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ALTIZER AND DELEUZE: MATERIAL METAPHYSICS FOR  
DISASTROUS TIMES

Some say Thomas J. J. Altizer is dead, others say his theology is a dead end. I am not so sure of either. I heard his heart stopped beating but I still hear the repetitions of his inverted gospel all around.<sup>1</sup> I hear it calling from below, from the earth, the melting ice, the overheated lands, the stones crying out an inverted gospel in a repetitious mania. God is dead, God is grounded, wounded, dying with us, incarnated, marinated in the consequences of human incapability, even evil. A marinated, incarnated Christ/Satan – the two have become inseparable in an actual *coincidentia oppositorum*. The only resurrection possible, though barely plausible, is one of a total presence, of absolute truth, revealing the abysmal facts of the current situation. A resurrection inseparable from life itself, from the possibility of life in actual accordance with the realities of creation. Not a life lived on a loan from a make-believe world of ideas where theoretical calculations legitimate use of that which is not ours. Not a life lived on resources we did not create ourselves, resources that our make-believe world pretends are endless and ever at the whim of human disposal.

Still, Altizer, the academic bad guy, the metaphysical modernist, the nutty, repetitive preacher who, in our first encounter, told me all about his actual meeting with Satan – is he an apt thinker for the current planetary crisis?<sup>2</sup> This article argues he could be. By relating Altizer to Gilles Deleuze I am *not* arguing that Altizer is inspired by and in that sense belongs to a vitalist or hermetic thought tradition but I *am* arguing that when read through a Deleuzian lens, material aspects of his metaphysics stand forth, as does the contemporary relevance of the peculiar style through which his metaphysics materializes.

The death of God theology movement in which Altizer was placed by media appeared in the wake of another human disaster.<sup>3</sup> Like the ecological crisis it was as corporeal as it was existential: the Holocaust. In *The Descent into Hell: A Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (1970), Altizer explored the divine movement into flesh, into the actual, earthly body. The Christian incarnation is a “descent into hell,” Altizer stated, since earthly life after the Holocaust cannot be viewed as in any way

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this analysis is published in Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt: Foucault, Deleuze, and Theology Beyond Representation* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2014), but its implications today – only a few years later – are very different.

<sup>2</sup> My first encounter with Tom Altizer was at the International Society for Religion, Literature, and Culture (ISRLC) conference in Stirling, Scotland, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Lissa McCullough, “Historical Introduction,” 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), xv.

“heavenly” without ignoring these actual bodily historic experiences.<sup>4</sup> Seven years later came *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), which Altizer himself regarded one of his most important works since this, for him, is where medium and message finally meet. *The Self-Embodiment of God* is a book that, according to Lissa McCullough, “remains the purest expression of Altizer’s vision, and truly to read this book is to read Altizer straight up, but for that very reason it is perhaps the least accessible of his works.”<sup>5</sup>

It is also a book, however, that many readers almost certainly open once and never again. It is probably the most incomprehensible of his works due to its seeming disconnection from any material reality or concrete academic discussion. What happened in between *The Descent into Hell* and *The Self-Embodiment of God*, one may wonder? Had Altizer lost contact with the outer world during those seven years? Or is there a way to understand his contribution so that his own high regard of it makes sense even in the light of human disasters? Let us explore this question further, starting by taking a closer look *The Self-Embodiment of God*, beginning with a characteristic passage:

A fully self-actualized presence can only be a total presence, and a presence in which speech and silence are one. A total speech must also necessarily be a total silence, an actually total silence, a silence which is empty of every partial or isolated expression of speech. Not until these expressions of speech have passed into silence, or have enacted their own final silence, can presence be total or can speech and silence be one. Yet speech and silence are one in the final self-emptying of speech. In that act, and in its enactment, and its reenactment, actuality is wholly self-actualized, and is wholly self-actualized because it wholly enacts itself. And it wholly enacts itself by wholly realizing the immediate actuality of total presence. That is the presence, and the one and only presence, in which self-realization is total actualization, an actualization in which presence is both total and is actually at hand: “The resurrection and the life are I.”<sup>6</sup>

