

The Yes of Nietzsche and Hegel in Altizer

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Thomas J. J. Altizer read both Hegel and Nietzsche as he read all thinkers he enlisted with a canonical routine: as theologians. This is not to say he confused their agenda and their task. Hegel remained the philosopher of philosophers, Nietzsche the master of all suspicious masters, a poet-philosopher with critique as his hammer. But their thinking was to be understood, in Altizer's view, principally as theological thinking, which is to say, whatever else we may think theology is in today's world, it cannot be thought without Hegel and Nietzsche. And this is because, as Altizer would audaciously write, these two figures "met the modern crisis of theology by recreating theology itself".¹ In what follows I want to work out what this re-creation looks like for Altizer, and how, under his reading, such an odd pairing, Hegel and Nietzsche, become more than partners in the process: they become, as Altizer would say emphatically, in "full union" with one another.²

It is insufficient to say that Hegel and Nietzsche were major influences on Altizer's theological enterprise, even profound influences. Both figures did more than persuade, more than redirect thought in its current state. They inaugurated something new, wholly new, and not just in their own day, against their own traditions of thinking, but more significantly within Altizer himself. These are two figures whose intentions go well beyond nuanced change or refinement, or nudging given ideas along a slightly altered path, and reach instead wholesale destruction and reinvention. Altizer was never one for subtleties and qualifications of argument. The conditional rarely figures in his prose or his thinking – "one might see in this...", "it could be argued that...", "perhaps we might consider...". His statements were of an absolute character, often accompanied with superlatives – "our greatest", "our deepest", "the ultimate", "totally", "nothing shows this more than", "and absolutely so". Altizer's yes was yes, and his no was no. If there was something in between, it was in the form of the interrogative, with the assumption that the answer could only be found on the poles of these extremes, even if simultaneously. Thus when he discovered Hegel and Nietzsche, two figures who could say yes and no at the same time, he felt the absolute presence of something genuinely new, a rebirth, by which the old could no longer remain. No other philosophical thinkers had this power or this effect for Altizer; they could only work in the wake left by these two radicals (as in the case of

¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Letter 67: To Friends (June 7, 2013)", in *This Silence Must Now Speak: Letters of Thomas J. J. Altizer, 1995-2015* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 227.

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), p. 19.

Kierkegaard, say, or Heidegger). Hegel and Nietzsche were, completely and uncompromisingly, new points of departure.

Now if Nietzsche seems the more natural candidate for this kind of revolutionary role, as he wields his sledgehammer and ignites his dynamite, and if Hegel seems to be more manipulated in this regard, being the arch systematician that he was, we need to keep in mind one crucial fact: of Altizer's life-changing encounters with both figures, it was Nietzsche who came first. If Hegel's thought provided more philosophical substance to Altizer's theological endeavors, it was only through the lens of Nietzsche that this substance could induce its power. Thus, in a move that, I am confident, would find support from Altizer himself, I will lay aside the conventions of chronology and examine Nietzsche first.

Altizer's Nietzsche

Nihilation, dissolution, reversal, re-creation – these are the hallmarks of Nietzsche's passion. When Altizer first discovered this passion, it was, he tells us in his theological memoir, within the context of his Masters degree at the University of Chicago's Divinity School in the early 1950s.³ While writing his thesis on nature and grace in Augustine, he was simultaneously immersed in the writings of Nietzsche, which began a long-term project of correlating these two unlikely thinkers. If Augustine was responsible for modern subjectivity as we know it – the self as the center of consciousness – it was Nietzsche who "decisively discovered the dissolution of that subject".⁴ Rather than ending modernity's stuttering theological journey once and for all, Altizer's Nietzsche reunited philosophical and theological thinking. But such reunification was not a regressive step back to a pre-modern, or even Augustinian, unity, even if Nietzsche's thought was implicitly reliant upon Augustine. A different kind of unity was inaugurated, one that could now hold together extreme poles in a *coincidentia oppositorum*. For just as Augustine could see grace at work in his own sinful nature, so Nietzsche could see a Yes at work in the profoundest of Nos. Of course that No only Nietzsche had the temerity to articulate in unequivocal and stentorian tones – the *No* of God, the *No* that is *God's death*. That No was unmistakably theological, but it was also inextricably philosophical, as God lay sacrificed upon the stony altars of all Western philosophy since Socrates, as Christianised with determination by Augustine.

This Nietzschean unity of Yes and No manifested itself in a deeply personal way for Altizer, and led him down a Damascene road, where

³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

in June of 1955, while reading Erich Heller's essay on Nietzsche and Rilke for the seventh time in a library at the University of Chicago, I had what I have ever since regarded as a genuine religious conversion, and this was a conversion to the death of God. For then I truly experienced the death of God, and experienced it as a conversion, and thus as the act and grace of God himself.⁵

Now to be converted *to* the death of God, and to call this conversion not merely religious but an *act and grace of God*, quite obviously defies conventional theological understanding (Christian or otherwise). But it also defies logical consistency. For how can anything act, much less offer grace, when it is no longer? Altizer's conversion is to this very contradiction, one that resides in a deep *pathos* that Nietzsche sees in both philosophy and religion. Very early in Nietzsche's career, during the same year that he published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the young Nietzsche was exploring intensely the relationship between truth and *pathos*, particularly as the Greeks had understood it. He wrote with an early aphoristic tone: "Curious problem: the self-consumption of philosophical systems! This is equally unheard of in science and in art. Religion, however, is *similar* to philosophy in this respect: this is remarkable and significant."⁶ This self-consumption can be seen in Altizer's way of rendering his conversion experience, which, in terms of *pathos*, he understood as "the very reversal of my experience with Satan", whose epiphany he had described a few pages earlier as "Satan consuming me, absorbing me into his very being... the deepest and yet most horrible union".⁷ This union he would extend to Satan and Christ as the deepest theological *coincidentia oppositorum* he would thereafter seek. If the *reversal* of this Satanic consumption is in fact the "pure grace" of experiencing the death of God, we can understand how Nietzsche informs – indeed consumes – the very core of Altizer's theological sensibility and passion, which is no less theological for that consumption, and all the more "truthful". "If you want to achieve peace of mind and happiness, then have faith", wrote a 21-year-old Nietzsche to his sister Elizabeth, but "if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search."⁸

