

APPLE ZEFELIUS IGREK
Vanderbilt University

IMPOSSIBLE GOD

A profile of Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology*. From the *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology* series. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2003. 195 pp. \$69.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0-7546-0597-3.

READING HUSSERL through Heidegger and Heidegger through Derrida, Hugh Rayment-Pickard interrogates the impossible conditions of theology. These conditions are essentially paradoxical: they are unstable, non-phenomenal, and multi-layered, but they are no less affirmative. There is, in other words, no purely negative discourse. There is neither a deconstruction of truth nor an absence of boundaries, linguistic or social, which fails to include those boundaries within its performative absence. Although it is perfectly valid to claim that the unsayable, the theological, and the impossible are irreducible to the said, to those signs which are circulated in a nonstop process of meaning and manifestation, it is not true that the horizon of impossible death, or impossible God, is separate from truth. Deconstruction, according to Rayment-Pickard, inexorably returns to the very foundations which it seemingly contests. Metaphysics, especially the metaphysics of God, is overturned but never eliminated: "Deconstruction must operate within the onto-theological discourses of philosophy, it must "inhabit" metaphysical structures. No matter how effectively these structures are resisted, there is always a complicity between deconstruction and metaphysics, a complicity moreover that does not arise accidentally, but as one of the structural features of deconstruction itself" (132). This single passage encapsulates the basic theme of *Impossible God*: the opening up of language to an unknown outside, to the limits of nothingness, is the opening up of life to its own impossible realization. There is a truth to the outside which is familiar to the inside: it is familiar even in its unfamiliarity. Hence the uncanny nature of God, which is formulated in terms of Derrida's so-called "anti-theology" as the sacrificial death of all religion. Rayment-Pickard's argument, then, is that the truth of God is to be located in a zone of fundamental non-truth (3). It is precisely the absence of God which calls forth an urgent need to speak about God, to concern oneself with the possibility of an ungrounded ground. This is the sacrifice, as opposed to the absolute absence, of an impossible God. To make the

same point differently, the discourse on the absence of God is closer to a phenomenology of disappearance than it is to a disappearance of phenomenology. In a post-structuralist world, inhabited by the ghosts of Hegel and Nietzsche, the emptiness of God becomes its own truth, its own concrete determination. If it is no longer the case that we are motivated by a stabilization of self-identity or a spirit of historical progress, it would appear, according to the writing of an impossible truth, that it is the difference between self and other which provides us with a new vision of exteriority.

As Derrida would say, this new vision is older than Being itself. It is based upon what he describes as “general theology,” which is the foundation of revealability, manifestability, and the science of divinity. Nothing is revealed by this opening up of truth to its unresolvable, unsynthesizable exteriority. But isn’t that the point? It certainly is for Rayment-Pickard, for there is no revelation of Being or *différance* which attests to a higher structure of presence, that is to say, to a mode of temporalization that outstrips every restricted category, every failed concept, and every determination of self in a concrete world of entanglement. No space beyond space. Yet, the space of God is irreducible to the space of historical questioning. It may be that philosophy is the science of all sciences, but at the same time, Rayment-Pickard argues, the space of theology cannot be explained according to a science which seeks to explain everything. To the extent that the question of God is a foundational line of inquiry, it must be sought after in a manner which lays bare the objective conditions of philosophy. The temporal delineations of subjectivity are typically determined according to negative instantiations of being-towards-death, but the impossible realization of death is already problematic from any objective position that stems from philosophy, restricted theology, or linguistic idealism. In all of these cases a metaphysics of presence is dominant: the crossing out of truth leads to a higher order of truth which simply cannot be questioned. From an objective standpoint, the ideal form of questioning overcomes itself in a final moment of absolute knowledge. Derrida’s theology puts all of this back into question. He does not oppose theology and knowledge but rather opens up a space of God at the very limit of the opposition that has declared God’s absence. A general theology of difference arises at the *end* of philosophy which is both a completion and a crossing out of metaphysical phenomenology. Hence the truth of God is once again to be found at the intersections of life and death, presence and absence, history and nothingness: “Somewhere in the undecidable cross(ing) or chiasmus of language is what replaces, or remains after, the horizon of theology has been erased. Derrida effectively proposes the installation of the chiasmus within the space of deconstructed metaphysics” (162).

