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FAITHFUL DEICIDES
Contemporary French Thought
and the Eternal Return of Religion

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by

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The religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully—but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion.

Friedrich Nietzsche
Beyond Good and Evil

L'Occident et l'Orient croient l'un et l'autre que la modernité est un événement profane, qui 'profanise' le monde, alors qu'il est peut-être ce qui vient seulement le 'déreligioniser' pour le spiritualiser autrement.

Abdenour Bidar
L'Islam face à la mort de Dieu

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Short Abstract

Faithful Deicides:

Contemporary French Thought and the Eternal Return of Religion

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At a time when religious fundamentalisms fight on all continents for the monopoly of religious truth, no definition seems as uncertain as that of religion. To be sure, the definitions proposed by Edward Burnett Tylor, William James and Emile Durkheim in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which all revolve around the notion of transcendent belief, have been used in social sciences for more than a century and still constitute the theoretical ground on which secularism rests in the modern West. In the past few decades, however, globalisation and the emergence of spiritual approaches to environmentalism and mindfulness in Western countries have raised the question of whether non-theistic devotion and ritual practices detached from supernatural belief should be considered as religious. Reformist currents of the Abrahamic religions have also contributed to challenging the idea that transcendent belief is *conditio sine qua non* of religion by emphasising ‘lived experienced’ and ‘reflective faith’. These definitional transformations go hand in hand with the urgency felt by political leaders and sociologists to distinguish religion from what is presented as its terrorist caricature. In this thesis, I argue that a way out of this definitional crisis may be found in the work of four of France’s most original contemporary philosophical voices. Through their respective non-dialectical engagements with the concept of the death of God, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy inaugurate a thinking of the religious that does not depend on transcendent belief, but rather unfolds as an open-ended trust in otherness. Over the course of four chapters, I demonstrate that, by designating faith in difference as the lowest common denominator of transcendent religions and immanent spiritualities found across the world, these thinkers lay the ground for a more inclusive approach to religious pluralism than the one currently secured by Western secularism.

Long Abstract

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At a time when religious fundamentalisms of all tradition and on all continents fight for the monopoly of religious truth, no definition seems as uncertain as that of religion. To be sure, the definitions proposed by Edward Burnett Tylor, William James and Emile Durkheim in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which all revolve around the notion of transcendent belief, have been used in social sciences for more than a century and still constitute the theoretical ground on which secularism rests in the modern West. In the past few decades, however, the so-called ‘return of religion’ at the forefront of international preoccupations has blurred the boundaries of what was hitherto understood as religion. Globalisation and the emergence of spiritual approaches to environmentalism and mindfulness in Western countries have raised the question of whether non-theistic devotion and ritual practices detached from supernatural belief should be considered as religious. Reformist currents of the three main Abrahamic religions have also contributed to challenging the idea that transcendent belief is *conditio sine qua non* of religion by increasingly putting an emphasis on ‘lived experienced’ and ‘reflective faith’. These definitional transformations go hand in hand with the urgency felt by political leaders and sociologists to distinguish religion from what is often presented as its terrorist caricature. In this thesis, I argue that a way out of this definitional crisis may be found in the work of four of France’s most original contemporary philosophical voices, namely, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy, in particular in their respective engagements with the concept of the death of God.

As Charles Taylor explains in *A Secular Age*, the concept of the death of God is generally associated with the diffusion of atheism in a world previously dominated by theism and the installation of an ‘immanent frame’ over Western minds—Westerners

‘come to understand [their] lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order’ (Taylor 2007: 543). The hitherto axiomatic belief in a form of transcendence is progressively recognised as a mere option. The death of God thus appears as a privileged starting point for any attempt at appreciating the diversity of religion today, beyond the limits of transcendence. A quick look at the history of the concept of the death of God, however, leads me to nuance this observation: far from challenging the axiomatic value of transcendence, the diffusion of atheism across Western countries led to the dialectical replacement of theological values with humanistic or rationalist ones. The ‘frame’ characteristic of secularism appears to only be immanent insofar as it does not depend on a belief in God, but it still appeals to a-theistic figures of transcendence, including Man and Reason. As Deleuze rhetorically asks, ‘en mettant l’homme à la place de Dieu, supprimons-nous l’essentiel, c’est-à-dire la place ?’ (1983b: 101). The development of atheism thus largely failed to challenge the axiomatic value of transcendence, which is found at the heart of theism *and* atheism, religion *and* its other. In this thesis, I argue that Bataille’s, Derrida’s, Nancy’s and Deleuze’s rigorous approach to the concept of the death of God, by contrast, finally liberates thought from the notion of transcendence. As I highlight across four chapters, indeed, despite conspicuous differences in their respective approach, Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze all conceive of difference in terms of the eternal return of the Same to its own differentiation, a Nietzschean-inspired non-dialectical gesture that prevents difference from serving as a foundation for identity. By proposing a thinking of difference that breaks with the ontological primacy of the concept of identity, these thinkers inaugurate a thinking that requires no reference to the realm of Ideas and ideals for which God stands as a figurehead. They thereby break with the transcendence on which both theism *and* atheism, religion *and* its other, depend.

That is not to say, however, that Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, Deleuze, and with them, contemporary French thought as a whole, finally turns the page on religion, as Christopher Watkin—among other scholars—has recently suggested (2011: 13). I contend that a sense of the religious does remain in the thinking of Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy, although it does not depend on a transcendent beyond. Rather, its shades glimmer *through* and *as* the eternal return of a differentiating gesture, a repeated, trustful, non-dialectical embracing of otherness. Hence my decision to refer to these thinkers as ‘faithful deicides’ in the threefold sense of the term. They are *faithful* in attempting to have done with God(’s transcendent place) and thereby are led to blur the line that demarcates religion from its other. This implies that their thinking remains haunted by shades of the religious which

do not depend on transcendence as it is traditionally understood. They remain somewhat *faith-ful*, but also, thereby, (iii) prove *faithful* to Nietzsche's word 'God is dead'. It is doubtful, indeed, that Nietzsche wanted to undermine religion as a whole. As he stresses in *The Will to Power*, 'At bottom, it is only the moral god that has been overcome' (1968: 36), in other words, God's transcendent place. Building on this observation, I believe that the four faithful deicides that are Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy open new horizons for religion beyond theism *and* atheism, religious governance *and* secular neutrality, in a way that reflects spiritual transformations currently observable in Western countries and beyond. Crucially, I argue that, by designating faith in (non-dialectical) difference—or as Bataille puts it, in 'la *différence non explicable*' (*OCI*: 345)—as the lowest common denominator of transcendent religions and immanent spiritualities found across the world, they lay the ground for a more inclusive approach to religious pluralism than the one currently secured by Western secularism.

Each of the four chapters of this thesis traces the general thrust of the argument I have made here by looking at one of the four thinkers considered. Three questions guide my exploration at each stage: first, how this thinker's approach to difference develops into a rigorous thinking of the death of God; second, how (far) this thinker sidesteps the threat of dialectical recuperation; third, what this implies for a thinking of religion today as well as for envisioning religious pluralism.

The first chapter, entitled 'Georges Bataille: The Sorcerer's Apprentice', thus examines how Bataille's pioneering non-dialectical approach to difference develops into a rigorous thinking of the death of God. If I agree with critics who describe Bataille's approach to God's death during the interwar period as that of a mystic or a sorcerer's apprentice carried away by his own spell, as I explain in the first two sections, I argue in sections 3 to 5 that Bataille's later elaborations on the 'heterogeneous' understood as a non-dialectical gesture of differentiation interrupts Hegel's dialectics, thereby proceeding to a non-dialectical *epochè* of God that opens thought to an approach to religion that is not limited to the relationship with a transcendent beyond. Crucially, as it becomes clear in the last two sections, I contend that Bataille's later thinking—his promotion of chance, inoperativity, and states of incompleteness, in particular—carries the seeds of an effective fostering of self-awareness among religious communities in the form of agnostic doubt

in the face of religious revelation as well as a recognition of other religions' legitimacy, while undermining the dogmatic logic that is generally called upon to justify violations of the freedom of consciousness. Bataille's later thinking might, therefore, be of crucial use in thinking the future of peaceful religious coexistence. Bataille's potential for a rethinking of religion, however, remains curbed by several issues, including the fact, while his promotion of chance, incompleteness and inoperativity allows him to escape the dialectical threat associated with knowledge and calculation, it also obscures his point. The fact that Bataille's potential for a rethinking of religion today has thus far been overlooked and that old definitions of religion still prevail confirm my observation.

In the second chapter, I therefore turn to Derrida's deconstruction, exploring not only how it builds on Bataille's findings, but also what it brings to the question of the definition of religion today. Unlike Bataille, whose works testify to a lifelong preoccupation with (the death of) God, Derrida is often said to only start to explicitly address religious themes from the early 1980s, halfway through his career. I demonstrate in the first two sections of this chapter that Derrida's engagement with religion cannot be reduced to the religious sensibility of an ageing philosopher but rather starts as early as in the 1960s, building on his approach to *différance*. More specifically, as it will become clear in a third section, I contend that Derrida's approach to *différance* as a non-foundational gesture of infinite *différentiation* may be framed as an *époque* of divine transcendence. Echoing Bataille's 'inachèvement', Derrida opens thought to the wholly other in every other by accompanying *différance* through an attitude which he terms 'indécidabilité', a withdrawal from full presence—and, by extension, the transcendent realm of Ideas and ideals—which recalls asceticism. This does not mean, however, that Derrida is immune to postsecular temptations. Whereas the sorcerer's apprentice is carried away by his own spell, the ascetic is prone to quietism, which facilitates theological contaminations. Sections 4 and 5 of this chapter evaluate the resilience of Derrida's thinking in the face of this threat, focusing specifically on his relationship with negative theology. The final two sections are, then, devoted to an assessment of Derrida's potential for rethinking religion today as well as for envisioning not just religious coexistence but what Derrida calls "'bien vivre ensemble", cela signifie s'entendre dans la confiance, la bonne foi, la foi, se comprendre, en un mot s'accorder' (2014: 31).

In the third chapter of my thesis, entitled 'Jean-Luc Nancy: The Faithful Intruder', I propose that Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity and ontological approach to what he describes as 'une loi générale de l'intrusion' (2017a: 31), are best understood when

considered as a response to the strengths and limits identified in Derrida's and Bataille's thinking. As I explain in four initial sections, although the first few decades of Nancy's career testify to a direct lineage between Bataille's, Derrida's and his own thinking, Nancy's *ontological* approach to human finitude and suggestion that '[I]'intrus n'est pas un autre que moi-même et l'homme lui-même [...], intrus dans le monde aussi bien qu'en soi-même' (2017a: 45) comes as 'un trouble dans l'intimité' of the three thinkers (2017a: 12). Crucially for my purpose, Nancy associates the ontological dynamic of intrusion with 'une configuration complète de la mort de dieu' (2017a: 42), one which breaks with the dialectics of a/theism and allows for a thinking of the religious that requires no reference to a transcendent beyond. Like Bataille and Derrida, however, Nancy is exposed to postsecular recuperation: his analysis of the deconstruction of Christianity and identification of a universal structure of religiosity threaten to circumscribe difference within a horizon of determination. I argue in sections 5 to 7 that the resilience of Nancy's thinking in the face of this threat provides us with new resources for thinking religious plurality today, as the effective equality of incommensurables.

In the fourth and final chapter of my thesis, I turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze, with which both Derrida and Nancy have testified to a profound affinity. Like Derrida and Nancy, indeed, Deleuze seeks to 'penser la différence en elle-même, et le rapport du différent avec le différent, indépendamment des formes de la représentation qui les ramènent au Même' (1968a: 1-2). However, Deleuze is not commonly associated with the Bataille-Derrida-Nancy line of thought. Insurmountable differences separate Deleuze from other thinkers of difference. Central among these is the fact that he refuses to let himself be suffocated by the history of philosophy: faced with the closure of metaphysics, Deleuze's *contemporains* feel responsible for deconstructing their predecessors' systems and striking a fatal blow to God so as to open new horizons for thought. By contrast, Deleuze admits feeling blithely unconcerned by the overcoming of metaphysics (1990: 122). For him, philosophy has its own raw material that allows it to think difference without feeling responsible for deconstructing old ontotheological concepts. In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Deleuze even expresses his surprise, with Félix Guattari, that many thinkers still concern themselves with God's death (2005: 89). It may, therefore, seem contradictory to include Deleuze in a thesis that centres on figures who qualify as deicides. In my final chapter, I delve into the constellation of Deleuze's works to justify my description of Deleuze as a faith(-)ful deicide. I start by looking at how Deleuze's approach to difference itself unfolds as a 'tranquil' form of atheism, as per his own terms

(1988b: 7), and examine how far it escapes postsecular recuperation. As I highlight in sections 3 to 5, Deleuze's *ontological* thinking, his reliance on Spinoza, Leibniz and Bergson as primary philosophical inspirations and his desire to overcome nihilism do raise suspicions of residual foundationalism and idolatry. I argue, however, that the ethics of *agencement* that Deleuze develops with Guattari in *Mille plateaux*, an ethics which pursues *both* lines of flight *and* processes of territorialisation, not only escapes recuperation but also, as I explain in sections 6 and 7, opens new perspectives for thinking (religious) coexistence today in a way that does not rely on the tenets of mainstream secularism, but rather unfolds as a *faith-ful* ethics of becoming-secular.

Whilst Nancy may well suggest that 'Il n'y a pas de retour du religieux : il y a les contorsions et les boursoufflures de son épuisement' (1997: 33), I contend, and demonstrate across the four chapters of this thesis, that his thinking, along with Bataille's, Derrida's, and Deleuze's, fosters a certain return of religion today. This return, to be sure, does *not* follow a so-called 'postsecular' trajectory. Bataille's, Derrida's, Nancy's, and Deleuze's attempt to have done with God('s transcendent place) and respective fostering of an affirmative and uncompromising form of agnosticism, a gesture of adoration, or a belief in this world as it is, do *not* participate in the re-enchantment of a world which would find its way back to transcendence after a period of secular wandering. Rather, I argue by way of a conclusion that these four thinkers' (re)turn to the question of religion, and fostering of a faith(-)ful mode of existence based on an infinitely repeated gesture of opening to, and welcoming of, difference, may be approached as an attempt to open, and educate, the disenchanting Western mind to the sustained experience of *wonder*.

Introduction – The Return of Religion¹

(0.1) Religion, in the Singular

*‘Comment “parler religion” ? de la religion ? Singulièrement de la religion, aujourd’hui ?’, Derrida asks at the opening of *Foi et savoir*. ‘Comment oser en parler au singulier sans crainte et tremblement à ce jour ? Et si peu et si vite ? Qui aurait l’impudence de prétendre qu’il s’agit là d’un sujet à la fois identifiable et nouveau ?’*

(2001a: 9).² At a time when religious fundamentalisms of all traditions and on all continents fight for the monopoly of religious truth, no definition seems as uncertain as that of religion. To be sure, the definitions proposed by Edward Burnett Tylor, William James and Emile Durkheim in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which all revolve around the notion of transcendent belief, never received a universal consensus. These definitions have, nevertheless, been used in social sciences for more than a century and still constitute the theoretical ground on which secularism rests in the modern West. Over the past few decades, however, manifestations of the religious across the world have come as a challenge to these, overall widely accepted, definitions.

Globalisation and the emergence of New Age ‘spirituality’ in Western countries, in particular, have raised the question of whether non-theistic devotion and ritual practices detached from supernatural belief can be described as *religious*. To this day, specialists remain divided on the question of whether Shintoism, Taoism, Buddhism and other non-

¹ An early version of material from the first three sections of this introduction was published under the title ‘The Eternal Return of Religion: Jean-Luc Nancy on Faith in the Singular-Plural’ in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* (see Chabbert 2021).

² Emphases in quotes are in the original sources, except where indicated otherwise.

Western forms of ‘spirituality’,³ which globalisation has brought under the spotlight, should be considered as religions, philosophical traditions or lifestyles (see Billington 1997: 1-8). As for ‘spiritual’ approaches to environmentalism, vegetarianism and mindfulness developing at a fast pace throughout the West, governmental agencies such as the French Mission Interministérielle de Vigilance et de Lutte contre les Dérives Sectaires are yet to settle on whether these should be considered religious, sectarian or strictly profane.⁴ In *L’Islam face à la mort de Dieu*, Abdennour Bidar suggests that they might be neither but rather testify to Westerners’ ‘spiritual’ dissatisfaction and longing for ‘un futur spirituel quelque part au-delà du Divin ancien et du Néant actuel, par-delà la croyance des uns et l’athéisme des autres’ (2010: 37). As Bidar highlights, ‘nous sommes très nombreux à [...] sent[ir] que ni la voie religieuse, ni la vie profane ne suffisent plus à nourrir ou à remplir notre âme’ (2010: 9-10). Reformist currents of the three Abrahamic religions, as well as recent work in the anthropology and the philosophy of religion, have also contributed to challenging the idea that transcendent belief is *conditio sine qua non* of religion (see Pouillon 1993; Lopez 1998; Pelkmans 2013; Taylor C. 2007; Latour 2005; Seddik 2004; Benkirane 2017; and Feneuil & Schmitt 2013). Contemporary religious leaders and believers increasingly describe religion in terms of ‘lived experienced’ and ‘reflective faith’, which for Derrida comes down to the following:

les droits de l’homme et de la vie *humaine* avant tout devoir envers la vérité absolue et transcendante de l’engagement devant l’ordre divin : un Abraham

³ That one should feel compelled to speak of ‘spirituality’ rather than ‘religion’ here is revealing. Yet it must be acknowledged that the former term raises just as many issues as the latter, for it implies a reference to a transcendent ‘spirit’, as opposed to matter, a distinction that is generally absent from so-called immanent ‘spiritualities’.

⁴ On the question of whether the appellation ‘New Age’ should be reserved for the ‘spiritual’ movement which developed in the 1970s and disappeared twenty years later or should be extended to these recent forms of ‘spiritual’ commitments, see Hammer 2001: 75, MacKian 2012: 7 and Kemp 2004: 179.

qui refuserait désormais de sacrifier son fils et n'envisagerait même plus ce qui fut toujours une folie (2001a: 65).

These definitional transformations go hand in hand with the urgency felt by political leaders and sociologists to distinguish religion from what is often presented, legitimately so or not, as its terrorist *caricature*; to sort the religious wheat from the chaff, as it were. As Derrida highlights, 'c'est la grave question du nom' (2001a: 14), the twofold question of whether what is done *in the name of* religion is necessarily religious in itself and of which criteria may be used to judge such a religious nature.

Far from confirming the traditional understanding of religion, then, the so-called 'return of religion' at the forefront of international preoccupations—which has belied the widely held belief in the pending disappearance of religion from the modern world—has blurred the boundaries of what was hitherto understood as religion. It has reshuffled the deck, to the point that one may wonder not only whether it is justified to speak of current manifestations of religion across the world in terms of a *return*—a question to which I will turn in a moment—but also whether it is necessary to keep speaking of religion *in the singular*, by referring to a universal structure of religiosity distinct from politics, economics, art, and so on. That is the relativistic question over which contemporary philosophical and anthropological analysis of religion keeps stumbling. Already in 1999, Hent de Vries observed that religion '[n]o longer [was] identifiable as a clearly demarcated field of research' (1999: 1), a tendency to which scholars have contributed by re-evaluating the demarcation between theology and philosophy, revelation and reason, the sacred and the profane, in other words, between religion and its other. Exemplary studies include John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, Moshe Halbertal's and Avishai Margalit's *Idolatry*, Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* and Jean-Luc Marion's *Etant donné*, the latter being just one example of the so-called

‘theological turn of French phenomenology’ (Janicaud 1991). Yet, as anthropologist Michael Scott warns, ‘[b]ecause “religion” has [acquired] the semantic capacity to capture aspects of almost anything, the concept threatens in many analytical contexts to disappear altogether’ (2013: 860).

Why would that be an issue? Talal Asad calls for such a disappearance on the basis that considering religion as a determinate sphere of human reality is ethnocentric since it requires a transcendent divine relatively detachable from this-worldly matters (1993: 27-54). If this corresponds to Abrahamic religions—and Christianity in particular, on which definitions of religion were modelled—this contradicts immanent ‘spirituality’, which does not conceive of religion as a separate institution. As Derrida notes in *Foi et savoir*,

Il n’y a [...] pas toujours eu, il n’y a pas toujours et partout, il n’y aura donc pas toujours et partout (‘chez les hommes’ ou ailleurs) *quelque chose*, une chose *une et identifiable*, identique à elle-même que, religieux ou irréligieux, tous s’accorderaient à nommer ‘religion’ (2001a: 56).

This issue is most pertinent to secularism, a political principle which depends on the definition of religion as a determinate anthropological category. The secular separation of religion from the public sphere in order to guarantee the neutrality of the State and freedom of consciousness fails to accommodate the variety of immanent ‘spiritualities’ found across cultures. No wonder Asad’s anti-essentialist position received wide attention and acclaim among anthropologists. ‘Et pourtant, se dit-on, **il faut bien répondre**’, Derrida suggests (2001a: 56). If essentialist definitions of religion may well be ethnocentric and, ultimately, unviable, one must nevertheless dare to raise the question of religion in the singular. ‘Et sans attendre. Sans trop attendre’ (2001a: 59). As Derrida immediately clarifies,

je n'aurais jamais proposé de traiter de la religion *elle-même*, en général ou dans son essence, seulement d'une question inquiète, d'un souci partagé : 'Que se passe-t-il aujourd'hui, avec elle, avec ce qu'on appelle ainsi ? Qu'est-ce qui va là ? Qui va là et si mal ? [...]' [Cependant,] cette forme de question ne peut se séparer de la fondamentale (sur l'essence, le concept et l'histoire de la religion *elle-même* [...]) (2001a: 60).

In today's world of rampant religious violence, relativism remains weak in the face of the practical exigencies of peaceful coexistence: denying that there may be a universal structure of religiosity does not make existing religious claims and violence any less real. Because a relativistic approach implies renouncing the—ethnocentric indeed—protection offered by secularism without providing an alternative, it even threatens to leave governments at the mercy of dangerous ideologies. In line with Derrida, then, I believe that the contemporary necessity to be more inclusive of the 'spiritual' experiences found across the world should not find its resolution in the dissolution of the concept of religion. Scholars and political leaders *must* be able to speak of—and better still, respectively study and organise their countries' relation to—something that 'va là et si mal' (2001a: 60). Not by falling into old traps—that is to say, by approaching the religious as a category *sui generis* overlooking the particularities of determinate religions—but rather by attending to its undeniable diversity and unshakeable singularity, *simultaneously*. It is out of this conviction that the present thesis has been written, in order to outline one way in which one can still speak of religion in the singular today while taking into account the plurality of an issue that is, as Derrida rightly notes, both identifiable and new (2001a: 9).

(0.2) The Return to Identity

That is, of course, no easy task. Derrida leaves no doubt as to the courage and arrogance required to take up such a challenge. As he suggests at the opening of *Foi et savoir*,

proposing that religion must still be discussed in the singular today can only proceed by way of an approach that is at once *impudent* and *imprudent*.⁵ But why should it be so? What can possibly be so difficult, risky and therefore potentially ground-breaking about trying to adapt the definition of religion to the available data concerning its manifestations across the world? As I have explained above, part of the answer lies in the ethnocentrism threatening any approach to religion *in the singular*. As Derrida warns, ‘*Penser “religion”, c’est penser le “romain”*’ (2001a: 13). Given that, in line with Derrida, I have suggested that this risk is worth running, I can only try to fight this threat at each stage of my thesis to the best of my ability—I am aware that being a European and a Catholic works against me on this point. Even more imp(r)udent, however, is the willingness to acknowledge and welcome the increasing plurality and fluidity of religious experience in the contemporary world, as doing so not only requires one to move away from the central element on which the definition of religion has so far rested, that is, transcendent belief, but also proves counter-intuitive to a Western mind largely refractory to difference.

Let me explain by turning, first, to Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference*. In the two 1957 lectures that constitute this work, Heidegger remarks that, in the Western tradition, ‘[t]he principle of identity is considered the highest principle of thought’ (1969: 23). Ever since the first Greek philosophers, metaphysics has focused on identity and its correlates—the notions of presence, permanence, and completion—not only to the detriment of difference, but also to the point that difference has only ever been considered in its difference *from* identity. Even in that case, difference tends to be considered as a superficial challenge to the status quo soon to give way to the return of a reinforced sense of identity. This is what Hegel theorised as dialectics. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*,

⁵ I refer to Samuel Weber’s rather interesting choice to translate the French ‘*impudent*’ with the English ‘*imprudent*’ in his 1998 translation of *Foi et savoir* (Derrida 2002: 42).

the philosopher proposes that a subject's sense of self-identity benefits from an exposure to its negation. He writes that 'the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it' (2004: 19). By extrapolating this recuperation of the negative, known as *Aufhebung*, to his understanding of history, Hegel contributed to presenting crises as helpful evolutionary challenges which provide access to higher degrees of identity. As Jean-Luc Nancy highlights in *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, the structure of the return relies on this logic: 'Le schéma du retour [...] comporte deux implications principales : d'une part, la crise est réputée seulement superficielle, et d'autre part le retour du sens profond doit être le retour de l'identique' (1986: 20). When considering the effects of crises, Western scholars are therefore tempted to focus on what remains untouched or *returns*, rather than on what dramatically changed.

Such is the case with the many philosophical, anthropological or sociological studies evaluating the long-term effects of the death of God and the diffusion of atheism. Contrary to what I implied in the previous section, these studies have so far focused on the crisis, followed by a resurgence, of past religious fervour—the *return* of the Same—rather than the multiple changes in religiosity and its perception to which I have alluded (see, for instance, Berger 1999; Hervieu-Léger 1993; and Augé 1994). Only a minority of scholars, including Derrida and Nancy, have flagged that '[l]edit "retour du religieux", à savoir le déferlement d'un phénomène complexe et surdéterminé n'est pas un simple *retour*, car sa mondialité et ses figures [...] restent originales et sans précédent' (Derrida 2001a: 65; see Nancy 2005a: 9). Yet even these thinkers acknowledge that contemporary manifestations of the religious testify to a return of religion as it has traditionally been understood. More precisely, Derrida stresses that this 'return' is not so much a *rebirth* of the religious than its *reappearance* at the forefront of international preoccupations for

‘[l]e religieux n’avait pas disparu, il n’était pas mort, seulement *réprimé* dans les sociétés totalitaires, communistes, dans les colonies, etc.’ (2016: 46, my emphasis). I believe that such a reappearance of religion in the contemporary world follows two trajectories, which I respectively designate as *post-secular* and *postsecular*.⁶

On the one hand, the recent upsurge of fundamentalist currents in religious traditions including Islam, Hinduism, Protestantism and Judaism, among others, is interpreted as the return of a devotion to transcendent beliefs which proponents of the ‘secularisation thesis’ thought condemned to disappear. However, much like the Freudian ‘return of the repressed’, whose violence is proportional to that of the repressive gesture,⁷ this return manifests as a dialectical backlash, ‘une surrection religieuse et hyperreligieuse’ (Nancy 2005a: 12). As Derrida observes, ‘Il y a là [...] une accumulation de force, une potentialisation, un déferlement de conviction, un surcroît de puissance extraordinaire’ (2016: 46-47). Secularism is violently rejected, a rupture symbolised by the hyphen in the term post-secular, in favour of the return, not simply *of* religion as it used to be understood before the rise of atheism, but *to a purer* version of religion. The latter, which comes down to an uncompromising reading of the dogma, even implies a rejection of the former. Salafism is an emblematic example, with its pursuit of the supposedly lost pure religiosity of the first generations of Muslims. When coupled with Jihadism, its search for purity justifies the destruction of any ‘infidel’, whether atheist, of another religion than Islam or even Muslim but non-Salafi. Yet nothing guarantees that

⁶ A similar play on hyphenation has been used to distinguish the ‘post-colonial’ from the ‘postcolonial’ (Hiddleston 2009: 3-4 and Shohat 1992: 101), and in relation to other ‘posts’, including post(-)modernism and post(-)structuralism (Bennington 1986 and Derrida 1990b). However, the distinction between post-secularism and postsecularism itself has not (yet) been picked up in literature. The only exception that I know of is an unpublished conference paper delivered by Kristina Stoeckl in 2011 and entitled ‘Defining the Postsecular’, in which the distinction is not even exactly developed in an illuminating way.