The passage is characteristic not only of *The Self-Embodiment of God* but of Altizer’s style in general in which the repetition of words often creates a circular or spiral motion. His repetitious flow of words breaks with the academic norm by excluding every other voice; there are no references, no footnotes in this keywork of his. The sentences are built up by numerous subordinate clauses that often start by repeating the object from the foregoing clause, making the object subject in the subordinate clause. Thus, a style is created where keywords rather than key names are repeated and used to carry the text and the thought forward. With each repetition the understanding of the word is only slightly (at least seemingly) developed. Repetition is also evident in Altizer’s frequent and repetitious use of strong adjectives like “necessarily,” “totally,” “absolutely,” “actually” and statements of certainty as in the above: “the one and only presence, in which self-realization is total actualization, an actualization in which presence is both total and is actually at hand.” Or: “A total speech must also necessarily be a total silence, an actually total

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> McCullough, “Historical Introduction,” xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 91.

silence.” Altizer, in other words, repeats absolute claims, grand assertions with every sentence and hence appears to prove both Mark C. Taylor and John Caputo right in their critique of his endeavor.

Taylor contended that the fact that “Altizer repeats his conclusive claim again and again and again” indicated it was time for Altizer to take the consequences of his own gospel and actually leave God and theology behind.<sup>7</sup> Caputo similarly argued that Altizer kept referring to the philosophical death of God without taking the full consequences of it.<sup>8</sup> Altizer did not leave the Grand Narrative or metaphysical foundation behind and he did not refrain from presenting truths about God, he stated.<sup>9</sup> Are they correct, is it time to leave Altizer among the dead? Or, is there a way to understand repetition as a subversive writing strategy when used by a theologian whose aim is that of disrupting not only the repetition of classical theology but even the repetition of destructive human powers?

#### A DIFFERENT DIFFERENCE

There is an obvious problem with Altizer’s style as exemplified in the lengthy quote above – and as expressed through Taylor’s and Caputo’s critique – namely that Altizer’s repetitions leave the reader with limited options: Either you accept the paradox of a text that demands a constant nodding “Yes!” to statements of absolute truth while, at the same time, claiming that “speech is silence.” Claiming, in other words, that every statement, every absolute truth, is simultaneously confirmed and dissolved by its opposite. Or, as a second option, you simply dismiss the text claiming it is a dead end, as many have done.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, however, there is the possibility of following the text beyond that which makes sense, to read until these repetitions of truth stand forth as a play with assertion as such.

Edward S. Casey captures the starting point for such a third option when he describes the two different kinds of identity at work in *The Self-*

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<sup>7</sup> Mark C. Taylor, “Betraying Altizer,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 26–27.

<sup>8</sup> Caputo stated that in “Altizer the death of God primarily meant that the absolute center had shifted its residence from transcendence to immanence by means of a metaphysics of *kenosis*, by which the full presence of a transcendent God was transported to the plane of immanence.” John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Caputo’s critique is discussed by Jeffrey W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey, “Radical Theology and the New Atheism,” in *Religion and the New Atheism*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), and by Rodkey in his doctoral dissertation, “In the Horizon of the Infinite: Paul Tillich and the Dialectic of the Sacred,” PhD diss., Drew University, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Many have expressed legitimate scepticism regarding Altizer’s endeavor; for example, Jayne Svenungson, *Guds återkomst: En studie av gudsbegreppet inom postmodern filosofi* (PhD diss., Systematic Theology, Lund University, 2002), 39; and Mark C. Taylor, “Altizer’s Originality,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (September 1984), 569–84. Twenty years later Taylor presents a more developed yet strikingly similar critique in his essay “Betraying Altizer,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 11–28. Edward S. Casey’s essay in the same volume, “Abyssal Absences,” asks ironically, “How dare one talk in these outlandish, not to say outmoded, metaphysical ways these days?” (Casey, “Abyssal Absences: Body and Place in Altizer’s Atheology,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 125).

*Embodiment of God*, the *simple* and the *non-simple* kind.<sup>11</sup> First, Casey argues, there is the simple identity, which is a kind of identity whose fate, in Altizer's vision, is to disappear.<sup>12</sup> The simple identity is identity thought apart from otherness. It is, then, the kind of identity that makes it possible to differentiate *this* from *that*; to nail down what a phenomenon really is based on that from which it differs. In *The Self-Embodiment of God*, this simple identity is expressed as the idea of God's eternal presence, and according to Altizer this simple identity cannot and will not persist. In Altizer's view, the very utterance of "God" makes God's simple identity disappear, which is why this identity as eternal presence simply will not stand. Altizer writes: "We acknowledge the disappearance of that presence [God's eternal presence] when we say God, and by saying God we sanction that disappearance, and thereby embody in our own voice our estrangement from an omnipresent and eternal now."<sup>13</sup> The word God cannot capture God's eternal presence but rather subverts the very idea of such a presence, which is why the word fails in defining a simple identity and, instead, indicates that identity is always non-simple.