The end of philosophy, however, is not so much a temporal event as it is a main-

tained form of tension. Likewise, the death of God is not an actual occurrence. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that the death of God is the inauguration of a search for meaning and truth: "God's impossibility acts therefore not to deaden religious feeling or to close down theological discussion but to draw it out. The desertification of the divine works as a vacuum to draw out a messianic longing for the coming of God, for the arrival of truth and the institution of justice" (147). Rayment-Pickard is quick to add that this longing may never be satisfied. The quest for God opened up by a deconstruction of truth seems to be perpetually displaced. While it may be true that religious feelings are stimulated in this process of privation, negation, or bracketing, it does not follow that the deconstruction of language reveals a metaphysical truth. The truth, instead, is held in suspension. It is not overcome, nor is it wholly dismissed. It is, however, continually manifested as an irreducible undecidability. The very nature of Derrida's theology would seem to hinge upon this obstacle to an actualized truth: an impossible theology, because it resists being totalized, is an alternative to the metaphysics of post-historical consciousness. Perhaps there is a revelation of truth, but Rayment-Pickard follows Heidegger and Derrida in describing this truth as unstable, unclear, and uncertain. On this model, the ambivalence of truth is not fundamentally distinguished from non-truth. In this way, Derrida's theology binds truth and non-truth together even as it confirms their irreconcilable antagonism. It might even be claimed that the living presence of God is precisely this binding together, in which case the life of God is profoundly implicated in an ongoing process of death, anguish, and persecution. For Rayment-Pickard, the sign of messianic hope which is situated within this vanishing horizon. This messianic hope cannot be fulfilled, but it does help us to affirm the non-phenomenality of life.

Despite the compelling, well-reasoned, and historically sensitive arguments, *Impossible God* may have difficulty with at least two questions. The first pertains to the prioritization of general theology. Is it the case that the impossible concept of God outstrips every other impossible concept, or is it closer to the truth to think of religion, economy, sexuality, and all other forms of social identity as equiprimordial? Do these various constitutive elements of historical life form a total social phenomenon, as Marcel Mauss has put forward? Rayment-Pickard makes his position clear from the outset: "[T]he claims of theology are always foundational, indeed must always be foundational, as the question of God must, by definition, always be the first and last in any inquiry into origins" (3). As an argument which stands on its own, it would be very difficult to deny its validity. But it seems to be at odds with another argument which forms a major line of reasoning throughout the book: Derrida's theology is an impossible theology *only to the extent* that it negates precisely what it affirms. This aporia constitutes the undecidability of general theology. It is of a piece with other fundamental

structures of human existence: "One of the consequences or corollaries of the impossibility of aporia is the fact that even the fundamental analysis of death cannot avoid 'a hidden bio-anthropo-thanato-theological contamination'"(112). Rayment-Pickard concludes from this deep-seated aporia that general theology survives the impossibility of death, but it still needs to be explained why this should not also be said of the political, ritualistic, economic, biological, and so forth.

There is, unfortunately, an even more serious question raised by Rayment-Pickard's hermeneutics: is it certain that Derrida's notion of play never resolves itself? In the realm of meaning there is no "play without rules." Derrida has made exactly this point in relation to Foucault and Levinas: we do not possess a discourse which speaks the language of either madness or infinite alterity as they exist in themselves, unmarked by the regulative fictions of power. But, strictly speaking, Derrida's argument does not rule out an absolute outside. If he does rule it out, then it would be correct to distinguish him from Bataille who developed the phrase "general economy" in connection with a form of negativity unrestricted by human purposes.¹ Rayment-Pickard seeks to do just this by referring to a passage in which Derrida criticizes Bataille for not having seen that every negation is "the underside and accomplice of positivity" (144). A closer look at the passage indicates that this is hardly a criticism of Bataille; to the contrary, it formulates a deconstruction of Hegel's phenomenology by means of an irreversible expenditure: "In discourse (the unity of process and system), negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity. Negativity cannot be spoken of, nor has it ever been except in this fabric of meaning. Now, the sovereign operation, the *point of nonreserve*, is neither positive nor negative."² Far from reappropriating Bataille's expenditure as a negative which cannot be dissociated from positive discourse, Derrida uses the same language as Bataille to open up an instant of nothingness that breaks away from systematic principles. In this vein he writes that Bataille's going to the *end*, or negating without measure, is "to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring *other* surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative."³ Derrida is famously difficult to read, but in this case it is apparent throughout his essay on Bataille and Hegel that he affirms sovereignty, Bataille's sovereignty, as an impossible operation of play which reinscribes work in the nothingness which it otherwise

¹ Bataille's term for unconditional negativity is "primary expenditure." Although he does not postulate a complete, innocent, ahistorical return to primary expenditure, it still plays a role in secondary (social) expenditure insofar as the latter reminds us of the future. It reminds us of an eventual overcoming of humankind by its ownmost possibility (i.e., excess, sacrifice, release).

² Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 259.

³ Ibid.

suppresses. Rayment-Pickard is right to claim that *for us* all things are held in suspension. He is also right to suggest that this is Derrida's position: there is no return to either a positive or negative which doesn't always already include its antithesis. Derrida's relationship to Bataille, however, should prompt us to rethink those interpretations, from Mark C. Taylor to Judith Butler, which emphasize an omnipresence of language, arche-writing, and social deconstruction. In much the same way as Bataille's human expenditure gestures to an outside which is no longer a comprehensible form of negativity, we should reconsider the deconstructive suspension of categories as a theological practice which ultimately returns us to the impossible absence of ourselves.

APPLE ZEFELIUS IGREK is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Vanderbilt University. His forthcoming essay "Violence and Heterogeneity: A Response to Habermas's 'Between Eroticism and General Economics: Georges Bataille'" will appear in the Winter 2004 issue of *Janus Head*.

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