⁷ On the parallel between the Freudian ‘return of the repressed’ and the return of religion, see Derrida 2001a: 40-41 and Mercier 2018.

the fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran proposed by Salafism has anything to do with that of the first generations of Muslims, or that such a reading is ‘purer’ than any other (for more detail, see Bouamrane & Gardet 1984).

Fortunately, not all manifestations of the return of religion in the contemporary world prove so violent. Some are the results of efforts made by reformist currents at work within Abrahamic religions as well as by scholars in philosophy of religion to make space for religion in the secular age (see McCaffrey 2009 and Blond 1998). Like post-secularism, however, this trajectory, which I refer to as *postsecular*, relies on a dialectical logic in that it attempts to *save* the perceived essence of religion, that is, the possibility of transcendent belief. To do so, the reformist currents and thinkers of this trajectory do not hesitate to transform, adapt, multiply and disseminate concepts such as the sacred, the divine and their traditional sources so that they fit in a world dominated by the death of God. Contrary to what Michael Scott suggests, then, stretching the semantic capacity of religion does not necessarily end in the dissolution of the concept. Rather, I contend that such a gesture simultaneously re-centres what is deemed essential in religion while universalising it, an approach that is as ethnocentric as any approach to religion in the singular. I suspect that Jean-Luc Marion’s radicalisation of the phenomenological method developed by Husserl and Heidegger is exemplary of this postsecular trajectory. According to Marion, whereas phenomenology is committed to exploring the thing in itself ‘en évitant de forger des hypothèses, aussi bien sur le rapport qui lie le phénomène avec l’être *de qui* il est phénomène, que sur le rapport qui l’unit avec le Je *pour qui* il est phénomène’, as Lyotard’s definition of phenomenology goes (1999: 7), Husserl and Heidegger have indexed the phenomenon’s appearance to the intentional horizon and the subject who ‘receives’ the phenomenon, thereby failing to think the phenomenon *as it appears*. As Marion explains in *Etant donné*, ‘il se trouve que l’intuition donatrice

n'autorise pas encore d'apparition absolument inconditionnée, donc de liberté du phénomène se donnant à partir de lui-même' (2005: 358). He therefore proposes to radicalise phenomenology by re-centring the latter on *revelation* for, he writes, 'le phénomène, qui advient comme un événement, prend la figure du révélé' (1999: 24). I argue that, by granting revelation such a primary phenomenological value, Marion participates in a postsecular return of religion. His radicalisation of phenomenology reinscribes the possibility of revelation, which conditions transcendent belief, at the heart of every phenomenon, guaranteeing its relevance in the modern secular world.⁸

Whether post-secular or postsecular, then, there does seem to be a return of religion in the contemporary world which manifests as a dialectical re-centring on what is deemed essential in religion, namely, transcendent belief. What Derrida and Nancy suggest, however, is that 'il n'est pas certain qu'une interprétation en termes de "retour" [...] soit suffisante, pour peu que la pensée ne soit pas trop paresseuse' (Nancy 1986: 16). The definitional crisis evoked in the first section supports this claim: religion today, or at least our perception of it, shows signs of an irreversible change for which the ever-growing body of literature on the 'return of religion' does not account. Nancy goes so far as to argue that the 'return' on which Western scholars have been focusing over the past few decades consists less in a spontaneous return *of* religion than in an artificial fear-driven return *to* religion in reaction to these changes. In *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, he remarks that 'Toutes les problématiques modernes de la différence attirent les protestations des penseurs du retour, qui y voient une destruction ou une frustration d'identité, et de la

⁸ As many have noted—and criticised—Marion identifies the phenomenological regime of revelation with Christian theophany by designating the latter as universally accessible (Nancy 1997: 4-5; Janicaud 1991; and Caputo 2007); a move which threatens to redirect Marion's trajectory from postsecularism to post-secularism. One can also question the legitimacy of Marion's reintroduction of the transcendence of the revealed at the heart of a method which aims at discarding the transcendence cultivated by the theological and metaphysical traditions. But these are other issues.

possibilité d'identifier quoi que ce soit' (1986: 98). Out of fear of the unknown, proponents of the 'return of religion' would artificially minimise the contemporary transformations of the religious in favour of the comforting—but simplistic—return to identity. Given that identity is a determining principle of Western thought, one could also argue that this return *to* religion partakes of what Derrida calls 'mondialatinisation', that is, the ethnocentric diffusion and universalisation of what is at root Latin and becomes 'européo-anglo-américaine dans son idiome' (2001a: 66; see Naas 2012: 58-60). That is what Nancy touches on in *La Déclosion* where, looking at the contemporary confrontation between the West and Islamic fundamentalism, he argues that 'c'est le modèle Uni-fiant, Unitaire et Universel, Unidimensionnel aussi, et finalement Unilatéral [of the former] [...] qui a rendu possible la mobilisation systématique et non moins nihiliste d'un modèle monothéiste et non moins unilatéral [Islamic fundamentalism]' (2005a: 62).⁹

(0.3) The Deaths *of* God¹⁰

Against this fear-driven return to identity, Nancy argues that 'Dans les phénomènes de répétition, de reprise, de relance ou de revenance, ce qui compte n'est jamais l'identique mais le différent' (2005a: 9). More specifically, he suggests that 'la question devrait bien plutôt se poser [...] de savoir ce que la "sécularisation" peut désigner et désigne inévitablement d'autre qu'un simple transfert de l'identique' (2005a: 9). Whereas discourses on the return of religion tend to depict secularisation as a momentary crisis and the death of God as '[un événement] du passé *qui tout simplement ne s'est pas passé*'

⁹ In 'Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu', Deleuze and Guattari describe Islamic fundamentalism and capitalism 'à l'américaine' as 'les figures opposées d'un nouvel intégrisme' (2003: 217; also see Derrida 2001a: 42).

¹⁰ Material from this section has been published in Chabbert 2018.

(Nancy 1986: 30), Nancy suspects that the death of God has played a determining role in the transformations that have recently challenged the traditional definition of religion. This is confirmed by Charles Taylor who, in *A Secular Age*, remarks that the diffusion of atheism in the West turned the hitherto axiomatic belief in a form of transcendence into an *option*. ‘The shift to secularity’, he explains, ‘consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others’ (2007: 3). Taylor describes this shift in terms of the installation of an ‘immanent frame’ over Western minds, for the latter ‘come to understand [their] lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order’ (2007: 543).¹¹ Because it seems to have liberated thought from the hitherto axiomatic notion of transcendence, the death of God appears as a privileged starting point for any attempt at appreciating the plurality of religion(s) today, beyond the limits of transcendence. A quick look at the history of the concept of the death of God, however, goes against this observation: God’s death does not seem to have *really* challenged the axiomatic value of transcendence. If anything, it has emphasised its resilience.

Indeed, if the death of God is now generally associated with the emergence of atheism in a world previously dominated by theism, the concept was first theorised as part of the Christian doctrine. The death of Christ on the cross constitutes not only the birth-act of Christianity—what distinguishes it from Judaism—but also the heart of its dogma. It is only by exposing Himself to His negation that Christ may revive, and His sacrifice redeem humankind. God’s death is, therefore, not a threat to Christianity; rather the opposite, it takes part in and reinforces its moral order. As Hegel highlights in *The*

¹¹ In secular societies, this frame is kept ajar: one is free to believe in a form of transcendence, provided that this remains a private matter; yet not everyone agrees on what the private sphere might include, as **evidence** by the recent debates in France surrounding the right for women to wear a veil when accompanying school trips.

Phenomenology of Spirit, the Christian death of God is thus dialectical in nature (2004: 475-476). It is this dialectical structure that one finds today in the postsecular return of/to religion. Drawing attention to the ecumenical efforts of reformist Christianity, Derrida observes that ‘Quand on entend les représentants officiels de la hiérarchie religieuse, à commencer par [...] le pape, parler d’une telle réconciliation œcuménique, on entend aussi [...] l’annonce ou le rappel d’une certaine “mort de Dieu”’ (2001a: 65-66). In *Métamorphose de la finitude*, Emmanuel Falque makes a similar point about Marion’s treatment of God’s death. For Marion, Falque argues, ‘Que Dieu soit mort [...] n’est pas ou plus simple profession d’athéisme, mais la plus haute vérité du christianisme bien compris—c’est-à-dire **centre** autour du mystère de la mort et de la résurrection du Christ’ (2015: 214). ‘Certains accuseront de *récupération* un tel tour de passe-passe’, Falque continues (2015: 214). But is this not what dialectics is: a sleight of hand?

As Gilles Deleuze observes in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, however, by staging for the first time the putting to death of God, Christianity opened thought to a world in which God is not. The Christian dogma ‘sécète par là son propre athéisme’ (1983b: 177), a second death of God, thereby confirming Nietzsche’s statement in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that ‘Lorsque les dieux meurent, ils meurent toujours de plusieurs sortes de morts’ (in Deleuze 1983b: 175; Nietzsche 2006: 211). This second atheistic death of God, however, proved no less dialectical than its Christian model insofar as it replaced God with another transcendent figure. As Deleuze explains in *Foucault*, the disappearance of the Christian God threatened to exhaust the transcendent values that traditionally supported human existence (2004b: 134). In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Immanuel Kant, and Ludwig Feuerbach therefore modelled new values based on human finitude. Thus was born the humanistic idea of Man in Western philosophy. Yet, as Deleuze rhetorically asks, ‘en mettant l’homme à la place

de Dieu, supprimons-nous l'essentiel, c'est-à-dire la place ?' (1983b: 101). In *Difficult Atheism*, Christopher Watkin highlights that the atheistic death of God merely replaced theological values with humanistic or rationalist ones, the God-Man with the Man-God, thereby 'explicitly rejecting but implicitly imitating theology's categories of thinking' (2011: 2). One may therefore criticise Taylor's use of the concept of the 'immanent frame'. The 'frame' of secularism is only immanent insofar as it does not depend on a belief in God, but it does still appeal to a-theistic figures of transcendence: its supposed secular 'neutrality' is colonised by transcendent placeholders, as testified by the emergence of quasi-religious humanist or rationalist currents in Western countries (see Kapferer 2001: 341-344 and Engelke 2014: 292-301). Most emblematic of all is Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being, which followed the installation in November 1793 of the 'goddess of reason' on the altar of Notre Dame (Watkin 2011: 2). Hence Derrida's assertion that 'la sécularisation est toujours ambiguë parce qu'elle s'affranchit du religieux tout en restant marquée, dans son concept même, par le religieux, par le théologique, voire par l'onto-théologique' (2003b: 51).

It therefore appears that both the Christian *and* atheistic deaths of God follow a dialectical logic and result in what Deleuze describes as '*un bizarre mélange [...] d'athéisme et de théologie*' (1983b: 210). This confirms Nietzsche's intuition that 'God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. —And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!' (2007: 109). According to Deleuze, this is exactly what Nietzsche seeks to do: as is evident from his project of a revaluation of value, Nietzsche is much less concerned about God's death—which was achieved by the end of the nineteenth century, with the advent of Man-God—than about the death of this Man-God and the destruction of the transcendent *place* he occupies (2004b: 138). Here, Deleuze meets Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. In 'The

Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead', Heidegger suggests that Nietzsche's project of reevaluation of values stems from the observation that there is a fundamental resonance between Christian theology and Western thought, for both think in terms of *transcendent* truths (1977: 209-268; 1969: 53-55; 60-61). While in theology, these are associated with revelation, belief and the figure of God, in metaphysics, they derive from an understanding of beings as sufficient substances immediately accessible to knowledge. Throughout the history of metaphysics, the highest, original and universal being was given the name of God by philosophers. In addition to being the central figure of what is traditionally considered as religion, God thus constitutes a privileged figurehead for Ideas and ideals, including the principle of identity and its correlates. It follows that any attempt to defeat God's shadow must oppose the transcendence at the heart of *both* theology *and* metaphysics. According to Heidegger, this is the purpose of Nietzsche's reevaluation of values: it denies all that is suprasensory in favour of the sensory, all that is transcendent in favour of immanence, so much so that the God whom Nietzsche opposes is just as much the Christian God as *transcendence* itself (1977: 216-217).¹²

Heidegger remarks, however, that, by proceeding by means of binary oppositions, Nietzsche's project too plays into the hands of dialectics. Nietzsche defines the sensory *in contrast with* the suprasensory, which means that, even after he denies the latter, its shadow remains within the structure of the former (1977: 209). As Watkin elucidates, 'In limiting itself to the sensory world *as opposed to* the suprasensory, the immanent *as opposed to* the transcendent, [this] residual atheism finds itself—just like imitative atheism—defined in terms of that which it seeks to escape', that is, transcendence (2011: 6). For Heidegger, then, Nietzsche's death of Man is no different than the Christian and

¹² This is where the parallel between Deleuze's and Heidegger's readings of Nietzsche ends. I will return to Deleuze's reading in chapter 4.

imitative deaths of God: by approaching immanence *negatively*, as that which is opposed to transcendence, it dialectically leaves a theological space unchallenged. God is not preserved per se—as with the Christian death of God—and His place is not occupied by an atheistic placeholder—as with the imitative atheistic death of God. His place is simply left empty (1977: 225). Watkin rightly observes that this resonates with Kant’s determination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to ‘deny knowledge in order to make room for faith’ (1998: 117). ‘If for Kant “the principles of (reason’s) natural use do not lead at all to any theology”,’ Watkin writes, ‘then conversely theology remains untouched either by the empirical or by the rational, and post-Kantian philosophies struggle to exorcise the same theological ghost’ (2011: 7). Moreover, as Heidegger stresses, leaving such a space untouched means running the risk of a theological contamination for ‘the empty space demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else’ (1977: 69). As far as Heidegger is concerned, Nietzsche not only fails to destroy God’s transcendent ‘place’, he is also complicit with filling it anew. Kant is also exposed to this risk. In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida observes that his efforts to counter dogmatic religions with reflective faith lead him back to a Christian approach to God’s death. According to Kant, being moral requires the will to become a better person through relentless efforts without external help or promise of salvation. Being moral thus requires that one behave *as if* God were dead. Such a moral vision aligns with Christianity, the religion of God’s death. As Derrida stresses, ‘*le christianisme, c’est la mort de Dieu ainsi annoncée et rappelée par Kant à la modernité des Lumières*’ (2001a: 22). Kant thereby threatens to fill the place anew with the Christian God.

All things considered, then, it appears that all three Christian, imitative and residual deaths of God play into the hands of dialectics. As Roberto Esposito puts it in ‘*Chair et corps dans la déconstruction du christianisme*’, these deaths of God are ‘*toujours de Dieu*,

dans le sens à la fois objectif et subjectif du génitif ; toutes ces morts, après tout, voire avant tout, lui appartiennent depuis le début dans la figure du Dieu mourant sur la croix' (2004: 157). They fail to liberate thought from the notion of transcendence which is found (returning) at the heart of both theism *and* atheism, religion *and* its other. The definitional crisis evoked in section 1 leaves no doubt, however: the notion of transcendence is not sufficient to account for the plurality of religious experiences in the contemporary world, much like, as Derrida rightly notes, '[l]e religieux ne se mesure pas seulement aux taux de fréquentation des églises' (2001b: 342). There must, therefore, be more to the death of God than what mainstream interpretations so far have suggested. This is what Derrida and Nancy suspect. By suggesting that the 'return of religion' deserves no more attention than any other 'return' (2005a: 9), in particular, Nancy calls us to realise that the death of God must be interpreted in a way that does *not* leave His shadow intact, but rather fosters non-recuperable difference. He argues, in other words, that it is now time to do justice to the second, often forgotten part of Zarathustra's exclamation in *The Gay Science*: 'God is dead! God remains dead!' (Nietzsche 2007: 120).

(0.4) Faithful Deicides

As Watkin observes in *Difficult Atheism*, Derrida and Nancy share this preoccupation with French thinkers including Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux. According to Watkin, 'There is a new move in French philosophy today to come to terms with the death of God more rigorously than ever' (2011: 1). This move cannot be said to participate in a post(-)secular return to religion, nor can it be reduced to any of the three above-mentioned deaths of God. Rather, 'it is a thinking that tries more fully than ever to have done with God' (Watkin 2011: 1). In his book, Watkin sets out to explore this new interpretation of

God's death and interrogates how it strives to escape the threat of dialectical recuperation as well as what this implies for religion today, a goal which I make my own in this thesis. Two points of disagreement however distinguish my own approach from Watkin's.

On the one hand, I contend that Watkin too hastily excludes Derrida from the new approach to the death of God he identifies, dismissing him in the first pages of his book as yet another example of residual atheism (see Watkin 2011: 7-8). In the second chapter of this thesis, I argue that, if Watkin's insightful reading sheds light on an intrinsic weakness of Derrida's approach, it does not do justice to the complexity of the latter's understanding of—the death of—God. On the other hand, a second, more profound, disagreement arises from a consideration of Watkin's argument that the common impulse of the thinkers he considers, which drives their (supposedly) rigorous approach to God's death, is that they all 'turn to religion in order to turn the page on religion' (2011: 13). According to Watkin, Nancy, Badiou and Meillassoux propose to defeat God's shadow not by rejecting Him along with His transcendence, but rather by besieging, 'occupying', and redeploying notions associated with the ontotheological idea of God (2011: 13). It follows from such an observation that Nancy's, Badiou's and Meillassoux's treatment of religious motifs serves one purpose: the end of all that is religious. Considering the history of the concept of the death(s) of God, as outlined in both the previous section and Watkin's introduction, it should be clear to the reader that what Watkin means here is that the three thinkers he considers rework notions associated with the religious in order to turn the page on *transcendence*. Yet Watkin does not clearly make such a distinction. He speaks indiscriminately of the religious and the divine as other words for transcendence, in line with traditional definitions of religion. Accordingly, when he—rightly—observes that Nancy, Badiou and Meillassoux 'fai[l] to banish the shades of the divine' (2011:

120), he concludes that they propose ‘an atheism after all [...] that must inevitably fall either into parasitism or into asceticism’ (2011: 123).

If the history of the concept of the death of God has taught us anything, however, it is that a rigorous approach to God’s death cannot but challenge the dichotomy between theism and atheism. To quote Bidar again, it necessarily carves a space ‘par-delà la croyance des uns et l’athéisme des autres’ (2010: 27), *for both depend on transcendence*.¹³ This means that even the most rigorous approach to God’s death may still be haunted by ‘spiritual’ motifs and shades of the divine *which do not necessarily depend on the notion of transcendence*, as it is traditionally understood. I therefore wonder whether Watkin’s lack of clear demarcation between transcendence and the religious more generally does not lead him to misinterpret religious traces resulting from a collapse of the dichotomy between religion and its other—itsself induced by a rigorous approach to God’s death—as signs of theological contamination. As John D. Caputo remarks in his review of *Difficult Atheism*, ‘sometimes Watkin speaks of the post-theological as if “God”, “theology” and “religion” were like AIDS’ (2012). Put otherwise, I wonder whether, by systematically looking to spot hidden traces of religious contagion, Watkin does not fall—despite himself—into the trap he identifies at the opening of his book, that is, the temptation to read the religious vocabulary haunting Nancy’s, Badiou’s and Meillassoux’s work as an indication of their reliance on transcendent forms of thinking, whether metaphysical or theological (Watkin 2011: 14). To be fair, this might only be true in Nancy’s case, for it seems to me that Badiou and Meillassoux do fall prey to

¹³ The dialectical stickiness of the notion of transcendence is once more exemplified by this phrasing. The idea that a space may be found *beyond* theism and atheism—that is to say, beyond transcendence—is a contradiction in terms. A rigorous approach to God’s death rather identifies a space—which Nancy describes as a black hole (2000b: 66), while Derrida and Deleuze prefer to speak of a desert (Derrida 2001a: 11; Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 473-474), as we will see in the coming chapters—where the categories of theism and atheism, religion and the secular collapse onto one another *without appealing to a transcendent beyond*.

dialectical recuperation, driven as they are by the will to be able to say—as Badiou does, with the same terminological ambiguity as that found in *Difficult Atheism*—‘Dieu, c’est fini. *Et la religion aussi, c’est fini.*’ (1998: 12, my emphasis). By relentlessly pursuing new ways of thinking without any trace of the religious, both thinkers appear not only to overlook the existence of non-transcendent forms of religiosity but also, as announced by the suffix ‘post-’ in the subtitle of Watkin’s book, to only ever think *after* God—after the end of God’s reign and in allusion to it. Although Watkin takes great care in explaining that the prefix ‘post-’ is ‘merely an indication of chronology: to think in the West today is to think after God’ (2011: 12), I contend that its use in the subtitle of *Difficult Atheism* is revealing of the dialectical undertone running through both the work of the considered thinkers—or, at least, two of them—and Watkin’s study more generally.

A rigorous thinking of the death of God, by contrast, cannot simply propose to have done with religion. Rather, I contend that it must be the work of *faithful deicides* in the threefold sense of the term: (i) thinkers who would be most *faithful* in attempting to have done with God must (ii) blur the line that demarcates religion from its other. This implies that their thinking remains haunted by shades of the religious which do not depend on transcendence as it is traditionally understood: they remain somewhat *faith-ful*,¹⁴ but also, thereby, (iii) prove *faithful* to Nietzsche’s word ‘God is dead’, a word which, according to Heidegger, Nietzsche himself betrayed. It is doubtful, indeed, that Nietzsche wanted to undermine religion as a whole. As he stresses in *The Will to Power*, ‘At bottom, it is only the moral god that has been overcome’ (1968: 36), in other words, God’s transcendent place. Crucially, because they would liberate thought from the transcendence on which both religion and its other rely, these faithful deicides would facilitate a thinking of the

¹⁴ We will have to examine what the term ‘faith’ means in that specific case, in particular in its demarcation from transcendent *belief*, and whether this implies that these thinkers retain some *faithful* attachment to specific religious traditions.

religious that does not depend on a transcendent beyond. One might therefore find the key to an approach to religion today in a rigorous interpretation of God's death. The question remains whether such an approach would be more inclusive than the traditional definition of religion by accounting for *both* the non-transcendent *and* transcendent forms in which the religious manifests in the world today. This depends on how these thinkers propose to defeat God's shadow: we now know that denying God's existence or rejecting transcendence altogether is not sufficient. Does this mean that there might be a way of liberating thought from the axiomatic notion of transcendence while making some space for the transcendence that still characterises so many religions—much like secularism (wrongly) claims to do? We will have to consider that in the following chapters by looking at the work of French thinkers whom I believe qualify as faithful deicides, namely, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze and Georges Bataille.

Such a line-up of thinkers may seem surprising. Bataille's treatment of the death of God is commonly associated with Nietzsche's residual atheism not only by critics but also by Bataille himself, who claims to be 'le seul à [s]e donner, non comme un glossateur de Nietzsche, mais comme étant le même que lui' (*OCVIII*: 401). As with Nietzsche, many accused Bataille of following a dangerous post-secular trajectory through a re-activation of the Christian dialectics of sin. How could such a 'nouveau mystique'—as Sartre famously put it (1947: 172)—qualify as a faithful deicide? As for Deleuze, he seems to be largely uninterested in religious matters. His marginal references to the death of God in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* and *Foucault* do not make up for the fact that, for him, 'l'inexistence ou même la mort de Dieu ne sont pas des problèmes, mais au contraire des conditions qu'il faut considérer comme acquises' (1988b: 7). In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, the philosopher even 's'étonne', with Félix Guattari, 'que tant de philosophes encore prennent au tragique la mort de Dieu. L'athéisme n'est pas un drame,

mais la sérénité du philosophe et l'acquis de la philosophie' (2005: 89). Describing Deleuze as a 'deicide' may thus be judged excessive. This qualification, by contrast, seems to apply to Derrida and Nancy as they both draw attention to God's death as a potential starting point to rethinking religion today. Many—if not most—scholars interested in Derrida's and Nancy's work, however, have suggested that these thinkers fail to escape the dialectics of 'a/theism'—to use Watkin's handy contraction (2011: 38): they would *either* propose a radical atheism (on Derrida, see Hägglund 2008, and on Nancy, see Hutchens 2005) *or* provide the Judeo-Christian tradition with a new postsecular impulse (on Derrida, see Altizer and others 1982 and Shakespeare 2009: 175-208, and on Nancy, see Derrida 2000 and Watkin 2011). In any case, according to existing scholarship, Derrida and Nancy should not be considered as faithful deicides.

(0.5) The Eternal Return of Religion

In this thesis, I go against that scholarship and argue that Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy do qualify as faithful deicides. My argument relies on the observation that, if a rigorous approach to God's death comes down to examining 'ce que la "sécularisation" peut désigner et désigne inévitablement d'autre qu'un simple transfert de l'identique' (Nancy 2005a: 9), then it requires us to breach the dialectical stickiness of identity. It should therefore not come as a surprise that I turn to four thinkers who have been referred to as 'the thinkers of difference' (see Williams 2013: 26; May 1997: 3; and Gasché 1994: 94). Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy go to great lengths to think a difference that is not recuperated to serve the order of the Same. Extending Nancy's remark about Derrida and Deleuze in 'Les Différences parallèles' to Bataille and Nancy himself, I contend that '[c]e qu'ils partagent, c'est [...] ceci : que philosopher c'est entrer dans la différence,

c'est sortir de l'identité' (2005b: 18). They do so in different ways, as we shall see. Yet I argue that they are similar in approaching difference as 'le retour du même à sa propre différenciation', as Nancy puts it (2005b: 5); a Nietzschean-inspired return which prevents difference from serving as a foundation for identity. In other words, Bataille, Derrida, Nancy and Deleuze break with the dialectical logic of the return of/to identity by means of another, non-dialectical, return: the eternal return of a differentiating gesture.

