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ALTIZER: PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

It was in 1977, the year I joined the faculty at Stony Brook University and first met Tom Altizer, that he instructed me—or rather *ordered* me—to read *The Self-Embodiment of God* published that same year. What an electrifying revelation this book proved to be! It was like no other book I'd ever read. It was written in prose in which each successive sentence came like a new revelation. A recent rereading demonstrated to me just how vibrant and life-altering Tom's writing can be: transformative of how we think and of how we can speak about the new thoughts thereby generated. I would like to suggest that the written prose of this one-of-a-kind book itself embodies, in its highly condensed prose, Tom's own presence in his speech. This presence—whether in preaching, teaching, or talking on his porch—was a self-embodiment of Altizer himself. His own first-person discourse brought his radical difference from ordinary academics and from conventional theologians to life in the very words he uttered and wrote as articulations of his own self-embodiment.

I

In Altizer's own preferred language, "total presence" comes paired with "total absence." The clue to this pairing—its paradigm case—is found in his conception of speech as a "fullness that both actualizes and embodies its own ground, its own ultimate or final ground"—a ground that is ungrounded and thus absent.¹ This is clearly a paradox, if not an outright contradiction. How can a speech act actualize a ground that is not itself linguistic? Examples of such grounds are physical objects, historical actions, and mathematical formulae. Each of these has an integrity of its own that does not require linguistic articulation to be grounded. They are their own grounds, or are grounded in systems of concepts and events that are coherent as a whole: integral and self-sufficing.

But Altizer is not talking about any such conventional grounds. He is speaking of a ground that is not merely present—as perceived, known, or thought—but that is itself radically absent from perceptual encounter, epistemic grasp, or other usual means of access. Such a

¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3. All further quotations and citations of Altizer are from this text.

ground is something whose mode of being is precisely *to be absent*. And not just temporarily so (as in a disappearance that is succeeded by a re-appearance) or absent relative to some other presence (as in the absence of a friend who suddenly, as if from nowhere, suddenly emerges). Rather, the ground he has in mind is *altogether absent*: absent beyond retrieval of any kind, not even in a mitigated format. And yet we can *say* it: in being spoken it becomes present.

The claim, then, is that it is just such an uncompromised and uncompromisable absence that becomes present in speech. This is not to make the true but tepid claim of most linguistic theory — namely, that meaning is *relatively* absent from the spoken word: absent *in relation to* a verbal formulation, somehow hovering in the vicinity of the speech act as it is invoked by it, thus indirectly present in this act. Rather than any such conventional mode of absence — which qualifies the ‘meaning’ or the ‘signified’ of any verbal sign taken as ‘signifier’ — Altizer is invoking an absence that is not merely relative to the speech on which his insistence resides. He is pointing to an *ir-relative absence* — an absence no matter what: no matter what is our obsession with making literal sense of the words of the speech he himself is putting forth. Our trying to figure out just exactly what they mean will not succeed. For these words do not mean anything exact. Yet what they invoke is forcefully present.

The absence to which Altizer points consists in its very presence. It is *absent-as-present*. In his own preferred way of putting it, it is a matter of “total presence” in “total absence” — and the converse as well. Absolute absence is what it is only as, and precisely as, full presence, and such presence in turn arises only in, and as, such absence. The grounding here is two-way: of each by the other, and both ways at once. Otherwise put, each is the ground of the other — a ground that lacks the determinacy of conventional grounds, each of which is univocal and formulatable as such. Not only are they not themselves grounded in something else, some third thing; they act to *un-ground* established speech and settled meaning.

We have to do here with strictly bi-valent grounds: grounds grounding only in the dyad they form with each other. These grounds evade any determinate description that can be expressed in so many words, whether in a single statement or many. Their meaning is always *elsewhere*, for they *mean otherwise*: elsewhere than we can conventionally locate, otherwise than we ordinarily mean. Their ultimacy consists in this double negation, this double evasion.

Yet despite their radical dis-appearance from ongoing ordinary experience, such presence and absence can be said, and said together: indeed, only as such can they be said at all, can they be *spoken*. Speech is their promulgative medium. Not in ordinary speech but in inspired speech as this is recorded in the Christian gospels and in other sacred writings, in certain philosophical texts such as Hegel’s — and in the writings of Thomas Altizer. This is a special speech

indeed, an apocalyptic speech that is inspired beyond inspiration, actual beyond actuality, grounded beyond ground.

