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ALTIZER AND THE CHRISTIAN EPIC TRADITION

In order to confront the question of poetry as apocalyptic revelation, I wish to engage the overall theology and specifically the Joycean interpretations of Thomas J. J. Altizer.¹ Altizer offers an explicitly, programmatically theological reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* that insists on the genuinely theological character of these works. According to this reading, Christian revelation is consummated in Christian epic literature, of which Joyce's epic novels are the culmination. In what follows, I embrace these premises in working toward what turns out to be an understanding of theological revelation in literature that is rather different from Altizer's. This is a difference in view as to what theology and literature reveal: in the end, it is a difference in view about theological as well as poetic truth. I must acknowledge, however, that precisely this difference is what I find to be most revealing. I do not believe that my own view or any other is in itself true, except as a way of seeing into and exposing the sorts of differences that can emerge from this type of dialogical engagement. *Between* visions scintillates some intimation of truth that is no longer definable in terms of any discrete discourse and its own exclusive viewpoint. It is this movement between views and languages, more than any single one of them taken in and for itself, that is the revelation of truth—or, rather, that refracts insight of a theological and also of a poetic order.

Let us, then, attempt to face critically some of the implications of Altizer's theology, taking his interpretation of *Finnegans Wake* as the focal point. As an integral part of his own theological vision, Altizer attempts to interpret James Joyce and in particular *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*, in the context of what he calls the Christian epic tradition.² Thinking Christian theology through in a rigorously modern and especially Hegelian framework, Altizer discovers Joyce as an incomparably revelatory moment in this tradition of revelation, which he understands as specifically apocalyptic in character. Dante and his

¹ This essay extracts and adapts parts from Chapter 4 of Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). I gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint.

² Altizer's theses on Christian epic are developed in detailed literary-critical studies of his selection of Christian epic poets in Thomas J.J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985). These views are integrated, furthermore, into his general theology, especially in Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) and again in Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

successors, Milton, Blake, and finally Joyce are seen as carrying out the mission of realizing theological revelation as apocalypse in the modern world. Their poems show the full and final meaning of human life and death in the light of Christian revelation. Beyond the plethora of thematic connections and citations of Christian tradition, Joyce is aligned with a continuous prophetic movement comprising the efforts of secular writers to extend apocalyptic revelation from the Bible into the sphere of literary, artistic endeavor.

Altizer's interpretation accentuates unequivocally the radical rupture with the Catholic tradition, insisting on Joyce's deliberate apostasy and obstinate heterodoxy — yet precisely in order to highlight the specifically apocalyptic thrust of Joyce's vision.³ And this apocalyptic vision he esteems to be, after all, an authentic realization of theological truth, the theological truth of apocalypse that orthodox Christian tradition all along had been betraying. Altizer sees Joyce's work, particularly *Finnegans Wake*, together with Christian epic in general, as realizing the death of God that for him is the core of true, eschatological Christian experience and, consequently, theology. He reads theologians from John and Paul through Augustine and Luther to Hegel and Nietzsche as all deeply realizing the death of God. But just as fundamental are the revelations of the poets, particularly Dante, Milton, Blake, and finally Joyce. Their epic works become eucharisties in which the death of God the Word is shared out in tormented and martyred words with the readers. Readers realize in their own experience and interpretations of broken, mortified meaning the apocalypse that is proclaimed by the Christian gospel and that is actually accomplished by Christ's Crucifixion/Resurrection.

It is by ending the era of belief in a static, self-identical God, immutable in his transcendence, that the death of God, in Altizer's view, opens up a genuinely new conception of divinity. For Altizer, authentic apocalyptic Christianity stands in opposition to previous religions and their myths of eternal return. Altizer derives this idea, which remains fundamental all through the development of his thought, especially from Mircea Eliade's work in comparative religions.⁴ In this perspective, Christianity inaugurates the vision of divinity revealed in a unique, irreversible historical event, an incarnation in flesh that is a final and irrevocable submission to death. The self-emptying of divinity in death without return to an eternity outside of and over and above time marks for the first time in the history of religions the real and actual beginning of finite historical existence that never returns but passes toward a future that is genuinely new and apocalyptic. The past is now totally past and finally vanishes in real and irrevocable death, and a future that is not just a return of the past is now really born in all its astonishing newness. Unique, finite, historical existence is finally free to be just itself in its definitive perishing, once the past has been nailed to the cross and is thus crossed out forever. This is resurrected life, and it is no longer beholden to any past. Only now is full and absolute presence of the embodied individual and the

³ Altizer's intuitions in this regard are confirmed and updated with detailed documentation by James Robinson, *Joyce's Dante: Exile, Memory, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴ See Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

incarnate historical act possible. And just this “total presence” is what would have been realized by Joyce in the apocalypse of *Finnegans Wake*.⁵