In consequence, the fate of the simple identity affects not only the purely theological notion of divine identity but *any* assertion that renders possible an identity free of otherness. According to Altizer: "Only an otherness that is finally other than itself can truly be other than an original and undifferentiated identity which is eternally the same."<sup>14</sup> The very notion of simple identity as such is, to Altizer, unavoidably self-destructive. In that very moment when identity becomes actual, spoken, incarnated in the singular linguistic moment it also becomes other than its eternal self, hence its simple and eternal identity stands forth as the delusion it truly is, and otherness appears.<sup>15</sup> This is made explicit, for instance, in the statement: "A total speech must also necessarily be a total silence." So much for the simple identity.

Second, the non-simple kind of identity, in Casey's words, is "compounded of otherness through and through."<sup>16</sup> This other kind of identity inevitably contains that which undermines it as simple identity. It contains and presupposes difference, its own opposite. The non-simple account of identity makes every spoken assertion, and every utterance of a name, an identity in exile from itself—a parody of the very idea of fixed identities.<sup>17</sup> In Altizer's words: "When God is named as God, God is named as the God who is in exile, the God who is in exile from himself. The God who is named, the God who is spoken, is, and immediately is, only insofar as He is other than Himself."<sup>18</sup>

Whenever God is named, God is in exile from himself and therefore is not—not in any other sense than precisely its non-self, its nonidentity, or non-simple identity. Similarly, Altizer's constant repetition of absolutes—in texts that claim to be speaking beyond the absolute in the sense of a simple identity—unavoidably serve to undermine the credibility of these absolutes as the truth claims they give themselves out to be. In other

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<sup>11</sup> Casey, "Abyssal Absences, 125–45.

<sup>12</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Casey, "Abyssal Absences," 132–33.

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

<sup>18</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 32.

words, if I am to follow the reasoning, I must accept that the truth claims of the text are at once dependent upon, and dissolved by, their own opposites. In consequence, I can choose between dismissing the text due to its incoherence, and I would have good arguments to do so, but I could also accept the invitation to move thought and language beyond the habitual laws of dual opposition. To Casey, the next step after acknowledging the presence of non-simple identity at work in Altizer's thinking is to interpret it through the lens of Derridean construction and its constant play between presence and absence. I will argue, however, that such a move may fail to capture the imperative of total presence and absolute truth repeated in and through his oeuvre. Let us turn instead, therefore, to Gilles Deleuze to further explore the possibility of moving thought and language beyond the habitual laws of dual opposition and toward a material presence in the present.

#### DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION

Inviting Gilles Deleuze into our analysis means complementing Casey's notions of identity with two related notions of difference and, in turn, with a developed understanding of repetition. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze discusses two divergent accounts of difference: difference as understood through Kant's universal law versus difference understood through Nietzsche's eternal return.

He describes, first, the kind of difference that is displayed in the relationship between the particular and the general – and in common readings of Kant's universal law. According to this account of difference the particular differs from the general in a negative sense – the particular is an imperfect variety of the general: There is the universal law and actions in accordance with it, and then there are exceptions, deviations, and plain errors. The relation between the general and the particular thus presupposes a notion of identity since the particularity indicates the existence of a something to which the particular is an individual and subordinate or deviating expression. For example, the idea of nature in its natural manifestation from which particular phenomena in nature differ. The notion of, for instance, normal summer weather makes us see the exception as precisely an exception. Particularity, thus understood, is inescapably representative since it always implicitly refers to an identity, and as such is repressive of difference and change of identity. The law or the norm itself remains the same and is even enforced by deviations from it precisely because differences/deviations stand forth as differences *in relation to* the law/norm. In relation to climate change, every expression of change risks standing forth as an exception, or as a sign of constant changes as normative through history. The identity of the particular is formed as differing from the general, which reinforces the identity of the general and thereby reinforces identity as such, hiding or obscuring actual change. The particular expression therefore represents the general, which is why, according to Deleuze, when understanding difference as particularity, difference is always negative and something that we expect may turn (back) into normality.<sup>19</sup> It is an understanding of difference that

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<sup>19</sup> Deleuze writes critically on this account of difference: "difference implies the negative, and allows itself to lead to contradiction, only to the extent that its subordination to the identical is maintained." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Continuum, 2007), xvii.

directs our focus not toward the actual phenomenon we experience in the present, but toward the generality from which it differs.

