by an (expansive) love, where that which is created loses the fullness of itself in order actually to exist. It is in this sense that we identify love as loss, and it is here that we find the basis of a truly radical gospel in which the salvation of self is theologically less redemptive than the fall that sets it free.²⁸

II

It is perhaps due to the scandal it sets in motion that Schelling's philosophical consideration of "unthought subjectivity" and the attendant implications of his dialectical materialism have been largely ignored by traditional theology. Were it to do so, theology would then be required to question its own character: not who is theology's character (be it God, humanity, the oppressed, etc.), but what is theology's character (its moral status and/or ontological condition). This most fundamental question of theology, of course, is equivocal, for the "of" here may just as well be objective as subjective genitive. Is it a question asked of theology, or one theology asks? This returns us to our initial inquiry: when the question posed to theology is itself a theological question, where to begin? One may well wish to reach the heavens, so to speak, in order to afford a divine vantage from which to ascertain the True or the Good, where all such questions of character begin and invariably end; but the lesson taught by Schelling is that when neither depth nor height escapes the dialectical circularity that renders one dizzy, the assumed vantage point of a transcendent or symbolic meaning is as rent and elusive as the breath or the echo of a dead god's laughter.

While reflecting on the Jewish proverb "Man thinks, God laughs," Milan Kundera cannot help but wonder why this God might be laughing. His conclusion is appropriate to the dilemma described above: because "man thinks and the truth escapes him. Because the more men think, the more one man's thought diverges from another's. And fi-

²⁸ Schelling amends his thinking in the third draft of *Ages of the World* and identifies the Absolute as that which is inaccessible and prior to the Word, and as such that which informs the Word of its content. This, however, seems actually to blunt his original theological insight. At this early stage of his thinking, there is no inaccessible reserve. God and the Absolute are indelible parts of a dialectical history set in motion by what can only be called a *miraculous moment* always already past. The Absolute, as such, is not to be thought of as "before" the beginning but rather as the excess of the beginning—which is to say, in the beginning, the repression of the Absolute was also its creation. The equivocalness of the construction "repression of the Absolute" is key, for it highlights the Absolute as both the subject who represses and the object repressed.

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nally, because man is never what he thinks he is.”²⁹ In its expectations of beginnings and endings that stabilize meaning and significance and thus seek to fill an absence, humanity misses the joke and thus, too, the “sudden transformation of a strained expectation into *nothing*” that Kant ascribes to laughter.³⁰ As we will see, however, the intensity of this excessive “nothing” is a joke that can get out of hand. The punch line of reality is simply too much, leaving us in stitches on the floor with our most insane of laughs, screaming “No! Stop! No more!”—unsure whether we mean it or not. Divorced from its ontological stability, this question (or is it a riddle?) of theology can only ever beg to be asked again and again. What we find, however, is that amid the apparent chaos of laughter and repetition, theology is neither stymied nor rendered absolutely (or mystically) silent by its impossible task; for, indeed, from the order and relative decorum inevitable to it as a disciplinary and/or confessional inquiry, theology is radically opened to the creative implications and freedom of speaking-itself.

For Charles Winquist, much like Schelling, the most proper characterization of theology attuned to the intensity of such a speaking is that of a “lover’s discourse.” He writes, “Love is an intense valuation of specificities in the finite display of experience. It is precisely because finite experience is highly variegated that the ‘yes’ to the importance of any specific person or object is meaningful. In Love, we are making life meaningful, but it is a meaning that can be neither contained nor controlled. Love makes life unsafe. This is its frightening and wonderful transformational power.”³¹ Inasmuch as this is true, theology is a kind of engagement—a violent battle as much as it is a formal promise of marriage—but with and to whom? Might we strip it bare, this question theology asks and is asked, to get beneath its surface and behold it in its natural glory? Moreover, might we yet behold the question of theology’s character, for us the fundamental problem of theology, in its essential, naked truth and origin, as it strives to understand all it can of, and indeed to fashion the very categories of thinking about, the Absolute and God?