Altizer emphasizes the heretical character of Christian epic and at the same time the absolute necessity of Christianity as ground not only of the epic but of the whole modern world. Joyce, like other modern epic poets, in his view, performs a dialectical reversal of Christian tradition, and so of every kind of dogmatic Christianity, in favor of an apocalyptic, visionary Christianity concerned not with conserving tradition but with ending, that is, with consummating the world. This reversal is necessary in order that Christianity be rediscovered as the religion of the *novum*, of the absolutely new, as against the return of the same. Its eternity is won precisely by ending the cycle of eternal return that dominates pre-Christian religion and also Christianity itself as grounded in an eternal and transcendent God, a God who is *only* transcendent and eternal and does not, at least not in his own person, die. The actuality of the event of Christianity is at the same time a definitive ending of the *inactuality* of the eternity outside time of all such purely transcendent religious presences. Altizer insists on the absolutely new and different eternity that is inaugurated by death, specifically the death on the Cross. This is the eternity of an event that remains forever irreversible precisely because it is the event of becoming definitively past, of perishing, never to come back again. Thus the full actuality of events is made possible by the death of God and takes place decisively in the central, literally crucial event of Christianity and of all history, the Crucifixion.

This new world and fully apocalyptic history has been apprehended and represented, according to Altizer, most completely and perspicuously, and in a contemporary language, by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. This can be seen most readily perhaps from the way that Crucifixion and Resurrection are deployed as key themes of the work. At the center of the *Wake*, in pages which happen also to comprise the first to be written, is an event that Altizer describes as “a divine acceptance of death.” It is concentrated into the utterance: “*I’ve a terrible errible lot todue todie todue tootorribleday.*”⁶ This phrase articulates a terrible, perhaps errant resignation to death as due (“todue”) today, as to-be-done presently – in the torrid heat and torrent of the present tense: “today” (Latin: *hodie*) becomes synonymous, by dint of quasi-homophony, with “to die” (*todie*). Altizer reads this statement as extending Joyce’s total demythologization of the divine death at the end of the Proteus episode in *Ulysses*: “God becomes man becomes fish,” which for Altizer describes “a victim wholly dissociated from any mythical form of Christ, a victim who is pure victim as such and no more, and hence by necessity a nameless or anonymous Christ.”⁷ Of course, it should not be overlooked that Joyce is also alluding to how this naked victim is inscribed into Christian symbolism, since the word for fish in Greek, ἰχθῦς, transliterated IXTHUS, was used by ancient Christians as an acronym for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” (*Iesous Xristos*

⁵ Altizer’s *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury, 1980) gives an outline of this and several other guiding insights that remain crucial for him throughout his career.

⁶ *Finnegans Wake*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1964 [1939]), 381.23–24; this passage is quoted in *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 171.

⁷ Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, 218.

Theou 'Uios Salvator). Joyce's "God becomes man becomes fish" exploits a latent comic potential inhering in what was initially a reverent symbol of the holy before it came to be transformed in the course of tradition. He explodes thereby the aura of holiness that would elevate the divine victim above the material world of ordinary comestibles.

Altizer also quotes the "prayer": "Grant sleep in hour's time, O Loud!"⁸ in which the name of the Lord has become just loud noise. Prayer here confesses itself to be distracted by distraction to the point where, prayer being impossible, only sleep can be wished, a wish for extinction in time, in an "hour," which is also what is most essentially "ours." Joyce is echoing, of course, the Book of Common Prayer: "Grant peace in our time, O Lord." But, when this refrain reverberates in his text, it suggests that our being has been fully disclosed as temporal to its very core, and thus as most essentially a perishing.⁹ This indeed is how Altizer takes it. However, there is also another crucial implication that imposes itself as the same parodic play is pursued in further deformations of liturgical formulae such as "Loud, hear us! / Loud, graciously hear us!"¹⁰ Insistent vocalization of "Lord" pronounced with a thick Gaelic accent as "Loud" mischievously exposes the resonant emptiness of language as *flatus voci*. We hear the holy mystery of the Name of the Lord God, from which all language derives and on which it all depends in monotheistic theologies of the Divine Name, reduced to a linguistic fact or flub. We are reminded, moreover, that language conjures up what it is *not* out of thin-air, out of the insubstantiality, the near immateriality of voice, and this holds even in the case of the divine Name. The name of the Lord, which substitutes for the unspeakable Name of God, sounds aloud (literally as "Loud") this uncannily pregnant and productive nothingness into which the purported presence of God evoked in prayer is evacuated.

This voiding of the Holy Name accords with Altizer's stress on the self-emptying of God in order that he become incarnate in a profane, contemporary language. But it also points another direction toward the death of God as a virtuality inherent in language as such. This might even be taken as *deactualizing* the death of God, as discovering God's absence to be already harboring in language in a way preceding and conditioning all possible events, and thus as beyond realization by any actual language and its supposedly apocalyptic significances. In the passage leading up to the prayer just quoted, a further phrase — "The timid hearts of words all exeomnosunt"¹¹ — by echoing the Latin *exeunt omnes*, as in the stage direction "all leave," meaning alternately "all die," likewise evokes the divine absence enshrined in every word. It bespeaks an emptiness of language that works as its omnipotence, its unlimited power of creation from nothing. These terms will furnish a basis for formulating the question concerning negative theology

⁸ *Finnegans Wake*, 259.4.

