

Barthes' and Derrida's *Agon* with God

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Abstract: This essay considers Barthes' and Derrida's continuing dialogue with Nietzsche's claim, "God is dead". Barthes urges one, in *The Death of the Author*, to accept the *text* as a means of escape from the nothingness of the self, and Derrida, at first glance, appears to agree when he states in *The Gift of Death*, that the first effect or destination of language involves the deprivation of an individual's selfhood. However; he uses the aporia of responsibility to highlight the paradoxes present in language/texts and offers deconstruction, not as a solution, rather as a tool for recognising and disarming such. A thorough examination of Barthes and Derrida contesting claims reveals flaws in their attempts to free post-modern theory from the grand narrative of Judeo-Christian theology, and sees both theorists caught in the paradox of defining their freedom against the very theology they deny.

A return to the world as we know it: Barthes' and Derrida's *Agon* with God.

Logos is thus a *resource*. One must turn to it, and not merely when the solar source is *present* and risks burning the eyes if stared at; one has also to turn away toward *logos* when the sun seems to withdraw during its eclipse. Dead, extinguished, or hidden, that star is more dangerous than ever.

'The Father of Logos' – Derrida¹

When Nietzsche made his famous announcement, "God is dead"² in 1882, he was attempting to do more than merely voice an increasing European discomfort with the idea of ceding responsibility to a higher power, and offering more than disinterested prognosis for the religious disappointment at the heart of Western culture. He wanted to vanquish God's shadow so that

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Father of Logos.' Leitch, Vincent B., William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, Jeffrey J. Williams, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (NY & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 1846.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 343.

humanity might come out from the cave, and “abolish the distinction between a true and apparent world...through an overcoming of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world”.³ Nietzsche predicted that his vision would be realised with the coming of the *Übermensch*; a free-spirited being who would kill the “author of life” in order to gain the freedom to “posit his own ideal and...derive from it his own law, joys, and rights...”⁴ Such an individual would be capable of seeing the true world revealed, and filling the void left by God. However, as with all matters pertaining to religion and God, the *Übermensch* and the terms of the New World Order over which he would rule are still under debate.

It is this debate, and more particularly Barthes’ and Derrida’s *agon* with Nietzsche’s dead God who refuses to die; encompassing their alternative claims to a territory that gives every appearance of still being inhabited by the Christian *Deus absconditus*, that is of interest here.⁵ In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes exposes the nothingness embodied by the cult of the self, and insists that we purge language of assumptions of selfhood, and embrace the pleasures of pure text. Derrida, with the debate having shifted by the time of *The Gift of Death*, shares Barthes’ disillusion with the cult of the self, but rather than suggesting text as solution uses the aporia of responsibility to highlight language and text’s inherent shortcomings and offers, finally, a solution both unexpected and paradoxical. In addressing Barthes’ and Derrida’s claims, I will demonstrate that their arguments regarding the self and language/text are underwritten by a further aim of freeing Western

³ Nietzsche, 108. The cave Nietzsche is referring to here is akin to the Platonic cave – See *The Republic, Book VII*. See also Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol II*, p184, for the belief that depending on, or deferring responsibility to a will foreign to one’s own runs counter to moral responsibility.

Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God’s Shadow*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 8.

⁴ Nietzsche, 143. *Übermensch* is usually translated into English as Overman.

theoretical and philosophical thought from the grand narrative of Judeo-Christian theology, and examine how successful they are in achieving such.

From the opening paragraph of *The Death of the Author* Barthes' frustration with the cult of the self is signaled when he demands of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, "Who is speaking thus?"⁶ He informs the reader that one can never be sure who they are hearing: "Balzac the author...universal wisdom," or something else altogether.⁷ But why this obsession with authorial voice, and how is it related to the cult of the self?