And yet, we cannot stop here. For, indeed, what would be the character of this undressing? Would it be rape or consensual, violence or foreplay? When surfaces are compound, when theology’s flesh is textual and textile (i.e., published, bound, and disseminated in an endless

²⁹ Kundera, for one, is pleased by the thought “that the art of the novel came into the world as the echo of God’s laughter” (“Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe,” in *The Art of the Novel* [London: Faber & Faber, 1988], 158).

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 177.

³¹ Charles Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 149–50.

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array of monographs), its undressing cannot go simply skin-deep. Like the instrument of torture in Kafka's fable "In the Penal Colony," where vibrating needles engrave into the skin of the convicted his or her transgression, the piercing of theology is a sort of tattooing and judgment thought to unveil its fundamental truth. Although the result of "the Harrow" is inevitably (and perhaps even unfortunately) death, in the eyes of its operator, just before death comes understanding.

It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure, that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it. By that time the Harrow has pierced him quite through and casts him into the pit, where he pitches down upon the blood and the water and the cotton wool. Then the judgment has been fulfilled, and we, the solider and I, bury him.³²

As we will see below, the theologian's desire to assess and judge theology strictly as an object follows a similar path. For, indeed, both the Commandant and theologian are exemplary models of the Freudian ego, which in its early development "wants to incorporate [its] object into itself, and . . . wants to do so by devouring it."³³ Like Kafka's tale, unable to escape the limits of his/her ontological and perspectival dilemma, the theologian's most ingenious and meticulous attempt at theology's dissection and analysis, aimed to bring his/her object into accordance with a rule and/or method—be it through systemizing, narrating, or even deconstructing—is both a verdict and a death sentence.

Tyler Roberts is to be credited for recognizing this tendency in the seminal works of two of America's most prominent contemporary theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and Mark C. Taylor.³⁴ Each thinker, he argues persuasively, falls prey to the metaphysical recalcitrance of narrative. For instance, while Hauerwas claims that self-identity or, in his apposite term, "character," is derivative of one's knowledge of and submission to God, one's knowledge and trust are always already deeply embedded in a preexistent Christian narrative in which humanity rec-

³² Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," in *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1961), 204.

³³ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 11, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 258.

³⁴ Tyler Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic Imperative: Narrative and Renunciation in Taylor and Hauerwas," *Modern Theology* 9 (April 1993): 181–200.

ognizes itself as “contingent,” “historical,” “sinful” creatures of God.³⁵ According to Roberts, this is the very sort of “master narrative” that postmodern theologians—those who have been informed by the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Frederic Jameson, and Jean-François Lyotard—are instinctively wary of.

Nevertheless, even Mark C. Taylor—who is as suspicious as they come, especially of beginnings and endings, and who is delighted by the notion of a “nomadic self” who endlessly errs and sempiternally puns in carnivalesque discourses that would make Bakhtin blush and Zarathustra proud—is undermined by his own characteristic “internal narrative”:³⁶ “Once there was a pre-modern subject who embraced faith in God. But in its journey to modernity the subject overturned the God-human relationship, making God its own creation as well as dominating others and hoarding possessions in a futile attempt to secure a foundation for itself and escape from death. But, when the subject recognized this futility and embraced the difference at the core of its identity, it emerged into postmodernity, an eternity of play. There the subject threw off lacerated consciousness, entered the divine milieu, and erred happily ever after.”³⁷ What makes Roberts’s essay compelling is not simply that he questions whether Hauerwas adequately addresses the disruptive implications of the interplay between “history and the world” and the “unity and plot of the Christian narrative”³⁸ or that he calls out Taylor’s slippage back into the metaphysical mooring of narrative. Rather, it is in his insistence that disruption and narrative are not mutually exclusive and that disruption is as structurally necessary to narrative as narration is to disruption, making the subjective imposition of order as inevitable as the disturbances to that order.