⁹ Viewed in this way, Joyce's project parallels Heidegger's almost contemporary disclosure of being as time and of human existence as "Being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tod*) in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927). I examine Joyce's affinities with modern phenomenological philosophy in "Linguistic Repetition as Theological Revelation in Christian Epic Tradition: The Case of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*," *Neophilologus* 90, no. 1 (2006): 155-172.

¹⁰ *Finnegans Wake*, 258.24-25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 258.2-3.

versus death-of-God theology in the interpretation of Joyce's linguistic apocalypse. For the moment, however, my main concern remains to read with Altizer rather than against him.

Altizer shows, furthermore, the full extent to which *Finnegans Wake* enfold an interpretation of the history of civilization and cosmos in the perspective rendered uniquely possible by Christianity. The work begins with a fall that, in the context of Christian epic tradition, reads as the fall of Satan. As a literary act, moreover, it aims to embody, and perhaps succeeds in embodying, to a superlative degree, the total presence of immanent historical consciousness that coincides with a new vision of eternity. The total immanence of God in the Word, that is, the word that is broken and dispersed and profaned in the unrelenting, audacious linguistic outrages and sacrileges that make up this uniquely blasphemous work is brought into clear and convincing focus by Altizer's interpretation. But it is especially the possibility of celebrating a new humanity on the basis of the total collapse of any established social and cosmic order that makes Joyce's vision apocalyptic in the sense Altizer advocates.

Finnegans Wake thus takes on unique significance for Altizer as the definitive modern apocalypse. Thoroughly integrated into his general theology, this work functions as the culmination of Christian epic and as fully realizing the truth of Christianity, its gospel of the death of God. The *Wake*, according to Altizer, reveals something that all Christian history struggles to render intelligible, something, however, that can become fully evident for the first time in the modern period alone. In this perspective, the utter demise of a transcendence which is only transcendence rather than divinity revealed in dying, in emptying and giving of itself without reserve for the benefit of all, has been fully realized only by distinctively modern consciousness. And Joyce's epic is constantly evoked by Altizer as the privileged site and crowning enactment of this revelation. The modern realization of death, specifically the death of God, is the key to this fulfillment.

What has been said so far suffices to suggest preliminarily how *Finnegans Wake* can be read, in company with Altizer, as a further transformation of the tradition of Christian epic and prophetic poetry that can be traced from Dante. It secularizes and thereby realizes theological revelation, even in aggressively undermining all dogmatic interpretations of revelation that would separate it absolutely from any admixture of poetry, and consequently from adulteration by the profane life of language. This theological revelation occurs through the sacrificial death of divinity, especially as refracted in language and in the world as language construes it. Indeed Joyce's strident violations of linguistic norms and propriety might be seen as the means by which he mimetically continues and actually carries out the sacrifice of God through sacrificing sense and order in language. However, as an alternative to Altizer's emphasis on the definitiveness of the death of God, I wish to argue that *Finnegans Wake* is theologically revelatory particularly by virtue of its structures of repetition, linguistic and typological. My stress on the role of repetition in revelation runs counter to the emphasis Altizer gives to the finality of death, the uniqueness and irreversibility of death as the definitive, apocalyptic event, the death of God. For him, death is the "actualization of

eternity in an irrevocable event."¹² This divergence will become crucial as we sift the significance of Altizer's theology for the possibility of a poetics of apocalypse and of revelation generally.

Altizer has given an invaluable impulse to readings of Christian prophetic poetry, including Joyce's epics, as specifically apocalyptic in import. The light he sheds obliges us to investigate his theology of apocalypse further and to consider how far it can guide our insight into poetry as apocalypse in general. But the engagement with Altizer in the remaining segment of this essay will lead to envisioning also some limits to the identification of poetry with apocalypse. The limits to direct disclosure in language of any final and total truth are what make specifically poetry necessary as a means of expression for apocalyptic vision. Consequently, alongside apocalyptic theology, a negative theology is crucial for explaining the role of poetry as prophetic and apocalyptic, for poetry is precisely the veil that covers over and prevents total disclosure of what theological apocalypse in principle would reveal. Altizer's apocalyptic theology is not inclined to concede anything to this twilight zone of the not fully revealed, or of the "re-veiled," that is, the concealing that is intrinsic to the unconcealing or revelation itself. His theology proposes a total presence in pure immanence. But the faith embodied in this vision is not the same as the faith that animates the literary works he reads, nor is it even necessarily the same as the belief that is actually operative in his own literary-critical insights.