So much for the difference of *the general* versus *the particular*. The second understanding of difference emerges out of Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's notion of eternal return. This is difference described as the relationship between *the singular* and *the universal*. Here the singular indicates the unavoidability of variation, that is, the fact that repetition of the Same is impossible since the notion of repetition in itself carries the potentiality of multiple variations in the form of what we call repetition.<sup>20</sup> Every repetition unavoidably displays the fact that repetition of the same never happens – the exact same thing never happens twice, which is why repetition as such exposes difference. What is repeated is difference. Here the universality of the universal is not to be understood as, say, a universal law, but rather as the eternal in the eternal return of difference, that is, as a multiplicity.<sup>21</sup> Each encounter with nature appears as an expression of the universal 'nature' so that even natural phenomena of the Anthropocene that we habitually regard as non-natural stand forth as expressions of the multiplicity that nature is, can be, and will be. Hence every natural phenomenon indicates the infinity of ways in which the natural appears, thus suggesting an endless repetition of difference rather than a universal law or norm.

In consequence, the repetition of "nature" enfeebles and distorts the idea of a general natural ideal, thus enabling the acknowledgment and embrace of that which actually appears. In a more Altizerian tongue, it enables the absolute truth and total presence located in the present situation. It directs our attention not toward the ideal but toward the real – the actual and the present. There is not a general plane from which particulars arise, but a universal repetition of difference with infinite singular expressions.<sup>22</sup> In theological terms, there is not a transcendent God on top of a hierarchical chain of being, but an infinite creativity repeated with every difference that appears on the plane of reality. What Deleuze aims for is a new way to understand difference as the radically new, to understand difference as the affirmative expression that gets lost in our habitual ways of explaining a phenomenon as negatively related to an already familiar phenomenon from which it differs. Things do change, but a negative account of difference hides this fact from us. Life on earth is not what it used to be – normality is not what it used to be. Identity is, to push the analogy slightly, no longer simple but non-simple.

Accordingly, what if Altizer's style were treated as precisely the materialization of his message – just as he himself claims when suggesting he managed to unite content and form in his most inaccessible work? What if the reader, in other words, allowed Altizer's repetitious assertions to function as non-simple assertions of identity? Could this allow the repetition of absolutes to function as a subversive play with assertion, even with the very notion of destructive power, as such? Let us recall the quotation above: "Only an otherness that is finally other than itself can

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<sup>20</sup> The notion of the singular indicates a variation that expresses "the differential mechanisms which belong to the essence and origin of that which is repeated" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 17).

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2005), 30.

<sup>22</sup> "What matters is the possibility of the cause having less symmetry than the effect" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 20).

truly be other than an original and undifferentiated identity which is eternally the same."<sup>23</sup>

Every Altizerian assertion could then appear as a singular truth, to speak with Deleuze: a singular, playful, and dissident expression of *a* truth rather than *the* truth; the particular truth that structures the world around it. How so? Well, simply since Altizer, as noted earlier, speaks repetitiously in absolutes despite the fact that he himself has declared that absolutes dead, his statements can appear simultaneously real as virtual possibilities of something other than statements of certainty *and* real as actual statements. In that manner, Altizer's repetitious use of eternal concepts does not reinforce their generality, but reveals their singularity in a Deleuzian vein. In such a Deleuzian account of repetition, Altizer's very *repetition* of absolutes depicts non-simple identity as it takes leave of simple identity. The very repetition of assertions indicates that every utterance of an absolute is an enactment of otherness, of multiplicity, and this is, then, enacted precisely through the kind of repetitious mania that we usually, in fact, associate with nonsense or plain madness. Altizer's own account of repetition supports such a reading.