Unable to free itself fully from the beginnings and endings of narrative, or the contingencies of life, the peculiarities of what Gordon Kaufman has described as its “imaginative construction” cannot be lost on or in our theologies. Kaufman writes, “Although it may be obvious to us that the constructive work of the imagination has in this way always been constitutive of theological activity, theologians have seldom

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 27–29, 46–49.

³⁶ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 149–69.

³⁷ Roberts, “Theology and the Ascetic Imperative,” 186. Roberts rounds out his critique with much the same conclusion as Walter Lowe: “Taylor purports to end narrative (and metaphysics, the self, history) only by telling a story that will end all stories—one that has been told for millennia” (Walter Lowe, “A Deconstructive Manifesto? Mark C. Taylor’s *Erring*,” *Journal of Religion* 66, no. 3 [July 1986]: 324–31).

³⁸ Roberts, “Theology and the Ascetic Imperative,” 188.

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understood themselves to be engaged primarily in imaginatively constructing a theistically-focused worldview; on the contrary, they have largely regarded themselves as attempting to express in human words and concepts what the divine King had objectively and authoritatively given the church or synagogue in revelation. The fact that their work was thoroughly imaginative and constructive in character was simply not recognized.³⁹ On the contrary, however, has not the more common modern tendency been for the theologian to peek inside and grasp, as though pursuing an exact science? Eschewing aesthetics and embracing the methods of the natural sciences, post-Cartesian theology became, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, yet another “specialization” devoid of *sensus spiritualis*.⁴⁰

Consequently, traditional theological discourse has become not unlike an infant, as observed by Friedrich Schlegel in his erotic novel *Lucinde*. “Unquestionably there lies deeply rooted in the nature of man a desire to eat everything he loves and put every new object he encounters immediately into his mouth in order to break it down. A healthy hunger for knowledge makes him want to apprehend the objects completely, to penetrate and bite through to its inmost core.”⁴¹ Indeed, in the Christian tradition, the theologian’s desire to know God—to know what lies beneath the fleshly masquerade of the Incarnation—has often taken on an overtly sexual tone. In his study of depictions of the Crucifixion in medieval Europe, for instance, Richard Trexler notes that it was customary for Jesus’s crucified body to be regarded as a “volume to be penetrated.”⁴² Thus, one might find Jesus appearing and quickly embracing Rupert von Deutz in a dream, kissing him, and then opening his mouth, “so that I could kiss him more deeply.”⁴³ Battista Varani is even more literal with his desired penetration when he expresses the wish to wriggle into Christ’s dying body in

³⁹ Gordon D. Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (March 1982): 78. See also his *An Essay on Theological Method*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), and *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 74–76.

⁴¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *“Lucinde” and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 51.

⁴² Richard C. Trexler, “Gendering Jesus Crucified,” in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23–24 March 1990*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton, NJ: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993), 108–9.

⁴³ Cited in *ibid.*, 109.

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search of his heart.⁴⁴ In this way, theology becomes as though a sacrament upon and into which, traditionally, the theologian cannot help but attempt to gaze or probe, but, it is interesting to note, from which the theologian also cannot be fully differentiated.⁴⁵

III

Is there room for an alternative conception of theology? Thus far, we have considered theology as simply being acted upon—as being spoken or spoken about. In this final section, I am concerned with introducing as more fundamental the aesthetics of theology speaking-itself. Here, where the dialectical history of Schelling’s “unthought subjectivity” meets Foucault’s genealogy of “deep subjectivity,” I will argue that the means of theology being spoken (of) at all—the basis of its existence as a stable, disciplinary, or confessional object—carries with it, too, theology’s inadequacy to live up to its ambitions and self-presentation. As such, I will argue, this should be considered a constitutive inadequacy, the source of theology’s greatest strength and the locus of its significance beyond its present disciplinary and confessional ghettos.