Crucially for my purpose, considering that, in metaphysics, God constitutes a privileged figurehead for the transcendent realm of Ideas and ideals, any thinking that strives to break with identity may be framed in terms of a thinking of God's death. As we will see throughout the next four chapters, Bataille thus associates his pursuit of *heterogeneity* with a project to sacrifice the God-*Logos* of Christianity and metaphysics. Nancy too identifies the dis-enclosing gesture characteristic of his ontology of being *singular-plural* with the self-deconstruction of the Christian God. As for Derrida, he frames his thinking of *différance* in terms of what de Vries describes as 'an *à Dieu* and an *adieu*, a going toward God and a leave taking' (1995: 217). Even Deleuze approaches his *differential* ontology as a 'tranquil' form of atheism (1988b: 7). To be sure, in these four cases, the eternal return of differentiation does not simply come down to a rejection of God *in favour of* either His antithesis or a transcendent imitator. Rather, it prevents the very establishment of God's transcendent place and, by extension, of the binary dichotomies that depend on it, including that between the religious and the secular, theism and atheism, and so on. If a sense of the religious remains in Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy—which, as we will shortly see, is undoubtedly the case—it does not depend on a transcendent beyond. Rather, its shades or nuances glimmer *through* and *as* the eternal return of a differentiating gesture. I contend, therefore, that Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy offer a way out of the definitional impasse evoked in section 1: one

can still speak of religion in the singular, without compromising its diversity in the contemporary world, as the eternal return of a differentiating gesture, which also explains why this issue today appears as both identifiable and new.¹⁵ If this is less immediately visible in Deleuze's work, I believe that the growing interest in Deleuze and religion in humanities and social sciences faculties in the English-speaking world calls for an in-depth examination of the religious traces haunting Deleuze's work. That anthropologists increasingly refer to Deleuze's concepts to approach non-Western forms of religiosity tells us something about his importance for thinking the plurality of religion today.¹⁶

Everything that has been said so far, however, depends on Bataille's, Nancy's, Derrida's and Deleuze's ability to maintain a non-recuperable difference, which many scholars doubt is achievable. The fact that these thinkers' potential for a rethinking of religion today has thus far been largely overlooked, and that old definitions of religion continue to prevail, does not help my case. To be sure, recuperation is never far off: it threatens each of the thinkers I consider in this thesis. However, I do not think that their work should be considered as yet another dialectical approach to God's death. Against the *défiance* of critics, I choose to show some *confiance*, albeit not uncritical, in these thinkers' endeavour, even if it implies following them, to some extent, down the rabbit hole, to use a Carrollian image dear to Deleuze. I agree with Deleuze's statement that:

Quand on se trouve devant une œuvre d[e] [...] génie, il ne peut pas être question de dire qu'on n'est pas d'accord. Il faut d'abord savoir admirer ; il faut retrouver les problèmes qu'[elle] pose, sa machinerie à [elle]. C'est à force d'admiration qu'on retrouve la vraie critique (2002: 192).

¹⁵ Deleuze even suggests that Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return, when read as the return of the Same *to its own differentiation*, provides an explanation for the fact that 'il y [a] du nouveau dans l'idée qu'il n'y a rien de nouveau' (Royaumont 1967: 280-281).

¹⁶ In 2013, the University of Oslo even ran a seminar series on 'Deleuze and Ethnography' exploring the way in which Deleuze's thinking facilitates ethnographic practice in non-Western settings (https://www.sv.uio.no/sai/English/research/project_s/anthropos-and-the-material/Intranet/ritual-practices/Reading%20group/deleuze-and-ethnography.html).

Adopting such a critical, and yet admiring, stance will lead me to conclude that the thinking of difference proposed by Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy opens new horizons for religion beyond theism *and* atheism, religious governance *and* secular neutrality, in a way that reflects ‘spiritual’ transformations currently observable in Western countries and beyond. Crucially, I believe that closely examining, clarifying and gathering these thinkers’—often obscure—approach to the death of God together in one thesis might facilitate their reception. In fact, their impudence and importance for a thinking of religion today might only then be truly taken into account.¹⁷

Each chapter of this thesis traces the general thrust of the argument I have made here by looking at one of the four thinkers considered. Three questions guide my exploration at each stage: first, how this thinker’s approach to difference develops into a rigorous thinking of the death of God; second, how (far) this thinker sidesteps the threat of dialectical recuperation; third, what this implies for a thinking of religion in its singular plurality today. I designed the twofold—chronological and thematic—progression from one chapter to the other, from one thinker to the other, so as to emphasise not only the common gesture that unites the four thinkers I focus on but also the way in which they build on each other’s strengths and (strive to) sidestep each other’s weaknesses. The

¹⁷ My explanatory approach here contradicts the performative, differ(a/e)ntial and therefore sometimes purposely incoherent writing style of the thinkers I consider. I contend that any thesis or academic exercise of the like is bound to betray the work of Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy in this way. *Et pourtant, me dis-je, il faut bien les comprendre*, I am tempted to respond, paraphrasing Derrida (2001a: 56). Contrary to what Bataille argues, nothing can ever be *for nothing*, not even his own work, or that of Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy, for these always serve specific academic, literary and philosophical purposes. The latter must, therefore, be *understood*, at least to some extent. This alone justifies the flourishing academic literature on these thinkers’ work, as well as the present study. Yet I also contend that the possibility that the works considered here might help to unravel and perhaps even offer some answer to a pressing socio-political issue trumps any reservation one may have to attribute *some* use-value to the latter. This shall not prevent me from appreciating the ground-breaking attachment of these thinkers to meaninglessness and inoperativity.

structure of my thesis thus echoes Nancy's gesture in his parallel study of Derrida and Deleuze—a gesture which recalls the Deleuzian disjunctive synthesis—in its attempt to 'rassembler ainsi chacun de leurs appels [here, those of Derrida, Deleuze, as well as Bataille and Nancy himself]: en les différenciant' (Nancy 2005b: 18). I suggest that Derrida's thinking of *différance* and ethical approach to the divine figure, which are central to my second chapter, are best understood when considered in the light of Bataille's pioneering pursuit of heterogeneity as the sacrifice of God, which is the focus of my first chapter. Similarly, I propose that Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity and ontological approach to an eternally repeated gesture of self-overcoming, which I explore in a third chapter, are best understood when considered as a response to the strengths and limits identified in Derrida's and Bataille's thinking. As for Deleuze's choice to build his ontology around the creative impulse rather than around negativity, I suggest that it constitutes an attempt at sidestepping the dialectical threat that haunts the Hegelian legacy of his *contemporains*. With this word, I do not simply refer to thinkers who lived during the same period as Deleuze, shared his opinions or even focused on similarly 'current' issues, but refer to Bataille, Derrida and Nancy as thinkers who share with Deleuze a 'ton du présent philosophique', as Nancy puts it (1998: 116). It is my contention, indeed, that one may recognise in these thinkers' work 'des voix, des traits, des plis contemporains' (1998: 116), including a pursuit of non-recuperable difference that is now recognised as characteristic of late twentieth-century French thought. Crucially, it is in this pursuit, which is often associated with the controversial label 'poststructuralism', that I identify what I describe, using Deleuze's and Guattari's terms, as 'la formule magique que nous cherchons tous' (1980: 31), that is to say, the formula which would counter both the exclusivism and universalism of post(-)secularisms today through the faith(-)ful promotion of an inclusive approach to religious diversity.

Chapter 1 – Georges Bataille: The Sorcerer’s Apprentice

It has been said of Michel Foucault that he was prone to grandiloquent praise (Ubilluz 2006: 36). For instance, in a letter written in 1969, he described Pierre Klossowski’s *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* as the greatest philosophical book he had ever read (1985: 85). A few months later, after reading Gilles Deleuze’s *Différence et répétition*, he asserted that ‘un jour, peut-être, le siècle sera deleuzien’ (1970b: 885). So what should we take from Foucault’s introduction to Georges Bataille’s collected works, in which he argues that: ‘on le sait aujourd’hui : Bataille est un des écrivains les plus importants de son siècle’ (1970a: 5)? During his lifetime, Georges Bataille was a relatively hidden figure in the French intellectual landscape. The obscenity and obscurity of his work perversely attracted, yet simultaneously repelled in horror, both critics and the general public. Since the 1960s, however, his work has been brought out of the shadows by the journal *Tel Quel* and figures of so-called French theory. In the past few decades, Bataille’s work has even begun to become fashionable. In France and abroad, scholars acknowledge the importance of Bataille’s reactivation of Nietzsche’s atheological project and Sade’s literary legacy, as well as his Mauss-inspired critique of utilitarian reason. This confirms Foucault’s assessment of Bataille as a landmark of twentieth-century French culture. Yet I contend that Bataille’s most important legacy lies in the underlying thread uniting these facets of his work which are now widely appreciated, namely, his pursuit of ‘la *différence non explicable*’ (OCI: 345). I argue that Bataille’s texts are where the *tone* characteristic of late twentieth-century French thought—which Nancy associates with the watchword: ‘entrer dans la différence, [...] sortir de l’identité’ (2005b: 18)—takes its roots.

In what follows, I explore how Bataille’s pioneering approach to *heterogeneity* as a non-dialectical gesture of differentiation develops into a rigorous thinking of God’s

death and question what this implies for a thinking of religion today. If I agree with critics who describe Bataille's approach to God's death during the interwar period as post-secular, as I explain in the first two sections, I argue in sections 3 to 5 that Bataille's later approach to the heterogeneous suspends Hegel's dialectics and thereby proceeds to a non-dialectical interruption or *epochè* of God that opens thought to an approach to religion that is not limited to a transcendent beyond. Yet, as it will become clear in the last two sections, and as Bataille himself suggested (*OCI*: 523), his approach can be compared to that of a sorcerer's apprentice. As Patrick ffrench elucidates in *After Bataille*, whereas 'the sorcerer himself may work on the basis of knowledge and calculation, the apprentice, on the other hand, puts himself at risk according to the demands of chance' (2007: 22), for better *and* for worse. While such an approach allows Bataille to escape the dialectical threat associated with knowledge and calculation, it also obscures his point, obstructs his critical reception and exposes Bataille to the risk of being carried away by his own spell.

(1.1) Dionysus, Apollo and the Crucified

Those unfamiliar with Bataille's work might find it useful to conceive of this elusive French thinker as the illegitimate child that Nietzsche's Zarathustra would have had with Sade's Juliette. From these two authors and their emblematic fictional characters, Bataille inherits a number of determining features, including a taste for polemic and a violent critique of the Christian moral order. Yet it is these thinkers' study of the rival forces of heterogeneity and homogeneity which fascinates Bataille most and guides his pioneering pursuit of a non-dialectical approach to difference. As Bataille argues in 'La Valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade', in a way that resonates with the two sources of Greek aesthetics embodied by Dionysus—God of excess and chaos—and Apollo—God of

measure and order—which Nietzsche identifies in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Dionysiac Worldview*, Sade’s narratives stage the unleashing of two basic human instincts of appropriation and excretion (*OCII*: 58). Whereas Bataille describes the latter as a force of heterogeneity—or *differentiation*—in which ‘l’objet de l’activité (excréments, parties honteuses, cadavres, etc...) se trouve chaque fois traité comme un corps étranger’ (*OCII*: 58), the former consists in a process of ‘participation, identification, incorporation ou assimilation’ (*OCII*: 59), which results in the homogeneity—or *identity*—of the subject and object of appropriation. The interplay of these forces is visible in a passage from Sade’s *Juliette*, which Bataille quotes: ‘*Verneuil fait chier, il mange l’étron et veut qu’on mange le sien. Celle à qui il fait manger sa merde vomit, il avale ce qu’elle rend*’ (*OCII*: 74). Yet for Bataille, such an articulation of the Dionysian forces of excretion with those, Apollonian, of appropriation goes beyond the limits of Sade’s narratives and Greek aesthetics: it structures human activity and existence.

As Bataille observes in ‘La Notion de dépense’, human activity consists of operations of production, conservation and consumption. The latter, for the most part, partakes of the former two through *appropriation*: ‘[la consommation] est représentée par l’usage minimum nécessaire, pour les individus d’une société donnée, à la conservation de la vie et à la continuation de l’activité productive’ (*OCI*: 305). Consumption thus constitutes a rational re-investment of the product of human activity towards humanity’s conservation and growth. Inspired by his reading of Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don*, however, Bataille remarks that certain operations of consumption remain useless, wasting the product of human activity: ‘le luxe, les deuils, les guerres, les cultes, les constructions de monuments somptuaires, les jeux, les spectacles, les arts, l’activité sexuelle perverse (c’est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale) représentent autant d’activités qui [...] ont leur fin en elles-mêmes’ (*OCI*: 305). For Bataille, these operations of excretion touch on

what humanity is *in truth*, namely, ‘du surplus d’énergie’ (*OCVII*: 14). Whereas appropriation conditions survival, human existence itself has no rational explanation; life and death do not respond to a given purpose. Like art, eroticism and other useless expenditures, humanity has ‘une valeur en lui-même, non en vue de quelque autre chose, cette autre chose pour une autre et ainsi de suite’ (*OCVII*: 298). As far as Bataille is concerned, then, humanity is *both* homogeneous in its capacity to reinvest the product of its activity *and* heterogeneous, or *sovereign*, by nature (*OCI*: 350).

Bataille’s economic analysis of, and interest in, the interplay of forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity in human existence could have ended here. Like Nietzsche and Sade before him, however, Bataille suspects that a progressive overriding of forces of excretion by those of appropriation threatens to alienate humanity. When considered in terms of use value alone, indeed, human beings are reduced to mere tools. As Bataille stresses, ‘Le cultivateur n’est pas un homme, c’est la charrue de celui qui mange le pain’ (*OCVII*: 306). It should be noted that Bataille’s position, here, reflects the spirit of his time: in France, the interwar period was marked by a fierce condemnation of rationalism based on the observation, by the thousands of widows, orphans and wounded left helpless by the horrors of the First World War, that the rationalist ethic of the Third Republic had not only failed to protect the people but also turned an entire generation of men into cannon fodder (see Chaubet 2006: 20 and Riley 2005: 282). Bataille, who was deeply affected by the war—as a teenager, he had to leave his sick father behind in Reims to flee German bombings and would never see him again (Surya 2012: 30)—is eager to understand how the forces of homogeneity have come to impose themselves upon modern societies to the detriment of human sovereignty. Such a preoccupation is central to his *Théorie de la religion*, a book which he started to write in 1948 but abandoned before it was finished. As evident from its title, and crucially for my purpose, this book associates

the historical progression of homogeneity over heterogeneity with the development of the first sacred cults and the emergence of the figure of God. It is to this book that I now turn.

Théorie de la religion opens with Bataille's suggestion that, before the emergence of humankind, minerals, plants and animals existed in a state of ontological continuity which recalls the 'primordial unity' discussed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999: 18). Because they were not subjected to notions of subordination, mastery or dependency, all beings were '*dans le monde comme de l'eau à l'intérieur de l'eau*' (OCVII: 292). Whilst Bataille acknowledges that animals respond to vital *needs* with operations of consumption, he also stresses that these operations have more to do with intuition than with the instrumentalization characteristic of human consumption. 'Le lion n'est pas le roi des animaux', Bataille argues, 'il n'est dans le mouvement des eaux qu'une vague plus haute renversant les autres plus faibles (OCVII: 292). The logic of appropriation only emerged with humankind which started to approach minerals, plants, animals and even other human beings in terms of use value. Humanity thus created the concept of the tool, as well as the distinction between the subject and the object, the master and the slave. Living beings are not like water in water any more: they are *transcendent* by contrast with what is described, retrospectively, as the lost primordial *immanence* of all beings (OCVII: 296). The first human beings, however, still carried the nostalgic memory of the continuity which their kind interrupted. They even started to perceive the latter as *sacred*—along with 'tout ce qui dans l'existence humaine est *communiel*', that is to say, reminiscent of the lost immanence of being (OCII: 291)—by contrast with the servile realm of appropriation which was associated with the *profane* (OCVII: 302). In line with Durkheim's definition of religion in *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Bataille thus identifies the emergence of the first sacred cults with the establishment of practices and beliefs related to the sacred realm of ontological continuity

from which humanity is kept *separate*. By extension, any activity that interrupts, if only for a moment, the profane logic of appropriation is considered sacred: excremental behaviours such as sumptuous offerings, intoxication, celebrations of mourning and sacrificial rituals are traditional religious activities. For Bataille, sacrifice is an emblematic excremental behaviour insofar as it consumes *in pure loss* an otherwise useful victim: ‘c’est la consommation qui n’a d’intérêt que pour l’instant même’ (*OCVII*: 311). Such a process of excretion draws the victim out of the appropriative logic of rational consumption and restores it to sacred immanence, in accordance with the Latin etymology of the term—*sacer facere* means to render sacred (*OCVII*: 61). By a process of catharsis, the community attending the ritual also experiences an ephemeral sense of *communion* reminiscent of the lost immanence. By proposing excremental activity such as sacrifices on a regular basis, the first human beings maintained a balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity: they preserved human sovereignty without compromising human survival.

Yet among these activities, one opened the door to what Bataille denounces as ‘un emploi rationnel des forces [hétérogènes] à l’accroissement constant de la puissance’ (*OCVII*: 321). Whereas war originally functioned as an excremental force directing the violence found in rituals against other communities, it also implied a winner (*OCVII*: 315-316). The heterogeneous potential of war was, therefore, recuperated to *serve* the development of military orders, and the sacred was enslaved to profane ends to the point of effecting a dramatic change in the way religion was perceived: the heterogeneous forces at the heart of pagan religiosity were rationalised and utilitarian reason was identified as the ‘true’ sacred. As Bataille explains,

La raison et la morale unies, tirées, en fait, de nécessités de conservation et d’opération de l’ordre réel, s’accordent à la fonction divine qui exerce une souveraineté bienveillante sur cet ordre. Elles rationalisent et moralisent la

divinité, dans le mouvement même où la morale et la raison sont divinisées.
(*OCVII*: 325).

In line with Nietzsche and Heidegger, Bataille associates this transcendent conception of the divine with Apollo—or the God of the philosophers—as well as with the Christian God (*OCVII*: 428). To explain his position, Bataille appeals to the systematic condemnation, by Christian dogma, of practices with no instrumental *raison d'être*—such as non-reproductive sex and purposeless violence—and suggests that the ethical rationalisation born of the Protestant Reformation elevated reason to the status of an imperative (*OCVII*: 111-122). According to Bataille, ‘Tel croit aimer le Dieu d’Abraham ou le Christ en agonie qui ne fait que placer l’existence humaine dans la dépendance de l’idéal’ (*OCII*: 380-381). Bataille extends such an analysis to the God of Islam and to Buddhism, despite the latter being non-theistic. Unlike archaic religiosity, including early Judaism (*OCVII*: 429), and with the exception of their mystic branches, Islam and Buddhism demonstrate a rejection of, respectively, wasteful behaviours and immanent this-worldly matters (*OCVII*: 430-435).

As far as Bataille is concerned, then, the history of religion must be read in the light of the interplay of forces of appropriation and excretion. Whereas such a history started with the rise of a heterogeneous sacred that proposed to restore humanity to the lost continuity of being, it comes down, however, to an inescapable movement of appropriation in which the sacred is enslaved to an almighty God-*Logos* and thereby contributes to the alienation of humanity. For Bataille, then, ‘il faut entendre par religion, non réellement ce qui répond au besoin de projection (expulsion ou excrétion) illimitée de la nature humaine, mais l’ensemble de prohibitions, d’obligations et de licences partielles qui canalisent et régularisent socialement cette projection’ (*OCII*: 61). This remark allows Bataille to distinguish the theistic world from the idealistic. Unlike the

latter, the former is still heterogeneous at heart. As Bataille observes, ‘[si] [l]a religion chrétienne s’opposait à la dévoration des uns par les autres, [...] elle mettait encore en valeur certaines formes de pertes, les dons inconditionnés, en particulier le don absurde et extatique de soi’ (*OCII*: 155).¹⁸ Bataille even suggests that the successful development of Christianity in the West owes much to the sacrificial energy of the crucifixion (*OCI*: 306).¹⁹ By contrast, Bataille depicts secular modernity as having traded the last crumbs of humanity’s sovereignty for a reassuring, yet enslaving, *absolute* functionalism. Industrialisation, capitalism, scientific modernity and secularisation contributed to removing Dionysus *and* the crucified from the Western pantheon, to better install Apollo as the sole deity of modernity. For Bataille, secular modernity thus marks the culmination of a millennia-old progression of homogeneity over heterogeneity; a culmination which ‘revient à reléguer dans les prisons et dans les bagnes tout sentiment qui risquerait de faire d’un homme autre chose qu’une larve pleine de modération et de prudence’ (*OCII*: 85). It follows from such a vision of history that restoring some balance in the interplay between forces of appropriation and excretion becomes an *ethical* imperative in Bataille’s thinking (Blanchot 1983: 36); an imperative that requires us to take down both the crucified and Apollo in order to facilitate the return of Dionysus. It should therefore be clear that Bataille’s thinking of heterogeneity—as a force of differentiation—is associated with a thinking of the *death of God*. Crucially, as Jeremy Biles notes in ‘The Remains of God’, contrary to the Christian and imitative deaths of God evoked in the introduction, ‘it

¹⁸ Bataille recognises a difference between Catholicism and Protestantism on that matter. While he builds on Max Weber to condemn the Reformation, which enslaved Christianity to reason by liberating work from divine judgement and by imposing a strict version of religious purity (*OCVII*: 111-122; 433-435), Bataille remains appreciative of the affective energy of Catholic rituals and mysticism (*OCVII*: 332-333; *OCXII*: 338; Hewson 2016: 168-169).

¹⁹ This also explains why, in reaction to the rationalism of the Third Republic, the interwar period was marked by waves of conversion to Catholicism in France, corroborating the dichotomy between reason and faith (Gugelot 1998: 26-27; 45).

was the sacrifice of God, in various forms, that Bataille pursued—the God of institutional Christianity, of eternity, of salvation, and of reason, who emblematised the stultification of what Bataille deemed genuinely sacred’ (2011: 128). Bataille thereby lays the ground for a thinking of the death of God that escapes recuperation; a thinking which might provide us with a way out of the definitional impasse identified in the introduction.

(1.2) Sacrificing God in Interwar France

The question that arises, at this stage, is how exactly Bataille proposes to defeat God in all forms. A brief look at his biography suffices to cast doubt upon any superficial reading of Bataille’s confrontation with the divine: the fervent disciple of Dionysus was once a Catholic convert considering entering priesthood. In fact, one can distinguish three stages in Bataille’s relationship with God, stages which, as Michel Surya (2012: 52) and Leslie Hill (2001: 46) warn, remain difficult to delimit: the piety of the adolescent Bataille—from 1914, the date of his conversion—is followed by his abandonment of the Catholic faith throughout the 1920s, which culminates in a violent rejection of the God of Christianity and metaphysics. From 1939 and after the end of the Second World War, however, such a rejection takes a different inflection: while it still seeks to defeat God, Bataille’s post-war thinking becomes more nuanced and complex. Throughout his life and career, Bataille articulated, reshaped, and deepened a relationship with God (and His demise) which is anything but straightforward. In order to get a sense of such a relation without compromising its subtlety and evolving character, I will first turn to Bataille’s early writings, leaving the study of Bataille’s post-1939 texts to subsequent sections.

From *Histoire de l’œil* (published in 1928) to *Manuel de l’Anti-chrétien* (written between 1939 and 1940 but abandoned before it was finished, possibly a sign of Bataille’s

evolving thoughts on the matter), each of Bataille's early texts can be read as an attempt to bring God, *in all forms*, down into the mud to permit the return of—or, more accurately, a return *to*—the lost sacred of the first human beings. In *Histoire de l'œil*, for instance, Bataille describes in great detail how the protagonists force a priest to desacralize the Sacramental wine and Eucharist with his urine and sperm before killing and enucleating him (*OCI*: 62-68). When his eye is introduced into Simone's vagina, in a way that resonates with the Surrealist use of the eye as symbol of consciousness and rationality, it is not only the Christian God who is desacralized; reason is also thereby violently blinded (*OCI*: 68). As for Bataille's early theoretical texts, they strive to persuade the reader that, as he argues in 'La Conjuración sacrée', '[i]l est temps d'abandonner le monde des civilisés et sa lumière' (*OCI*: 443; 513). They even direct readers to anti-Christian, anti-productive and irrational behaviours, such as intoxication, non-reproductive sex and sacrificial mutilation. As evident from the title of one of his early articles (*OCI*: 523), Bataille thereby appears as a *sorcerer's apprentice*, a modern-day disciple of shamans and magicians, an apostle of Dionysus, looking to restore ancient mythic representations and associated excremental activities (*OCII*: 85; Le Rider 1999: 165-166).²⁰

Crucially, Bataille's theoretical texts themselves are written in such a way as to challenge rational discourse in an attempt to conjure up the heterogeneous sacred of archaic societies. This performative approach culminates in 'La Pratique de la joie devant la mort' (*OCI*: 552). In this text, written half in prose, half in poetry, Bataille's words are

²⁰ In *After Bataille*, Patrick ffrench explains that, by recognising himself as a sorcerer's apprentice, Bataille responds to an accusation that was addressed by Alexandre Kojève to the *Collège de Sociologie* in 1936 (2007: 15-18). As Roger Caillois recalls, by proposing to restore to modern society a sacred that was long lost, if it ever existed, and which no member of the *Collège* had actually experienced, 'A ses yeux [Kojève's], nous nous mettions dans la position d'un prestidigitateur qui demanderait à ses tours de prestidigitation de le faire croire à la magie' (1970: 7). Not fully a sorcerer, then, but an apprentice who pronounces magic spells without knowing in advance their signification or effect but hoping that he or she will come to believe in magic and become sorcerer through this act, that is, be *carried away* by his or her own spell (ffrench 2007: 18).

not those of a scholar any more, they convey no rational argument but are charged with a violent energy. For Patrick ffrench, Bataille attempts to convey the ‘immediate emotional contagion’ (2007: 4), or *affectivity*, characteristic of the effervescent crowd of the Maenads, whose communion is reminiscent of the lost continuity of being and which Bataille wants to see ‘in the street’, as evident from his political activities during the interwar period (ffrench 2007: 11). Bataille’s involvement in the *Cercle Communiste Démocratique* and contribution to *La Critique Sociale* attest to his hopes for unleashing the violent potential of the people against any rational authority—any ‘head’ (ffrench 2007: 23-25; 29). Bataille himself formed several intellectual groups with revolutionary ambitions, including the secret community *Acéphale*. Both in theory and in practice then, Bataille’s endeavours are well illustrated by the figure of the acephalic man: his—ethically committed—pursuit of the death of God in all forms depends, at least until the end of the 1930s, on the rise of a man who, ‘excéd[é] de servir de tête et de raison à l’univers [...] a échappé à sa tête comme le condamné à la prison’ (*OCI*: 445).