All conversion involves a turning, indeed a reversal, so to reverse Christian conversion itself, while remaining true to the Christian *pathos* that inspires conversion, requires Nietzsche, and what Nietzsche called *dysangel*, the opposite of "evangel". As he describes it in *The Antichrist* (§39), "the

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle between Art and Knowledge", in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979), p. 19.

⁷ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, pp. 4-5.

⁸ Letter to Elizabeth Nietzsche, 11 June 1865, as quoted in Sue Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), p. 43.

'evangel' *died* on the cross. What has been called 'evangel' from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived: 'ill tidings', a *dysangel*."⁹ The passion of Christ becomes a unique reversal, therefore, of the history of Christianity, even before that history could unfold, so that any return to a genuine Christianity must take on the dysangelical reality of Christ's passion as death. Nietzsche was the first to issue a clarion call as dysangelist – the "euthanasia of Christianity".¹⁰ Altizer is converted to this call as the necessary reversal of conversion itself: one is not converted to God, but to God's death, which for Altizer is a "good death" not because it redeems the converted, nor, as it was for the Nietzsche of *Daybreak*, because God happily elides himself in a moralism, but because it reverses the news, the *angel*, by which the converted is impassioned to act, a passion which of course Nietzsche had elsewhere called Dionysian, but which Altizer, following Blake, associates with Satan, so that the fallen angel and the redeemer Christ can become one.¹¹ In this sense it is now "Dionysus *and* the Crucified".

This reversal, whereby *euangelos* is converted to *euthanatos*, transfers the creativity of Dionysian impulse to the Crucified. To understand that transference, we need, perhaps paradoxically, to understand Altizer's reading of Nietzsche's sense of life. When Nietzsche affirms life, and affirms it in contradistinction to what Christianity had become – a moral set of values underwritten by the metaphysics of a transcendent God designed specifically for the weak – he affirms something that is instinctual, in the moment, immediately active, and always in deed. When Goethe's Faust famously re-fabulates the Gospel of John's creation story, itself already a theological re-fabulation of the first creation story in Genesis, he alters what was "in the beginning" from the Word (*Wort*) to the Mind (*Sinn*), and then to the Force (*Kraft*), and finally to the Act (*Tat*).¹² For Nietzsche, Goethe and indeed his Faust represented a true free spirit, a character of noble strength, one that no longer negates, but, out of the sheer power of the artist's *poesis* and the experimenter's will, brings into existence with the defiant Yes of enactment. "And should I not with utmost yearning seek / To bring to life

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist", in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), p. 612.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Book I, §92, p. 54.

¹¹ Bruce Ellis Benson points out Nietzsche's claim, as issued through the voice of Zarathustra, that "when gods die, they always die several kinds of death" (*Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008], p. 27; quoting Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV, "Retired from Service"). We might add, following Altizer, they die several kinds of *good deaths*.

¹² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One and Sections from Part Two*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 52-53.

that creature most unique?”, quotes Nietzsche from *Faust* in his “Attempt at Self-Criticism” to *The Birth of Tragedy*, that inaugural book where the Dionysian spirit first unfolded its wings.¹³

Altizer works out the question of beginning and creation in the most sustained manner within his 1993 book *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy*. Nietzsche had figured in Altizer’s earlier texts as the one who presents the reversal or self-negation of Christianity, as voiced especially by Zarathustra, or later by Nietzsche as the Antichrist. This reversal is possible only upon Nietzsche’s discovery, as Altizer put it in *History and Apocalypse* (1985), of “the archaic and primordial ground of the individuality and interiority of consciousness itself”, a ground upon which consciousness, in Hegelian fashion, negates itself.¹⁴ In *The Genesis of God*, rooted in the thick forest of Altizer’s mature work, Nietzsche comes into his own as a creative force, especially in relation to Hegel (of which more below). The book’s title already shows the circular nature of creative power, as it oscillates between destruction and creation, for the title’s cognitive structure, in which the genitive construction should be read both subjectively and objectively, indicates both the genesis that is effected by God and the genesis that effects God. The “theological genealogy” of the subtitle will reveal both sides as necessary to each other.

In a discussion on actuality that begins with Spinoza in the fourth chapter entitled “The Necessity of God”, by which God is actualized only within the immanence that is nature, so that both nature and God become co-extensive, and infinitely co-extensive, Altizer is able to aver God’s necessity as an absolute necessity actualized in the world, which he calls the very embodiment of God. So when Nietzsche proclaims the death of God, he does so, for Altizer, with the full knowledge that this death is predicated upon a consciousness of this actuality, as much as an actuality of this consciousness, so that God is both dead to this world as a transcendent Being, *and*, through absolute kenosis, fully actualized as this death, in all the potency of this actualization. But a *conscious* actualizing of death is, technically, impossible, for as Blanchot has taught us, the instant of death is something one can never experience.¹⁵ And yet it is precisely this “impossible necessary death”, where, as Derrida describes it, “impossibility and necessity both reciprocally refer to and co-implicate each other, both [are] subject and attribute each to the other abidingly [*à demeure*]”, that Altizer picks up in the

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 11.