What Foucault says of the individual is especially relevant to what I have in mind here: “For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference to others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonwealth (family, allegiance, protection); then he was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was obliged to pronounce concerning himself.”⁴⁶ Apropos Schelling’s dialectical history discussed above, Foucault relates this shift to the emergence of the literature and philosophies of self-consciousness, those “long discussions concerning the

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also Jean Wirth, *L’image médiévale: Naissance et développements, VI^e–XV^e siècle* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989), 323, and “La naissance de Jésus dans le coeur: Etude iconographique,” *Publications du Centre Européen d’Etudes Bourguignonnes, XIV^e–XVI^e siècle* 24 (1989): 149–58.

⁴⁵ While Robert Smith is describing Hegel’s philosophical method, he may just as well be describing the sacramental desire of theology when he writes: “Its method, tacitly supposed to be plastic or protean, adaptable and therefore free a priori, *sacrifices itself* in taking on as exactly as possible the imprint of what it helps to describe, its ‘object’, in order to maximize the object’s phenomenon unto noumenal reception. Like any power of mediation philosophical method invites being thought of as a virtue, since it gives itself up for the sake of what it mediates, as though it had a free will and, as such, one that might have been less altruistically trained. . . . Hence the oblique ontological make-up of ‘method’, existing only to the extent that it vanishes in fulfilling the task that makes it what it is—*disappearance would be the greatest scope of its being*” (Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 14; emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 58.

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possibility of constituting a science of the subject, the validity of introspection, lived experience as evidence of the presence of consciousness to itself.”⁴⁷ For Foucault, of course, this emergent “discourse of truth” or “science of the subject” is fundamentally flawed. It is a declaration of subjective autonomy, he argues, but one based on a forgotten and/or repressed (and indeed forced) confession and thus on a subjugation to the existing structures/relationships of power that police the freedom and autonomy of self-revelation.⁴⁸ Although he admits it would ultimately be an illusion provoked in and by language and thus blocked by the power of introspective consciousness’ “will to truth,” Foucault would much prefer the self-presence of apocalyptic anonymity.

I would really liked to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance.⁴⁹

Foucault continued to wrestle with his ambivalence regarding the autonomy and anonymity of the self-present subject and toward the end of his life seemed to settle on what he called the necessity, in the face of the breakdown of classical and Christian morality, of a “search for an aesthetics of existence.”⁵⁰ By this, Foucault refers to a transformational knowledge about oneself that does not rely on a prescribed narrative or code but which emerges “in the relationship you have to yourself when you act.”⁵¹ With this in mind, his question elsewhere, “How does the subject speak truthfully about itself,” is not one strictly of ethics and morality but more fundamentally should also be considered an aesthetic inquiry.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 59–60. Compare Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Lawrence D. Krizman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 14, 50, 95.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1982), 215.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 49.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14–15.

⁵² “Structuralism and Post-structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1994), 444. His response is appropriate to our discussion: “It is an analysis of the relation between forms of reflexivity—a relation of self to self—and hence between forms of reflexivity and discourse of truth, forms of rationality and effects of knowl-

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This subject, whose existence is precisely in the thinking about itself, is ultimately inseparable from Schelling's dialectical history of the subject creating-itself. Here, I argue, theology is opened radically to aesthetics and creativity. Admittedly, in doing so, I am recasting the fundamental theological task and setting it in a tense relationship with the systematically redemptive fetish that, its cries of protest notwithstanding, still grips traditional theology. Following Schelling and Foucault, I propose that it is only when theology takes seriously its unthought subjectivity that it fully realizes the significance of its radically creative potential in and for the world. The gospel of this radical, aesthetic theology speaks foremost to itself. In terms of what we have seen in Schelling, the original voice of theology is borne from its original sin. By the attention it pays to its constitutive inadequacy as a subject, theology becomes incarnate and in the process exemplifies the miraculous potential of life and existence always to be other than it currently is.