Bataille’s early deicidal endeavours, however, meet with two series of criticisms. On the one hand, his exaltation of bloody rituals and the Dionysian unleashing of forces of affectivity raise ethical concerns. In the interwar period, such concerns even arose from intellectual circles which shared with Bataille a critical approach to reason, including the Frankfurt school. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer met on several occasions with future members of the *Collège de Sociologie*. Yet already in 1929 Benjamin suspected the French Surrealists—and affiliated figures, including Bataille—of being trapped in ‘the humid backroom of spiritualism’ (1978: 180). In January 1937, Adorno confirmed Benjamin’s assessment, writing to Horkheimer that, ‘I, too, have the feeling that irrationalist confusion begins to overgrow the great achievements of Max Ernst’ (in Weingrad 2001: 133). In his reply to

Adorno, Horkheimer similarly observed that ‘with these French, [...] it seems to go increasingly downhill’ (in Weingrad 2001: 135). Even among ‘these French’, Bataille’s mystical exaltation sparked controversy, leading the *Collège* to disband in 1939. As Caillois explained in 1970:

Entre Bataille et moi, il y avait une communion d’esprit très rare, une sorte d’osmose sur le fond des choses [...]. Mais nous nous séparions quant à l’usage à faire de ces recherches. [...] Bataille avait tendance à avancer toujours du côté de la sphère mystique (1970: 7).

This reservation must be considered in the light of the historical context. If, as Michel Surya stresses in *La Mort à l’œuvre*, Bataille was known in Paris as a militant of the far left ‘convaincu de l’urgente nécessité de rassembler contre la montée progressive du fascisme, toutes les forces intellectuelles disponibles’ (1992: 265), the mystical undertones of his interwar texts and fanatical exaltation of violence dangerously resonated with the nascent fascism of the Brownshirts in Germany and the Fascio in Italy. Before the outbreak of the war, Bataille himself acknowledged that his aim was to ‘[se] servir des armes créées par le fascisme, qui a su utiliser l’aspiration fondamentale des hommes à l’exaltation affective et au fanatisme’ (*OCI*: 382).²¹ After the war, this would raise the question of Bataille’s complicity with Nazism. Bataille defended himself, convincingly observing that Nazi violence owed more to reason than to heterogeneity (*OCI*: 348-349). As Nancy concurs in ‘L’Insacrifiable’, ‘la raison qui est victime dans les camps est aussi du côté du bourreau, comme l’a constamment souligné l’analyse de la mécanique étatique et technicienne de l’extermination’ (1990b: 94). Yet, that Bataille was not directly complicit with Nazism does not imply that his texts are ethically acceptable.

²¹ Surya speculates that *Le Bleu du ciel*, written in 1935, remained unpublished until 1957 because of its indifference—bordering on appreciation—towards the rise of fascism (1992: 265, see Suleiman 1994: 68-69).

Besides, it is not even certain that Bataille's early thinking is exempt from traces of the logic of appropriation. As Bataille came to acknowledge in 1943, insofar as it pursues an objective, be it to kill God, his *œuvre* remains caught up in a utilitarian logic (*OCV*: 35). One can also object that his conceptualisation of the forces of heterogeneity in essays using rational discourse re-inscribes the latter within the dialectics of positive meaning. The forces of homogeneity, therefore, still loom over Bataille's thinking. As Klossowski observes in 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille', however, such an interpretation overlooks crucial aspects of Bataille's work, including the fact that it *mimics* the interruption of reason through the use of poetic language and quasi-mystical intonations (1963: 742-750; James 2006a: 97-98). As Derrida concurs in 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale', 'lire le texte de Bataille [...] à l'intérieur du "discours significatif" c'est peut-être y entendre quelque chose, c'est assurément ne pas le lire. [...] [L]'écriture de Bataille ne tolère pas [...] la distinction de la forme et du contenu' (1967b: 392-393). We will return to this. Moreover, Bataille describes his opposition to God in various forms in terms, not just of murder, but of *sacrifice*: 'Dieu comme le bélier substitué à Isaac' (*OCV*: 66). By dragging reason and Christian principles into the mud, Bataille strives to undo the rationalising process that enslaved the sacred to the divine hypostasis of reason, much like ancient rituals (*OCVIII*: 573). Crucially, because sacrifice restores the victim—here, God—to a realm in which reason ceases to exist, it can be argued that its *only* utility is to undermine utility. It is in this sense that sacrifice may be said to be performed *in pure loss*, though it responds to specific ethical purposes. Bataille's project 'n'est plus dans ce cas celui, positif, du salut, mais celui, négatif, d'abolir le [...] projet' (*OCV*: 35). Like someone who shouts 'Silence!' in a crowded room, Bataille's *sacrificial* project is thought of as a necessary concession to utilitarian reason in order to undermine it (*OCV*: 25).

In 'L'Insacrifiable', Nancy remarks, however, that the sacrificial gesture always preserves the appropriative logic it transgresses insofar as it is a *simulation* (1990b: 86). As Bataille acknowledges in 'Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice', sacrificial rituals are a 'subterfuge' (*OCXII*: 337): 'le sacrifiant s'identifie à l'animal frappé de mort. Ainsi meurt-il en se voyant mourir [...]. Mais c'est une comédie !' (*OCXII*: 336). This comedy is not limited to ancient rituals. The self-sacrifice of Christ and of Socrates drinking hemlock are *spectacular* examples. As in ancient rituals, only the victim dies; the rest—the cathartic moment experienced by those who witness the sacrificial destruction—is mere comedy. As for self-sacrifices which do not end in death, they confront the subject with her *metaphorical* demise. The subject is only *exposed* to the possibility of her death. Yet as I have mentioned in the introduction, according to Hegel, the evolution of a subject's experience of self-consciousness requires such an exposure to negation; the *self-sacrifice* of the subject being what allows the latter to *appropriate* herself. To illustrate this dialectical operation, Hegel refers to the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross (2004: 475-476), but also—as a minor form—to the spectacle of archaic sacrificial rituals: spectators who gaze on the subject at the moment of her death identify with the victim and are thereby exposed to the possibility of their negation (2004: 432-439). This operation leads not only to an increased self-awareness on the part of the spectators, but also—as ethnographies suggest—to the renewal of a religious and social bond. In line with Nancy and Hegel, but in contrast with Bataille, Western social theory—with the notable contributions of Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, James Frazer, Edward Burnett Tylor and Victor Turner, among others—has forged a functionalist understanding of sacrifice, in which the renunciation of something or someone valuable to the society is compensated by an advantageous return. The destruction of a victim, offered to the gods, is thus thought to attract the latter's favours (Hubert & Mauss 2010:

63). Crucially, ethnographies suggest that a sacrificial economy also functions on a social level (Hubert & Mauss 2010: 64). As a spectacular expression of violence directed against a community member, sacrifice cathartically purges the society of violent desires, thereby reaffirming the social bond (Durkheim 1990: 481-482; 495-500). In both metaphysics and social sciences, then, sacrifice is described as a dialectical operation that reinforces what it was supposed to undermine. Even Bataille's definition of sacrifice bears the trace of such a dialectical structure. As I have mentioned above, in *Théorie de la religion* (written in 1948), Bataille describes sacrifice as 'l'antithèse de la production' (OCVII: 310). He must, therefore, have realised by 1948 that, like antithesis in Hegel's system, the negative gesture of sacrifice works towards *a synthesis of production*.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that critics doubt that Bataille's project to sacrifice God escapes recuperation. Like Nietzsche's revaluation of values, Bataille's early thinking attracts the accusation of finding itself defined in terms of what it seeks to escape. As Habermas denounces in 'Between Eroticism and General Economics', insofar as heterogeneity '[is] related to the world of purposive-rational action in an absolutely heterogeneous fashion, [...] then there is no possibility of a theory that reaches beyond the horizon of what is accessible to reason' (1987a: 235-236). Such a critique was extensively developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1943, the same year Heidegger wrote 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is dead"'. Sartre observes that Bataille's exalted call for a return to the heterogeneous sacred of Dionysus through the systematic destruction of transcendence and the imitation of the ecstatic communion of the Maenads borrows essential features from Christian mysticism, to the point that some of his writings can be compared to Pascal's (Sartre 1947: 174).²² As Bataille himself explains in a 1948 lecture,

²² Supporting Sartre's point is the fact that Bataille was an avid reader of mystical theology. Bataille's desire to be 'carried away' by his own spell, and for his sociology of the sacred to thereby become a sacred sociology (ffrench 2007: 37), testifies to Bataille's attraction to the

mysticism can be described as an attempt to destroy transcendence in favour of immanence: ‘Le mystique cherche l’union avec un Dieu transcendant et, par conséquent, détruit nécessairement la transcendance’ (*OCVII*: 432). Yet Bataille also observes that this destruction of transcendence is never complete, for immanence depends upon the transcendence it negates, by antithesis. Accordingly, ‘[L]e christianisme mystique ne peut pas être considéré comme une parfaite négation du christianisme lui-même’ (*OCVII*: 432). By the same token, and in a way that recalls Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche’s residual atheism, Sartre argues that Bataille’s pursuit of a divine sacrifice that would restore humanity to immanence plays into the hands of dialectics: by seeking to destroy homogeneity in favour of the return *to* the heterogeneous sacred of the first human beings, Bataille’s thinking depends on the former, *by antithesis*, in the same way that mystics depend on the transcendence they transgress (1947: 206).

Towards the end of his reflexion on Bataille’s work, Sartre takes a step further by suggesting that Bataille does more than borrow the dialectical structure of the mystic experience. According to Sartre, Bataille’s thinking re-activates the Christian *via negativa* in a way that threatens to restore the moral order of God which was evacuated from secular modernity. Bataille is not *like* a mystic; according to Sartre, ‘C’est vraiment un mystique qui parle, un mystique qui a vu Dieu’ (1947: 207). It is here only that, for Sartre, Bataille’s early thinking ‘prend son véritable sens : [...] [C]’est Dieu, c’est bien Dieu qu’il s’agit de retrouver’ (1947: 205). Whether Bataille admits it or not, his call for the return to a lost sacred immanence would reveal itself as an excuse better to *return to* God and His transcendence. Unlike Nietzsche, whose residual atheism—according to Heidegger—left God’s transcendent ‘place’ empty, Bataille would *restore* God to His

mystical *experience*. He was also personally close to Simone Weil, who inspired the character of Lazare in *Le Bleu du ciel* (Sing 2019: 153).

place, violently putting an end to the secular age, thereby following what I have described in the introduction as a post-secular trajectory (with a hyphen). That is also what Pierre Klossowski suggests in the original 1947 version of *Sade mon prochain*, pointing towards Bataille's re-activation of the Christian redemptive logic of sin. According to Klossowski, Bataille should be seen as a Christian writer insofar as killing God, or attempting to do so through all that is considered sinful by the Christian dogma, is recognising the latter's existence in the first place.²³ Moreover, as Klossowski highlights, 'l'athéisme qu'affecte la conscience du libertin et les délits dont elle conçoit l'exécution ont un caractère de provocation à l'adresse du Dieu absent, comme si le scandale était un moyen de forcer Dieu à manifester son existence' (1967: 102). Sin is an essential part of the Christian moral order, for it conditions the experience of redemption. Following Klossowski, then, Bataille's sinful sacrifice of God—and the associated attempt at returning to the lost (if it ever existed) archaic sacred, which is in itself a dialectical move—must be read as dialectically *reviving* the moral order of God that secular modernity defeated.

Following Habermas, Sartre and Klossowski, then, insofar as it relies on binary oppositions which sacrifice allows one to navigate dialectically, Bataille's thinking does *not* escape recuperation. Like Nietzsche's revaluation of values, at least according to Heidegger, Bataille engages in a pursuit of immanence which refuses to see the ties that irremediably link it to transcendence. He appeals to Satan and Dionysus, while refusing to admit their kinship with the crucified and Apollo. Wasn't Lucifer the purest of all angels before his fall? Most strikingly, isn't Dionysus also called Dionysus *diogonos*, the God who was born twice, mirroring the resurrected crucified? Perhaps Bataille does acknowledge such a kinship through his clumsiness in defining heterogeneity: 'la

²³ As Ian James notes in 'From Recuperation to Simulacrum', Klossowski abandons such an approach after the publication of *La Vocation suspendue*, in 1950 (2006a: 96).

première détermination de l'*hétérogénéité* définie comme non *homogène* suppose la connaissance de l'*homogénéité* qui la délimite par exclusion' (*OCI*: 343-344; Hill 2001: 79-80). In 'Le Matérialisme dualiste de Georges Bataille', Denis Hollier also remarks that 'Bataille n'a jamais manqué de rappeler la séduction que les manifestations dualistes de la pensée ont exercé sur lui' (1966: 43). Yet, at least before 1939, Bataille does not seem to anticipate the dialectical recuperation that comes with such a dualism. He does not take the full measure of the post-secular danger that threatens the sorcerer's apprentice carried away by his own spell, despite Kojève's warning. In fact, based solely on Bataille's early writings, it appears that Bataille's approach to the death of God falls short of its promise to provide us with a way out of the dialectics of a/theism.

(1.3) Inner Experience

For Bataille, however, a dialectical interpretation of sacrifice 'éloigne de l'essentiel' (*OCXII*: 335). Already in 'La Valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade', Bataille stressed that sacrifice proposes a negation that remains *an-economic*, one which 'n'est pas seulement un moyen terme entre deux appropriations, de même que la pourriture n'est pas seulement un moyen terme entre le grain et l'épi' (*OCII*: 65). According to Bataille, Hegel—as well as, we might add, Western social theorists—were unable to appreciate the 'négativité sans emploi' proposed by the sacrificial rituals of archaic societies due to their rational intelligence (*OCV*: 369). He explains,

Entre Hegel et l'homme du sacrifice subsiste [...] une différence profonde. Hegel s'éveilla d'une manière *consciente* à la représentation qu'il se donna du Négatif [...]. Tandis que l'homme du sacrifice, auquel il manqua une connaissance discursive de ce qu'il faisait, n'en eut que la connaissance 'sensible' (*OCXII*: 337-338).

Preceding by several decades the development of critical self-awareness in anthropology, Bataille's work raises an essential question: were the rituals observed across cultures and throughout history conceived in such a way as to be functional, or is the modern observer artificially imposing economism upon his or her object of study? For Bataille, economism is in the eye of the modern observer, not only due to the influence of the economic stance of Christianity and metaphysics, but also because of the appropriative nature of human reason (*OCV*: 129-130). According to Bataille, evolution has conditioned humanity to attribute a purpose to the things and processes it confronts, *even those that have none*: 'Dans la mesure où le discours l'informe, ce qui est *souverain* est donné en termes de *servitude*' (*OCXII*: 342). As a result, heterogeneity is a *blind spot* in human intelligence. For Bataille, this explains why Hegel and Western anthropologists were unable to identify that sacrificial rituals are where utilitarian reason comes to die. Although these rituals admit no return on investment, they were given 'des fins utiles "après coup"' (*OCXII*: 342).²⁴ In other words, their *outcome*—be it the renewal of social unity, the strengthening of the bond uniting humanity to the divine or an increase in the subject's self-consciousness (*OCVII*: 314-317)—were misidentified with a *function*.

Yet as Nancy argues in 'La Communauté désœuvrée', it is here that Bataille touches on what makes the structure of sacrifice tremble: 'la vérité du sacrifice exig[e] en fin de compte le suicide du sacrificateur' (1990a: 47). Preserving the heterogeneity of sacrifice requires not only the *death* of the victim—and not just an exposure to his or her metaphorical demise—but *also* that of the sacrificer and all the spectators, including indirect observers such as Hegel and Western anthropologists, so that no appropriative intelligence is left at the end of the sacrificial operation to rationally appropriate it. It

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, who attended the lectures of the *Collège de Sociologie*, is one of the few anthropologists to concur with Bataille that sacrifice might simply be devoid of good sense, although for different reasons (see Lévi-Strauss 2008: 802).

requires, in other words, that no ‘sortie’, to use Hubert’s and Mauss’s term (2010: 69), should bring the ritual to a close. According to the two anthropologists, sacrificial rituals always end with ‘the ceremonial and utilitarian disposal of the sacred remains’ (Arnould-Bloomfield 2016: 103). This final phase of the ritual is designed to put an end to, and thereby contain, the heterogeneous violence of the ritual by means of the re-installation of a homogeneous order. Bataille’s heterogeneous sacrifice *must* remain without such a ‘sortie’. Yet Bataille finds himself cornered into a double bind: ‘[s]i le sujet n’est pas vraiment détruit, tout est encore dans l’équivoque. Et s’il est détruit l’équivoque se résout, mais dans le vide où tout est supprimé’ (*OCXI*: 485). If the subject is not destroyed, but simply exposed to the possibility of her negation, sacrifice fails to restore her to immanence. In order to escape recuperation, sacrifice *must* consist in a *holocaust*, in which everyone perishes—the victim/God, the sacrificer, and spectators alike. Bataille’s sacrificial logic is thus torn between ‘l’efficacité infinie de la négativité dialectique et le cœur sanglant du sacrifice’, as Nancy puts it (1990b: 84), between *comedy* and *holocaust*. The sacrifice pursued by Bataille is, therefore, not just ethically problematic, as I have suggested in the previous section; it is untenable. As Bataille himself admits, ‘le sacrifice nous promet au piège de la mort’ (*OCXI*: 485).

Bataille came to directly face that issue on a dark night in 1939. Members of *Acéphale* had met in the Marly forest, a few miles outside Paris. As Patrick Waldberg recalls: ‘nous n’étions que quatre et Bataille demanda solennellement aux trois autres de bien vouloir le mettre à mort [...]. Cette faveur lui fut refusée’ (1995). The sacrifice probably aborted because no member wanted to suffer the psychological and legal consequences of the role of sacrificer. Yet Nancy also remarks that the imminence of the sacrificial gesture led Bataille to realise that the sacrificial pursuit of immanence can only end in death, or failure, for ‘la fusion communielle n’enferme pas une autre logique que

celle du suicide de la communauté qui se règle sur elle' (1990a: 35-36). Nancy finds confirmation of this in Nazism's attempt at reviving the supposedly lost Aryan community, which not only led to the extermination of the perceived 'sous-homme extérieur à la communion du sang et du sol' (1990a: 36)—17 million Jews, homosexuals, disabled and Romani—but also aimed to sacrifice 'tous ceux qui dans la communauté "aryenne" ne satisfaisaient pas aux critères de la pure immanence' (1990a: 36). Although the sacrificial interpretation of Nazi violence is not necessarily legitimate, as I have already noted, Nazism's 'immanentist' endeavour did initiate a *Holocaust*, and the suicide of the community. Bataille may have perceived this, for Caillois has remarked that it was only after the Second World War and the discovery of the death camps that Bataille abandoned his dream of reviving sacred violence in modern society. 'Ces forces noires que nous avions rêvé de déclencher s'étaient libérées toutes seules, leurs conséquences n'étaient pas celles que nous avions attendues' (Caillois 1970: 8). Besides, as Nancy stresses in 'L'Insacrifiable', the association of Nazi murders with sacrificial vocabulary sullied the term sacrifice, blurring the line between victims and perpetrators, murder and immolation (1990b: 98). So much so that, for Miguel de Beistegui, '[t]he limit of the thought of sacrifice [...] is the experience of the death camps' (1997: 167). For these critics, then, Bataille's project of sacrificing God ought to be abandoned (1990b: 71).

According to Maurice Blanchot, however, Nancy is too hasty in proclaiming the failure of Bataille's sacrificial endeavour. In 1983, only a few months after Nancy published a first version of 'La Communauté désœuvrée' in the journal *Aléa*, Blanchot responded with *La Communauté inavouable*, initiating an emblematic dispute which continues to receive considerable critical attention (most recently, Hill 2018). What is striking to the reader unfamiliar with this dispute is less its violence or the extent of the theoretical divergences at stake, than the extreme proximity of the opponents' views on

key aspects of Bataille's thinking. Blanchot's approach to Bataille so closely follows Nancy's, 'that the opening ten or so pages of Blanchot's book read almost like an exact restatement of the corresponding sections of Nancy's original essay' (Hill 1997: 200; James 2010: 177). In particular, Blanchot follows Nancy in highlighting that the abortion of *Acéphale*'s sacrificial endeavour marks a turning point in Bataille's thinking. Like Nancy, Blanchot argues that this episode emphasised the fact that, in order to restore the supposedly lost immanence of being, putting a designated victim to death 'ne suffit pas, puisque seul peut donner la mort celui qui, la donnant mourrait en même temps' (1983: 32). As a result, he stresses, 'Chacun devrait mourir pour tous' (1983: 32). Faced with the trap of death, members of *Acéphale* would have had no other choice but to abort their sacrificial project. This is where Blanchot and Nancy diverge: for Blanchot, such an abortion should not be seen as a failed attempt at establishing a fusional community justifying the abandonment of the sacrificial gesture. Rather, for him, the impossibility of carrying out the deadly gesture exposed *Acéphale* members to the intrinsic insufficiency of community, thereby laying the ground for a different, bloodless kind of sacrifice.

At stake here is the question of the relationship between Bataille's sacrifice and death. For Nancy, Bataille's sacrifice is stuck between *comedy* and *h/Holocaust*: it either does not involve death, and therefore fails to interrupt reason's appropriative quality, or becomes ethically unacceptable. Blanchot, by contrast, does not find the comedy of sacrifice problematic, for he maintains that simulation is *the only way* that one can approach death. As Hill explains, death in Blanchot's thinking 'is an experience that is never accessible as such for any human self or subject, who is effaced in dying and unable to address dying as in any sense an individual, personal experience' (1997: 113). Death can therefore only be approached through simulation or mediation, as 'a limitless non-experience of the impossibility of dying' (Hill 1997: 113). Crucially, Blanchot suggests

that this non-experience exposes human beings to their *unsurmountable insufficiency*, for they are denied the possibility of dialectical self-appropriation. As Blanchot argues, ‘[m]e maintenir présent dans la proximité d’autrui qui s’éloigne définitivement en mourant, prendre sur moi la mort d’autrui comme la seule mort qui me concerne, voilà ce qui me met hors de moi’ (1983: 21). Moreover, because it sheds light on beings’ insufficiency, sacrifice also highlights that the only possible form of community is the one already formed by these insufficient beings. Far from restoring the supposedly lost immanence of being, sacrifice exposes us to a community which ‘inclut l’*extériorité* d’être qui l’exclut’ (1983: 25). Blanchot therefore rejects Nancy’s interpretation of *Acéphale*’s sacrificial endeavour as a failed attempt at establishing a fusional community. For Blanchot,

L’absence de communauté n’est pas l’échec de la communauté : elle lui appartient comme à son moment extrême ou comme à l’épreuve qui l’expose à sa disparition nécessaire. [...] La communauté d’*Acéphale* ne pouvait exister comme telle, mais seulement comme l’imminence et le retrait (1983: 31).

As far as Blanchot is concerned, *Acéphale* can neither be compared to the Nazi quest for a pure Aryan belonging, nor be judged by the criteria of success or failure (James 2010: 175). If Blanchot acknowledges that *Acéphale*’s sacrificial endeavours might indeed have developed as a ‘dernier soubresaut d’une tentative communautaire incapable de se réaliser’ (1983: 35), he argues that the impossibility of carrying out the deadly gesture exposed *Acéphale* members to the impossibility of dying and, by extension, to the fact that the *only* community they could form was ‘une communauté d’absence, toujours prête à se muer en absence de communauté’ (1983: 13). *Acéphale*’s aborted sacrifice thus initiated Bataille’s turn to ‘une tout autre sorte de sacrifice, lequel ne serait plus meurtre d’un seul ou meurtre de tous, mais don et abandon’ (1983: 32), abandonment of any hopes of restoring the immanence of being as well as of the Hegelian illusion of a *sufficient*

subject fully transappropriated.

To Nancy's utmost consternation, indeed, Bataille never gave up on his sacrificial project, convinced as he was that there must be a way of proposing a non-dialectical negation that does not end in the trap of death. After the Second World War, he switches focus from the deathly rituals practised by so-called archaic societies to bloodless practices with '*un esprit de sacrifice*' (OCI: 264). 'S[i] [cet esprit de sacrifice] ne nous convie pas, cruel, à mourir dans le ravissement,' he stresses, 'du moins a-t-il la vertu de vouer un moment de notre bonheur à l'égalité avec la mort' (OCXI: 486), thereby restoring the victim's sovereignty *without* irrational bloodshed. Bataille considers two bloodless sacrifices, which exemplify what he calls 'expérience intérieure' (OCV: 15). Poetry, on the one hand, is said to *expose* its readers to a violent and yet bloodless sacrifice: that of sense (OCV: 156). By throwing words on the page in a way that makes *no sense*, poetry liberates words from their enslavement to meaningful communication. Crucially, if Bataille admits that poetic sacrifice does not destroy the subject *per se*, he argues that poetry conveys 'toute la vérité de l'émotion [de la mort]' (OCXI: 485), interrupting the subject's rational intelligence *without return* and thereby escaping recuperation. If an exposure to poetic nonsense starts with its (attempted) appropriation by the subject, indeed, the process is interrupted, for the sense of nonsense is that it is *the nonsense of sense*. The subject attempts to reverse this nonsense by searching for the sense of the nonsense of sense, yet this re-emerges as the nonsense of sense. The reader is thus thrown into 'l'expérience (extatique) du sens du non-sens, se renversant en un non-sens du sens, puis à nouveau... sans issue recevable...' (OCVI: 160; OCV: 66-68); an experience which consists of the exposure to an *unfinished* confrontation between forces of *appropriation* and *excretion*. Bataille gives an example:

Quand la fille de ferme dit *le beurre* ou le garçon d'écurie *le cheval*, ils connaissent le beurre, le cheval. [...] Mais au contraire *la poésie mène du connu à l'inconnu*. Elle peut ce que ne peuvent le garçon ou la fille, introduire un cheval de beurre (*OCV*: 157).

Of course, the butter horse can be—and is—recuperated by the reader's appropriative intelligence: the unknown is drawn to the known. However, because poetry keeps *excreting* new unknown figures, it 'place, de cette façon, devant l'inconnaissable' (*OCV*: 157). Poetry highlights that there will always be something heterogeneous to our categories of understanding. It shows that meaning and knowledge always remain *incomplete*. As part of inner experience, then, 'ce qui échoit n'est pas une réponse à une question : c'est une question qui échoit' (*OCV*: 333). This explains why Bataille speaks of a 'système inachevé du non-savoir' (*OCVIII*: 558), in contradistinction with Hegel's *finished* or *closed-off* system of Absolute Knowledge.