II

In all of this we may be reminded of Lacan's notion of "present speech," which brings forward the truth of desire that has been repressed or otherwise lost—that is to say, is absent from conscious access. "For it is present speech," writes Lacan, "that bears witness to the truth of this revelation in current reality and grounds it in the name of this reality."² This schema, attractive as it is in the context of psychoanalytic treatment, makes absence that is the product of repression relative—that is, correlative to the present word considered as the expression of repressed desire. This word establishes a ground in current reality. Such desire had been speaking in my neurotic symptoms, but it was not recognized as such. Once articulated in so many words—in a moment of "insight"—its truth is brought into the light of day, made evident, made *the plain truth*: 'I wanted to sleep with my mother.' Once articulated in so many words, the repressed desire loses the unconscious force that allowed it to be given indirect expression by symptoms such as obsession, undue guilt, and the like. A ground for my psychical-erotic drives is established when I pronounce my words of insight. Once these words come forth, there is no further mystery: *alles ist klar*. My symptoms recede, and little mystery remains: little is absent from the presence of my self-revelation.

Altizer's notion of religious speech proposes something quite different. For here the presence of words does not ground anything; their presence brings forth an absence that is equal but opposite, yet also ungroundable. Such speech is *full* only insofar as it is also at the same time, and entirely, *empty*. This is eminently true of parabolic language, which is, as Lissa McCullough has argued, the enactment of "the *total presence* of a *negative*. It says absolutely *this*, annihilating *that*."³ This is to say that the special presence of parabolic truth is not just the other side of an ungrounded absence but *requires* that absence to be the presence it is. This absence occurs as *silence*. As is written in *The Self-Embodiment of God*: "Speech arises out of silence, and the fullest speech may well arise out of the deepest silence. . . . Speech must die to live. . . . Speech can only be itself by being decisively and

² Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 212–13. Lacan adds that "through the word—which is already a presence made of absence—absence itself comes to be named in an original moment" (228). Here Lacan draws close to Altizer's conception of absence-in-presence, despite the differences to which I point.

³ Lissa McCullough, foreword to Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today*, 2nd ed. (Aurora, CO: Noesis, 2016), ix.

actually other than that which it once was or that which it will become."⁴

Speech in Altizer's fully valorized sense, then, speaks from the radical absence that is silence. Such speech is not present qua "full" — full of sense, of disclosure, of the finite truth of the discovery of something merely hidden from myself by myself, as in psychoanalytic insight — but empty of standard sense, measurable truth, even of existential self-revelation. Something else is revealed than my unconscious self: a divinity that is at once within me and without me — in both senses of "without." The truth I attain is an untruth in empirical, mundane terms; it is the very truth of an absence that is not reducible to being evasively locatable, to being covered up or over (for example, by the ego's defensive structures). It is a *revealed* truth that may be empty or useless in worldly terms but that is replete in the vision of radical theology. This is a theology whose *modus operandi* is apocalypse and whose *radix* is damnation.

III

Who can forget Tom Altizer's booming voice, his own full speech? Fulminating and furious as it often was, it was never flippant. It was almost always *dead serious*. I recall the time when Tom drew me aside at a party in his own house in Port Jefferson and in a dark corner said to me: "Ed, I hope you realize that *you are damned!*" Having delivered this charge (and doubtless knowing how stunned I was to hear it), Tom said not a word more but stared me down: down into the bottomless bottom of my soul. Full and present speech had here emerged from silence; it articulated the truth of my doomed being on earth. Unlike psychoanalytic insight, it did not emerge from the troubled past of my own unrecognized desire, but looked right down into the abyss of my present being. Tom's accusation cut to the quick of my life at that moment: a life I could no longer consider as simply there to be known and interpreted as such. His accusatory speech, in all its alarming presence, summoned up an abyss of emptiness, leading me to wonder: How could I be damned — sweet, innocent (well, not *so* innocent) me in my 40s? Had I always been damned? Was I damned forever? There were no easy answers to these questions; perhaps no answers at all, and certainly none that were merely coherent...