It is important to emphasize that, contra the objections of Balthasar, the aesthetically realized radical theology in view here is not simply an appropriation of aesthetic concepts, such as that of beauty. Moreover, neither is it merely an "attempt to do aesthetics at the level and with the methods of theology," thus "betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty."⁵³ And yet, following Balthasar's important distinction, neither would such an aesthetic theology be the same as theological aesthetics. For the latter, beauty is the transcendental determination of being and can only be known in full by a theology guided by faith and revelation.⁵⁴ In contrast, the aesthetic theology I argue here to be the implications of Schelling's dialectical materialism attends to the stifling of life and freedom that all such transcendental determinations of being cause. In theological aesthetics, God and beauty both dictate and transcend the limits of phenomenal experience and materiality. They can be materially exemplified, of course, but in order for these approximations or analogies to be evaluated as such, there must always already be a transcendental remainder. Otherwise, how would one know whether the approximation or analogy is sound? In aesthetic theology, however, there is truly nothing behind or beyond the mask of phenomenal experience, and, as such, paradoxical though

edge [*connaissance*]." Significantly, this aligns perfectly with Foucault's famous development of *ascesis* throughout vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, in which he argues that only in the active engagement with the formation of the self is a free subject at all possible. For an excellent elaboration, see Marli Huijter, "The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25, no. 2 (1999): 61–85.

⁵³ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:38; cf. 1:79–117.

⁵⁴ John Riches, "The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Part 1," *Theology* 45 (1972): 565.

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it may seem, this is why something new, something miraculous because it was previously impossible, is in fact made possible in the contingency and material limitations of lived experience.

Aesthetic theology reengages the subject of theology in a way that theological aesthetics cannot. This is because aesthetic theology is attuned to the priority of the subject speaking-itself versus the subject that is only ever spoken about. By appealing to Schelling's provocative discussion about the problem of evil, we can perhaps best highlight the degree of difference between the two. Evil, he argues, is only truly possible in a free subject that "loses" itself—it must be freely chosen.⁵⁵ The possibility of this choice, he continues, "consists . . . in the fact that man, instead of making his selfhood into the basis, the instrument, can strive to elevate it into the ruling and total will and, conversely, to make the spiritual within himself into a means" (*PI*, 54). Evil, therefore, emerges from the subject's misguided sense of having "fallen" from (the truth of) itself and thus of believing it has lost something that can be regained. This, Schelling notes, is the root of the subject's "spiritualized" desire to "return" to its status as (contractive) universal/ideal: "For the feeling still remains in the one having strayed [*gewichen*] from the *centrum* that he was all things, namely, in God. From this arises the hunger of selfishness which, to the degree that it renounces the whole and unity, becomes even more desolate, poorer, but precisely for that reason greedier, hungrier, and more venomous" (*PI*, 55). Per Schelling's dialectical history, if existence is what follows the original sin and original voice of the subject speaking-itself, evil emerges as the self-created subject's ongoing duplicitous attempts to present as essential or determinative truth that which is really a retroactive characterization or projection (i.e., that which becomes essential only after the subject's existence). In this way, Schelling effectively explodes from within the traditional notion of evil as imperfection or privation—that is, of the absence of beauty, goodness, or God—for indeed, evil becomes foundational for existence as such.⁵⁶ Inasmuch as theological aesthetics is committed to beauty and God as transcendental determi-

⁵⁵ Compare "On the one hand, nature can spiritualize itself, it can turn into the medium of Spirit's self-manifestation; on the other hand, with the emergence of the Word, the obscure principle of Ground and Selfhood which hitherto acted as an anonymous, impersonal, blind force is itself spiritualized, illuminated; it becomes a Person aware of itself, so that we are now dealing with an Evil which, in full awareness of itself, *wills itself as Evil*—which is not merely indifference towards the Good but an active striving for Evil" (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 64).