As I briefly evoked in the introduction, Hegel's theory of the self-appropriation of the subject and, by extension, his dialectical approach to negation, depend on a philosophical system which approaches being and knowledge in terms of totality. If being is understood as an all-encompassing totality, negation only proposes a *different angle* on the truth of being, which it cannot exceed. Crucially, in so doing, negation increases the knowledge one has of being-as-such. Hence Hegel's assertion that negation contributes to a circle of appropriation evolving towards *Absolute Knowledge*. By shedding light on the 'inachèvement' of knowledge, poetry carves a breach in this system and challenges the totalising goal of Western epistemology. As Derrida explains in 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale', 'La transgression du sens n'est pas l'accès à l'*identité* immédiate et indéterminée d'un non-sens, ni à la possibilité de *maintenir* le non-sens. Il faudrait plutôt parler d'une *époque* de l'époque du sens' (1967b: 393). Poetry does not destroy the subject, but rather corresponds to the subject's 'renonciation à tout savoir'

(OCV: 66). This implies that the subject is exposed to the impossibility of a complete Hegelian self-appropriation, an experience which can hardly be described as an experience at all, this term implying that the subject gains knowledge from it. Rather, poetry consists in the *non-experience* of a sacrificial gesture that remains ‘inachevé’, one that does not end in blood but rather maintains the interruption of the victim’s appropriative intelligence, *beyond recuperation*.²⁵

A second bloodless form of sacrifice is found in Bataille’s lifelong fascination with erotic practices, especially those ‘classé[es] comme “sale[s]”’ (OCI: 45). In several of his later works, including *Histoire de l’érotisme* and *Les Larmes d’Éros*, he observes that such practices consist of the abandonment of the subject to a *wasteful* activity that challenges both the Christian moral order and utilitarian principles (OCX: 90-94). The ecstatic moment of *jouissance*, in particular, ruptures the subject’s appropriative understanding, plunging her, like poetry, into the unfinished experience of nonsense in which sense *continually* inverts itself as a nonsense of sense without admissible outcome. Yet Bataille remarks that sense is not the only thing that gets lost: ‘dans l’érotisme, JE me perds’ (OCX: 35). Through sexual intercourse and shared moments of ecstasy, the lovers face the collapse of the boundaries of their individual self, which threaten to *dissolve* onto one another. Eroticism is ‘la violation de l’être des partenaires’ (OCX: 23); it negates their ontological sufficiency. One may object that, through what is only *la petite mort* and not death itself, the lovers’ subject is not destroyed but put to the test (OCX: 24). As Bataille highlights, however, if eroticism does not destroy the subject, it does, like poetry, suspend the sufficiency of the lovers’ self without return, for it highlights that

²⁵ After the end of World War II, Bataille extends the effects of inner experience to all forms of art which remain non-representational, embracing the *formless*, and thereby ‘prolonge[nt] en ce sens l’obsession multipliée de l’image sacrificielle’ (OCXI: 482; see OCIX: 7-102; OCIX: 171-316; and OCXI: 480-486).

there is no such a thing as a sufficient subject: ‘L’expérience est la mise en question (à l’épreuve), dans la fièvre et l’angoisse, de ce qu’un homme sait du fait d’être’ (*OCV*: 16).

As part of the erotic experience, Bataille argues,

l’*ipse* [...] attein[t] en une seule et brusque renonciation de soi-même [...] la déraison du tout [...]. Mais le tout, dans ce cas, n’est appelé le tout que provisoirement : l’*ipse* se perdant en lui va vers lui comme un opposé [...]. [N]e subsistent ni l’*ipse* ni le tout, c’est l’anéantissement (*OCV*: 134-135).

According to Bataille, eroticism starts with a heterogeneous gesture: the dissolution of the lovers’ selves. However, because the latter dissolve *into one another*, up to a point of fusion, excretion reverses into appropriation: a new sufficient whole threatens to emerge. Yet because eroticism precisely consists of a *negation of sufficiency*, it in turn challenges totality in a movement that threatens to reinstate the subject. But the process starts again, in an ‘incessant glissement de tout au néant’ (*OCV*: 137), from homogeneity to heterogeneity to homogeneity again, and so on and so forth. This process suspends the lovers’ being in a state of *undecidability*, it ‘tend à rendre interminable un instant suspendu où rien n’est tranché, où malgré la logique formelle, *a* est la même chose que *non a*, bien que *a* soit toujours autre que *non a*’ (*OCXII*: 413). Eroticism thus exposes its ‘victims’ to what I call *the unfinished system of non-being* and marks, paraphrasing Derrida, *l’épochè de l’époque de l’être* (1967b: 393). Already in his early essay ‘Le Labyrinthe’, Bataille stressed that ‘[à] la base de la vie humaine, il existe un *principe d’insuffisance*’ (*OCI*: 434). By shedding light on the ‘inachèvement’ of being, eroticism dispels the ‘illusion puérile mais commode [...] de l’existence isolée se repliant sur elle-même’ (*OCI*: 437). As with poetry, this cannot even be described as an ‘experience’, for no subject can appropriate the event ‘après coup’ (*OCXII*: 342). Inner experience is neither ‘inner’ nor an ‘experience’ per se (see Blanchot 1983: 33 and Nancy 1990a: 50).

As should now be clear, Bataille's displacement of sacrificial logic from rituals to inner experience testifies to a major change in his thinking. Whereas his earlier texts revolve around the—ethically motivated and yet problematic—destruction of a sacrificial victim so that it may be restored to the lost immanence of being, Bataille's later approach to sacrifice recognises that what matters most in sacrifice 'n'est pas tuer, mais abandonner et donner' (OCVII: 310). As Bataille remarks in *Théorie de la religion*, indeed, 'la mort ne lui est pas nécessairement liée et le sacrifice le plus solennel peut n'être pas sanglant' (OCVII: 310); yet the latter does require the *abandonment*, without reserve or return, of the subject's appropriative logic as well as, by extension, of the Hegelian illusion of a sufficient subject fully transappropriated. According to Bataille, art and eroticism, among other excremental activities, *expose* the self to the *impossibility of completion*, without threatening to unleash an irrational violence. They abandon beings 'à hauteur de mort' (OCVII: 242). By contrast with sacrificial rituals and their 'cœur sanglant' (Nancy 1990b: 84), these experiences can be described as a sacrificial *mea culpa*; the self acknowledges that: 'Je voulais être tout [...]. J'ai honte d'avoir voulu l'être, car je le vois maintenant, c'était dormir' (OCV: 10). If they do still involve cruelty and anguish, or as Bataille puts it, 'un mal au ventre continuel' in the face of one's own insufficiency (OCVIII: 189), they remain bloodless and are confined to restricted spheres of existence, in particular to 'la communauté des amants' and 'la communauté littéraire' (Nancy 1990a: 89; 160; 165; Blanchot 1983: 40; 49). We will soon see that many find Bataille's displacement of the sacrificial gesture from rituals to inner experience unsatisfactory. It is doubtful, indeed, that art and eroticism convey the actual emotion of death. I will return to that. For now, I propose to follow Bataille a little longer so that I may evaluate how his rewriting of sacrifice as exposure affects not only his approach to heterogeneity but also, and most importantly for the purpose of this thesis, his project of sacrificing God.

(1.4) *Deus Interruptus*

On the one hand, it appears that rewriting sacrifice as exposure leads Bataille to renegotiate the dualism that Sartre, Klossowski and Habermas identified, and condemned, in his earlier writings. In this respect, I follow Denis Hollier who, in 'Le Matérialisme dualiste de Georges Bataille', reminds his readers that there is more to Bataille's dualism than meets the eye upon a first reading. As Hollier highlights, contrary to what critics have argued, the dualism that one finds in Bataille's writings, both before and after the Second World War, does *not* rely on binary oppositions. Rather, Bataille's dualism opposes 'le monde de l'identité et son altération' (1966: 49). According to Hollier, immanence, the sacred and the figure of Dionysus emerge *through* and *as* the collapse of the sufficiency characteristic of transcendence and the profane, embodied by the figures of Apollo and the crucified. These terms are, therefore, not mirror images but rather consist of an alteration of the other and thereby escape recuperation. As Hollier explains,

le sacré confond ce qu'oppose ou distingue le profane, mais en ceci il ne s'oppose pas lui-même au profane, il en diffère par une différence qui est l'altération de son identité. Le sacré n'est pas le contraire du profane ; sans quoi la synthèse serait irréversible (1966: 50).

By extension, heterogeneity in Bataille's thinking should not be conceived of as the *other* of homogeneity, as this would come down to considering the former as a structure of the latter. Rather, paraphrasing Hollier, heterogeneity would differ from homogeneity by a difference which is the alteration of the latter's identity, which happens to be identity itself. In line with Klossowski in *Sade mon prochain*, however, Hollier observes that this heterogeneous gesture of alteration requires the prior institution of homogeneity.

Bataille's dualism would still depend on an architecture 'tout entière suspendue à ce qu'elle rejette' (1966: 49). Indeed, that is the logical conclusion of Hollier's interpretation of Bataille's dualism. I am not certain, however, that Hollier is correct to suggest that Bataille presents heterogeneity as the alteration of a primordial homogeneity. Whilst I agree that Bataille's dualism is far more complex than one might first imagine, I contend that this has to do with the fact that heterogeneity is presented as an excremental *force* which prevents the establishment of 'homogénéité (identité)' *in the first place* (OCII: 60). As early as in 'La Valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade', Bataille describes homogeneity and heterogeneity as *forces of identification and differentiation*, respectively, rather than as sufficient substances. The dualism that one finds in Bataille opposes forces that may be described as 'inachevables'. That critics tend to reduce these forces to fixed concepts—Heterogeneity and Homogeneity with a capital H—is understandable, not only because human intelligence is appropriative but also because such a reduction is found in Bataille's early texts through the suggestion that the heterogeneous realm of immanence can be *reached* through sacrifice. That the latter be reachable implies that it be sufficient, much like what thereby appears as its *other*, Homogeneity.

I suggest, however, that Bataille's displacement of the sacrificial gesture from rituals to inner experience allows him to reconnect with the non-dialectical dualism he had in mind when writing 'La Valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade'. As I have highlighted in the previous section, Bataille's later texts—from *L'Expérience intérieure* (1943) to *Les Larmes d'Éros* (1961)—identify a spirit of sacrifice in activities which expose human beings to an endless confrontation between the forces of identification and differentiation: as part of artistic or erotic (non-)experience, an excremental gesture is met with an attempt at appropriation, itself interrupted by excretion and so on and so forth, *with no admissible outcome*. Both Homogeneity and Heterogeneity thereby appear as *unattainable*, always

already impossible. What remains is ‘inachèvement’ alone, a question that no answer can ever resolve, a secret that no revelation can ever exhaust; what Derrida describes as ‘une négativité si radicale—il faut dire ici *sans réserve*—qu’on ne peut même plus [la] déterminer en négativité dans un procès ou dans un système’ (1967b: 380). In particular, it cannot be identified with the dialectical negative of Hegel’s system, much as ‘inachèvement’ cannot be identified with Hegel’s *good* infinity. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel sets his thinking against what he describes as a *bad* approach to the infinite as the open-ended opposite of finitude, which leaves out finitude itself and is, by extension, not properly infinite or total. By contrast, Hegel describes the *good* infinite as the dialectical union of the finite and the infinite (2010: 110-125). Insofar as it throws human beings into ‘inachèvement’, inner experience interrupts the totalisation characteristic of Hegel’s good infinite. Yet it cannot be reduced to the *bad* infinite either.²⁶ If ‘inachèvement’, in Bataille’s later thinking, does remain without an end, it is not ‘the *limit* of the finite and thus only a determinate, *itself finite infinite*’ described by Hegel (2010: 111). The ‘inachèvement’ to which inner experience exposes human beings is neither *determinate* nor *proper*. It is not the open-ended mathematical infinity in which numbers are aggregated indefinitely and cannot be reduced to Heterogeneity with a capital H. Rather, it consists of the unceasingly repeated mutual interruption of the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Bataille touches on a third approach to the infinite, one that articulates the infinite and the finite in a non-dialectical way. Heterogeneity is *infinitely finite*.

Through his rewriting of sacrifice as exposure, then, Bataille suspends the dialectical dualism that Sartre, Klossowski and Habermas criticised in his earlier writings. In so doing, he demonstrates a peculiar relation to Hegel’s system, which he

²⁶ As we will see in chapters 2 and 3, Rodolphe Gasché also distinguishes Derrida’s and Nancy’s thinking of the infinite from both Hegel’s *bad* and *good* infinite, in *The Inventions of Difference* (1994: 136-149) and ‘Infinitely Finite’ (2017) respectively.

simultaneously admires and criticises, follows and interrupts. On the one hand, Bataille admires Hegel for having first—or, most emphatically—signalled the importance of finitude; for both thinkers, a rigorous thinking of infinity cannot do without finitude. Yet on the other, he criticises Hegel for having enslaved finitude to the ontotheological dream of totalisation. *L'Expérience intérieure* bears the trace of Bataille's frustration: Hegel had a chance to confound the illusion of totality with a non-dialectical thinking of finitude; 'Hegel toucha l'extrême. [...] [Mais] pour finir, Hegel arrive à la *satisfaction*, tourne le dos à l'extrême' (*OCV*: 56). Like proponents of the so-called 'return of religion' according to Nancy, Hegel would have preferred a cowardly return to identity in the face of difference. What Bataille proposes to do in his writings, therefore, is to read Hegel against himself by subtracting the synthesis from the three-step process of dialectics equivalent to the 'sortie' of sacrificial rituals.

Crucially, such an interruption of dialectics affects another system, that of God in all forms. As was already established, God is another name for the principles of utility, identity and sufficiency. Given that inner experience exposes its victims to the impossibility of sufficiency, it follows that, in Bataille's later thinking, as Jeremy Biles puts it, 'a sacrifice is always a sacrifice of God' (2011: 133). Such a sacrifice does not propose to destroy God, as is the case in Bataille's early writings. It rather consists of an exposure to the *impossibility* of God in all forms. This should not be confused with an attempt at denying God's existence. As Bataille stresses, 'L'expérience ne révèle rien et ne peut fonder la croyance' (*OCV*: 16). This includes both religious revelations and the atheistic belief in God's inexistence, for exposing human beings to the impossibility of *reaching* the sufficiency which God embodies does not imply that God is inexistent. God exists *as* the impossible, what can never be reached. Inner experience therefore comes down to an exposure to 'l'absence de Dieu' (*OCVIII*: 665): not an absence dialectically

implying the return of presence, as with residual atheism, but one that is unceasingly reinstated. Inner experience unceasingly withdraws the possibility of satisfaction from human beings, whom it brings to the apex of anguish in the face of their insufficiency. It condemns them to a *deus interruptus*.²⁷ As with sense and nonsense in poetry and fusion and dissolution in eroticism, this interruption proceeds by way of an endless confrontation between Dionysus, Apollo and the crucified. Inner experience throws these figures into an endless conflict, pushing them against each other like a magnet's rival poles. Hence Bataille's response to Sartre: 'on peut [...] successivement me reprocher d'aboutir à Dieu, d'aboutir au vide ! Ces reproches contradictoires appuient mon affirmation : *je n'aboutis jamais*' (OCVI: 199). To re-write Derrida's assertion, quoted earlier, one could argue that God's death, in Bataille's later thinking, is not *l'accès à l'identité immédiate et indéterminée d'un Anti-Christ, ni à la possibilité de maintenir l'athéisme de ce dernier. Il faudrait plutôt parler d'une époque de l'époque de Dieu, d'une mise en parenthèses suspendant l'époque de Dieu* (1967b: 393). Crucially, as Foucault notes in 'Préface à la transgression', 'il ne faut point entendre [this *époque*] comme la fin de son règne historique, ni le constat enfin délivré de son inexistence, mais comme l'espace désormais constant de notre expérience' (1994: 235). *God remains (as) dead*.

It therefore appears that Bataille's later thinking of heterogeneity develops into a thinking of God's death that can be reduced neither to theism nor to atheism, whether imitative or residual. Bataille uses the term 'athéologie' (OCVIII: 667), stressing that '[alors que] l'athée est satisfait d'un monde achevé sans Dieu, ce sacrificateur [qu'est l'athéologien] est, au contraire, dans l'angoisse devant un monde inachevé, inachevable' (OCV: 176). He even argues that maintaining 'inachèvement' is the only way of being

²⁷ With this formula, I wish to echo the non-reproductive sexual behaviour known as *coitus interruptus*, which withdraws from the lovers the possibility of satisfaction, and thereby refer to the interrupted God, rather than to the theological figure of the interrupting God.

genuinely atheist: ‘je suis athée, je le répète, et même en un sens, je le suis violemment. [...] J’admets, d’ailleurs, que l’être violemment, c’est sans doute ne pas l’être sérieusement’ (*OCVIII*: 241).²⁸ Bataille’s atheism is not ‘serious’, that is to say, consistent or *faithful*. It thereby escapes dialectical recuperation and can be described as most violent. I would thus like to suggest—against Hollier—that Bataille adopts a neither/nor position in relation to identity (Homogeneity) and its complete alteration (Heterogeneity), a position which results in the suspension of both Hegel’s system and the dialectics of a/theism. Crucially, I suspect that Bataille was the first thinker to inaugurate such a position which has, since then, been taken up by thinkers gathered under the controversial label ‘poststructuralism’ (see Noys 2000: 100; Watkin 2007; and Angermuller 2015).

(1.5) The Eternal Return of Chance

In the preface to *Sur Nietzsche*, Bataille acknowledges that his neither/nor position, as innovative as it may be, derives from Nietzsche’s thinking of the eternal return, which it reverses (*OCVI*: 23; see Biles 2007: 64-66). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes eternal recurrence as a working hypothesis positing that ‘all things recur eternally and we ourselves along with them’ (2006: 178), which implies that ‘we have already been here times eternal and all things along with us’ (2006: 178). For Nietzsche, the idea of an eternal recurrence of all things is life-affirming in that it encourages human beings to live their lives in such a way that they would ‘not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not in all eternity’ (2005: 99). As Biles highlights in *Ecce Monstrum*, Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return thus lays the groundwork for ‘the

²⁸ In *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze similarly describes his own approach to the death of God as ‘un violent athéisme’ (1983b: 4). I return to this in chapter 4.

sculpting of one's authentic self by way of an existence invested in a future of one's own choosing—the rationally motivated production of an identity' (2007: 65). In Bataille's thinking, eternal recurrence takes a different meaning. It is not conceived of as a hypothesis but rather manifests as an *experience*, the inner experience of the eternally recurring mutual interruption of the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity. The distinction between the *doctrine* of eternal recurrence and its *lived experience* is of crucial importance, for whereas the former fosters an existential concern for the future, the latter 'immotive l'instant, libère la vie de fin et par là d'abord il la ruine' (OCVI: 23; see Noys 2000: 42). Because inner experience implies 'inachèvement', it is incompatible with calculation. It cannot, however, be said to remain beyond time either, as the adjective 'eternal', which is an attribute of God, suggests in contradistinction with 'sempiternal', which corresponds to the temporal framework of Hegel's bad infinite. As the eternally recurring mutual interruption of the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity, inner experience liberates the *instant* from its inscription within the Hegelian dialectics of historical progression. It can thus be compared to a '*coup de dés*' which, to quote the title of Mallarmé's poem, 'jamais n'abolira le hasard' (OCVI: 444; 85). As an eternally recurring throw of dice, the instant returns as always different, subject to an *inextinguishable* chance. Hence the subtitle of Bataille's *Sur Nietzsche*, which turns the Nietzschean concept of the will-to-power into 'la volonté de chance' and testifies to Bataille's reversal of the homogeneous value of Nietzsche's eternal return of the Same into a heterogeneous gesture of return of the Same as different in each occurrence (OCVI: 7; 17; Agostini 2016: 62-63; Smith, Douglas 1996: 92).²⁹

²⁹ This reversal is also visible in Klossowski's approach to eternal recurrence as the parody of a doctrine and a lived experience of a radical contestation of *identity* (Le Rider 1999: 198-199; Royauumont 1967: 239); an approach which will become central to what Le Rider describes as 'le troisième moment français de Nietzsche' (1999: 242; Klossowski 1963: 206-208; Moore 2011: 18-19). Given that Klossowski published most of his writings on Nietzsche

Much as with Hegel, then, Bataille develops a peculiar relationship with Nietzsche. As Hollier explains in ‘De l’au-delà de Hegel à l’absence de Nietzsche’, Bataille credits the latter with having first, or most emphatically, signalled the importance of eternal recurrence. He even suspects that Nietzsche perceived the heterogeneous value of such a return, the fact that ‘à partir de lui il n’y a plus de fondamental, il est la perte du fondement, l’irruption du sans fond’ (1973: 86). Yet Bataille also expresses reservations regarding the redemptive potential of Nietzsche’s concepts of *Übermenschlichkeit* and the will-to-power (see, for instance, Nietzsche 1999: 98). For Bataille, Nietzsche’s attachment to the possibility of redemption led him to turn his back on the heterogeneous value of eternal recurrence (Hollier 1973: 83-85; Le Rider 1999: 172). The best way of reading Nietzsche is, therefore, to read him against himself. ‘[J]’ai plus que Nietzsche incliné vers la nuit du non-savoir’, Bataille claims. ‘Il ne s’attarde pas dans ces marécages où, comme enlisé, je passe le temps. Mais je n’hésite plus : Nietzsche même serait incompris si l’on n’allait à cette profondeur’ (*OCV*: 39). For Hollier, the relationship that Bataille cultivates with Nietzsche can thus be described as an intricate form of imitation: a repetition that is ‘authentique jusqu’à la négation de l’authenticité, jusqu’à la dissolution de l’identité’ (1973: 91-92). Klossowski would prefer the term ‘parody’. Nietzsche *returns* through and as Bataille, who might truly be ‘le seul à [s]e donner, non comme un glossateur de Nietzsche, mais comme étant le même que lui’ (*OCVIII*: 401), provided that this return is understood as the return of the Same as different.

after Bataille’s death, I suspect that the latter’s reversal of Nietzsche’s eternal return may have informed Klossowski’s, with an important divergence however. As Blanchot observes in *L’Entretien infini*, Klossowski associates eternal recurrence with the possibility of redemption from the burden of responsibility (1969: 290; Klossowski 1969: 107; Keenan 2018: 160). In Bataille’s thinking, by contrast, the eternal return signals the *impossibility of redemption or satisfaction, eternal unrest*.

Crucially, such a reversal of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence not only leads Bataille to renegotiate the association of the logic of the return with the re-installation of identity, but it also affects his approach to the sacred. In the first section, I have shown that Bataille associates the sacred with the logic of excretion. Given that the majority of his early writings compromised the non-dialectical dualism proposed in 'La Valeur d'usage de D. A. F. de Sade' by depicting heterogeneity as attainable, along with the—supposedly lost—immanence of being, it should not come as a surprise that the sacred in Bataille's early texts is associated with experiences of *communion* reminiscent of ontological continuity. By rewriting sacrifice as exposure, however, Bataille reconfigures his approach to heterogeneity which, far from being attainable in the form of immanence, consists of an *eternally recurring* 'inachèvement'. Bataille's reversal of the doctrine of the eternal return (of/to identity) into the inner experience of the instant thus also becomes that of the sacred. Far from being reminiscent of the lost *totality* of being, the sacred consists of an experience of exposure to *insufficiency*. As Bataille stresses, 'le sacré est le contraire de la substance' (OCV: 271). It is the dreadful experience of the absence of totality, 'l'absence de Moi' (OCXI: 236), as well as of 'l'absence de Dieu' (OCXI: 236); an absence that is 'plus grande, plus divine que Dieu' (OCXI: 236). In 'Préface à la transgression', Foucault summarises this reversal in Bataille's thinking thus:

La mort de Dieu, en ôtant à notre existence la limite de l'illimité, la reconduit à une expérience où rien ne peut plus annoncer l'extériorité [understand, the sufficiency] de l'être [...]. Mais une telle expérience, en laquelle éclate la mort de Dieu, découvre comme son secret et sa lumière, sa propre finitude, le règne illimité de la Limite (1994: 235).

Inner experience inaugurates a *deus interruptus*—it suspends the *finite infinite* traditionally associated with God—and exposes human beings to the eternally reinstated reign of insufficiency. In such conditions, Bataille argues, '[l]'absence de Dieu n'est plus

la fermeture : c'est l'ouverture de l'infini' (*OCXII*: 236). Instead of a definitive answer symbolised by the totalising figure of God, or as Nietzsche puts it, in the very place of 'the great seriousness', the divine absence of God poses—and itself appears as—the real question mark' (2005: 126; Bataille *OCV*: 9). In Bataille's thinking, the finite approach to God as 'l'illimité' gives way to a thinking of the divine as infinitely finite; a thinking which Bataille phrases thus: 'Dieu n'est pas la limite de l'homme mais la limite de l'homme est divine' (*OCV*: 45).

Immediately, it appears that Bataille's later understanding of the divine threatens the demarcation between the religious and the profane in a much more profound way than his earlier approach. Whereas Bataille first associated the sacred with ancient rituals and opposed it to the homogeneous divine of revealed religions, the sacred which Bataille's later texts identify in the inner experience of the infinitely finite is one that 'ne peut être limité à l'expérience lointaine des anciens ou des primitifs, il ne peut davantage [...] être limité à l'expérience des religions "révélées"' (*OCXII*: 49). As early as in the interwar period, Bataille recognised that the sacred cannot be reduced to religious rituals, be they those of the first human beings, and that activities such as art and eroticism too qualify as heterogeneous. The novelty in Bataille's later thinking when it comes to the sacred, however, lies in his recognition that, '[d]e la nostalgie du sacré, il est temps d'avouer que nécessairement, elle ne peut aboutir à rien' (*OCXII*: 55).³⁰ As the inner experience of chance, the sacred in Bataille's later thinking is incompatible with the operations of calculation and prescription associated with the establishment of a set of religious beliefs and practices, including those of the first human beings. It can, therefore, never *reach completion* in the return of/to ancient cults or the homogeneous structure of institutional

³⁰ Here, finally, Bataille gives in to Kojève's 1936 critique. His pursuit of an ancient sacred that was long lost and which he only knew from the scraps found in the often-ethnocentric accounts of the first anthropologists, was illusory indeed.

religions. As Bataille argues, '*la religion* dont je parle n'est pas, comme le christianisme, *une religion*. C'est *la religion* sans doute, mais elle se définit justement en ce que, dès l'abord, ce n'est pas une religion particulière' (OCX: 36).