IV

Altizer interprets the full word of live speech as *embodiment*. This is not an innocent interpretation. It amounts to an outright rejection of intellectualist views of language as conveying primarily meaning or sense — as primarily a vehicle of *thinking*. These views are committed to linguistic logocentrism, whereby the signified, though disembodied, is the controlling element. This holds whether the meaning signified is held to be a coherent noematic core correlated

⁴ Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 6.

with individual signs (as on Husserl's view) or synchronically determined (deriving from the relations between signs rather than from discrete signs taken one by one: as in Saussurian linguistics).

By stressing embodiment, Altizer brings language not just down to earth but more specifically down to its embodied presence: to the *sensible* rather than to *sense*. In other words, *the body speaks*. It speaks in enunciation and pronouncement: in performative utterances, speech acts that accomplish what they signify by the very act of uttering them. The agent of this performance is the speaking body. The only question is: *whose body?* Altizer answers: the speaker's body: "The act of speech is self-embodiment, and it embodies itself by negating itself, by dividing itself from itself."⁵ We are not here talking about the personal subject: you or me. Some *other subject*, deeply pre-personal, is operative in speech that matters: "speech is the immediate presence of a self-embodied otherness."⁶

Such speaking comes from something other than the individual or personal subject, and the embodiment is of this other subject. It is this subject that realizes itself, *becomes itself*, not just despite but in and through its very alterity. Such speech, as thus embodied, is not only uttered or performed; it is *othered*. What it makes present is not just something absent at the time – something missing and not in my proximity – but absent being itself: absence-in-presence. We are here taken somewhere other than the linguisticity of meaning, however this latter is conceived; and somewhere other than sheer expressiveness, as in Merleau-Ponty's emphasis. We are taken to the other side of speaking – to a being that is nothing like the unconscious (described by Freud as "like another person") but is at once utterly impersonal and yet completely present. Present in and as its very absence...

V

Martin Heidegger – a thinker with whom Altizer had an ambivalent and fitful relationship – declared in the introduction to *Being and Time* that the trajectory of Western philosophy was set as soon as the ancient Greeks conceived of Being as "determinate presence." This claim is the root of Derrida's accusation that Western thought has been mired in a metaphysics of presence. Once organized at a conceptual level, determinate presence became systematic metaphysics in the hands of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, and all too many others. Only when indeterminacy became valorized as such – inspired by the breakthrough of quantum physics and the consideration of its philosophical implications in Alfred North Whitehead – does the metaphysics of presence come into serious question. Derrida's version of this questioning relies on *undecidability*, which he pursues by undoing the binaries that have dominated

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

Western thought: mind/body, self/other, man/God, and presence/absence.

Altizer was drawn to Derrida's thought, and even attempted to get him hired on the religious studies faculty at Stony Brook. This never happened, but one might claim that Altizer's writing represents his own effort to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. He pursued this by a radical rethinking of the binary pair presence/absence. He demonstrated that they are not on an equal footing — one is not the simple alternative to the other — and yet, on the other hand, they only exist together and at once, with the result that we cannot decide between them. In embodied speech in Altizer's strong sense we have both at once, each fully operative despite their apparent incompatibility. It is just their unlikely bonding — unlikely from the standpoint of common sense and formal logic — that must be affirmed in a speaking that embodies both at once. They are distinguishable in principle but indefeasible in practice — eminently so in speech acts that perform the death of God in our time. God is, at one and the same time, present and absent: fully both. This explosive coupling is the driving force of apocalypse as interpreted by Altizer. His writings, consternating at the level of linear logic, offer inspired testimony to the unmitigated indeterminacy, the undecidability between presence and absence, that is the secret motor of apocalypse.

VI

When Altizer writes in *The Self-Embodiment of God* that "presence is a demanding presence,"⁷ he might as well have been describing himself as a thinker. He was nothing if not a demanding presence: someone *demanding to be heard in his full word, his sheer insistence, his brutal inscription of truth* — spoken from the molten core of his troubled and troubling self, where there was an absence of established decorum and order. This core came forward to us in speech and writing that were the self-embodied expressions of his thought: their total presence in living language. Now this core, which we loved and feared at once, has gone quiescent. But we should remember what Tom himself taught us unforgettably: silence, regarded as a primary modality of absence, is the active other side of embodied speech. His silence — now literal and final — speaks to us in the continuing presence of his written word.

⁷ Ibid., 17.