⁵⁶ On this point, Schelling could not be any more clear: "The simple reflection that only man, the most complete of all visible creatures, is capable of evil, shows already that the ground of evil could not in any way lie in lack or deprivation" (*PI*, 36).

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nations of being and thus as prior to existence, it actually represses the very foundation it claims to uphold. To speak, then, of aesthetic theology as committed to evil may seem unnecessarily cynical and self-indulgent but doing so actually enables us to reflect on the problematic desire and attempts for an impossible knowledge—knowledge of some essential truth about ourselves, of our theologies, or of our religions that is not there, cannot be there, unless/until we create it as such.

If aesthetic theology is not fully in concert with “the aesthetics of Christian truth” that is professed by the guardians of ecclesiastical theology,⁵⁷ neither is it an apophatic exercise in mystical silence⁵⁸ or a deconstructive affirmation of alterity.⁵⁹ For each, the task of theology is to think about and/or conceptualize the necessary, immaterial essence of the Good or the true behind (or analogously transcendent to) its myriad phenomenal masks. The content of a theology attuned to the aesthetics of its production, however, cannot merely abide in the immediacy or immateriality of “pure being,” the *analogia entis* of “theological metaphysics,”⁶⁰ or be content in the interest of a “structurally deferred” presence. For, indeed, as Theodor Adorno memorably wrote in *Minima Moralia*, any such authenticity, be it immediate, analogical, or as a hope deferred, “itself becomes a lie the moment it becomes authentic, that is, in reflecting on itself, in postulating itself as genuine, in which it already oversteps the identity which it lays claim to in the same breath.”⁶¹ To this, of course, it may be objected that the

⁵⁷ Compare David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). Hart (alongside John Milbank) is the undisputed heir to Balthasar’s theological aesthetic project, forcefully carrying it into the new century alongside an (overly?) aggressively polemical attack on (primarily postmodern) philosophical encroachments into theological territory. For Hart, the “engagement” between philosophy and theology is only ever a fight to the death. Compare James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); and John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁸ The best contemporary representatives of this position, one an analysis and the other an actualization, are, respectively, Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁵⁹ John D. Caputo is certainly the most prolific philosopher-cum-theologian writing today about deconstruction and theology. For representative examples, see his “God Is Wholly Other—Almost: *Differance* and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God,” in *The Otherness of God*, ed. Orrin F. Summerell (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 190–205, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ Compare John Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” *New Blackfriars* 76, no. 895 (July–August 1995): 325–43.

⁶¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left, 1974), 154.

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aesthetic theology introduced here would be just another dubious promise of truth or authenticity. It is important to note that what distinguishes it from these other theologies is not primarily its content, although its disciplinary and confessional applications are sure to lean more toward nonorthodoxy and perhaps even heresy but rather its capacity to admit the constitutive problems at the heart of this content.

These are much the same problems recognized by Foucault. On the one hand, there is the (retroactively) imposed sovereignty of systematic, transcendent order, in the guise of coherence, beauty, and efficiency; on the other hand, there is the confused nihilism of vitalistic and/or mystical immanence. Consequently, no matter whether its form be discursive (as it is here), liturgical, literary, or artistic, the subject of theology's aesthetic self-inquiry is on the surface little different from that of the theologies mentioned above, in that it too resents the inadequate, material immanence of its reflection, a reflection that cannot know what it does or is without some ineffable/transcendental determination of being. In turn, the object of theological reflection, that which is spoken into being in the name of (and thus self-created as) the theological subject, works to repress the surplus of freedom that defies the now-existing criteria—a surplus, we will recall from Schelling, that does not preexist and is not contained by the objectivity and/or materiality of that which is said but is the subjective excess created in the dialectical activity of the subject speaking-itself. The ambition for wholeness, the pure night of "theology without theology," is theology's paradoxical end, the full actualization of its being and its annihilation. In this way, as in Schelling's dialectical history, we identify the circuitous desire for wholeness without truly wanting it.⁶²