Religion, for Bataille, proceeds by way of an abandonment to 'inachèvement'. Far from relying on codified practices and beliefs, 'elle égare' (OCXII: 55). It should be noted that, contrary to what Sartre has suggested, this *religious* interruption of transcendent beliefs has little to do with that proper to the mystical experience. In contrast with his numerous references to Saint John of the Cross, Dionysus the Areopagite, Teresa of Avila and Angela of Foligno throughout *L'Expérience intérieure*, Bataille asserts that, by inner experience, 'je songe moins à l'expérience *confessionnelle* [...] qu'à une expérience libre d'attaches, même d'origine, à quelque confession que ce soit. C'est pourquoi je n'aime pas le mot *mystique*' (OCV: 15). Moreover, given that, in his later thinking, Bataille renounces his earlier dream of 'être tout' along with the 'victims' of the inner experience, he also renounces what Thomas Sing eloquently describes as '[l]e devenir-Dieu des mystiques, qui au final n'est qu'un devenir tout en ne devenant rien' (2019: 154). Hence Derrida's conclusion in 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale', that 'Bataille n'est surtout pas un nouveau mystique' (1967b: 399-400). Crucially, given that he cannot be reduced to a nostalgic pagan either, Bataille cannot be associated with the post-secular trajectory I have identified in the introduction. In Bataille's later thinking, there is no return of/to religion, neither to an ancient sacred nor to revealed religions. Bataille's challenge to secular modernity is *wholly other*: it centres on a definition of religion that requires the eternally reinstated impossibility of the transcendence that underpins the dichotomy between the religious and the profane, theism and atheism. He stresses that '*La religion est la mise en question de toutes choses* [...] les coups de dés, heureux ou malheureux, sur lesquels s'est jouée la vie' (OCV: 321). Does this imply that Bataille's

definition of religion requires the disappearance of institutional religions as we know them and is, therefore, just as *exclusive* as the transcendence-based definition he refutes? I dig deeper into that question in the coming sections, but Bataille's assertion that 'il n'est nullement besoin pour nous de religion : le monde où nous vivons est toujours dans sa profondeur imprégné de sacré' seems categorical (*OCXII*: 49).

With all this in mind, I propose that (the later) Bataille is a perfect example of—if not the very first—faithful deicide: (i) he is faithful in attempting to have done with God, (ii) and in doing so, he blurs the line that demarcates religion from its other. Not only does God remain in Bataille's later thinking *as* the impossible, but the 'inachèvement' into which human beings are thrown as part of inner experience is also described as 'plus divi[n] que Dieu' (*OCXI*: 236). In a gesture that counters post(-)secular re-centrings on transcendence, Bataille thus touches on a sacred that manifests through and as the latter's always renewed impossibility; and (iii) he thereby proves twice *faithful* to Nietzsche's thinking, if one considers, as does Amy Hollywood, that 'Bataille's necessary apostasy [i]s his true discipleship' (2010: 100). Much as Bataille believes that, when it comes to eternal recurrence, the most faithful way of reading Nietzsche is to read him against himself, Bataille's interruption of the transcendent God-*Logos* proves faithful to the word 'God is dead', which Nietzsche himself betrayed, at least according to Heidegger. For Bataille too, at bottom, it is only the moral God that has been, not overcome—as this implies a dialectical *Aufhebung*—but interrupted. Crucially, because he liberates thought from the transcendence on which both religion and its other rely, Bataille inaugurates a thinking of the religious that does not depend on transcendence. One might, therefore, find the key to an approach to religion today at the heart of his atheology. With his thinking of religion as exposure to the *infinitely finite*, indeed, Bataille provides us with a way out of the dialectics of a/theism and contributes to what Bidar identifies as the

contemporary 'transition entre nos vieux rêves religieux de salut et une nouvelle conception possible de notre infinité' (2010: 31).

(1.6) A Faithful Heresy

This, however, would be to overlook the numerous incoherencies within Bataille's later thinking which have so far been set to one side for the purpose of clarity. Now that I have followed that thinking up to its conclusion—if I may use that term, considering that the conclusion at issue lies in the impossibility of reaching a conclusion—I believe that it is now time to go back to these issues and evaluate the extent to which they threaten Bataille's *deus interruptus*. Starting with inner experience, on which *deus interruptus* relies, one may doubt that such commonplace activities as art, eroticism or laughter convey the actual emotion of death (*OCCI*: 485). All three experiences are usually associated with delight, rather than with a distressing experience of loss of the self. Moreover, considering that these activities are not always approached in an aneconomic way, how could they throw human beings into such profound existential disruptions as those evoked by Bataille? This is the thrust of Hill's critique of Bataille's understanding of poetry in *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot*: only that poetic expression which is not subject to the economy of symbolic representation qualifies as a non-dialectical sacrifice of sense (2001: 43-44). Yet one may doubt, as do Nancy (1990b: 88) and Derrida (1967b: 383-384), that such a poetry *for nothing* exists. Does poetry ever truly make no sense? The same can be said of the different forms of art. Bataille's inner experience appears to rest on weak grounds. This is all the more so as inner experience is confined to spheres of reality which might not be accessible to everyone. As Nancy notes,

Ces formes—essentiellement la souveraineté des amants et celle de l'artiste [...]—ne purent [...] apparaître autrement que comme des extases, sinon proprement 'privées' (quel sens cela pourrait-il avoir ?), du moins isolées, sans prise—sans prise repérable, énonçable, en tout cas—sur la communauté dans laquelle pourtant elles devaient être tissées, aréalisées ou inscrites (1990a: 55).

The artistic community can even be judged as elitist. How could inner experience challenge ontotheology and its dream of totalisation in such conditions?

That is not, however, the only issue faced by Bataille's *deus interruptus*. It is now time for me to admit that the divide between Bataille's interwar and later writings is not as strict as I may have presented it thus far. To be sure, such a divide exists. Yet it might better be described as an underlying trajectory running through Bataille's *œuvre*, a trajectory from which Bataille often deviates. In particular, the later Bataille struggles to rid himself of his nostalgia for the sacred—as is evident from his uninterrupted admiration for both 'l'homme de Lascaux' (*OCIX*: 17-42) and Dionysian affectivity (*OCXI*: 67-69; *OCVII*: 281-362)—as well as of his fascination with violence. As Nancy highlights in 'L'Insacrifiable', despite Bataille's attempts at displacing sacrifice to bloodless grounds, 'un regard fasciné reste fixé sur le moment *cruel* du sacrifice comme tel' (1990b: 79). In his later works, Bataille hardly manages to fight off his desire 'que le sang jaillisse' (Nancy 1990b: 84), and with it, the threat of recuperation. According to Nancy, however, it is Bataille's attachment to sacrifice which most firmly anchors the logic of appropriation within his writings. If being is always already insufficient—as Bataille argued ever since the interwar period—the following question emerges: 'y a-t-il rien de sacrificiable'? (1990b: 91). So that there can be the sacrifice *of* a subject, there must be a subject. For Nancy, then, it follows that 'l'existence n'est pas sacrificiable. Elle ne l'est pas, parce qu'elle est déjà, par elle-même, non pas sacrifiée, mais offerte au monde' (1990b:

101). By building his thinking around the sacrificial gesture, Bataille compromises his commitment to insufficiency and imbues his thinking with a dialectical undertone.

This is one reading of Bataille's treatment of sacrifice—a reading which, according to Blanchot, 'les citations de texte peuvent modifier, voire renverser' (1983: 13). To be sure, Blanchot follows Nancy in suggesting that the insufficiency Bataille finds at the root of each being 'ne se conclut pas à partir d'un modèle de suffisance' (1983: 20); rather, being is always already offered, given up, abandoned—so much so that there is in fact 'rien à donner ni rien à abandonner' (1983: 30). However, whereas Nancy accuses Bataille of a residual attachment to the subject through his rewriting of sacrifice as exposure, for Blanchot, sacrifice 'n'est jamais (chez Georges Bataille) [l'espace] d'un sujet, mais le glissement hors des limites' (1983: 33). If Blanchot considers, along with Bataille, that there is a principle of insufficiency at the root of being (1983: 15; Bataille *OCI*: 434), he admits that human beings tend to close in on themselves when left unchallenged, up to the point of positing themselves as subject: 'l'être se ferme, s'endort et se tranquillise' (1983: 16). Inner experience comes as a healthy challenge to this closure of being: the impossibility of dying exposes beings' insufficiency, for they are thus denied the possibility of dialectical self-appropriation. For Blanchot, then, inner experience is not about putting a subject to death; it is never the sacrifice *of* a subject. Rather, it is about exposing beings to the fact that they are always already abandoned, insufficient.

I find Blanchot's defence of Bataille's work convincing. Yet it leaves questions unanswered, including that raised by Bataille's continuous attachment to the pagan sacred of Dionysus. Moreover, Nancy remarks that Bataille's displacement of the sacrificial gesture from rituals to inner experience from 1939 and after the war 'vient suppléer, relayer ou relever l'impasse du sacrifice' (1990b: 88). Bataille's rewriting of sacrifice as exposure would emanate from a *sublation* of sacrificial economism which Dennis Keenan

eloquently phrases thus: ‘[The] **sacrifice of** (economical) **sacrifice** (= aneconomical sacrifice) is inevitably *impossible*; it is inevitably the **sacrifice of** (aneconomical) **sacrifice** (= economical sacrifice)’ (2005: 3). *Contra* Blanchot, Nancy concludes that: ‘C’est exactement en ce point qu’il faut, sans relâche, corriger [...] Bataille, [...] c’est-à-dire : [lui] retirer encore le moindre entraînement vers le sacrifice’ (1990b: 102). Insofar as he attempts to ‘save’ sacrifice from the trap of death through its rewriting as exposure, Bataille proves unfaithful to his commitment to ‘inachèvement’. I argue that such an unfaithfulness manifests not only through the numerous incoherencies mentioned above but also, and perhaps above all, in the form of two rival postsecular temptations.

On the one hand, I suspect that Bataille contradicts his life-long commitment to the ‘inachevé’ by succumbing to the postsecular temptation of identifying ‘inachèvement’ as the universal structure of religiosity. As I have explained in the introduction, proposing that religion can be approached in the singular comes down to considering religion as a determinate, that is to say, separate or *transcendent*, universal sphere of human reality. Such an approach is exposed to accusations of ethnocentrism given that non-transcendent forms of ‘spirituality’ do not normally conceive of religion as a separate anthropological category. In Bataille’s case, however, ethnocentrism seems coupled with postsecularism for approaching religion in the singular, as the inner experience of ‘inachèvement’, re-introduces an element of transcendence at the heart of what was precisely supposed to manifest through and as the latter’s eternally renewed impossibility. Bataille was aware of this issue. In ‘La Guerre et la Philosophie du sacré’, he acknowledges that proposing a single definition of the sacred is not desirable because it partakes of a homogenising gesture: ‘je dois m’apercevoir, le faisant, que je suis encore du côté du *profane*’ (OCXII: 48). Yet he also remarks that he is condemned to be so, for refusing to formulate definitions implies surrendering the sacred to the realm of affectivity. Renouncing the

critical distance provided by theoretical objectivity implies that the sacred can only be found in the post-secular abysses in which Bataille spent the interwar period. Reflecting back on his earlier post-secular ambitions, Bataille notes: ‘Si je parle en effet du *sacré* comme tel, autant que faire se peut, évitant de le déguiser, de le transformer d’abord en *profane*, je tombe sous le coup d’un interdit plus grave’ (OCXII: 48). Proposing that religion should be defined in terms of a universal structure thus proves the lesser of two evils—postsecularism vs. post-secularism.

In ‘Non-savoir, rires et larmes’, however, Bataille remarks that, ‘[e]n parlant comme je le fais, j’ai conscience [...] de représenter une sorte de religion constituée’ (OCVIII: 229). Bataille’s approach to the eternal return of chance as the definition of religion in the singular borders on the inauguration of a universal religion of ‘inachèvement’. As Jeffrey Kosky points out in his review of Bataille’s ‘Le Système inachevé du non-savoir’, such a religion even has its own (a)theological treatise: the title of Bataille’s *Somme athéologique* recalls the theological treatises written in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* in particular (2004: 84). Like these treatises, Bataille’s focuses on divine matters—Laurens ten Kate counted 180 occurrences of the word ‘Dieu’ in *L’Expérience intérieure* alone (2000: 267). Many of these occurrences refer to the impossible God of ontotheology. Yet others designate the *divine impossibility* of such a God. One might thus be tempted to argue that two Gods coexist in Bataille’s thinking. This would be missing Bataille’s point. He stresses that ‘[j]e m’en remets à Dieu pour se nier lui-même, s’exécrer, rejeter ce qu’il ose, ce qu’il est, dans l’absence, dans la mort’ (OCV: 152). In Bataille’s later thinking, there is only one God, *who interrupts*

Himself.³¹ This God is not the transcendent God-*Logos*, whom men address in deferral and repentance through prayer. Rather, the self-interrupting God prays to man thus:

— O mon père, toi, sur la terre, le mal qui est en toi me délivre. Je suis la tentation dont tu es la chute. Insulte-moi comme j’insulte ceux qui m’aiment. Donne-moi chaque jour le pain d’amertume. Ma volonté est absente dans les cieux comme sur la terre. L’impuissance me lie. Mon nom est fade. Hésitant, troublé, je répons : — Ainsi soit-il (Bataille *OCV*: 152).

A treatise, a prayer and a God. Bataille’s later thinking combines ingredients for the emergence of an institutional religion. Perhaps this should be considered as the fulfilment of Bataille’s wish to be carried away by his own spell: the sorcerer’s apprentice becomes the prophet of a new religion, one which, unlike the ancient cults that Bataille initially wished to revive, fits into the modern secular world, as the religion of God’s eternally reinstated absence and impossibility. Yet by succumbing to the postsecular temptation of exposing his views on religion in the singular, in an a/theological treatise, and by referring to God—be it the God who makes Himself present by putting Himself to death—Bataille contradicts his commitment to ‘inachèvement’. As was already established, the sacred ‘ne peut aboutir à rien’ (*OCXII*: 55), not even to a postsecular religion of the eternal return.

A careful reader of Bataille might also wonder whether this postsecular temptation is not concealing a greater postsecular endeavour. In his later works, and most evidently in *L’Expérience intérieure*, Bataille remains in close proximity to existing religions; a proximity that arouses suspicion. Could it be that the constituted religion that Bataille claims to ‘represent’ corresponds to the postsecular version of an existing religion rather than to a universal religion of ‘inachèvement’ (*OCVIII*: 229), to the return *of/to* religion

³¹ I should thus speak of *dei interruptio* (the interruption *of* God) rather than *deus interruptus* (the interrupted God), the double value of the genitive allowing me to shed light on the fact that the interruption *of* God (objective genitive—God is interrupted) is also the interruption *of* God (subjective genitive—God interrupts). I return to this play on genitives in chapter 3.

than to the eternal return *as* religion? That is what Per Buvik suspects in *L'Identité des contraires*, highlighting Bataille's 'dialogue permanent avec le christianisme, dialogue qui n'est d'ailleurs pas seulement négatif' (2010: 10). Bataille's description of the God who makes Himself present by putting Himself to death resonates with the Pauline doctrine of *kenosis*. As Ian James highlights in *The New French Philosophy*, the doctrine of hypostatic union of the divine spirit of the Father with the mortal flesh of Christ (*homoousia*) through incarnation occupies a privileged status within Christian theology. The more marginal doctrine of *kenosis*, by contrast, insists on 'the movement by which God is thought to empty or void himself of his divinity' (2012b: 57). God weakens His divine nature in the events of incarnation and crucifixion (*OCVI*: 43). The doctrine of *kenosis* is in many ways similar to Bataille's *dei interruptio*. Bataille himself makes no secret of his fascination with crucifixion, which he considers after Nietzsche as '*le plus sublime de tous les symboles*' (*OCVI*: 43). Bataille's promotion of inner experience even comes to resemble a sermon in favour of the Imitation of Christ. '[N]ous devons imiter en Dieu (Jésus) la déchéance, l'agonie, le monde de "non-savoir" du "*lamma sabachtani*"' (*OCV*: 61), Bataille argues, designating Christian mystics as examples to follow (*OCV*: 15). I therefore agree with Klossowski: 'Bataille, en dépit de son attitude athée, demeure solidaire de toute la structure culturelle du christianisme' (1963: 128).

Bataille's *imitatio Christi* has a limit, however. As Rina Arya highlights in 'Atheology and the Recovery of the Sacred', 'Christian ritual is a simultaneous acknowledgement of fracture, which is also a celebration of reconstituted wholeness' (2010). If Bataille does embrace the former, his proximity to Christianity only extends so far for, as testified by his relationship with Hegel's system and the sacrificial ritual theorised by Hubert and Mauss, Bataille denies any resolution in a reconstituted wholeness. He asserts that '[s]e perdre [as part of inner experience] [...] *serait se perdre*

et d'aucune façon se sauver' (OCV: 35). According to Michael Richardson, this should be seen as a sign that Christianity 'was, in fact, not religious enough' for Bataille (1994: 115). For many Christian readers of Bataille, including Roman Catholic cardinal Jean Daniélou, Bataille's subtraction of redemption from the self-abandonment of both Christian mystics and the Christian God Himself in the form of inner experience and the self-interrupting God of his *Somme athéologique* should even be considered a fruitful critique addressed to Christianity. Claudio Tarditi thus argues that 'la critique de Bataille, comme avant lui de Nietzsche, au christianisme [...] pourrait [...] servir d'aiguillon pour une nouvelle fondation de la foi' (2004: 111; Buvik 2010: 46). That is what Bataille himself suggests in 'Discussion sur le péché': quoting Nietzsche, he recognises that his project of sacrificing God aims to 'dépasser tout christianisme', while remaining 'héritie[r] de la médiation et de la pénétration chrétienne' (OCVI: 315). Bataille proposes what he calls, after Nietzsche, 'un hyperchristianisme' (OCVI: 85). One could also speak of a *postChristianity*, for interrupting the Christian dialectics of redemption allows Bataille to re-centre Christianity on God's death, much like Kant before him. He thus appears to make space for Christianity in a world dominated by God's death: his interruption of Christian redemption highlights that Christianity is still relevant to secular modernity; it 'saves' it through a discipleship that can only be described as apostatic.

It must be noted that Bataille's *faithful heresy* extends beyond Christianity. In *Sur Nietzsche*, for instance, he identifies a self-abandoning gesture similar to Christ's crucifixion in the conquering endeavours of the God of Islam: 'dans l'esprit des foules, Dieu se délace immédiatement de l'absolu et de l'immutabilité. [...] Jéhovah se délace : se clouant sur la croix !... Allah se délace dans le jeu de conquêtes sanglantes...' (OCVI: 151). According to Bataille, the spectacular violence of the wars led in the name of nascent Islam partakes of a heterogeneous gesture, along with the mystic tradition of

Sufism (*OCVII*: 85; *OCXII*: 393). Heterogeneity is also visible in the sumptuous offerings and fascination with poetry that characterised the first years of the Caliphate. Bataille quotes the Quran: ‘Ne donne pas pour avoir davantage’ (*OCVII*: 86). In *La Part maudite*, he also remarks that Buddhism too relies on an ‘ivresse d’anéantissement’ (*OCVII*: 91). To be sure, Bataille knew very little of Asian ‘spirituality’, as he himself admits (*OCV*: 30). Yet he nevertheless argues that:

Le calme [common to Eastern ‘spiritual’ practices including Zen meditation and yoga], la profonde respiration, prolongée mais comme on dort, à la façon d’une danse incantatoire, la concentration lente, ironique, des pensées vers un vide, l’escamotage habile de l’esprit sur des thèmes de méditation, où successivement s’effondrent le ciel, le sol, le sujet, pourraient être objet d’enseignement (*OCV*: 194; see *OCVI*: 53; 192-194; *OCV*: 28-30; 219).

As with Christianity, however, Bataille remarks that the self-abandonment characteristic of Islam and Eastern ‘spiritual’ practices resolves itself in redemption. He highlights that Buddhists ‘ont souci d’un salut, d’ailleurs différent du chrétien. On sait qu’ils imaginent des suites de renaissances—jusqu’à la délivrance : ne plus renaître’ (*OCV*: 31). Buddhists await the redemptive *end* of the eternal return of ‘inachèvement’, a completion that Bataille refutes as impossible. Moreover, such a wait is itself organised according to moral principles: ‘Le bouddhisme commence comme le christianisme à partir de la position morale et c’est en cela que le bouddhisme est une religion transcendante’, even if it admits no God (*OCVII*: 430). As for Islam, Bataille is wary of the transcendence and redemptive potential of Allah who, like the Christian God, ‘promet la béatitude après la mort’ (*OCVII*: 83). He also recognises that the heterogeneous potential of nascent Islam was recuperated to serve the establishment of the homogeneous authority of the Caliphate. ‘Le *hadith* (tradition écrite et sorte de code de l’islam ancien)’, Bataille writes, ‘organisa systématiquement la conquête. Il exclut les violences et les exactions inutiles’ (*OCVII*:

85). Keeping in mind that the term ‘Islam’ means ‘submission’ (*OCVII*: 85), Bataille’s inner experience of sovereignty could not be further from the latter.

Yet despite their inevitable return to redemption, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism all harbour a sense of fracture similar to that dear to Bataille. One might thus wonder, as Tarditi does with regards to Christianity, whether Bataille’s critique could not serve as the ground for a postsecular re-orientation of these religious traditions. If so, Kosky might be right to suggest that ‘[i]ncluding Bataille in the list of thinkers considered by the turn to religion in and among continental philosophers might [...] prove fruitful to our wrestling with the question of what becomes of religion [...] after modernity’ (2004: 86). By extension, Bataille should perhaps be listed along with Jean-Luc Marion as a crucial contributor to the postsecular trajectory I identified in the introduction. Whether Bataille’s postsecularism proceeds by way of the identification of a universal structure of religiosity, which might serve as the ground for the establishment of an institutional religion of ‘inachèvement’, or through the revitalisation of existing institutional religions based on a prioritisation of ‘inachèvement’ at the heart of their own structure, is not entirely clear. Yet in any case, if we do consider that Bataille falls for either of these postsecular temptations and/or that he effectively commits the dialectical missteps I have listed above, he *seems* to be caught up within a dialectical and postsecular logic.

(1.7) Performative Oscillation

If we are to take Bataille’s project of sacrificing God seriously, however, we should not underestimate the depth of his commitment to ‘inachèvement’. It is my contention, indeed, that Bataille’s *oscillation* between distinct postsecular temptations as well as his inability—refusal?—to keep the homogenising forces of appropriation at bay both

partake in and condition Bataille's commitment to the 'inachevé'. Let me explain by turning to Derrida. In 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale', Derrida remarks that Bataille's thinking is colonised by the forces of homogeneity despite the latter's claimed commitment to promoting heterogeneity. In line with Nancy's critique, Derrida notices that '[o]n pourrait [...] abstraire, dans le texte de Bataille, toute une zone par laquelle la souveraineté reste prise dans une philosophie classique du *sujet* et surtout dans [l]e *volontarisme* [i.e. operativity]' (1967b: 391-392). Derrida also remarks that promoting 'inachèvement' requires that Bataille inscribe the 'inachevé' within written language. However, as I have briefly remarked in a previous section, this, in turn, implies running the risk of enslaving heterogeneity to the sphere of rational discourse. Bataille finds himself trying to communicate 'la part de l'incommunicable' (Klossowski 1963: 742-50). One may thus suggest, with James, that '[i]f Bataille seeks to affirm "non-savoir" but is inevitably caught up within the dialectical circle of positive meaning, then, perhaps he should simply fall silent' (2006a: 96). Yet if Bataille was to promote exposure to insufficiency, silence was not an option. Hence Derrida's question: 'comment [...] inscrire dans le lexique et la syntaxe d'une langue, la nôtre, qui fut aussi celle de la philosophie, ce qui excède néanmoins les oppositions de concepts dominées par cette logique commune ?' (1967b: 371). An answer is found in Klossowski's 1963 essay 'A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille', in which the author suggests that, '[p]arce que le langage (notionnel) rend contradictoire l'étude et la recherche du moment souverain, inaccessible par son surgissement, là même où s'impose le silence, s'impose du même coup le simulacre' (1963: 742-50). According to Klossowski, Bataille's texts should be read as *mimicking* the interruption of reason by means of a poetic mode of writing. As explained earlier, Bataille considers poetry to interrupt sense *without return*. Yet Derrida shares Nancy's doubts regarding the

heterogeneous potential of poetry (1967b: 384). At best, Bataille's use of poetry can only simulate the interruption of reason; it therefore 'announces the loss of meaning but only *announces* it' (ffrench 2007: 82). This explains why the poetic passages in Bataille's works are accompanied by a second mode of writing, more conceptual, which acts as a commentary on the poetic sacrifice of sense. These commentaries, ffrench explains in *After Bataille*, 'guard against the possibility that this loss of sense may be transformed into (a) meaning' (2007: 82). Yet they also guard against the possibility that this loss of sense precipitates Bataille and his readers into the unreflective realm of affectivity. Bataille's writing thus oscillates between a commitment to an-economy and an unavoidable economism. Again, we find ourselves at an impasse: Bataille is torn between his intention to interrupt sense and the necessity to make *some* sense.

At this point, the question arises whether one should consider that this oscillation, reflected by the incoherencies running through Bataille's thinking, condemns the latter to an inevitable failure. I suspect that the answer to such a question lies in the term *failure* itself. If Bataille's thinking is to be judged by the criteria of success or failure, it must be seen as trying to *achieve* a specific goal; and in order to *fail*, this goal must be to propose stable concepts and binary oppositions. Given the emphasis Bataille puts on 'inachèvement', it seems clear to me that he never wanted to *reach* (such) a goal. The unresolved and irresolvable incoherencies identified in Bataille's writing, including his dialectical missteps and lifelong attraction to violence and the pagan sacred of the first human beings, should *not*, therefore, be considered an obstacle to his atheology, as does Nancy, among others. They should not be overlooked either, as Blanchot tends to do. On the contrary, they may be said to participate in the confrontation between sense and nonsense, homogeneity and heterogeneity, characteristic of Bataille's atheology. Since evidence can be found in Bataille's texts to support both Nancy's and Blanchot's

readings, indeed, it seems to me that they shed light on complementary aspects of what can only be described as a profoundly ambivalent—or aporetic—treatment of sacrifice, in which an *ethically necessary* pursuit of sacrificial an-economy and an *unavoidable* economism coexist. In other words, they partake of a *performative cultivation of 'inachèvement'*. I believe that it is in this sense that Derrida argues that 'l'écriture de Bataille ne tolère pas en son instance majeure la distinction de la forme et du contenu' (1967b: 392-93). For Derrida, Bataille's texts are intended to expose readers to an-economism by refusing to follow the logic of rational discourse, but rather forestalling any satisfying conclusion by introducing contradiction. Here, finally, one is able to pinpoint what I consider the greatest strength of the sorcerer's apprentice. As ffrench highlights, whereas 'the sorcerer himself may work on the basis of knowledge and calculation, the apprentice, on the other hand, puts himself at risk according to the demands of chance' (2007: 22). Not knowing what one is doing, making missteps, and thereby keeping oneself clear from systematisation partakes of 'inachèvement'. '[I]n [Bataille's] terms this is part of the plot' (ffrench 2007: 22).