I have chosen to read passages that I believe compellingly illustrate the pertinence of Altizer's paradigm for reading Joyce. Yet reading in them a total sublation of the past to a present that is totally present seems to me to violate the poetic character of Joyce's writing. Joyce's text entails a trace of otherness in repetition, in its typological structures. This is what refuses to yield itself to the total presence that Altizer's apocalypse proclaims. Indeed this otherness is the God that Altizer wants to kill and erase, or if not identifiably "God," then at least an openness to such a possibility as God. It is because of repetition, because what we experience has come to us we know not whence, not exhaustively, and surely not as purely our own production, that "God" cannot be eliminated from our world. This is the acknowledgment of an apocalypse that is not totally present, of a possibility that transcends our horizon. It is probed in poetry, and poetry remains the veil that keeps this apocalypse from becoming final and authoritative within our world, and consequently leaves that world free.

Precisely this horizon of transcendence must be erased for Altizer's apocalypse of total presence to take place. Altizer eliminates this horizon, together with all residues from the past, in order to affirm an absolute beginning as necessary in the constitution and emancipation of the free, autonomous subject for whom God is dead. In *The Genesis of God* Altizer argues that only an absolute beginning can "foreclose the possibility of the repetition of beginning and of the eternal repetition of beginning, a repetition that finally and actually ends with the ultimate enactment of a pure and total irreversibility."¹³ He maintains that "the absolute necessity of a unique and

¹² Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 36.

¹³ Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 66.

absolute beginning is the absolute impossibility of eternal return."¹⁴ Altizer's theology styles itself and indeed *is* an atheology. God is definitively erased by the self-originating beginning of an absolutely free, autonomous, individual, modern consciousness. This entails "the absolute negation of eternal return,"¹⁵ for "Only an absolute negation and transcendence of eternal return makes possible a subject or an 'I' which can only be itself, an 'I' which is a once-and-for-all and unique 'I.'"¹⁶

Now it must be admitted that Altizer, too, often gives an ostensibly crucial place to repetition in his theological thinking and in his reading of Joyce. In *History as Apocalypse* he writes, "The fall, condemnation, and crucifixion of H.C.E. is the dominant epic action in the *Wake*, and it is repeated again and again, even as the host is ever broken in the mass."¹⁷ He writes further of "a ritual presence above all in the eternal repetition and return of a primordial and divine sacrifice."¹⁸ It is not that Altizer ignores the dynamics of repetition: they purportedly belong centrally to his conception of the realization of apocalypse. He embraces repetition in the form particularly of the Nietzschean doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence, which he takes to be the reversal of all myths of eternal return, for Nietzsche's doctrine would supposedly identify apocalypse with the fully actual, with what happens in history.¹⁹ Yet the result of this concern is to reverse repetition, so that it becomes annihilation rather than affirmation of what it repeats. The "return," as Altizer understands it, is so total and without residue that it frees itself absolutely from the past and owes it nothing. It is repetition that completely erases that which it repeats, which is quite simply everything.²⁰

Altizer acknowledges and indeed insists that apocalyptic vision is the repetition of all of history and of the cosmos and quite simply of everything whatsoever. Yet the repetition is not for him an affirmation of continuity with this past but just the opposite. It is a final and definitive severance from this past, and even more decisively the irrevocable annihilation of this past as in any sense past, as in any way *inaccessible*. All such barriers and veils are broken down—this precisely is the etymological meaning, after all, of "apocalypse"—as when the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom at the moment of Christ's death,²¹ along with other apocalyptic signs (the earth quaked, rocks were rent, and graves were opened and the bodies of saints rose up and appeared to many). And Altizer always takes this stripping away

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, 239.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁹ Altizer dedicates an essay specifically to Nietzsche's teaching with "Eternal Recurrence and the Kingdom of God," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge: MIT, 1985).

²⁰ Edith Wyschogrod, "Crucifixion and Alterity: Pathways to Glory in the Thought of Altizer and Levinas," in *Thinking Through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer*, ed. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 89-103, demonstrates from another angle Altizer's erasure of the past as "the trace of the Other."

²¹ Matthew 27:51.

of veils to be total. That is what makes him the uncompromisingly radical thinker of apocalypse that he is.²²

Altizer approaches repetition from the standpoint of apocalypse, so that it too becomes total revelation in the here and now of the totally actual. Total presence and the final revelation of death is what is repeated. There *is* nothing else, nothing that remains hidden, no mystery, no transcendence of any kind. I suggest rather an approach from poetry and from the mediations of language, which can arguably become apocalyptic, though we never quite grasp fully or finally what is revealed. Total apocalypse, in this view, is a possibility we may glimpse or sense rather than a manifest truth, and much less a stable or achieved platform from which we can organize the world. Repetition does, in my own view as well in Altizer's (and Nietzsche's), in some sense abolish the past, but the present does not thereby become fully actual and without residue, so as to be picked clean of anything latent or virtual. Whereas for Altizer repetition abolishes the past definitively and irrevocably, for me it abolishes the past only as *merely* past. In repetition, as I understand it, the past comes back and becomes actual, but always only partially actual. There is also a past that never becomes fully actual because it was never actually present in the first place.²³ Such an archaic past forever subtracts itself from history and hides in an apocalyptic totality that is never manifest. This sort of inarticulate totality is typically seen by Altizer (as by Hegel before him) as anti-modern or "regressive."²⁴

In "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," Altizer discusses the redemption of the past through repetition that makes it fully present in "a moment of full or total time" in modern masters, particularly Proust and Rilke, along with Kafka, Eliot, and Joyce.²⁵ This aesthetic moment of total presence is a higher, more essential, spiritual reality that is ideal without being abstract. It represents for Altizer a human overcoming of archaic repetition and its subjection to an inhuman eternity. Through its openness to contingency, contemporary repetition is thus a "full reversal" of cultic repetition, which rather abolishes contingency by the enactment of eternal archetypes.