¹⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History and Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 227.

¹⁵ See Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). The last lines of the short main story read “‘I am alive. No, you are dead’” (p. 9), before the final line of the postscript: “the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance” (p. 11).

name of Nietzsche, in whose genealogy genesis and God, birth and death, reciprocally refer to and co-implicate each other.¹⁶ Thus Altizer will state:

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God can be understood as a reenactment or renewal of a unique and absolute beginning, and it is precisely as such that it has wiped away our whole horizon. And the disappearance is not and cannot be an eternally repeated disappearance, but a once-and-for-all disappearance, and Nietzsche himself could understand it as the most important event in history.¹⁷

This is also to say that disappearance and beginning are likewise co-implicated in each other. What has been rent from us consequently demands a new beginning, a new organon as Bacon would call it, one that now perpetuates itself from a moment wholly within time and space, and no longer from a pre-temporal eternity. As Altizer quotes from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (III, "The Convalescent"), "Being begins in every now."¹⁸ This beginning in every now, which starts anew as actualization, is, for Altizer, Nietzsche's sense of life – "not the eternal now of transcendent Godhead, but an immediate and actual now, and a totally actual now", which the late Nietzsche could know as a Godhead, but a Godhead of absolute immanence to which he would attach the name Dionysus.¹⁹

Now if this "actual now" is for Nietzsche *life*, the life that reinvigorates our grievous sense of loss and guilt in the shadow of God's disappearance in death, the existential life that no longer depends upon a reflective consciousness to shore up the transcendental edifices of our being (or Being), then this is a life that asserts itself, that wills itself, into the now of actuality through creation. And this is why Nietzsche, as much as Altizer, returns consistently to the artist (the poet, the musician, the novelist, the painter), in what Heidegger will call "the will to power as art".²⁰ But the abiding question for this life is how to sustain the actual now in this creation. If actuality must reside in the now alone, which is constantly fleeting, constantly giving itself over to its opposite (as past or future), how can it maintain itself?

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 47. The phrase "impossible necessary death" is Blanchot's from *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, 1995), p. 67.

¹⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche – Vol. 1, The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), pp. 1-220.

For Nietzsche, the answer was in his concept, or his doctrine, or what Altizer will call his “vision”, of Eternal Recurrence. The meaning of this doctrine is notoriously elusive, but it is no accident that Heidegger in his Nietzsche lectures of the second half of the 1930s followed the first lecture, “The Will to Power as Art”, with a second lecture entitled “The Eternal Recurrence of the Same”, even if Heidegger goes on to read the latter doctrine as a Nietzschean form of metaphysics. For Altizer, the idea is the basis not of a metaphysics but of a reversed “holiness”. For if the idea of the holy is to be set apart, the holiness of the Christian God, as it developed within the history of Christianity, had set God apart from *life*. This, for Altizer, is the basis of Nietzsche’s understanding of *ressentiment*. To reverse this *ressentiment*, to reverse the flight from life, Nietzsche introduces Eternal Recurrence as that which engenders anew in the actual now of life, immediately and repeatedly and eternally, and does so in a totality that reverses all holiness as separation, as departure, as distance. This totality – “total presence”, Altizer’s theological reconstitution of “real presence” – totalizes beginning and ending in a single but forever ongoing act of creation, and thus “gives witness to the original and absolute act of creation”, so that “Nietzsche’s vision of Eternal Recurrence is a visionary enactment of an absolute act and actuality, an actuality that is the very act of creation itself.”²¹

For Altizer this creative vision is also an apocalyptic vision because every “now” requires a radically, irreversibly new beginning, which is as much an ending, so that origination and negation become one. This is why, throughout all of Altizer’s work, genesis and apocalypse are always coupled, always and inevitably in a *coincidentia oppositorum*.²² Altizer’s reading of Eternal Recurrence keeps these two sides in an absolute embrace, a dance of perpetual origination, in which what is recurring is not an eternity that is primordial and eternally only itself, but a *new* eternity, one that, oxymoronically, begins anew. So when Altizer appropriates the phrase “eternal recurrence”, the “eternal” is not a modifier of recurrence so much as it is what is being modified *as recurrence*. That is, *a recurring eternity*, wholly and absolute new, a consequence of the apocalyptic death of the old primordial eternity of premodernity. This is why Altizer seldom adds “the same” to the phrase as it appears in the original Nietzschean idea. For what is “same” can only be utterly new; but it is precisely in the same actualization of a new beginning that eternity can remain new, and that life can remain life. It is this recurring eternity which Altizer sees as Nietzsche’s new Godhead, born anew in genesis, but only on the death of apocalypse.²³

²¹ Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, p. 81.

²² See, for example *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Towards Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 36-40.