I contend that this performative cultivation of 'inachèvement' extends to the postsecular temptations identified in the previous section. Given that evidence has been found to support distinct postsecular interpretations of Bataille's thinking, it can be argued that such interpretations shed light on complementary aspects of what can be described as an aporetic approach to religion. To be sure, Bataille does identify a universal sacred force that is independent from—and more originary than—revealed religions. Bataille even proposes that the latter emerge out of the recuperation of the former. As Bataille argues in 'La Structure psychologique du fascisme', homogeneous authority is unable to find in itself a *raison d'être* for 'le *devoir être* pur [...] exige l'être *pour soi*, c'est-à-dire le mode spécifique de l'existence *hétérogène*' (OCI: 354). Just as the

heterogeneous potential of war was recuperated to back up the development of homogeneous military orders, then, the sacred was enslaved to determinate revelations so that States and other sources of temporal authority find in the former ‘un motif d’exiger et d’imposer [leur] existence’ (*OCI*: 354). Yet ‘*la religion*’ remains independent from the homogeneous structures that are ‘*les religions*’. Bataille’s commitment to the former’s universality even seems to require the demise of the latter. As I have highlighted in the previous section, however, passages from Bataille’s works contradict the primacy of a *universal* structure of religiosity over *particular* religions. Could it be that Bataille developed his approach to ‘inachèvement’ based on the sense of fracture he identified in Catholicism, among other religions, a sense of fracture which he perceived as universal—let us not forget that the word ‘Catholic’ comes from the Greek καθολικός, meaning ‘universal’—and which he spent his career trying to re-valorise in the face of the homogenisation of secular modernity?³² If that is the case, one may argue that revelations first opened the structure of religiosity that Bataille designates as the sacred and are, therefore, prior to it. Is ‘*la religion*’ prior to ‘*les religions*’, then? Or is it the other way round? Nothing in Bataille’s texts allows me to reach a conclusion; much as nothing in Derrida’s thinking offers a way out of the aporia he identifies between a general structure of revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) and determinate revelations (*Offenbarung*).

Derrida borrows the concepts of *Offenbarkeit* and *Offenbarung* from Heidegger who, in *Being and Time*, observes that ‘[f]or some revelation to take place, *Dasein* must be able to open itself to revelation and this revealability is, let’s say, ontologically—not chronologically, not logically—prior to *Offenbarung*, to revelation’ (Derrida in Sherwood & Hart 2005: 43). If Derrida agrees with the structure of Heidegger’s argument, he takes

³² The same could be said about my own project: could it be that my belief in the possibility and desirability of defining religion, today still, with reference to a universal structure of religiosity is conditioned by my Catholic education and faith?

issue with the latter's readiness to embrace the universal to the detriment of the particular: 'My difficulty with Heidegger's very strong, very rigorous argument has to do with the possibility that revelation is not simply something that comes to confirm and to fulfill a revealability' (Derrida in Sherwood & Hart 2005: 43). In other words, Derrida takes issue with the fact that, by considering that a structure of revealability is prior to and independent from determinate revelations, Heidegger indexes phenomena to a horizon 'against which one sees the event coming' (Derrida in Sherwood & Hart 2005: 44). Yet, Derrida continues, '[i]f so, there is no event: if you see it coming, it is not an event' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 44). The primacy of *Offenbarkeit* compromises the intrinsic unforeseeability of the event, which translates as the unpredictability of chance in Bataille's 'système inachevé du non-savoir' (*OCVIII*: 558). Against Heidegger, then, one could vouch for the primacy of *Offenbarung* on the basis that '[r]evelation is always an event: an event that, in fact, breaks something' (Derrida in Sherwood & Hart 2005: 43-44). Yet Derrida proves equally unsatisfied by this option, for the unveiling of hidden truths implies a structure of revealability, which revelation only, at best, *opens*. Neither the primacy of *Offenbarung* nor that of *Offenbarkeit*, then, allows one to think the eventness of the event. Hence Derrida's decision to displace the discussion to '*un troisième lieu qui pourrait bien avoir été plus que l'archi-originnaire, le lieu le plus anarchique et anarchivable qui soit, [...] un certain désert—et non le désert de la révélation, mais un désert dans le désert*' (2001a: 28-29). As Michael Naas explains in *Miracle and Machine*, this 'place' which is referred to as *khôra* is 'that which comes before all determinate revelations without itself being revealed' (2012: 176). It is the space in which the eventness of the event does not have to be thought with a reference to unveiling. By invoking *khôra*, Derrida reminds us that the structure of religiosity is not

limited to a horizon of revealability and is thus compatible with, *and even conditions*, the unforeseeability of the event/chance.

Crucially, in the desert of the *khôra*, the question of the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit* is *suspended*, along with the structure of unveiling on which both these concepts depend. Considering that the possibility of religion is not limited to a horizon of revealability implies that there will always be a gap ‘entre l’ouverture de la *possibilité* (*comme structure universelle*) et la *nécessité déterminée* de telle ou telle religion’ (Derrida 2001a: 88). With *khôra*, Derrida highlights that *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* *do not exhaust each other’s possibilities*. Both stand, as de Vries puts it, ‘in a relation of mutual implication and oscillation’ (1999: 333). They imply *and* open each other to the unforeseeability of the event/chance. As Naas notes, ‘Derrida would seem to be suggesting that every determinate religion reflects and presupposes an elementary faith and that this elementary faith opens up the possibility at least of a determinate religion without determining any particular religion’ (2012: 158). *Khôra* can thus be described as a ‘place of resistance’ (Derrida in Caputo & Scanlon 1999: 76), resistance to the resolution of the aporia between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*. We will return to Derrida’s treatment of *khôra*. For now, I draw a parallel between Derrida’s call to maintain an ‘*oscillation indécise* [...] *entre révélation et révélabilité*’ in order to suspend the structure of unveiling (2001a: 35), and Bataille’s oscillation between a universal structure of religiosity and particular religions. Unlike Derrida, Bataille does not *express* an intention to maintain this oscillation. Yet I argue that it is nevertheless *performed* in the form of a contradictory pursuit of both the eternal return as religion *and* the return of/to religion. Much like the coexistence of sense and nonsense, aneconomy and recuperation in Bataille’s texts, the coexistence of rival postsecular strategies in Bataille’s later thinking partakes, I argue, of an overriding commitment to a suspensive *dei*

interruptio, a gesture which implies that Bataille cannot be strictly identified with either one of these postsecularisms.³³

Such a suspension has major consequences for a thinking of religion today. The coexistence of the eternal return of religion and the return of/to religion in Bataille's thinking implies, on the one hand, that one is able to posit a definition of religion in the singular that does not depend on transcendence. Such a definition not only centres on a general structure of religiosity which implies one's abandonment to the eternal return of chance and the always already renewed impossibility of transcendence, but also sidesteps the postsecular re-introduction of transcendence that usually comes with any attempt at defining religion in the singular. Unlike the religion of 'inachèvement' at which Bataille sometimes *seems* to be getting, Bataille's approach to 'la religion' can never close onto itself in the form of a constituted religion or as a reality *independent* from revelations *for it can never claim priority over the latter*. By extension, Bataille's approach to religion cannot render determinate revelations obsolete and justify their disappearance. Hence his assertion that: 'L'expérience ne révèle rien et ne peut fonder la croyance ni en partir' (*OCV*: 16). From ancient pagan cults to Catholicism, Islam and the wide variety of Eastern 'spiritualities' that Bataille mentions, any given religion based on specific beliefs and practices must still be considered relevant. This extends to atheistic ideologies which are traditionally considered as profane, whether scientific, political, or other. Bataille might thus be said to find a way of liberating thought from the hitherto axiomatic notion of transcendence while making some space for the transcendence that still characterises

³³ The question remains whether Bataille first came up with such a strategy of oscillation, which Derrida would have later identified and borrowed, or whether Derrida *opened* such an oscillation by interpreting Bataille's texts in terms of '*oscillating* poles that incessantly refer to each other like the foci of one and the same ellipse' (de Vries 1999: 384). Am I only depicting a 'very Derridean Bataille' (Irwin 2010: 29)? Perhaps, here too, the question of primacy should be left hanging.

many religions—much like secularism (wrongly) claims to do. By extension, this allows Bataille’s approach to religion to escape the accusation of ethnocentrism, the *universalism* of any attempt at thinking religion in the singular being balanced out by the latter’s relation of mutual implication with *particular* religions.

Transcendent revelations do still have a place in Bataille’s thinking, then. Yet only to the extent that they (i) do not lose sight of the universal structure of religiosity on which they were built, that is, on the eternal return of ‘inachèvement’, by closing in on their institutional and dogmatic—homogeneous—structure and (ii) remain open to coexistence. As Derrida stresses in *Foi et savoir*, determinate religions should keep in mind ‘l’écart [...] à l’intérieur de chaque religion entre, d’une part, ce qui la tient au plus près de sa propre et “pure” possibilité et, d’autre part, ses propres nécessités ou autorités déterminées par l’histoire’ (2001a: 88). Put otherwise, religions should cultivate *doubt* with regard to their own relation to the general structure of religiosity and therefore remain humble enough to recognise the legitimacy of other religions. This counters the dogmatism that feeds terrorism today, as well as any post-secular approach to religion. In fact, the self-reflexive cultivation of *doubt*—or the sacred ‘inachèvement’ of knowledge, to put it in Bataillean terms—is in keeping with Abrahamic reformisms today, which strive to tone down the emphasis on transcendent belief in favour of an opening to lived experience, ecumenism and the general structure of religiosity which Derrida calls ‘reflective faith’ (2001a: 35; on doubt in Abrahamic reformisms see Pouillon 1993; Latour 2005; Taylor C. 2007 and Seddik 2004). What we are left with, then, is a *sacred doubt*, which must be cultivated both within *and* outside determinate religions, whether these are traditionally considered religious or profane. Crucially, this sacred doubt might serve as the ground for an inclusive alternative to Western secularism insofar as it not only facilitates peaceful coexistence by fostering self-awareness among given revelations

and a recognition of other religions' legitimacy, but also undermines the dogmatic logic that is generally called upon to justify violations of the freedom of consciousness and the violent imposition of ideologies, whether the fundamentalist Catholicism of the Inquisition or Stalin's communism, Salafi Jihadism or national socialism, to give only a few examples. Here, one could say that this religious cultivation of *doubt* comes close to agnosticism, which designates the increasingly popular idea, within Western populations in particular, that the question of God's existence should be left hanging, for no divine truth will ever be revealed. This agnosticism would be cultivated both *within* and *outside* existing religious traditions, in an *affirmative* and *uncompromising* way. Affirmative because it cannot amount to scepticism, as is often the case with mainstream agnosticism. The religious doubt on which Bataille is touching is not just negative; rather, it *affirms* that no final answer can ever be given, whether in form of a revelation or as revealability. Such an agnosticism would also be uncompromising for, unlike mainstream agnosticism, it must apply to any revelation, whether traditionally considered religious or profane.

In conclusion, then, I argue that Bataille's ethically motivated project to restore balance in the interplay between the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity opens new horizons for religion(s) beyond theism and atheism, in a way that reflects and illuminates 'spiritual' transformations observable in Western countries today. By extension, I contend that Bataille's approach to God's death points to a more inclusive approach to religion than the one traditionally used in social sciences, thereby laying the ground for an inclusive religious coexistence, at least more so than that currently secured by secularism. Bataille's potential for a rethinking of religion, however, remains curbed by several issues which cannot be accounted for by his performative oscillation. These issues have already been evoked. They include (i) the weakness of Bataille's inner experience when it comes to challenging the ontotheological tradition, considering that it might not convey the

emotion of death and remains confined to specific—sometimes even elitist—spheres of human reality, but also (ii) the difficulty for Bataille’s thinking to emerge from the shadows. While being the sorcerer’s apprentice allows Bataille to escape the dialectical threat associated with knowledge and calculation, it also obscures his point. The fact that Bataille’s potential for a rethinking of religion today has thus far been overlooked and that old definitions of religion still prevail confirm my observation. All things considered, then, I believe that, whereas Bataille may have opened up new perspectives for an approach to religion today, he did not explore such perspectives himself. However, other thinkers did take up his project, building on his findings and learning from his (strategic) missteps. I argue that Derrida, in particular, avoids the technical issues that hinder Bataille’s thinking. In the next chapter, I turn more explicitly to Derridean deconstruction and explore not only how it resonates with Bataille’s approach to heterogeneity but also what it brings to the question of the singular plurality of religion today.

Chapter 2 – Jacques Derrida: The Last of the Ascetics

‘You were a superstar, indeed’ (Horner 2013: 102). In her final address to the late Derrida, Robyn Horner summarises in these terms the status that the Algerian-born French philosopher had come to acquire in academic circles, particularly in the English-speaking world, by the end of his career. In fact, I believe that it is safe to say that Derrida was as well-known and critically acclaimed during his lifetime as Bataille was obscure and disregarded by both critics and the general public during his. That is not to say that Derrida should be seen as a consensual figure, as opposed to the transgressive and polarising Bataille. Much like the latter, Derrida is known ‘as bringer of terror to the literary and philosophical worlds’ (Horner 2013: 105), particularly to the ontotheological tradition. The violence with which a number of scholars reacted to Derrida’s deconstructive approach, which has been depicted as a dangerous attempt at debunking all values, is revealing of the threatening potential of Derrida’s thinking. In what follows, I argue that deconstruction unfolds as a rigorous—and therefore, both jarring and groundbreaking—approach to the death of God, and question what this implies for a thinking of religion in the singular today.

Unlike Bataille, whose works testify to a lifelong preoccupation with (the death of) God, Derrida is often said to only start to explicitly address religious themes from the early 1980s, halfway through his career. Crucially, far from Bataille’s blasphemous promotion of the confrontation between Dionysus, the crucified and Apollo, Derrida shows a profound respect for the religions he considers—sometimes adopting theological accents himself. As Steven Shakespeare highlights in *Derrida and Theology*, critics thus generally approach Derrida’s (supposed) religious ‘turn’ by drawing a parallel with philosophers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein who, as they were growing older, got

the sense of living in a wasteland—an image associated by Taylor with the secular age (2007: 770)—and hence developed a religious sensibility. ‘It’s a nice story’, Shakespeare admits, ‘but it is told with the benefit of hindsight and the taint of nostalgia. It obscures the lines of continuity and complexity that make such stories overly simplistic’ (2009: 5). In line with Shakespeare, I contend—and demonstrate in the first two sections of this chapter—that Derrida’s engagement with religion cannot be reduced to the religious sensibility of an ageing philosopher but rather starts in the 1960s, building on Derrida’s approach to *différance*. More specifically, as it will become clear in a third section, I contend, along with de Vries, that Derrida’s approach to *différance* as a non-foundational gesture of infinite *différentiation* may be framed as ‘an *à Dieu* and an *adieu*, a going toward God and a leave taking’ which comes down to an *épochè* of God in all forms (1995: 217). Echoing Bataille’s ‘inachèvement’, Derrida opens thought to the *tout autre* by accompanying *différance* through an attitude which he terms ‘indécidabilité’, a withdrawal from presence which recalls asceticism. Crucially, unlike with Bataille, the experience of undecidability is *not* limited to a series of (elitist) activities but rather extends to any ethical welcoming of alterity. This does not mean that Derrida is immune to postsecular temptations. Whereas the sorcerer’s apprentice is exposed to being carried away by his own spell, the ascetic is prone to quietism, which facilitates theological contaminations. Sections 4 and 5 of this chapter evaluate the resilience of Derrida’s thinking in the face of these threats, focusing specifically on Derrida’s relationship with negative theology. The final two sections are, then, devoted to an assessment of Derrida’s potential for rethinking religion today as well as for envisioning not just religious coexistence but what Derrida calls “*bien vivre ensemble*”, *cela signifie s’entendre dans la confiance, la bonne foi, la foi, se comprendre, en un mot s’accorder*’ (2014: 31).

(2.1) The Particularity of the Particular

That Derrida did not wait until the 1980s to touch on religious matters should seem obvious to anyone who has read ‘Violence et métaphysique’. In this 1963 essay, Derrida deconstructs Levinas’s postsecular approach to the Wholly Other as God. Crucially for my purpose, I suspect that it is in this essay that Derrida lays the foundations of his unique approach to religion in the singular. Using the in-built aporias of Levinasian ethics as a springboard, he identifies an essential link between what he describes as ‘la religiosité du religieux’ (1967b: 142) and the experience of an encounter with radical alterity, that is to say, with non-recuperable difference.

‘Violence et métaphysique’ opens with Derrida’s observation that, for Levinas, ‘toute la tradition philosophique aurait partie liée, dans son être et en profondeur, avec l’oppression et le totalitarisme du même’ (1967b: 136). Much like Heidegger, Levinas considers that Western thought has so far proved ‘[i]ncapabl[e] de respecter l’autre dans son être et dans son sens’ (Derrida 1967b: 136). The two thinkers, however, approach this issue from different perspectives. In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger suggests that, insofar as it approaches Being as a fixed abstract substance, metaphysics is blind to the ontological difference between Being and beings (1969: 62-70). By contrast, Heidegger proposes an ontology in which ‘l’être n’est pas un étant excellent’ (Derrida 1967b: 203): being is conceived of as *Dasein*, a mode of being that is not only self-aware but also already engaged in the world, subjected to time, space and interpersonal relations. Yet for Levinas, ‘[l]’“ontologie” heideggérienne, malgré de séduisantes apparences, [...] rest[e] encore “égologie” et même “égoïsme”’ (Derrida 1967b: 144). Insofar as ontology takes as its starting point the ontological ground that unites all beings, it prevents any encounter with alterity. Against both metaphysics and ontology, then, Levinas suggests that

philosophy should take as its starting point a non-violent face-to-face with an otherness whose mode of being cannot be reduced to being-as-such but rather corresponds to a non-ontological 'il y a'. According to Levinas, *ethics* should be considered as first philosophy (Derrida 1967b: 145-146; Peperzak 1995). By ethics, Levinas does not refer to a set of universal moral laws; rather, it has to do with the particularity of the particular. In *Noms propres*, Levinas illustrates his displacement of ethics from the universal to the particular with the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice.

As Levinas observes, in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that Isaac's aborted sacrifice sheds light on God's role as mediator in human relationships. It is through a religious perspective that Abraham's intention to kill his son may be praised; otherwise, he is but a would-be child murderer. God is thus presented as the one who gives relationships their ethical value. By sending an angel to stop Abraham's arm, God even teaches humanity how to behave in relation to the Other. Based on Kierkegaard's reading, then, the ethical is a universal domain which God—from above and beyond this domain—helps humanity navigate. For Levinas, however, the ethical does not reside where Kierkegaard thinks it does. Levinas draws attention to Abraham's sensitivity to the angel's call (1976b: 113). Considering what Abraham endured to prepare for the sacrifice—he lied to Sarah, went into the mountains, prepared the altar; he surely resigned himself to obey God—one might be surprised by Abraham's readiness to respond to the angel, as if he had heard the latter's call before it was uttered. Most importantly, the call does not come from God himself, but from a messenger (Katz 2003). This means that the relation between Abraham and his son is not mediated by God, as Kierkegaard had it. Abraham is face-to-face with his son, face-to-face with the other. For Levinas, it is this confrontation with otherness that brings Abraham back to the ethical, not the angel's command. The ethical lies in the face of the particular, before any dogmatic command. It

even requires God's *effacement* as mediator in human relationships. Levinas's ethics can, therefore, be said to propose a rigorous approach to God's death, one that centres on the effacement not just of the God of Abraham but also of the universal—the God of the philosophers—in the face of the particular. As Derrida stresses, Levinasian ethics is elaborated 'ni comme une dogmatique, ni comme *une* religion, ni même comme *une* morale' (1967b: 123). It simply consists in attending to the particularity of the particular.

If Levinasian ethics cannot be reduced to a religion, however, Derrida remarks that it is nevertheless haunted by a *religious* voice, that of the angel. As Derrida observes, in an attempt at liberating thought from the tyranny of the Same, Levinas is led to absolutize the other. In order to be able to think the other as an irreducible alterity, and not merely as difference from a primordial sameness, Levinas identifies the Other as 'origine du monde' (1967b: 184): alterity comes before sameness; the Other comes before any sense of self in an ethical relationship. As Derrida explains, 'l'autre n'est l'autre que si son altérité est absolument irréductible, c'est-à-dire infiniment irréductible; et l'infiniment-Autre ne peut être que l'Infini' (1967b: 154). This recalls the traditional definition of God as 'l'illimité'. Like the dialectical narratives of God's death evoked in the introduction, Levinas's ethics appears to leave a theological space unchallenged: it replaces the moral order of God with an ethical absolutism of the Wholly Other. Ethics therefore seems to be caught up in the dialectics of a/theism. De Vries confirms this assessment in 'A-dieu, adieu, a-Dieu', as he observes that, in Levinas's reading, the voice of God the mediator and the—ethical—voice of the angel '[are] in fact different intonations or modulations of "one and the same" voice, that of the "one" Other, that of the Other as the "One"' (1995: 212). This voice does not come from outside and above the ethical order, as with Kierkegaard; God is removed as mediator between the 'I' and the Other. Instead, Claire Katz stresses, 'the Other is the middle term between the "I" and God. And it is in the

Other that one sees the trace of God and is called to responsibility' (2003). The ethical relation therefore does not depend on God's command, but rather constitutes an encounter with God *as* the Wholly Other. As Levinas argues, 'par ma relation avec autrui, je suis en rapport avec Dieu. L'éthique n'est pas le corollaire de la vision de Dieu, elle est cette vision même' (1976a: 33). Levinasian ethics can thus be considered as touching upon the religious *before and beyond* dogmatic commands. Hence Derrida's assertion that '[l]a relation éthique est une relation religieuse. Non pas *une* religion, mais *la* religion, la religiosité du religieux' (1967b: 142)—a religiosity which Levinas extrapolates from his Jewish culture, to the extent that Judaism conceives of otherness in terms of an absolute exteriority (Gasché 1994: 151). Derrida even suggests that one should 'appel[er] judaïsme cette expérience de l'infiniment autre' (1967b: 226). This explains why Levinas is generally included in the list of philosophers who strive to make space for transcendence in the secular world (see Blond 1998: 103-120; Kosky 2004: 86). His non-dogmatic thinking of a transcendent *Wholly Other* does depend on the effacement of God as mediator. Moreover, much like Marion, he focuses on what is traditionally deemed essential in religion, namely, transcendence, while universalising it.

Derrida, however, suspects that this postsecular ethic comes with a risk of violence: the asymmetric relationship between the self and the Wholly Other/God threatens to reintroduce oppression in a thought otherwise liberated from the domination of presence (1967b: 173; 192; Gasché 1994: 151). It threatens, in other words, to replace the tyranny of the Same with a tyranny of the Wholly Other. This puts Levinas in a double bind. The ethical relation appears to both *prevent* and *promote* violence: 'Sans Dieu ou avec Dieu, il n'y aurait pas la guerre. Celle-ci suppose et exclut Dieu' (Derrida 1967b: 158). Reading Levinas against himself, then, Derrida argues that the conclusion that one should draw from Levinas's attention to the particularity of the particular—an attention that Derrida

wishes to cultivate—is that ethics *always compromises what it makes possible*.³⁴ Derrida even suggests that this ‘im-possibilité’, as he puts it (2001b: 294), of a non-violent encounter with alterity is the most important lesson one can learn from the story of Isaac’s sacrifice. In *Donner la mort*, he stresses that Abraham is faced with two incompatible ethical demands (1999: 103): that Abraham proves willing to sacrifice his son fulfils his absolute responsibility to the Wholly Other/God; yet in the selfsame gesture, he sacrifices the ethical demand not to murder. For Derrida, Abraham is thus at once ‘le plus responsable et le plus irresponsable des hommes’ (1999: 103). The narrative of Isaac’s sacrifice, therefore, highlights that no decision can ever be purely ethical, for every responsible decision *sacrifices* absolute responsibility. Abraham is not just faced with two incompatible ethical demands, however. He is also faced with an *impossible* choice between compliance and freedom which, for Derrida, testifies to another crucial element of responsible decision-making, namely, ‘l’épreuve même de l’indécidable’ (1999: 20). As Derrida remarks, responsible decisions cannot derive from compliance with a given law or knowledge for, in that case, ‘ce n’est plus une décision responsable, c’est [...] le simple déploiement machinique d’un théorème’ (1999: 43). Rather, Derrida argues,

pour qu’une décision soit juste et responsable, il faut qu[’] [...] elle soit à la fois réglée et sans règle, conservatrice de la loi et assez destructrice ou suspensive de la loi pour devoir à chaque cas la réinventer, la re-justifier (1994: 51).

For Derrida, Abraham’s decision to sacrifice Isaac in spite of the ethical imperative not to murder exemplifies the sacrifice of law required as part of every responsible decision-

³⁴ That Derrida’s deconstructive approach comes down to reading a thinker against himself or herself raises the question of whether an important inspiration for deconstruction—in addition to those traditionally cited, including Saussure, Nietzsche and Heidegger—does not lie in Bataille’s *faithfully heretical* approach to Nietzsche, Hegel and the Christian dogma.

making. Abraham sacrifices moral laws in favour of what exceeds all knowledge, law or duty: the *tout autre*, here named God. The narrative of Isaac's sacrifice thus exemplifies 'l'expérience de décisions absolues, prises sans continuité avec un savoir ou des normes données, donc prises dans l'épreuve même de l'indécidable' (Derrida 1999: 20).

All things considered, then, Derrida's deconstructive reading of Levinas sheds light on two crucial characteristics that Derrida associates with any attempt at establishing a respectful, non-appropriative, relationship with difference. On the one hand, whatever the circumstances, an ethical encounter is always unprecedented—it cannot follow a pre-existing law or dogma—and on the other, such an encounter is condemned not to be pure. Violence *always* remains. Such conclusions are not just found in 'Violence et métaphysique'. I suspect that they run through almost every one of Derrida's texts, at least from the 1960s and early 1970s. It is around that time that Derrida first put forward what would come to be recognised as one of his central ideas, namely, the fact that a differentiating gesture which he calls *différance* is at work in language, preventing meaning from ever being fully present. In the next section, I examine *différance* in detail not only to highlight the nuances of Derrida's attention to non-recuperable alterity and how these relate to the conclusions he reaches in 'Violence et métaphysique', but also so that I am able to shed light on these elements that make it, to my mind, a particularly rigorous approach to God's death.