Altizer rightly maintains that repetition is total – it is the way that the totality of the past can come back into play even after having been lost, however definitive and irrevocable the loss seemed. Repetition is the mechanism that enables history to be totalized. This claim to totality, moreover, is the characteristic mark of theological vision. Yet precisely this completeness and comprehensiveness is what cannot be represented nor, consequently, be definitively and exhaustively revealed. It is what refuses to give itself up to apocalypse, to final disclosure. It remains a thing rather of poetry, of "making" (up) and metaphor, where metaphor furnishes an image that is

²² Altizer comments on "multiple forms of a uniquely modern apocalyptic totality" and discusses the necessity for "totalizing apocalypticism itself" in *Godhead and the Nothing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 93.

²³ The roots of this idea, which has been much bandied about by Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida, lie in Schelling's 1811 essay fragment "Die Weltalter" ("The Ages of the World").

²⁴ See, for example, *The Genesis of God*, 33 and 69.

²⁵ Altizer, "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," *Dialog* 19 (1980): 274–80, quote on 279.

always only partially identifiable with what it evokes. The authority of theology, as Altizer evokes it, overwhelms and kills the poetic mode of disclosure of Joyce's language. The problem is that Altizer's theological discourse attempts to state the apocalypse that the poetic discourse he interprets manages to insinuate and enact without explicitly formulating it. Altizer's discourse is brilliant as a critical discourse enabling the poetic language of the epic text of Joyce and others to be understood and experienced as never before in its theological challenge and audacity. But, as theological discourse pretending to unequivocally state the apocalypse, it becomes also something more than that. It becomes an appropriation of the literary text. This theological takeover results especially from its authoritative, prophetic tone.

Despite Altizer's insistent declarations of the death of God – and in defiance of every type of rhetoric – the past is never dead once and for all; no matter how many times it is killed, it keeps coming back again. It haunts us in unconscious and virtual ways over which we can never completely gain control. Hence the ancient impulse to exorcise it and lay the ghosts of the ancestors to rest. Now Altizer, too, conceives of a resurrection together with death, but it is not of the past; it can be resurrection only of the future, which for the first time is genuinely future because of its absolutely abandoning and burying the past. Thus is realized the divine power to be in and for oneself alone without extrinsic origin in the past or in any otherness. This is how Altizer's apocalypse entails a "repetition" that actually reverses Nietzsche's eternal return of the same and finally annihilates the past without repeal. Altizer's total presence as the total actualization of all that has ever been marks in reality the end of the Eternal Return.²⁶

For Altizer, what is repeated *ad infinitum* is an actual event, the death of God, the event of the finite. The actual, the finite, our world or ourselves, the sphere of immanence is the only reality for Altizer, just as for Hegel, at least as Altizer reads him, and it is therefore infinite, undelimited by anything outside itself. This is really divine power: to be only oneself and unconditioned, to be the beginning of a history that is itself alone and therefore absolutely actual, not the reenactment of some other scenario, of someone else's story. God, accordingly, is to be understood wholly in terms of *this* world. Against Altizer, I am choosing to see this world more as a gift than simply as an existential and empirical given; it opens upon a mystery of whence and wherefore, rather than being itself ultimate, final, "apocalyptic" presence. This is more like the attitude of faith in religious traditions, and it is often expressed clearly enough in Christian epic. Beyond all the secularizing tendencies of this tradition, Dante, Milton, and Blake open a horizon that extends past this world of ours and its actuality. All that is actual they take to be also the enactment of other worlds, eternal worlds such as Blake imagines in declaring his "great task":

²⁶ D. G. Leahy, "The Diachrony of the Infinite in Altizer and Levinas: Vanishing without a Trace and the Trace without Vanishing," in *Thinking Through the Death of God*, also argues that Altizer's apocalypse entails "not the eternal recurrence of all things, but the *end of the eternal recurrence of all things*," in effect an "absolute inversion" of Nietzsche (106).

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. the Human Imagination. . . .²⁷

This is not the actual world, the external world, the world of history. It *does* express a strong secularizing sense that God and humanity are one in the Imagination, which is within, in worlds of thought, and it thus avoids alienation into the inaccessible other world of an afterlife. The other world is discovered in its presence as another dimension of perception of this world rather than as any separate region or universe. The other, the eternal world is to be found in the here and now, but it is not fully consummated here and now with the definitiveness of the historically factual. On the contrary, it is an openness to worlds of the imagination reaching infinitely beyond the actual and factual.