²³ Heidegger, even in his reading of Eternal Recurrence as the “accomplishment” of metaphysics, “the most profound gathering” of all that is Western metaphysics since Plato towards what is a fatal “counterposition”,

But here it is imperative that we understand one crucial distinction: Eternal Recurrence is not synonymous with Eternal Return. This is a pitfall most commentators make in coming to terms with Nietzsche's *circulus vitiosus*. If a primordial eternity, as just discussed, takes us back to a state or condition in which eternity transcends all actuality, leaving behind actuality, an utter holiness that is consummate separation, then in the understanding of time within ancient religions, this involves a circle, one we can call Eternal Return. For what is the end is also the beginning, but a beginning that is primordial rather than actual, taking us back always to that transcendent holiness or, in the case of Buddhism, to a state or a condition in which all time is emptied, and there is absolutely nothing on the horizon. This is the traditional theological understanding of death or nirvana as a portal to Heaven's eternity or Sunyata. Now if, for Altizer, it was Nietzsche who reverses this circle with Eternal Recurrence, so that this entire ancient circle is negated in order that it can recur anew in actuality, rather than returning us to the primordial, it was Hegel who best understood Eternal Return, and who reverses that Return *from within itself*. But such a reversal – the reversal of that which is always in reversal – can only make sense through a decisive Nietzschean break with the ancient horizon (either of holiness or of emptiness). And it is in this sense that Altizer reads Hegel through Nietzsche. So we can now turn to Hegel, in a kind of reverse order from where we started, to see how Eternal Return is subsumed by Eternal Recurrence, and how Hegel is in many respects a harbinger of Nietzsche, only to become himself Nietzschean.

Altizer's Hegel

Altizer tells us he came to Hegel only after years of a resistance fueled by Kierkegaard. In a study on the poet William Blake published in 1967, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Vision of William Blake*, he first deployed Hegel's dialectical thinking "as a guide to the dialectical ground and meaning of Blake's vision", claiming that Hegel's system "is a far more effective guide to Blake's visionary world than are the traditional forms of Christian theology and mysticism."²⁴ This is because that vision

one that amounts to the end of metaphysics, nevertheless sees that this does not equate necessarily to the disappearance of God. "What to common sense looks like 'atheism', and has to look like it," he writes, "is at bottom the very opposite. In the same way, whenever matters of death and the nothing are treated, Being and Being alone is thought most deeply" (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche – Vol. 2, The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell [New York: Harper Collins, 1984]), pp. 205, 207-208. Perhaps here is an early platform by which one might begin to mount the claim, as many have done with later texts, of Heidegger's own metaphysical allegiance in respect to Being.

²⁴ *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Vision of William Blake* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967; republished Aurora: The Davies Group, 2000), p. xii. This deployment is an extension of Altizer's earlier deployment of Mircea Eliade's dialectical understanding of the sacred and the profane, with the goal of

demands a fall of the divine into the actuality of the given world in order, not to eradicate the absolute world of the divine, but in fact to *realize* it. What Hegel's dialectic allows is not vision of a pre-existing Absolute, or primordial Eternity, as we might expect from mystical revelation, but, through its necessary negating impulse, the creation of an absolutely new Absolute, possible only through an new apocalyptic overturning and eradication of the primordial Absolute, or, as Altizer directs it to Blake's vision, "the universal kenotic process of Eternity passing through condemnation in Albion's 'Eternal Death'".²⁵

We can already see Nietzsche's "death of God" informing Altizer's early appropriation of Hegel here. For nowhere in this text does the term "sublation" (or the original German "*Aufhebung*") appear. Dialectical thinking for Altizer is not towards a third term of higher manifestation, a "synthesis" as it is so often characterized (conveniently but erroneously) within general Hegelian overviews. In the "Eternal Death" that marks the "universal kenotic process", death does not yield to a higher register of existence. For this death is eternal, unending, but now in the sense of a forever *recurring* death, and recurring anew. This is why apocalypse must accompany all dialectical thinking, for the end is always present, never merely overcome or sublated. But it is, paradoxically, always a new end, or a new apocalypse, not as a singular event in history that happens only once (say, on the cross, or at the *Parousia*), but a singular event *always recurring*. Thus we might say Altizer, on the strength of Nietzsche, recreates the Hegelian schema as an endlessly fructiparous *coincidentia oppositorum*.²⁶

It is in such a *coincidentia oppositorum* that the death of God as an actual reality must be understood. It is far too easy to take Nietzsche's madman as the herald of a triumphant atheism, in which God and theology are laid to rest as philosophically untenable, culturally moribund and socially irrelevant. This, in Hegelian terms, would be a "bad death of God", along the lines of Hegel's "bad infinite" – an infinite that has not yet been taken up into its absolute character as a totality. But as we have seen, to take up God's death in its absolute character as totality means to transform that reality into an ever newly created reality, an eternal Yes that is an eternal recurrence. This "true" or

developing a fully Christian appropriation of a *coincidentia oppositorum* – Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and Dialectic of the Sacred* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1963).

²⁵ Altizer, *New Apocalypse*, p. 77.

²⁶ In speaking of "the ultimate theological necessity of a total Yes", the later Altizer writes: "This is a Yes that Hegel comprehensively understands and enacts, but a Yes that can never be separated or isolated from an absolute and No, and Hegel deeply understands an absolute No in his very understanding of self-negation or self-emptying. Yet this is a No which not Hegel but Nietzsche profoundly understands interiorly, which is just why *Nietzsche is absolutely necessary to Hegel and only thereby can a purely and totally dialectical thinking actually be meaningful and real to us*. Hence full dialectical thinking is inseparable from a pure and total *coincidentia oppositorum*, a true and actual *coincidentia oppositorum* of an absolute Yes and an absolute No" – *Living the Death of God*, p. 87 (italics added).

“genuine” death is a coincidence of opposites between disappearance and beginning. Here God is not flushed from our experience as the culmination and end-point of an enlightened modernity, what a young Hegel would characterize as “reducing the sacred grove to mere timber”,²⁷ but rather modernity’s very deicide creates an entirely new grove, as it were, one constituted by a disappearing that is simultaneously an originating and fructifying, resulting in, we might say, *sacred timber*, growth that revitalizes theology through new and abundant fruit.