#### ALTIZER'S CONCEPT OF REPETITION

When Altizer discusses the concept of repetition, he does so in relation to different thinkers than does Deleuze, yet his critique of repetition is, I find, closely related to that of Deleuze. In his book on William Blake, for example, Altizer writes how traditional theology and church liturgy have confined Jesus's death and resurrection to a particular historical event: Blake's hatred of religion was primarily directed against its destructive movement of repetition; a repetition that re-presents a spatial and temporal moment of the past must bind its celebrant to an eternal repression, for a submission to a past moment of concrete time isolates the believer from the reality of both the present and the future, and enslaves him to an alien moment that is alien just because it is past.<sup>24</sup>

Repetition understood as repetition of the same is, when applied to the understanding of the Christ-event, not only binding and repressive but also what distances the believer from her present and future reality. Christian repetition, if understood as a repetition of the same, risks enslaving the believer, and even more importantly in our contemporary ecological situation, alienating the believer from the present.

In a 1980 article titled "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," Altizer discusses the notions of ritual and myth in modern literature via the Kierkegaardian notion of repetition. He moves away from the Christian idea of a "once and for all" – as in the faith in an original act of salvation – and approaches what he calls a "ritualistic repetition" that he finds in modern literature. What Altizer names ritualistic repetition is not the idea of a singular past that breaks into the present and transforms every now into the same past event; rather, this repetition is always a "once and no

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<sup>23</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2000), 131.

more."<sup>25</sup> In this modern account, repetition, is an imageless act behind and beyond all "mythical" meaning, that is, beyond everything we know as "meaning."<sup>26</sup> It is a repetition that strives toward a notion of time that is not a cultic time of *kairos/chronos* (where a vertical eternity meets the horizontal time on earth) but a totality of here and now, and as such "the very opposite of a primordial Beginning or One."<sup>27</sup> It is, in other words, a notion of repetition that takes leave of the very idea of an origin, as well as therefore the very idea of final meaning. It takes leave of meaning understood as that which makes sense in accordance with an idea of simple identity, to speak with Casey, where a phenomenon can be captured by an original definition. It strives toward an actual presence, an open-eyed presence that is able to see the different. Things are not what they used to be. The here-and-now is the real, the actual, and it is calling for our attention.

For Altizer the very notion of meaning—"the myth of meaning"—is preceded by the imageless act of repetition. The very idea of a final or original meaning is a myth produced by the *delusion* of a transcendent God. The empty motion of repetition, on the other hand, makes every "here and now" a "once and never again." As Rilke writes: "Just once, everything only for once, once and no more."<sup>28</sup> The once and never again breaks with the idea of a "once and for all" as an original and eternal transcendent meaning behind every event. Altizer argues that the ritualistic repetition in modern literature manages to invert the eternal as well as the mythical (as meaning), and thereby gives room for the contingency of repetition, for the truth of the present and for a disclosure of "myth as lie."

For Deleuze, as suggested above, repetition does not reestablish an eternal Same but rather erodes any transcendent foundation since difference both precedes and is created through repetition. Along this Deleuzian line of thought—which appears to accord with Altizer's non-simple identity—repetition does not preserve but it rather erodes. Each repetition of absolute claims, of eternal concepts and statements of certainty, serves to break down the very idea of an absolute in order to make room for the brute reality of the here and now. It is an enactment, a writing strategy instigating a reading epiphany, an apocalypse understood precisely as an un-folding, a dis-closure—at least for the courageous and patient.

Altizer holds that in *The Self-Embodiment of God*, message and form finally meet. I agree in the sense that here the very repetition of identity finally becomes dissident by making God as well as any simple identity stand forth as illusion. This truly is the point where message and form become one, and also where the skeptical gut reaction that may occur when reading Altizer can turn into something more creative. The very repetition, every "once and no more" in Altizer, indicates the impossibility of repetition as anything other than the playful repetition of difference,

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<sup>25</sup> Here Altizer's account of Kierkegaardian repetition differs from that of Deleuze in a manner that actually draws Altizer's repetition closer to Deleuze's; see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Altizer, "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," *Dialog* 19 (1980): 274–80, quote on 279.

<sup>27</sup> Altizer, "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," 280.

<sup>28</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Ninth Elegy," in *Duino Elegies*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Altizer, "Ritual and Contemporary Repetition," 280.



since his repetitions unsettle the very possibility of identity, of actual truth claims in his texts.