Altizer's theology entails very simply a decision to exist in and for oneself out of one's own existence here and now as absolute actuality which is not beholden to any other – to any predecessor or ground – that is not itself. All that is past has simply perished. Neither can there be any Other that is purely and only other. By this decision to absolutely affirm one's own existence, every past and every other is annihilated – is made as nothing – for the one that so decides and acts. Whatever is "repeated" is appropriated totally and thereby made so "new" as to have no trace of connection whatsoever with anything past or other. No past could have any consistency of its own as in any way enabling it to offer a minimum of resistance to such total appropriation. Any such acknowledgment would cause consciousness, according to Altizer, to fall short of the modern affirmation of self as an absolute beginning in an irreversible historical time that can never return to what was.

There is a rage to totalize in Altizer that is typically theological. But it is quite different from another kind of characteristically theological impulse that is a willingness to be part of a totality, to be part of an order which one does not constitute or even grasp the principle of because it has a beginning that transcends one. This, too, is a theological attitude, one that is open and expectant toward what is external to oneself. It is theological in relating to a ground or supreme principle of things as a whole, though it cannot grasp or know or articulate its God – nor can it, therefore, pronounce Him definitively dead. Altizer rages against this kind of openness which represents for him a regressive hankering after primordial unity and wholeness and a persisting alienation from oneself as finite and historical. This is what Altizer thinks Christian revelation and crucifixion, and the modern world they give rise to, have finally overcome and even rendered impossible.²⁸

²⁷ William Blake, "Jerusalem," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David W. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), plate 5, lines 18-20.

²⁸ This, incidentally, is where I differ from Mark C. Taylor as well. Even though Taylor often comes out as a strong advocate of the wholly Other, he is often averse to perceiving it at work in Christian tradition and its transcendences.

For Altizer, faith in this sense is no longer really a viable choice, not a live option in the modern world, and he presents this situation as a plain fact, thereby covering over the way that it is *his* choice to consider faith in a transcendent God to be outmoded and even “impossible” in modern times. His is a fateful and courageous, but not a necessary or inescapable decision. There are actually innumerable witnesses in modern and postmodern culture to the possibility of faith in an Other beyond one’s reach and beyond everything that can be grasped as “actual.”²⁹ Many orient their existence to such an otherness to all that is revealed, rather than taking the immanence of their own existence as isolated individuals to be absolute and without exit. Such an Other is indeed unthinkable and unsayable, but that does not prevent us from relating ourselves to it and orienting the fractured openness of our existence toward it. In the end, the deepest poetry, as a metaphorical language of the unsayable, is concerned with nothing other than this.

For some, such an attitude might seem nostalgic, but for me it is not a question of nostalgia so much as of acknowledgment of the other external to me and my freedom. This is a difference of theological posture, an attitude of faith very different from the self-assertion and self-realization, even in absolute self-annihilation à la Blake, that Altizer advocates. What is intended in this acknowledgment is not known. It is silent and invisible and cannot be delimited. It is a “bad infinite” in Hegel’s terms and “Mystery” as the whore of Babylon for Blake. But acknowledging it affords an alternative to consuming oneself in the isolated apocalypse of one’s own absolutely inescapable presence. This acknowledgment entails a choice to live in relation to the Other that is not actually revealed, rather than to consume oneself totally in the apocalypse of self, of identity and its absolute disintegration into the Nothing of self-annihilation. There is, of course, a kind of freedom and even salvation in this latter approach to existence. It is a decision to assume utter responsibility for oneself. Yet modernity and its self-certainty, its apocalypse of chaos, may not after all be all there is, and indeed it still proves possible to live in faith toward what is entirely other than ourselves.

Phrased in these terms, the question is not so much about whether one imagines that there is some superior Mind in control of things; it is not about what we can imagine at all but rather about what we cannot imagine. This question arises once we opt, or at least allow, for a faith that would point us beyond what we can comprehend and thus would make room for an origin antecedent to ourselves of the order by which we find ourselves so often surprised. Are we going to respect this ordering principle, whatever or whoever it is, and acknowledge ourselves to be beholden to it, or are we going to make our freedom and its unconditional exercise its own foundation or abyss? Altizer opts for the latter. He is not incapable of recognizing order as it is given in the universe, but he evidently feels compelled to appropriate it, to deny it as belonging to someone else, to kill it as God or God-given, thus to deny it as a possible manifestation of divinity. He is compelled to do this in the name of a humanity that he thinks must shake off self-imposed tyranny and assume itself and its, in truth, unconditional freedom.