This transformation of death is already seen in Hegel’s early essay of *Faith and Knowledge*, from which the “sacred grove” quote is taken. In its famous concluding paragraphs, a distinction between a good and a bad infinite is already being worked out, where the good infinite becomes an “absolute principle”, or the negative principle of the Absolute: “Infinity is the pure nullification of the antithesis or of finitude; but it is at the same time also the spring of eternal movement, the spring of that finitude which is infinite, because it eternally nullifies itself. Out of this nothing and pure night of infinity, as out of the secret abyss that is its birthplace, the truth lifts itself upward.”²⁸ But this pure night and abyss signify an “infinite grief”, a grief at the loss of finitude that is relinquished in the Absolute. Formally, says Hegel, this grief took the form within historical and cultural processes of a feeling that “God Himself is dead”, a feeling found even within modern religious sentiment, when the longing of finite subjectivity stands in a barren place, a grove reduced to timber, much as the enlightened figures of philosophy reduced God to the empirical realm of finitude. But now, insists the young Hegel, this grief must be transformed. The loss of finitude in the Absolute must be resituated in the totality or purity of the Absolute, not to rid us of the grief, but to “re-establish” that grief within an “absolute Passion”, or a “speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday”, where “the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything...”.²⁹

Altizer throughout his writings saw this Good Friday as primary and foremost in the Easter celebration, and in the Eucharistic remembrance that follows from it. In a later letter written to friends on Good Friday itself (April 10, 2009), he commented: “Good Friday is our most solemn day of meditation, a meditation induced by a renewal of the death of God”. This is a sacrifice alien to all philosophical language, that is *until Hegel* – he who unfolds “the first philosophical realization of the death of God”, one as “a genuine philosophy of absolute kenosis, and our only one apart from

²⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. and eds. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Nietzsche, for it is Hegel and Nietzsche who most profoundly enact the death of God.” And hence, he adds, “Nietzsche and Hegel are our primal philosophers of Good Friday.”³⁰ In their respective announcements of this Good Friday, the “death-day” of divinity,³¹ dysangelical good news, crucifixion and resurrection become one and the same, a celebration of *coincidentia oppositorum* that is most powerfully enacted for Altizer in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, whose celebration of death in the wake becomes a joy synonymous with the Yes-saying of Nietzsche’s call, so that if, Altizer writes, “Eternal Recurrence is fully and finally celebrated in the *Wake*, this is an eternal recurrence of that Easter which is Good Friday, or that crucifixion which is eternal resurrection.”³² This Nietzschean renewal and recreation comes to constitute the speculative nature of the young Hegel’s absolute Good Friday.

If in his earlier texts Altizer emphasized the process of this recreation as it took form in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the middle and later texts he emphasized the logic of this recreation as it took form in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. If the concluding words of the *Faith and Knowledge* essay invoked a “speculative Good Friday”, and the concluding words of *Phenomenology of Spirit* invoked a “Calvary of Absolute Spirit”³³, the concluding words of *Science of Logic* invoke an “absolute liberation”.³⁴ Altizer was fully cognizant of these end points in Hegel, for to him they were as much, and crucially, beginning points. The speculative crucifixion leads to resurrection, Calvary to infinitude, absolute liberation to the totality of the Concept (*Begriff*) as wholly in-and-for-itself (*an und für sich*), the externality of Idea mediated into the “free Existence” of a pure, and purely self-comprehending, Spirit as *Geist*. But what exactly does this *an und für sich* mean for Altizer? The liberation at the end of Hegel’s Greater Logic is not merely the culmination of a science (*Wissenschaft*). It is the culmination of a profound theology, at work by means of an eternal circularity.

In *Faith and Knowledge*, the speculative Good Friday returns us to the opening of the text where over the corpse of an old Reason and Faith hovers a “new born peace”, one which dialectically is neither Reason nor Faith but rather a unifying “child of both”.³⁵ So a speculative Good Friday, in its speculation upon “the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness”, is neither logical

³⁰ Altizer, “Letter 44: To Friends (April 10, 2009)”, in *This Silence Must Now Speak*, p. 156.

³¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 161.

³² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. Lissa McCullough (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 130.

³³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 493.

³⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1969), p. 843.

³⁵ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 55.

reasoning nor illogical believing, but a new born peace between crucifixion and resurrection into which both “the dogmatic philosophies” and “the natural religions” “must vanish”.³⁶

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the Calvary of Absolute Spirit returns us to the opening Preface, where the True is possible only through a self-imposed negation of its otherness within, or, in language that distinctly anticipates Nietzsche, only through a “self-restoring sameness” of its internal diversity, described as “the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.”³⁷ We might say with Nietzsche: only by being worked out to its end (as death) *is it life*. Significantly, for Altizer, in the words to immediately follow, Hegel recasts this process theologically: “Thus the life of God and divine cognition may well be spoken of as a disporting of Love with itself; but this idea sinks into mere edification [Nietzsche’s sense of moralism], and even insipidity [Nietzsche’s sense of “morality as vampirism” – “the ruse for sucking the blood of life itself”³⁸], if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labor of the negative.”³⁹

In *Science of Logic*, the absolute liberation returns us to the opening “With What Must the Science Begin?”, in which the question of beginning, of logic’s beginning and of beginning’s logic, must be liberated from presuppositions, so that the beginning might become absolute, mediated by nothing and with no ground, totally free.⁴⁰ But to achieve this logically, so as to be led back to absolute knowledge in its innermost truth, this beginning must go to its end where it freely externalizes itself, “opening or unfolding itself into the creation of a world which contains all that fell into the development which preceded that result and which through this reversal of its position relatively to its beginning is transformed into something dependent on the result as principle.” The essential requirement for this, Hegel concludes, “is not so much that the beginning be a pure immediacy, but rather that the whole of the science be within itself a circle in which the first is also the last and the last is also the first.”⁴¹ This very biblical idea constitutes the end’s absolute liberation (from itself).