In the introduction to *The Self-Embodiment of God* Altizer writes: "The fundamental purpose of the book is to open yet another way to a new theological language, a language that will be biblical and contemporary at once and altogether."<sup>29</sup> Mark C. Taylor is, as noted above, critical of Altizer's endeavor. Owing to the fact that Altizer never finally leaves "total presence" behind, he fails to notice what is already at hand, Taylor claims, namely "the endless play of presence and absence which, though neither present nor absent, is the possibility of all presence and absence."<sup>30</sup> Taylor then calls for a more Derridean death of God, a death of God in which the Altizerian notion of "total presence" would give way to a "presence/absence." Taylor argues that Altizer should leave the absolutes behind and enter an elaborate analogical account where presence is inescapably also absence. Casey, in turn, suggests that Altizer should move toward materiality, toward the body, "incarnation as organic materiality," in order for his "total presence" to finally succeed. Casey notes that toward the end of *The Self-Embodiment of God* the text "suddenly reverts to an apparently outright metaphysics of presence that begs for an equally outright deconstruction."<sup>31</sup> In Casey's view, Altizer does not follow his own plea for immanence and total presence but returns, instead, to metaphysics.

Contrary to Taylor's critique, I would like to suggest that the subversive strength of the Altizerian *coincidentia oppositorum* is that it is *not* an endless play of presence and absence, not an in-between or a constant deferral, nor a simple leaving behind of the absolutes, but a twisting of the language of metaphysics so that it becomes not a poststructural deconstruction of metaphysics but a material *enactment* of metaphysics, beyond the logic of simple identity. As for Casey, I would not agree that his work calls for deconstruction, but possibly for organic materiality—if, that is, materiality is not already there, only in a new guise, a guise that suits our catastrophic times just fine.

#### METAPHYSICAL MATERIALISM IN THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

In his comments on *The Self-Embodiment of God* thirty years after it was published, Altizer wrote (in his own characteristic tone):

I would affirm that God the Creator is present here, and if a self-negation or self-emptying of the Creator does occur, it occurs not by way of a dissolution, but rather by way of God's own act, an act which is absolute sacrifice itself, but that sacrifice is a fulfilment of the Creator, in which the Godhead itself is even more fully and finally itself. Perhaps this does not occur in the book, or is not enacted in the book, and if so the book is finally a failure. But it can be read in such a way that it occurs, even if here the reader must transcend the author; thus the book does demand

<sup>29</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, "Altizer's Originality," 569. Taylor's later critique ("Betraying Altizer," 2004) underscores the fact that Altizer's modernism results in a complete neglect of popular culture and postmodern art. The reason for referring mainly to Taylor's earlier critique here is its explicitly Derridian take, which elucidates the benefit of a Deleuzian reading.

<sup>31</sup> Casey, "Abyssal Absences," 140.

a meditational reading, a reading in which the reader actually enacts what occurs, although this may well force the reader to respond to this text as an anti-text, a text annulling or reversing the enactment for which it calls.<sup>32</sup>

The author himself, then, calls for a “meditational reading,” and even insists that “the reader must transcend the author.” The reader is obliged to go along with the author’s project, throwing herself into his repetitious spirals, and in fact becoming a part of the project itself. And if she does so, she will encounter nothing less than God the Creator.

This certainly sounds pretentious, perhaps even slightly mad, but Altizer’s claim may in fact be rather pragmatic. *The Self-Embodiment of God* could very well be said to be an “anti-text, a text annulling or reversing the enactment for which it calls” since the reversal of the text itself is precisely what is caused by the repetitious spirals and the repetitions of absolutes. And along the lines of the above one could agree that “a self-negation or self-emptying of the Creator does occur” simply by stating that as a result of the repetitious style of writing, the God concept is emptied and negated as simple identity, along with every assertion. The claims are weakened as absolute and general, but reinforced as universal/singular – the killing of God as origin and transcendent identity in the text is neither less nor more mysterious. It is a twist from particular identity to singular, non-simple identity, simply performed through repetitions and absolute statements. Altizer’s assertions undermine their own credibility through repetitions accompanied by an explicit critique of assertions. If Altizer’s repetitious spirals are considered in this way, then they would be nothing but the self-emptying of the God-notion. Altizer’s headstrong repetition of certainty calls forth his self-emptied God, the Godhead as abyss, or perhaps as a principle of uncertainty, as difference before organization. It is a God, in Deleuze’s words, before good and evil, before the organization of the sacred as opposed to the profane, a God stripped of transcendence and Christian orthodoxy.<sup>33</sup>