²⁹ Some good examples can be found in Regina Schwartz, ed., *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Others will opt to live in a world in which we are not unconditioned and yet recognize and orient ourselves to the unconditioned as Other. It is my contention that this choice can be persuasively motivated by the astonishingly grace-ful turns and re-turnings of a text such as *Finnegans Wake*. Emblematic is its "Gracehoper" hopping by haphazard felicities from hap-piness to hap-piness, or from contingency to contingency: "The Gracehoper was always jiggling ajog, hoppy on akkant of his joyicity."³⁰ Faith, after all, is by definition faith in what is not seen but rather hoped for. This is so in Paul's definition, or that anyway of Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Taken this way, theological revelation becomes purely openness to revelation. Positive declarations concerning what is or has been revealed betray the transcendent sovereignty of divinity by lashing it down in language of human forging. Poetry, by springing open the latches of language, can effectively engender this openness, which is apocalyptic. It is disclosure within a certain absoluteness, the limit case of unconditional openness, openness to God, to God's advent or event. However, this also puts apocalypse back in the hands of God and rejects any human claim to "realize" it.

Such faith gives no positive directions in pragmatic social terms, and it could never be used to run a religion. Nevertheless, it does point a direction. In fact, it entails a whole orientation of life. Everything that we live and do from within this outlook and existential stance is shaped by its relation to what might be recognized as God, indeed as the absolutely sovereign Lord of my life and of life *tout court*. This I consider to be the apocalyptic revelation to which poetic work of the order of *Finnegans Wake* is apt to open us, even though it shies away from all programmatic agendas for the realization of apocalypse. I am suspicious that apocalypse degenerates to ideology when it assumes the field of representation. Poetry is representation, and to that extent *not* apocalypse, but it is representation that can be peculiarly adept at canceling itself out as representation, and that is what enables it to approach very near to and open itself into apocalypse.

Particularly metaphor embodies these negative capabilities of poetry. Metaphor is language that denies its own literal meaning in order to project toward some other, previously inconceivable meaning. Metaphor opens meaning beyond the actual and factual. As "live metaphor," it projects a new meaning on the basis of the old by turning it in a different direction.³¹ It thereby generates its own new signified, where none is given in advance in the existing system of concepts making up a given language. Poetic metaphor is brought into relation with religious faith by opening toward an indeterminacy of meaning which is, however, anchored to some concrete, particular given or gift, an image.³² There is a concrete element in a metaphor that projects beyond itself to unlimited further meanings, some even of an

³⁰ *Finnegans Wake*, 408.21–22.

³¹ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

³² For the idea of metaphor as leading to indeterminacy of meaning, see Gerhard Neumann, "Die 'absolute' Metapher: Ein Abgrenzungsversuch am Beispiel Stéphane Mallarmés und Paul Celans," *Poetica* 3 (1970): 188–225, and Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

abstract nature. This is the element that repeats itself in all the innumerable possible meanings that open in the perspective opened by the metaphor.

The type, whether literary or theological, repeats itself in this manner too. The type similarly gives a new twist to a traditional figure by placing it concretely in the present and opening its meaning to being construed in fresh directions from within undelimited new contexts. I have previously evoked a religious kind of faith as belonging to the openness with which we attend to the open possibilities of meaning in any given type-figure from Scripture or literature, and this is the same sort of attention as is required to discern the meanings of metaphor. It is an active openness to letting meaning be given. It means remaining undecided as to what comes from the indeterminate source or Giver of meaning and what, on the other hand, is determined by the form of reception imposed by the human discernor.³³

At the same time as it effects a rupture with the logic of language as literal statement and a negation of the world that simply is, metaphor also works at another level to evoke unprecedented possibilities of *unrepresentable* unity. A metaphor is a monad in which all things can be seen together from a particular perspective. Metaphor, through a single image, can give an entirely new angle of vision upon the whole world construed as through a window opened by a principle of similarity replicated *ad infinitum*.³⁴ The universe is reenvisioned under the aspect of the likeness of all in accordance with the content of the metaphor. It is turned into unity—a uni-verse—by the turning (*versus* in Latin, from *vertere*, to turn) of the trope. The Christian apocalyptic vision of the unity of all things reconciled to God in Christ through the blood of his Cross,³⁵ so that “Christ is all, and in all,”³⁶ is paradigmatic of this sort of ultimate apotheosis of metaphor. It constitutes a quintessentially metaphorical type of vision, turning typically on such tropes as “one body” for the Church as the mystical body of Christ and “one flesh” for the sacrament of marriage, which turns out, with the marriage of the Lamb, to be the culminating metaphor in the Apocalypse of John.

This illustrates how metaphor bears the apocalyptic vision of all things brought back to unity in God or in absolutely simple Being. Radical, or what Northrop Frye calls “anagogic” metaphor entails an unqualified assertion of identity between different things or ideas (“A is B”).³⁷ It projects an apocalyptic transformation and renewal of the world, since such utter

³³ The superimposition of human *ingenium* upon divine *creatio continua* is at the origin of language in Vico’s conception. His theory, as the culmination of a long tradition of speculation in rhetoric and theology, is studied in detail by John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1668–1744* (Lewiston, NY: Mellon, 1991), part 1, chapter 5.

³⁴ The monadic metaphysics of metaphor are suggestively discussed by Jorge Luis Borges, “Apuntaciones críticas: La metáfora,” *Cosmópolis* 35 (1952): 395–402, and “Examen e metáfora,” *Inquisitiones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952): 65–75.

³⁵ Colossians 1:20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:11.