Now let us see how Altizer, whose voice shares Hegel’s accent unmistakably, appropriates the dense ideas circulating here. Let us again draw upon Altizer’s comparison with Spinoza, as we did above in

³⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

³⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 10.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 790.

³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 70.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 71.

relation to Nietzsche's actuality within the immanent world, this time from the earlier second chapter of *The Genesis of God* entitled "Hegel and the Christian God":

The question of the identity of God is perhaps the deepest question posed by Hegel's system, and that question is also the question of the presence or the absence in that system of the uniquely Christian God, and, more specifically, the question of the presence or absence therein of the Crucified God. Clearly, the question cannot even be asked of Spinoza, and even if Spinoza and Hegel alike deeply affirm the absolute love of God, just as each affirms the absolute providence of God, Spinoza's God can in no way be associated either with death or with evil. But Hegel's God is a God who from the beginning becomes alienated from itself, therein withdrawing into itself and becoming "self-centered"; and this "evil existence" is not in itself alien to God, but rather essential to the very identity of God as God. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*: 780)⁴²

With this understanding of self-alienation within the Godhead, Altizer can now go on to redirect the *Phenomenology* through the *Science of Logic*:

This is that purely negative movement of God which realizes that God who is "being-in-itself," a negative movement which is absolutely necessary to make possible the death of God. And that is the death which reconciles absolute essence with itself, a reconciliation which is the death of the purely alienated or the purely abstract God (*Phenomenology of Spirit*: 779). The conclusion of the *Science of Logic* knows that death as absolute liberation, a death which is the Calvary of absolute Spirit, and a Calvary apart from which God would only be that purely abstract Spirit which Hegel can discover in Hinduism and Spinoza alike.⁴³

This alienated or purely abstract Spirit allows us now to return finally to Altizer's reading of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence. For what is dying here at Golgotha is the wholly alienated or holy God of primordial Eternity, which Altizer says Hegel finds in Hinduism and, in his way, Spinoza. If we read backwards in *The Genesis of God*, back towards the beginning as genesis, as we have been reading backwards throughout this discussion, we go back to "The Logic of Genesis" that is Chapter

⁴² Altizer, *Genesis of God*, p. 38. An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Hegel and the Christian God", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1. (Spring, 1991), pp. 71-91.

⁴³ Altizer, *Genesis of God*, p. 38.

1, and there find Altizer addressing directly Hegel's circular logic/*Logic* that deals with both the death and liberation of Eternity.

It was Hegel, Altizer claims, who most understood that the nullity of the Creator God who stands wholly apart from creation in a prior eternity is a nullity that itself needs to be annulled. To return back to this God of prior or primordial eternity is what is captured in Eternal Return. And it is this Eternal Return that needs now to be overturned. But how is it to be annulled? It was Hegel who best understood that it must, out of necessity, be annulled *from within itself*. To do so requires that negation, as the act of annulling, become an actualizing force, a *Trieb*, to use Hegel's term he picked up especially from Schiller, and which Altizer places at the center of absolute spirit.⁴⁴ This force first must act upon itself, to negate the nullity of primordial eternity and in that negation to actualize the nullity of an actual eternity. Eternal Return takes us back to a primordial nothing, whether in Christian, Buddhist or Hindu terms.⁴⁵ As part of modernity's forward-moving impetus, this return is now rendered impossible by the absolute, Hegel's absolute negation, so as to engender an *actual* nothing. Only from this *actual* nothing can a new beginning arise.

What, then, is the Hegelian circle? It cannot be an archaic or primordial circle of return, just as it cannot be a Buddhist circle of pure emptiness, and cannot be because it cannot return to an undifferentiated totality or emptiness. The truth is that the Hegelian circle is not an empty circle, not a circle which is empty of actuality, but rather a circle which is absolute actuality itself.⁴⁶

This absolute actuality is non-metaphysical and purely immanent for Altizer, which is why he can call Hegel an "atheist", but "only by way of a unique Christian thinking".⁴⁷ It is towards this unique way of thinking that the *Science of Logic* moves, as it begins its own genesis with the actuality of a new beginning. And even if there is "no direct exposition of the 'death of God'" as the *Logic* explicates its *Wissenschaft*, "every movement of this [the *Logic's*] exposition is an abstract embodiment of that 'death'", which does away with metaphysics and transcendence, and plunges us into a total

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 20. For a discussion on Hegel's debt to Schiller in relation to the *Trieb*, see Andrew W. Hass, *Hegel and the Art of Negation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 27-28; 62-70.

⁴⁵ In this list Altizer also included Neoplatonism, or at least Plotinus' version of Neoplatonic thought, the Oneness of which he felt constituted an absolute transcendence synonymous with a primordial Nothing. See Altizer, "Letter 27", *The Silence Must Now Speak*, p. 109. This is arguable, and I have taken issue with Altizer on this point in subsequent correspondence.