In consequence I find, contrary to Taylor, the fact that Altizer *does not* stop talking about God is what finally makes him succeed in his aim to enact the death of God. The God concept, and thus the identity concept, is emptied through his very writings, yet through this emptying a radically new concept of God and identity is created. Altizer writes: “Accordingly, the God who is spoken or who is named is an embodiment of otherness. And insofar as God is named as God, the source of otherness is named. Thereby is likewise named the ground of all that identity which can never be simply or only itself.”<sup>34</sup> The very naming of God, he says, is a revelation of difference: “To speak of God is to speak of otherness, of a final otherness, an otherness which is the same only insofar as it is other.”<sup>35</sup>

Still, is a metaphysical battle really all that helpful in the current ecological crisis? How could this repetitious madman guide us through the existential and corporeal abyss before which we are standing as humanity? In 1992, Taylor discussed the materiality of his own a/theology in relation Altizer’s gospel of Christian atheism. When God truly has

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<sup>32</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*, with a foreword by Mark C. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” 28–29.

<sup>34</sup> Altizer, *Self-Embodiment of God*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

become one with the world, Taylor avers, the appearances of this world no longer point beyond themselves, for “appearances are the appearances of nothing other than themselves.” In other words, the virtual is as real and corporeal as the actual. The actual/virtual distinction collapses in a true presence that has left the logic of the simple identity behind. “According to Altizer,” Taylor continues, “the incarnation reveals that truth is embodied in the ever-changing currents of the material and historical world.”<sup>36</sup> What appears in this world of ideas and things is the appearance of incarnated truth. The incarnation in Altizer, Taylor claims, finally points to the historical and material realities of this world. Taylor himself does not follow Altizer into the thingness of the world, however. In the final chapter of *Disfiguring*, Taylor pursues rather the Derridean path of deconstruction and lets his journey end in the desert of erring and not-knowing, with “the bleeding trace of the wounded word” suffering a “disfiguring for which there is no cure.”<sup>37</sup> This, though, is where I choose to follow Altizer rather than Taylor in view of the ecological crisis.

I do not think we need a “wounded word” these days, nor a “cureless disfiguring.” On the contrary, I think we just might need a madman who is not afraid of the corporeal realities of life and death, heaven and hell. To Altizer, theology is not about meaning or knowledge, not about abstract ideas, it is about life and death. So why does he not describe life as actually lived, why does he keep talking like a metaphysical prophet? Because, when writing, he enters into the realities of language, its materiality and affect. When writing, the total presence is that of the materiality of words and their way to function. He kills the general level of ideas with every sentence, in order to enter instead into the materiality of language as life. It is about absolute presence in words as in life, a total presence that may lead to death, and to new life. A speech that is so fully a speech that it turns silent. A life so fully lived that it dies. An actuality that is a self-actualization as enactment, a speech speaking itself into silence. So present, so alive it can never live or die but must do both, repetitively. Always with eyes wide open, always in the face of “an actualization in which presence is both total and is actually at hand: ‘The resurrection and the life are I.’”

Altizer’s God is never distant from these words, this life, these thingies, these matters, these times, these absolutes, these dying critters and plants, but so into it that distinctions between this and that are interfused. So present that even words cannot reach outside the linguistic battle itself. As David Jasper argues, Altizer’s metaphysics can thus be characterized as an “absolute loss that is, at the same time, the moment of the profoundest creativity.”<sup>38</sup> And this is why, I find, his theology is still relevant when it comes to actual living and dying, existentially and bodily. Fully present and with blinders off he prepares for a possible resurrection. This-worldly, of course. To repeat – to repeat quite purposefully – words from my first paragraph: The only resurrection possible, though barely plausible, is one of a total presence, of absolute truth, revealing the abysmal facts of the current situation. A resurrection inseparable from life itself, from the possibility of life in actual accordance with the realities of creation. Not a life lived on a loan from a make-believe world of ideas where theoretical

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<sup>36</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 156.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>38</sup> David Jasper, “In the Wasteland: Apocalypse, Theology, and the Poets,” in *Thinking Through the Death of God*, 185.

calculations legitimate use of that which is not ours. Not a life lived on resources we did not create ourselves, resources that our make-believe world pretends are endless and ever at the whim of human disposal—whether those resources are fossil fuels, or words understood as detached from the materiality of reality.