³⁷ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 123. Frye develops his conception of metaphor as identity further in Chapter 3: “Identity and Metaphor,” of *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Yovanovich, 1990), 63–96.

oneness is not in the least possible in our spatiotemporal universe, where everything is separate and divided up in space and time. Frye conceives the regaining of identity at all levels, cosmically of the oneness of Paradise, as the motive for metaphor and the universal purpose of literature.³⁸ This anagogical, apocalyptic sphere can be evoked by metaphor, even if it cannot be objectively represented. Metaphor, if it is believed, instills something like faith that all things come together in the end, but it does not produce this vision actually and objectively worked out as a system. It tacitly suggests, through an image or picture, a wholeness that it cannot logically articulate.

This is a kind of wholeness and gift that Altizer's theology can never admit. It is a wholeness which is always only partially realized, as in Wallace Stevens's poem, "The Motive of Metaphor," where things are seen "With the half colors of quarter-things," under the obscurity of the moon, and not even death is experienced as total: "You like it under the trees in autumn, / Because everything is half dead." Metaphor leaves unrealized the totality which it nevertheless evidently presupposes and intimates, even as it departs from what language literally denotes according to "The ABC of being." There is repetition of words here and endless metamorphoses of sense, but as if without meaning, since meaning in any proper sense is always broken or crippled and is, in the end, as indecipherable as the wind: "The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves / And repeats words without meaning."³⁹

For Altizer the cosmos has become totally chaos because he is certain that there is no transcendent principle to order and unify it. This is what "knowing the death of God," in a phrase he often repeats, entails. The only order consists in purely human orderings. But in Joyce's texts an order of things keeps cropping up mysteriously, as if through no one's control. It is not perhaps possible to disentangle it from the order that I as reader project and impart to the text, but is this latter ordering, then, all there is? Does the text not give me something too that I cannot account for? Might not everything I do in interpreting the text just as well be seen as already contained within it, as consisting in implications that I simply bring out into the open? This text might yet be a revelation of a divinity, even in all of its sacrilegious exposures and plain profanity, as in the text of Joyce. For Altizer, that divinity is totally dead and thereby makes possible the beginning of new life in the present and as totally present. Resurrected life fully begins for humanity only after the definitive death of God. But this is to abstract oneself from the process of the text, to have apprehended it already. And, then, for this kind of reading, it is no longer a poetic text. Then the text no longer reveals itself to us—rather it is made to reveal only what we have already comprehended. This is to circumscribe the open revelation that is true theological mystery—or ongoing poetic manifestation and disclosure.

In a critique avowedly indebted to Altizer and strikingly similar to the one I have reached by a different route, Andrew Mitchell likewise valorizes ambiguity, undecidability, hesitancy, and argues that repetition cannot be

³⁸ Northrop Frye, "The Motive for Metaphor," *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

³⁹ "The Motive of Metaphor" is quoted from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954; New York: Knopf, 1990).

erased even in the final apocalypse of the death of God. For the killing of God is never finished. Referring to the Nietzschean text from *The Gay Science* (sec. 125), Mitchell observes, "If one must become a God to be God's murderer, then God is not killed but serially replaced." And further, "God's death cannot be regarded as a *fait accompli*, because He dies only to reappear again, each appearance announcing a subsequent death. And would not an infinite God require an infinite death, repeated at each moment?"⁴⁰ This remark points to the circumstance that nothing finite like death can ever exhaust the infinite. Believing in the ultimacy of death or in the finitude of God (as conceived by Hegel) is an article of faith. Altizer, like Hegel, negates the infinity of God and derives divine power from the finitude of death. Yet negation itself is infinite; it is never final or exhausted. And beyond any God that is negated, this infinity of negativity is still operative as the "divine" life in which we live and can relate to a God that outlives every "apocalypse." Of course, Altizer's point is that death is, nevertheless, for us final, irreversible negation—end of story. But are we within or outside of this story? The same question must be posed with relation to God. Posing the question is, in a sense, already taking up a position outside. The *question* at least remains infinitely open—at least as long as we live and go on asking.

Before concluding, and in order to conclude, I must acknowledge a piquant irony. In order to express a view on Joyce and Christian epic, I have found it necessary to insistently negate the interpretation of Thomas Altizer, which nevertheless I am awed by and in fact believe at least as much as I believe anything I myself am able to write, whether by way of addition or detraction, about it. Does this not show, inadvertently corroborating Altizer's thesis, the inescapability of negation, the inevitability of denial, at least in critical discourse, vis-à-vis the most powerful mediators of the truth or apocalypse we wish to embrace? By a negatively theological logic, do we not confirm the inexhaustibility of that power and truth in our never finished, yet ever so limited, attempts to resist it? Can this very gesture of negating, given the coincidence of all opposites, not be read as a giving up of oneself to the other in this still too ungrateful way?

⁴⁰ Andrew John Mitchell, "'So it appeals to all of us': The Death of God, *Finnegans Wake*, and the Eternal Recurrence," *James Joyce Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2002), 420 and 423.