⁴⁶ Altizer, *Genesis of God*, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

immanence. This plunge is Nietzschean, but taken from the starting point of an abstract absolute, rather than from that of the viscera of life. As Altizer writes:

This is a purely abstract form of that total immanence that Nietzsche will enact in his proclamation of Eternal Recurrence, and even as that eternal recurrence is the very opposite of a primordial eternal return, and is so if only because of its celebration and exaltation of a present and actual moment, the Hegelian circle is the opposite of a primordial and Buddhist circle.⁴⁸

The *Science of Logic* is thus “a purely logical realization of genesis”, of beginning anew within a wholly consummate immanence, which is Nietzsche’s end.⁴⁹ “Ecce Homo”, behold the man, the incarnated being there in the world. Thus the *Logic’s* liberation is a consummate Calvary, or an apocalypse, but one whose ending inaugurates a beginning, a newly immanent beginning, and one that, from Hegel, as he moves between the *Phenomenology* and the Greater Logic, begins again in Nietzsche, who himself was already beginning in Hegel. Thus we could say, as Altizer beholds both men, Nietzsche has his beginning and end in Hegel, Hegel his genesis and apocalypse in Nietzsche.

Enacting the Unity of Nietzsche and Hegel

If it was Altizer’s stated project to unify Hegel and Nietzsche, the foregoing examination reveals that the movement of that unity is fundamentally and irrevocably circular, where the beginning is actually end, the end actually beginning. Both Hegel and Nietzsche enact this circularity in their thought and writing: Hegel in the circularity within and between the *Phenomenology* and the *Science of Logic*,⁵⁰ Nietzsche through his evolving idea of Eternal Recurrence that begins, most assuredly and dramatically, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The drama is crucial: the circularity must remain in self-conscious motion, not as linear narrative, but as a Greek play, enacted again and again, first in the service of a Dionysian festival, and then, increasingly, in the service of a Eucharistic liturgy, the remembrance of, and the partaking in, a dysangelic euthanasia as a deep awakening to a new theological actuality, celebrated in the wake of Joyce.

Altizer’s great legacy is not only to mark out this drama within these two crucial *dramatis personae*, Nietzsche and Hegel, but indeed to enact the drama *between them*. “Enactment” is a word

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁰ “While all serious Hegelians are aware of the integral relationship between the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*, this relationship has only recently begun to be critically explicated...” – Altizer, “Letter 26”, *This Silence Must Now Speak*, p. 106.

frequently employed by Altizer. Its very frequency is self-fulfilling, for to repeat “enactment” is itself an enactment of recurrence. Anyone coming to Altizer’s work is immediately struck by that recurrence, and the less perspicuous reader will see this as deficiency, a mind stuck in a stale loop of sameness and repetition, betraying a lack either of imagination or of intellectual acumen, if not of both. To charge Altizer with such deficiency is to misunderstand profoundly the very intention of his theology – and it is, unashamedly, a theology from beginning to end – a theology both prophetic and liturgical. It is prophetic in its calling out with audacity and courage what modern theology has been so resistant to accept, that God is *actually* dead, annulled in an actualized and actualizing death, and it enjoins modern prophets from Blake to Nietzsche to Joyce in marking out both the nay-saying and yea-saying of this reality. And it is liturgical in its repetitive call of the *coincidentia oppositorum* between this No and Yes, a call that echoes in multiple but recurring voices of the artists, theologians and philosophers that make up Altizer’s canon. We might even go so far as to call this a prophetic liturgy, in the sense that the prophetic call must always be enacted, repeatedly, so that it does not revert to the Eternal Return of a primordial ground, but keeps itself newly alive in an Eternal Recurrence of an actual ground-breaking genesis.

Both Nietzsche and Hegel break new ground in this respect, but they *keep* breaking ground in the very enactment of their thought. For Hegel this is done most emphatically in the *Phenomenology*, which in *Geist*’s movement towards its own self-consciousness performs the realization of the actualization of Nothing in the Absolute.⁵¹ For Nietzsche this is done most emphatically by Zarathustra, who rewrites the Gospel narratives in dysangelic terms (for “what could one create if gods existed?”⁵²). Altizer breaks new ground by breaking the ground that traditionally separates Nietzsche from Hegel, and by enacting their respective enactments as an act of unity. This enactment requires the kind of liturgical recurrence in which the invocation of Hegel elides with that of Nietzsche, and if Hegel through negation could penetrate deeply into Eternal Return to unfold its own self-alienating and self-annulling logic, Nietzsche through destruction could penetrate deeply into Eternal Recurrence to generate a life-giving force and vitality. What Altizer ultimately enacts therefore is the negation of Eternal Return in Eternal Recurrence. And if this engenders an *Aufhebung*, it is one where, in the annulment of a primordial Eternity, a new born peace emerges

⁵¹ Altizer and I differ on the terminology here. I argue, in *Hegel and the Art of Negation*, that it is not the Nothing that is enacted but negation, since Nothing is the opposite pole to Something, whereas negation realizes and fulfills the Becoming that is in operation between these poles. Altizer’s sense of “actual”, as informed by Nietzsche, intends, I believe, to capture this Becoming, that is, to infect the Nothing with an *actus purus* by which “an absolute beginning or genesis is the beginning of an actual emptiness” (Altizer, *Genesis of God*, p. 21).

⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, “Upon the Blessed Isles”, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 199.

between disappearance and beginning, as manifested in an actual Eternity forever beginning itself anew.