A theology whose attention is the aesthetics of existence realizes the necessity of its self-reflective split and that its own lack of wholeness, its own original sin, makes it what it is: namely, a self-deceptive pursuit for that which would finally and essentially bridge the gap between its transcendent ambition and its immanent materiality. It does not, however, offer an alternative or solution to its pathology. Rather, by thinking the aesthetics of this subject's pathological existence (i.e., its relationship with itself), such attention engages theology's creative kernel and most vital significance beyond itself. A common misconcep-

⁶² We see this exemplified in the traditional Christian theology, where the redemptive significance of the historical resurrection of Christ and the universal offering of justice are the means by which the anticipation of and passion for wholeness are given their faces but also the forestalling obstacles to actually achieving wholeness materially. The wholeness described, rather, is always and necessarily elsewhere, never fully now, perhaps on the far side of the eschatological veil, in a new heaven and new earth to come.

tion of dialectical reasoning is that it creates a closed relationship based on balanced codetermination, whereby nothing new is ever truly possible. The subject creates the object, and the object creates the subject. This, it is supposed, is the end of the story and indeed the beginning of the most oppressive absolute truth that philosophy has ever devised. This is, however, not the case. On the contrary, at the root of the dialectical relationship that informs the inadequacy of the theological subject is a desire fraught with undecidability. Slavoj Žižek describes it well: “Two characteristics of this paradoxical causality should be retained: a cause is inherently undecidable—it can enhance the feature it stands for or its opposite; and above all, there is no ‘proper measure’ in the relationship between a cause and its effect—the effect is always in excess of its cause, either in the guise of the upward spiral (aggressivity leads to more and more aggressivity) or in the guise of the counteraction (awareness of aggressivity brings forth a fear of ‘overreacting’ that deprives the subject of the ‘normal’ measure of aggressive self-assertion).”⁶³ As demonstrated by Schelling, the stability of self-becoming in dialectical reasoning is possible only by way of an undecidable self-creativity. If this is the case, an aesthetic theology informed by Schelling’s dialectical history is undecidably concerned with both its freedom to resist institutionalization and its tendency toward the adaptive order of self-organized stability. Therefore, in the thinking of theology speaking-itself, we conceive of theology as a creation whose true value is precisely the act of its being created and not merely its prearranged capacity for discursive exchange, disciplinary consumption, or confessional use.

If theology’s transcendent ambitions are shown to be fully the effect of immanent contingency, the sovereign of modern politics and economy is also but a created effect. Insofar as this is true, I have tried to show here that an aesthetic theology is capable of empowering a state of resistance to itself and thus to the determination/judgment of sovereignty—be it concerning identity or essence, beauty and goodness, or value and worth. As such, the idiosyncratic character of theology speaking-itself thus becomes akin to what Gilles Deleuze describes in one of his final essays as the immanence of “a life”: “We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss. . . . It is an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed

⁶³ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 29.

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in a life. . . . The transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life.”⁶⁴ Just as a life is not the same as the one who lives it, as we have seen above, neither is theology necessarily what it claims of and for itself. On the contrary: “A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualised in subjects or objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments . . . but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn’t just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of immediate consciousness.”⁶⁵

In closing, the attention paid by aesthetic theology to the unthought speaking-itself of theology opens us to the self-creative, immanence of life—that is, to the intense, indefinite potential of a life in which all things are ever in the course of being made new. Here, the thinking of such a life and theology is no longer modeled simply on the True, but in the words of Philip Goodchild, is “an attempt to generate an ethos of thought that expresses an intensification of life” and thus where the unity of thought and being “is replaced by an aspiration for the unity of a living thought and the unthought which gives life to it.”⁶⁶ It is, as such, here in the original sin of its immanent weakness and contingency that theological thinking carries within itself the intensity of a truly original voice, one that embodies the inherent creative capacity for reimagining existence and the self-created confines of what we think to be possible.

⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. A. Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), 27–28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁶ Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002), 165.