Barthes understands only too well that the figure of the author stands for individuality, creativity and above all authority, and urges the author's death as a means of escape from the nothingness of self, and the destructive desire for non-being that self-will implies.⁸ Even so, why should the author die to achieve such? Barthes believes that in order to purge the modernist self without a return to the grand narratives of Judeo-Christian tradition, the figure of the humanist author who strives for a unified self, writes as an author-God, and creates the world through self-expression fulfils in dying, "much the same function in our day as did the death of God for late nineteenth-century thought" as "both deaths attest to a departure of belief in

⁵ The concept of a hidden God is derived from the *King James Bible*, Isaiah 45:15.

⁶ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author.' Leitch, Vincent B., William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, Jeffrey J. Williams, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (NY & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 1466.

⁷ Barthes, 1466.

⁸ The concept of the nothingness of self is attributed to St. Augustine in Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, 2003:189. "To be self-willed... [is] to be in one self in the sense of to please oneself, [which] is not to be wholly nothing but to be approaching nothingness. To exist independently is to be a kind of cipher. The self-willed have the emptiness of a tautology. They make the mistake of imagining that to act according to laws outside the self is to be something less than the author of one's own being. Whereas the truth is that we could not act purposively at all except according to rules and conventions which no one individual invented." Eagleton cites Augustine's *Confessions* but does not supply page citation. Comprehensive investigation failed to verify this source.

authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity”.⁹ Barthes requires the removal of the “prestige of the individual” embodied in the “person of the author”, and yet does not lose sight of the dangers involved in such an excision.¹⁰ As Burke points out, “for a culture which thinks itself to have come too late for the Gods or for their extermination, the figures of the author and the human subject are said to fill the theological void, to take up the role of ensuring meaning in the absence of metaphysical certainties”.¹¹

Barthes’ insistence then, that the author is a modern figure, purposely positioned to present a unified Truth from a single, authoritative source through self-expression, while appearing to confide in the self of the reader, signals his appreciation of the dual function of the author.¹² He stresses the fallacy of belief in authorial intention, stating that the “text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning’ and denies the existence of an intended message from an ‘Author-God’”.¹³ He denies also, the presence of meaning, originality or intention in the text because writing, and for that matter, language, is the “negative where all identity is lost”, the “destruction of every voice, of every point of origin.”¹⁴ Hence, “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.”¹⁵ However, by convincing the reader that all we can hope to find in the language of an authorless text is a reinforcement of the nothingness of the self, Barthes exposes his argument to a greater danger: acknowledgement of the nothingness of self may lead the individual back to God.

⁹ Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) 22-23.

¹⁰ Barthes, 1468.

¹¹ Burke, 22-23.

¹² Barthes, 1466.

¹³ Barthes, 1468.

¹⁴ Barthes, 1466.

Barthes sees no value in such a return, and is quick to offer the text as an alternative. But what should one expect to gain from this exchange? Barthes tells us the text offers freedom through refusing “an ultimate meaning...” and liberating “what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end to refuse God...”¹⁶ Furthermore, the reader can expect “multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation...” without the intervention of a higher source of meaning. The new-born reader can in fact, become “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed...” so that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”.¹⁷ The birth of the reader may at first notice appear to be a fresh regard for, rather than destruction of, the individual.¹⁸ However, Barthes is not suggesting a new text-savvy *Übermensch*: in this instance he is privileging the text, not the reader.

Barthes is urging, through the death of the author, freedom from both the emptiness of self and the hold God exercises over the Word.¹⁹ He is only too aware of the dual Author-God relationship that has developed in a culture obsessed with self, and develops a strong case for taking the text on its own terms; but surely the “pure gesture of inscription” in Barthes’ Text would demand such an excessive degree of inflation to fill the void left by the Judeo-Christian God, that it would either become empty, or fall prey to the very mythologising it has been designed to frustrate.²⁰

¹⁵ Barthes, 1468.

¹⁶ Barthes, 1469.

¹⁷ Barthes, 1469.

¹⁸ Barthes, 1470.

¹⁹ It is worth considering the opening of ‘The Gospel of St. John’ in relation to this matter: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” See *King James Bible*, St. John 1:1.