The most explosively original enactment of this most circular ground of ground-breaking is for Altizer found neither in Nietzsche nor in Hegel, however. It is found, as we have already suggested, in the most circumlocutory of all novels, the Christian epic that is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. For as Altizer never tired of pointing out – and on occasion enacted in a theatrical performance of reading⁵³ – the ending leads directly back to the beginning, and “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” (concluding words of the novel) finds its completion in the opening “riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs”.⁵⁴ No mere literary sleight of hand, this movement for Altizer realizes the originating center – the *Trieb*, in Hegelian language – that drives the “unreadable” narrative⁵⁵ forward in its totality. The “commodius vicus of recirculation” is, on one level, of course Dublin and its byways; but it is also, for Altizer, the encompassing totality of language itself, its universality in the literal sense of the word, which as an *actus purus* he dares to call “the speech of God”. As God falls into the world, as enacted on the first page of the novel, he falls into the actuality of language. But in the *Wake* this is a pure actuality of newness, with speech always under renewal, and in that process it yields a God always recurring again and again.

But God again is God *again*, and God again in the linguistic chaos of the *Wake*, a chaos in which the apocalypse of God is the fall of God, and the fall of God into a fully and actually spoken speech. This speech is truly eternal recurrence, the eternal recurrence of condemnation and fall, and the enactment of that fall in the pure actuality of speech.⁵⁶

In this continually re-enacted fall, as an eternal Fall, the Creator becomes wholly identical with creation, and thus the passing that is “the wake of God” becomes “a wake which itself

⁵³ For those of us lucky enough to witness such a performance, this was simultaneous delivery and deliverance, simultaneous creation and liberation, simultaneous prophetic announcement and liturgical rite, all enacted with a homiletic power that, if bemusing and bewildering to a by-passer, deeply moved the room in which it was performed.

⁵⁴ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 628-p. 3.

⁵⁵ “...if this work is the fullest realization of our unconscious which has ever occurred in any work, its dreamers are vibrantly awake, and most awake in the pure immediacy of their language, a language calling forth not only a universal humanity, but a humanity that is overwhelming in its language, and hence pure language *is* pure act. But it is only so when we can least understand it, only when it is most distant from all understanding and all actual comprehension. Hence the necessity of this radically new language...” – Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, p. 128.

⁵⁶ Altizer, “The Epic Voyage into Apocalypse”, in *Call to Radical Theology*, p. 129.

is resurrection”, as actuality overcomes primordiality.⁵⁷ If Hegel traced the philosophical lineaments of this re-enacted Fall as “a feeling that God himself is dead”, from which a speculative Good Friday becomes a Calvary of Absolute Spirit, Nietzsche embodied the “wake of God” through Eternal Recurrence. Neither Hegel nor Nietzsche, in all their obsession with speech and language, would have understood *Finnegans Wake*. But for Altizer, Hegel’s radical *logic* and Nietzsche’s radical *life* find ultimate enactment in a radical wake by which the negation of consciousness in death is met by the wakefulness of consciousness in life. No is best articulated by a Yes, and if there is any pure Yes available to us, it is found in the over-abundance of *Finnegans Wake* that remains unavailable to our comprehension yet wholly available when “we truly hear it, and hear it above all as enactment”, the enactment of an ecstatic Yes.⁵⁸

For those who dare to have ears to hear this Yes, Altizer enacts this enactment over and over again. If he himself has an *actus purus* of this Yes, it is in the book devoted most directly and most pronouncedly to speech, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977). He himself knew this to be “his best book”, but precisely because it came from elsewhere, he says, as if in a revelation.⁵⁹ What it reveals is the drive for a new theological language, in which the actuality of speech, through a mode more meditative than discursive (“Eastern and Western at once”⁶⁰), finds its originating source in silence.

The book begins with a question: “What is speech?” It ends in a final act of locution, requiring double quotation marks: ““It is finished.”” In the middle, as it passes through thematic biblical movements familiar in kind – Genesis, Exodus, Judgment, Incarnation, Apocalypse: a five-act drama – it enjoins the becoming speech of silence. What is silenced upon a first pass of reading is what is never not present in all his other writings: the familiar names and texts of those Western writers who form Altizer’s *liturgica dramatis*, from Augustine to Joyce. Not even the Bible is named, even though Altizer tells us he set out to write a full biblical theology.⁶¹ In this conspicuous absence then is a text in which Nietzsche and Hegel are consciously made mute. And yet they resound on every page, heard in the inexorable coincidence of speech and silence, the one the pregation of the other. What is heard upon a second pass is thus the fecund negation that is both Hegel and Nietzsche at

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 30-31.

once, a negation giving birth to an actuality that is prolix, even if what is prolix in that actuality is its own otherness. "Only the act of speech can actualize silence, but when speech is fully and finally enacted in silence, silence is thereby actualized, and so actualized that it can never again be only silence."⁶²

Thus Hegel and Nietzsche are heard in repeated passes of this extraordinary text as the very *circularity* of the passing, as what has passed and what comes to pass, and what passes over from speech to silence in a coming together. "It is finished" is the text's final utterance. This declamation of an end, as an ending, returns us to the opening as an interrogative: "What is speech?" In Altizer, what is born in this question is the beginning of actuality, but an actuality that only finds itself in finality: "A beginning? Yes, a beginning because it is an ending, an actual ending of its real opposite, and thus an actual beginning."⁶³ To say "It is finished" it to begin anew the passage of God's own embodiment. Tellingly, the words "death" and "dead" are not to be found anywhere in this text. Only words like "negation", "self-emptying", "silence", and "finality", the finality that is spoken in "It is finished". But to speak these words is to re-embody the God of Calvary. "The real ending of speech is the dawning of resurrection, and the final ending of speech is the dawning of a totally present actuality."⁶⁴

In this dawning we cannot but hear Nietzsche; in this beginning Hegel. In the totally present they come together as an affirming unison of Yes. And if in their unity they should hear Altizer speak, it is to hear the words that Joyce himself might have said: "No, in truth, it is never finished."

⁶² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-embodiment of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 94.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 96.