To say that the act of writing is as “the hand, cut off from any voice,” or to see language as a phenomena that requires no subjective intervention is mythopoeic and runs the risk of circling back to the notion of a text that wrote itself as if divinely inspired; the parallel to the Romantic view of a divinely gifted author-creator is simply too strong to ignore.²¹ Furthermore, Barthes insists that our current view is one in which, “the Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child”.²² None of this is in dispute, but what happens if we do take the *father* out of the picture? Fatherless texts invoke beliefs in *Divine Texts*, written straight from God through the conduit of chosen scriptors, who consequently deny ownership of authorial intention. Such texts are easily mythologised and exercise much greater power than those written by fallible and to some extent, knowable human authors.

It is worthwhile to turn now to Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, and consider his reservations with regards to either elevating or apportioning too much faith in language/text. As with Barthes, Derrida is disillusioned with the cult of the self and considers idealised selves such as Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, or Sartre’s individual who maintained “the ideals of personal and political freedom in all aspects of day-to-day existence” to be flawed.²³ Indeed, by Derrida’s own admission Sartre’s model is one that although he loves, he considers, “ill-fated and catastrophic...”²⁴ In order to understand why this is so, and how Derrida attempts to colonise the Judeo-Christian God rather

²⁰ Barthes, 1468.

²¹ Barthes, 1468.

²² Barthes, 1468.

²³ Burke, 11.

²⁴ Christopher Norris, *Derrida*. (London: Fontana, 1987) 240.

than privilege language/text, one must tease out the various strands of Derrida's argument on the aporia of responsibility.

By using the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to explore the aporia of responsibility, Derrida highlights the impossibility, and impossibly negative attributes of a true attainment of individuality. Abraham's intention to sacrifice his son Isaac to God sees him stranded between absolute responsibility and personal ethics. Abraham, in order to maintain his duty to God, must remain silent; must keep his secret and deny his ethics. Derrida states that through this secretive act of silence, the self "becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility".²⁵ Therefore, it is only through Abraham's refusing language, through refusing to speak what he knows, that he will remain individual.²⁶ Abraham has no choice then, but to remain individual in order to uphold his responsibility to God, so that when "Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one's own singularity, at the moment of decision".²⁷ It is this that Derrida asks us to consider in relation to the self: this knowledge that "as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses one's singularity and one's ability to make singular decisions; thereby annulling 'the possibility of deciding or the right to decide'".²⁸

Such a situation is, as Derrida says, "both a scandal and a paradox".²⁹ For, if the implication of an "absolute responsibility" is a secrecy that gives no account of an individual's actions, that requires the "I" to "answer for

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 15.

²⁶ Derrida, 1995, 15-16.

²⁷ Derrida, 1995, 60.

²⁸ Derrida, 1995, 60.

²⁹ Derrida, 1995, 60.

nothing...and to no one”, then surely the status of the individual is compromised.³⁰ Derrida explains:

Such is the aporia of responsibility: one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of forming it. For responsibility...demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence, and secrecy.³¹

Abraham’s example highlights the impossibility of imagining oneself truly individual, and the implications of adhering to the secrecy of true individuality. Derrida’s vision of the self is not one of emptiness, but one so full with aporia and paradox as to be undesirable, yet he is not eager to offer language or text as valid replacements. Rather, he shows that just as the individual is caught in the aporia of responsibility, so too is language/text caught between what it means to say, and what it is nevertheless forced to say.

If we return to Abraham’s dilemma, we can see that, “far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility...” so that one feels impelled ‘to speak to reply, to account for something, and thus to dissolve...singularity in the medium of the concept’.³² Herein resides the problem for language and for the text. All singularities are dissolved into the “medium of the concept”, nothing escapes the supplement, or the “paradoxes and aporias of every economy”.³³ Derrida’s methods of deconstruction have made it abundantly clear that one cannot put one’s faith in language. It is a

³⁰ Derrida, 1995, 60-61.

³¹ Derrida, 1995, 61.

³² Derrida, 1995, 61.

³³ Derrida, 1995, 22. See also ‘That Dangerous Supplement’ in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). Derrida’s term “supplement” encompasses the concept of references tracing back to an undecidable origin. For example: if one searches for the origin of a word, one shall discover a continual trace of antecedents that are nothing other than supplements. This means that no matter how far back one searches there can be no “origin of language” to discover.

flawed medium, unable to either remain free of intention, or offer absolute truth. Indeed, one cannot put one's faith in language and have it mean what it says.

Derrida tells us it is this instability of language, these very paradoxes and aporias, that expose all religious or philosophical turns to the risk of a new fall, so that, "one escapes the demonic orgiastic by means of the Platonic triumph, and one escapes the latter by means of the sacrifice or repentance of the Christian 'reversal' that is, by means of the Christian 'repression.'"³⁴

Thus, we are brought to his true purpose in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida's argument rests finally on a turn of his own devising;

We should stop thinking about God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent, and what is more – into the bargain, precisely – capable...of seeing into the most secret of the most interior places...to think of God and of the name of God without such idolatrous stereotyping or representation. Then we might say: God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. Once such a structure of conscience exists, of being with oneself, of speaking, that is, of producing invisible sense, once I have within me...a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself, once I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists..." then "God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self'..."³⁵

Instead of turning to language or text to furnish a new economy, Derrida has attempted to conflate Western concepts of God and self into an *absolute* self. This new self would contain an Other with which to hold interior counsel, and in so doing would escape both individualism and the aporias of language/text. The deficiencies of this model are encapsulated in his earlier admission about the dangers paradoxes and aporias pose to every new economy, and places his own attempt to reconfigure God at risk of a similar fall.

³⁴ Derrida, 1995, 22.

Derrida's reconsideration of the concept of God is a bold move, yet despite urging the reader to understand how "paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude", his final solution appears to have not so much breached conceptual limits, as been sacrificed in an unexpected and incongruous turn.³⁶ Returning to the term *God* in order to describe a new way of being and knowing risks deeper engagement with the hierarchical structures, accepted norms and supplements present in all instances of language and text. Indeed, Derrida's use of God is a supplement in this instance, and as such his concept cannot be seriously entertained when one considers his prior contention: the subject "of the sentence might always say through using the 'supplement,' more, less, or something other than what he *would mean [voudrait dire]*".³⁷

It is the abyss caused by Nietzsche's dead God that both Barthes and Derrida have unsuccessfully attempted to reclaim. Barthes urges the author's death as a means of destroying the cult of the self, and offers the text as a solution; however his arguments for elevation of the text and removal of the Author-God run the risk of alienating the individual, and augmenting the very myth he is attempting to disarm. Similarly, Derrida seeks a new philosophical economy capable of weakening Judeo-Christian theology's hold on Western theoretical and philosophical thought. His appraisal of the ethical implications of absolute responsibility appears to suggest that participating in and trusting to language may provide temporary respite from singularity, nevertheless he leaves no doubt that the resource of *Logos* can neither deliver

³⁵ Derrida, 1995, 108-109.

³⁶ Derrida, 1995, 68.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Exorbitant. Question of Method.' Leitch, Vincent B., William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan, Jeffrey J. Williams, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (NY & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 1825.

Barthes' ideal of intentionless purity, nor neutralise Western theology's hidden, but ever present star. His final solution, an *absolute* self as defined within his new economy, unsuccessfully attempts to appropriate God from Judeo-Christian theology, and on close reading fails to persuade.

Barthes and Derrida are unable to properly disable either Judeo-Christian theology, or its *Deus absconditus*. What Nietzsche began remains incomplete: Barthes' solution is not substantial enough to offer deeper philosophical satisfaction, while Derrida, although engaging in the outer limits of conceptual thought, proposes an equally unsatisfactory turn, and in so doing leaves the abyss unsounded. The bounds of Christian-moral interpretation have not yet been breached; postmodern theory remains locked in the paradox of defining its freedom against a theology and God it denies.

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