(2.2) An Originary 'Default' of Origin

Derrida first explicitly unpacks the notion of *différance* in *De la grammatologie*, as part of his questioning of the millennia-old phonocentrism of Western thinking. Derrida observes that their pursuit of truth led Western thinkers to privilege speech—as Niall

Lucy explains, speakers ‘mean (or intend) what they say and say what they mean without recourse to prosthetic or technological devices. The presence of the speaker guarantees the truth of what is said’ (2004: 118)—over writing, which is considered a lifeless and incomplete representation of meaning. As Lucy observes, ‘[w]riting as “written-down speech” is condemned to be inferior to speech’ (2004: 118); an inferiority which seems to be confirmed by the fact that children learn to speak before they learn to write. Derrida himself acknowledges that the written communication of meaning is compromised by a twofold movement of difference and deferral, ‘espacement’ and ‘temporisation’ (1972b: 8), which he coins as *différance*. On the one hand, Christopher Norris explains, ‘writing is split (differed) by the absence that makes it necessary’ (2004: 20). We write down what we fear we might forget or to communicate with someone who is absent. Writing therefore operates as a *trace*, understood as a present mark which testifies to something absent. On the other hand, the meaning of a text is always deferred, insofar as it relies on signs, which imply repetition (Derrida 1967c: 55). Yet repetition comes with alteration. The context in which a sign is used changes from one occurrence to another, so do the author’s intention and readers’ interpretation, which attribute new inflections to the sign. A sign, Derrida stresses, ‘doit rester le *même* et pouvoir être répété comme tel malgré et à travers les déformations que ce qu’on appelle l’événement empirique lui fait nécessairement subir’ (1967c: 55). He draws a parallel with Nietzsche’s eternal return, understood here in much the same way as Bataille does, that is to say, as the eternal return of the Same to its own differentiation: ‘C’est à partir du déploiement de ce même comme *différance* que s’annonce la *mêmeté* de la *différence* et de la répétition dans l’éternel retour’ (1972b: 18-19). For Derrida, writing depends on iterability understood as an eternally repeated gesture of *return-as-différance*. It depends, in other words, on a movement of *différance* that deconstructs the very meaning it makes possible. It should

not come as a surprise, therefore, that Western thinkers in search of the full presence of meaning have privileged speech over writing.

In *De la grammatologie* and ‘La Pharmacie de Platon’, however, Derrida suggests that any attempt at communicating, including speech, and by extension any attempt at establishing a relationship with alterity, depends on *différance*—which explains Derrida’s insistence on the impurity of ethical relationships in ‘Violence et métaphysique’. This is confirmed by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who identifies a differential character in both written and spoken signification (1971: 46; Derrida 1967a: 53). In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure highlights that meaning arises from the assemblage of a signifier and a signified, which contradicts Husserl’s identification of a God-like ‘transcendental signified’ as unique origin of meaning (1971: 157). Crucially, Saussure observes that this assemblage is *arbitrary*. The fact that the written or spoken word ‘cat’, for instance, means different things in different languages implies that there is no natural reason why these should have anything to do with an actual cat. The word ‘cat’ only acquires meaning from the *differences* that exist between the latter and other English words. According to Derrida, Saussure’s ties to the metaphysics of presence led him to compromise such a thinking of difference by indexing the latter to a *structure* of difference, that is to say, to identity. As Saussure argues, ‘la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles et des différences phoniques *issues de ce système*’ (1971: 166, my emphasis). By contrast, Derrida extrapolates from Saussure’s difference a thinking of the *trace* (1967a: 100; see Bernasconi 1988). As Gayatri Spivak explains, one learns from Saussure that the sign is never fully present: ‘half of it [is] always “not there”, and the other half always “not that”’ (1976: xvii). Given that a sign acquires meaning based on its difference from other signs, indeed, ‘[e]very sign bears the *traces* of the others from

which it differs' (Wortham 2010: 229). The differential character of the sign thereby points to an originary trace at play in—deconstructing—*both* written *and* spoken language. Writing should not be seen as inferior to the supposed immediacy of speech, then. Rather, it appears as a privileged entry point to understanding the fact that no value, meaning or relation to otherness can ever be pure, for these are conditioned and withdrawn by a movement of *différance*. Such a *différentiation* of meaning recalls the *époque* of sense characteristic of Bataille's inner experience of poetry; a resonance which explains Derrida's interest in Bataille's treatment of poetry in 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale'. In Derrida's case, however, *différance* extends beyond the limits of artistic expression to include all forms of communication, which considerably broadens the reach of Bataille's sometimes weak inner experience. Yet, both thinkers meet in their efforts to shed light on a non-recuperable *differe/antiating* force at the heart of the metaphysical system which hitherto relied on full presence. As Elise Lamy-Rested stresses, Derrida suggests that '[l]e système est percé du dedans par son autre. L'altérité qui échappe à toute représentation, à la lumière et à son appropriation par le même, n'est pas extérieure à la pensée grecque' (2018). The latter merely built its illusory pursuit of presence on the overlooking and repression of such a non-recuperable alterity.

Let us pause here for a moment and remark that such an approach to *différance*, when read superficially, exposes Derrida to two series of criticisms. On the one hand, Derrida's identification of a *différentiating* gesture destabilising every concept established throughout the history of metaphysics is met with accusations of nihilism, relativism and residual atheism. In 1992, for instance, when Derrida's name was put forward for an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge, many voices arose to denounce Derrida's thinking as a dangerous debunking of values, much like Nietzsche before him. 'Deconstruction, so the fear goes, infects our most cherished realities, our

ethics, and yes, our religion with nihilistic fantasy and excess' (Shakespeare 2009: 1). Keeping in mind that religion, as it is traditionally understood, depends on the possibility of revelation—that is to say, on the uncovering of truth in its full presence—and that God acts as a figurehead for the concepts of identity and completion, critics have suggested that Derrida's *différance* signs God's death warrant. Norris and Spivak, in particular, 'disseminated deconstruction's assumed power to demystify religion and to convict theology of the metaphysics of presence' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 11; see Norris C. 1984; Spivak 1976). I believe, however, that this is forgetting a crucial aspect of Derrida's deconstruction. As I have elucidated above, *différance* both withdraws *and* conditions the communication of meaning, the ethical encounter with alterity and the metaphysical pursuit of values more generally. This does not imply that values do not exist, but rather that they can *only* exist as impure. That the gesture making an ethical relation *possible* also makes it *impossible* does not, for instance, imply that ethics should be abandoned. Rather, it means that respecting the particularity of the particular requires one to admit not only that no ethical gesture will ever be pure—that is to say, strictly non-violent—but also that such purity is not desirable, for the latter can only realise itself in tyranny. Derrida describes this second form of violence—homogeneous violence, as Bataille would label it—as '*la pire*' (1967b: 191), for it 'occurs when the other to which one is related is *completely* appropriated to or *completely* in one's self' (Lawlor 2019). Yet Derrida remarks that the possibility of such evil conditions ethics (2001a: 72): opening oneself to the particularity of the particular implies exposing oneself to the threat of recuperation.³⁵ The question remains whether one gives in to this threat—as does

³⁵ Derrida adopts a different approach to evil than Bataille here: whereas the latter associates evil with transgression and sovereignty (*OCIX*: 171), in other words, with one's *sinful* openness to and embracing of non-recuperable difference, Derrida associates evil with the forces of appropriation, that is to say, with homogeneity.

Levinas—or resists it. Derrida suggests that resistance to radical evil is possible through the cultivation of an *aporia*: respecting the particularity of the particular as *the experience of the im-possible* allows one to prevent the establishment of tyranny, whether that of the Same or of the Wholly Other (see Raffoul 2008: 270; 274). Renouncing purity is the only way to ‘prendre en charge, on pourrait dire en gage, la *possibilité* de ce **mal radical** sans lequel on ne saurait bien faire’ (Derrida 2001a: 71). For Derrida, the same goes for all values. One must admit that ‘il n’y a pas de stabilité absolue, éternelle, intangible, naturelle. Mais cela est impliqué dans le concept même de stabilité. Une stabilité n’est pas une immutabilité, elle est par définition toujours déstabilisable’ (1990a: 279). The thrust of Derrida’s defence against accusations of nihilism and residual atheism, then, is *not* that meaning, ethics or God do not exist, but rather that these should be considered in their complexity, without overlooking or repressing the *différance* that both condemns and conditions them, for doing so is already giving in to radical evil. Hence Derrida’s response to detractor John Searle: ‘la valeur de vérité (avec toutes celles qui lui sont associées) [...] [n]’est jamais contestée ou détruite [dans mes ouvrages], seulement réinscrite dans des contextes plus puissants, plus larges, plus stratifiés’ (1990a: 270).

Contra Norris and Spivak, Shakespeare remarks that Derrida here ‘touch[es] [...] on a strange “theological” dynamic that is neither theistic nor atheistic’ (2009: 45). Paraphrasing Derrida, God is never destroyed in his writing, but only re-inscribed, *through His own im-possibility*, in more powerful and stratified contexts. Could one find in Derrida, ‘if not a new theology, at least a thinker who provokes us to consider the possibility of doing theology otherwise’ (Shakespeare 2009: 47)? I will consider this in later sections. For now, it appears that Derrida can be described neither as properly theist nor as strictly atheist; an ambiguity which is confirmed by his observation that ‘je passe à juste titre pour un athée’ (1991a: 146)—an equivocal way of saying that he is not one,

at least in the straightforward sense. Yet with this statement, Derrida also recognises how easy it is to find evidence of atheism in his thinking. His work, he admits, builds on propositions which are ‘toute[s] prête[s] à se convertir en athéisme’ (1967b: 160). For instance, is it not a contradiction in terms to suggest that God or truth can be anything else than absolute? As Derrida notes, ‘[c]’est ce que Levinas, d’accord ici avec toutes les métaphysiques infinitistes les plus classiques, jugerait impossible, absurde ou purement verbal’ (1967b: 211). Could one blame Martin Hägglund for suggesting ‘that a radical atheism informs [Derrida’s] writing from beginning to end’ (2008: 1), then? Derrida’s *différance* does leave us with a finitude that cannot be overcome, which contradicts God’s existence as ‘l’Illimité’. I contend, however, that the very title of Hägglund’s book hints at the limitations of such an approach: depictions of Derrida’s thinking as *radical*, a term which the Oxford English Dictionary associates with ‘foundational’ and ‘essential’, can only raise suspicion, given Derrida’s commitment to *différance*.

A second series of criticisms similarly attempts to simplify the question of Derrida’s ties to theism and theology, yet this time in the opposite direction, by interpreting Derrida’s insistence on impurity as an attempt at dialectically returning to purity, that is to say, to God. Theologian John Milbank, for instance, has suggested that Derrida’s insistence on the impossibility of absolute responsibility implies that ‘responsibility will never be fully realised, always postponed, always demanding further sacrifice in a futile quest for purity’ (Roberts T. 2005: 272). Habermas has also argued that Derrida ‘renews the mystical concept of tradition as an ever *delayed* event of revelation’ (1987b: 183), thereby misreading Derrida’s work in much the same way as he misreads Bataille’s, by categorising them as mystics in search of a purity *to come*. As I have already pointed out, that a purely ethical relation is impossible does *not* imply, for Derrida, that one should keep trying to secure such purity. I agree with Tyler Roberts: Milbank’s reading, like

Habermas's, 'overemphasize[s] the imperative to purity' (2005: 272). Yet for critics such as Mikel Dufrenne and Susan Handelman, Derrida pursues purity *negatively*. Handelman goes so far as to describe Derrida as 'the new high priest of the religion of absence' (1982: 172), an approach that recalls Sartre's critique of Bataille. Handelman appeals to Derrida's Jewish culture and proposes that Derrida's pursuit of *pure* alterity testifies to his attachment to the God of Judaism, much like Levinas before him. As for Mikel Dufrenne, he suspects that Derrida proposes 'une expérience de l'absence [...], elle-même tendue vers une présence qui lui apporterait à la fois une confirmation et un démenti' (1973: 28), an absolutisation of absence that plays into the hands of negative theology. 'Nous voici à nouveau apparemment délivrés de Dieu, mais à quel prix?', Dufrenne wonders, pointing to the postsecular potential of Derrida's attention to absence, '[...] A défaut du divin, nous trouvons ici [...] un Dieu en négatif' (1973: 20-21), perhaps even, as with Levinas, *un Dieu au négatif*, the Wholly Other. I will shortly return to the question of Derrida's relationship with negative theology. For now, I argue that Dufrenne and Handelman are mistaken in their depiction of Derrida's thinking as a postsecular quest for *pure alterity*. If Derrida asserts that '[d]evant une pensée comme celle de Levinas, je n'ai jamais d'objection' (Derrida & Labarrière 1986: 74), he nevertheless shows reservations regarding the latter's '*rêve d'une pensée purement hétérologique en sa source*' (1967b: 224). In 'Violence et métaphysique', Derrida could not be clearer: one should renounce the dream of a *pure* encounter with the Wholly Other/God.

Moreover, Derrida is careful to specify that, if *différance* is found 'à l'origine du sens et de la présence' (1967c: 95), it must not be considered as a God-like prime mover which could, as Dufrenne and Handelman fear, become a new foundation for meaning, 'the origin and law of everything' (Handelman 1982: 174; Dufrenne 1973: 19-20; Gasché 1994: 164). This is where the difference between Saussure's *différence* and Derrida's

différance acquires crucial importance. That *différance* is a trace implies that it can be approached neither as an *originary present absence*, as Handelman and Dufrenne tend to argue, which rather corresponds to Saussure's *structure of difference*, nor as the mere *absence of an originary presence*, an absence whose only value is to prepare for the dialectical return of/to presence, as Milbank and Habermas seem to suggest. Rather, a trace is always that of someone who was never *properly* there. In Levinas's terms, it testifies to 'un passé qui n'a jamais été présent' (Derrida 1972b: 21). It consists, in other words, of the experience of an *eternally recurring* gesture of 'espacement' and 'temporisation' that always already prevents the establishment of identity (1972b: 8; 1967a: 96). *Différance* corresponds to the *impossibility of presence*, of a God-like origin of meaning or prime mover existing outside of time and change. As Derrida stresses, '[l]a trace est en effet l'origine absolue du sens en général. Ce qui revient à dire [...] qu'il n'y a pas d'origine absolue du sens en général' (1967a: 95). The trace can thus be described, using Bernard Stiegler's terms, as '*un défaut originaire d'origine*' (2003: 37; 2005: 64). As Shakespeare summarises, then, in Derrida's work:

Presence is not simply replaced by absence, because the two terms reflect one another. They are both metaphysical names for the absolute [...]. Rather than simply directing us towards relativism, nihilism or even atheism, Derrida is suggesting that the difference between presence and absence (and between theism and atheism) needs to be re-thought in a new way (2009: 56).

(2.3) God, For Example

It should be noted that the farther this 'new way' of thinking gets from Levinasian ethics, the closer it gets to Heidegger's ontology. In a final section of 'Violence et métaphysique', Derrida remarks that, if Levinas was right to distrust ontology, he should

have been more nuanced in his rejection of Heidegger's (1967b: 196-228). For Heidegger, '[l]'être de l'étant (par exemple de Dieu) n'est pas l'étant absolu, ni l'étant infini, ni même le fondement de l'étant en général' (Derrida 1967b: 211). Time, space and interpersonal relations prevent *Dasein* from being frozen into an abstract being-as-such. This is why Heidegger argues that Being *is* not—it can only be written under erasure, as '~~Being~~' (1958: 33)—and that it should rather be considered as *given*, as 'es gibt', the event or coming into view (*Ereignis*) of a gift with no identifiable giver or recipient who could recuperate it. Unlike other ontologies, then, Heidegger's does not admit being-as-such as its starting point but rather attends to the non-foundational *différance* that renders being-as-such im-possible. It approaches being/'es gibt' as a non-originary trace and thereby unfolds as what Derrida describes as a *hauntology* (1993b: 31; 255). Yet, as Horner observes, 'Derrida is not entirely sure that Heidegger is willing to give up on the *proper*' (2001: 41; 42-44, my emphasis). Indeed, it is doubtful that any gift, including being as gift, can be maintained as *pure*, considering that the act of giving, the giver's intention to give and the receiver's identification of the gift as gift circumscribe the event of the gift to a horizon of expectation (Derrida 1991b: 18-19). As soon as it appears, the gift threatens to constitute a new ground for being-as-such. According to Derrida, that is what happens with Marion. Although the latter 'attempts to suspend the horizon by suggesting that the origin of the [ethical] call cannot be ultimately determined, he does tend toward identifying the caller as the Christian God' (Horner 2001: 104; Derrida 1991b: 74), thereby anchoring 'es gibt' to the metaphysics of presence. A similar risk looms over Heidegger's work. As far as Derrida is concerned, both Levinas's and Heidegger's attempts at making space for non-recuperable difference risk succumbing to the temptation of presence, whether positively or by negation.

By contrast, Derrida suggests that ‘[i]l faudrait confronter systématiquement ce thème du “il y a” avec les allusions que Heidegger fait au “es gibt”’ (1967b: 133) so that neither can establish itself as pure presence, thereby adopting a method which recalls Bataille’s performative oscillation between inoperativity and economism. I have already established that, for Derrida, approaching difference ethically requires one to go through the ordeal of undecidability. Such a commitment to undecidability explains why Derrida proposes to play Heidegger off against Levinas, presence against absence, *without admissible outcome*. Referring to the Jewish inflection of Levinas’s Wholly Other and to the Greek legacy of Heidegger’s ontology, Derrida calls us to ‘viv[re] dans la différence entre le Juif et le Grec’ (1967b: 227). The Jew and the Greek must unceasingly confront each other so that the door remains open for figures of excretion, to use Bataille’s term, ‘la forme informe, muette, infante et terrifiante de la monstruosité’ (Derrida 1967b: 428). In Derrida’s thinking, being is therefore thought neither as non-ontological absence, as the Jew might have it, nor as full presence, as the Greek might suggest, but as ‘*peut-être*’ (1993b: 62). In order not to fall back into the dialectics of presence, ‘perhaps’ must not be circumscribed within a horizon of expectation: it remains ‘du côté de la chance’ (Derrida 2003b: 24). In line with Bataille’s thinking of chance, then, Derrida approaches the question of being through a thinking of the *event* (2003b: 203). Yet by contrast with Heidegger’s *Ereignis*,

L’arrivant doit être absolument autre, un autre que je m’attende à ne pas attendre, que je n’attende pas, dont l’attente est faite d’une non-attente, une attente sans ce qu’on appelle en philosophie l’horizon d’attente [...]. Si je suis sûr qu’il y aura de l’événement, cela ne sera pas un événement (Derrida & Stiegler 1996: 21).

This incalculability implies that the event is different in its own return: ‘Répétition *et* première fois, voilà peut-être la question de l’événement [...]. Chaque fois, c’est

l'événement même, une première fois est une dernière fois. Toute autre' (Derrida 1993b: 31). Derrida's thinking of the event thus identifies *différance* at the root of being, withdrawing and *disseminating* both being and alterity. According to Derrida, '[I]'infiniment autre ne serait pas ce qu'il est, autre, s'il était infinité positive et s'il ne gardait en lui la négativité de l'in-défini' (1967b: 168). In stark contrast with Levinas, Derrida's quasi-ontology implies that '[I]'infiniment autre, l'infinité de l'Autre n'est pas l'Autre *comme* infinité positive, Dieu ou ressemblance avec Dieu' (1967b: 168). Rather, it is *disseminated* in each event; in and as the eternal return of *différance*. Hence Derrida's assertion that '[I]'apparaître de la différence infinie est lui-même fini' (1967c: 114). Alterity is *infinitely finite*. It should be noted, as Gasché does in *The Inventions of Difference* (1994: 136-149), that the infinitely finite discussed by Derrida exceeds the Hegelian dichotomy between good and bad infinities. If *différance* is, by definition, incompatible with the totalisation characteristic of the good infinite, it cannot be reduced to the bad infinite either, for *différance* is infinite 'selon une identité non-hégélienne' (Derrida 1972a: 309). *Différance* is not the 'determinate, *itself finite infinite*' described by Hegel (2010: 111), but rather corresponds to the eternal return of finitude. Far from the *exemplarity* of Levinas's Wholly Other, alterity in Derrida's thinking manifests through infinite series of finite *examples* (Gasché 1994: 162-163).

This calls for a re-reading of the story of Isaac's sacrifice. Following Derrida, the ethical relation between 'I' and the other is not of an asymmetric nature, as Levinas had it. There is no hierarchically superior Other to which 'I' must sacrifice everything.³⁶ Rather, otherness lies in 'chaque autre, tout autre est infiniment autre dans sa singularité

³⁶ I have explained elsewhere that Derrida structures his approach to non-recuperable difference around a similar aporia to that found in Bataille's thinking. Both thinkers approach difference in terms of the impossibility, or unavoidable sacrifice, of absolute *sacrifice* (Chabbert 2019: 39).

absolue' (1999: 110). As Derrida eloquently phrases it, 'Tout autre (au sens de chaque autre) est tout autre (absolument autre)' (1999: 110).³⁷ This explains why ethics confronts us with multiple demands, all of which we cannot satisfy. Otherness is disseminated, thus never singular; '[i]l y a [...] des autres, en nombre infini' (Derrida 1999: 98). This also explains why there is no pre-given rule on how to approach difference ethically. The latter always manifests as *unprecedented in its own return*. Ethics, and deconstruction, by extension, can thus never be programmatic. I agree with Simon Critchley's suggestion that 'Derridian deconstruction can, and should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas' (2004: 127). I even suggest that Derrida's thinking of *différance* is more respectful of the particularity of the particular than Levinas's ethics, thanks to an approach which Watkin insightfully compares with *asceticism* (2011: 8). Like the ascetic, Derrida withdraws (being) from full presence. I argue that it is such a discipline, which Derrida compares with a retreat to the desert (of the desert) (2001a: 11; 16; 29; 32) and associates with '*une certaine* *Verhaltenheit* *aussi dont parle Heidegger*' (2001a: 29), that allows him to resist the threat of radical evil and make space for non-recuperable alterity.

Crucially, Derrida remarks that '[cette] pensée de l'être serait ce qui permet de dire, sans naïveté, réduction ou blasphème "Dieu, par exemple". C'est-à-dire de *penser* Dieu comme ce qu'il est sans en faire un objet' (1967b: 211). Put otherwise, it is such a quasi-ontology that would explain why Derrida's thinking can be reduced to neither theism nor atheism. Thinking in-between the Greek and the Jew does imply that God, *if there is any*, is suspended, much like being, between infinity and finitude, absence and presence, life

³⁷ Though Blanchot largely agrees with Derrida's Levinasian-inspired approach to the ethical relationship, he suggests that the latter is best defined as one of *double dissymmetry*. The hierarchical, vertical relation established by Levinas is reconfigured as a two-way, horizontal relation between 'I' and the other, as well as between the other and 'I' (Hill 1997: 176-177).

and death.³⁸ It implies, in other words, that ‘Dieu *n’est rien* (de déterminé)’ (1967b: 170). I have already mentioned that this statement may seem contradictory, given that God traditionally stands as another name for the absolute. I believe that understanding Derrida’s point here requires one to turn to his treatment of the trace. Given that a sign only acquires meaning from the traces of all the signs from which it differs, it may be said that the value of a sign is an *effect* of the trace. Similarly, for Derrida, ‘Dieu [est] un *effet de trace*’ (1967b: 160). Much like the sign, (the im-possibility of) God remains as a trace in every event. As Gasché explains, ‘His possibility is dependent on a structurally infinite network of referrals that comes to only an illusion of a halt when it represents itself, reveals itself, in exemplary fashion’ (1994: 162). God remains as a trace, a spectre, a—Holy?—ghost. ‘[Sa] présence (*est*) une certaine absence. Non pas absence pure et simple, car la logique finirait par y trouver son compte [as with Levinas], mais une *certaine* absence’ (Derrida 1967b: 135). God’s exemplarity is the effect of the trace, a ‘perhaps’ that is carried *and* contradicted by each event,³⁹ by the eternal return of *examples* of otherness. For Derrida, then, ‘Dieu est partout où il y a du tout autre’ (1999: 110).

As Gasché remarks, this implies that ‘Derrida makes room for God, so to speak’ (1994: 161), which disproves accusations of atheism, radical or otherwise. Yet in contradistinction with theism, what one is left with is only the *promise* of God, which, by definition, can never be fulfilled—for when it is fulfilled, a promise ceases to be a promise. In the last few decades of his career, Derrida started referring to this promise in terms of *messianicity*, thereby breathing new life into accusations of negative theology—

³⁸ I argue in the last section of this chapter that there is an uncanny resonance between Derrida’s God, who is suspended between life and death—‘Dieu mort vivant’ (Derrida 2016: 44)—and Erwin Schrödinger’s cat, at least before the box is open.

³⁹ Hence Richard Kearney’s referral to the God-who-may-be (2001). If Derrida largely agrees with Kearney’s approach, he nevertheless observes that, unlike the term ‘perhaps’, ‘may’ carries a sense of *potentiality* and *power* which threatens to introduce violence in an otherwise ethical approach to the particularity of the particular (2018).

despite his insistence on the ‘sécheresse quasiment athée de ce messianique’ (1993b: 267). Derrida’s approach to messianicity is modelled on a passage from Blanchot’s *L’Écriture du désastre* which tells the story of the Messiah who, while among beggars, is recognised and asked ‘when will you come?’. As Blanchot explains, this question indicates that ‘[l]e fait d’être là n’est donc pas la venue’ (1980: 214). For Blanchot and Derrida, indeed, what matters most about messianicity is the *coming*, the promise of presence, rather than its effectuation in a determinate messianism. I will examine what this implies for Derrida’s relationship with negative theology in the coming sections. For now, keeping with chronology, I argue that Derrida’s quasi-ontology proposes a way out of the dialectics of a/theism *as early as the 1960s*. According to de Vries, this way out consists of a farewell gesture addressed to the divine: in Derrida’s ethics, ‘an *address* and a certain *suspension*—an *à Dieu* and an *adieu*, a going toward God and a leave taking—coincide in an enigmatic way’ (1995: 217). The ethical relation that Derrida outlines requires one to be responsible in the face of the im-possible God (*à-Dieu*); a responsibility that can never be absolute (*adieu*). The ethical relationship is caught in the middle of an endless confrontation between an ‘*à-Dieu*’ and an ‘*adieu*’. It lies in the ordeal of undecidability, which guarantees one’s ethical openness to (the eternal return of examples of) otherness. De Vries, however, points out that Derrida does not take into account a third possible interpretation of *adieu* as *a-Dieu*, which implies ‘say[ing] farewell to the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God of ontotheology’ (1995: 218). For de Vries, this can be explained by the fact that Derrida takes great care not to fall back into a dialectical logic. *Contra* de Vries, however, I suggest that Derrida does propose an *a-Dieu*, provided that this ‘a-’ does not refer to the privative ‘a-’ of *a-theism*, which might better be described as *anti-theism*, but rather corresponds to the *suspensive* ‘a-’ of Bataille’s *a-theology*. Much like Bataille, indeed, Derrida reworks the death of God into

an ethical suspension of the God of ontotheology which, to use Derrida's terms, 'semble déborder l'alternative d'un théisme ou d'un athéisme qui s'opposeraient autour de ce qu'on appelle parfois ingénument l'existence de Dieu' (1987: 540-541).

(2.4) How to Avoid Speaking?

'Is that the end of theology, then?', Shakespeare asks, voicing a concern shared by many in theology faculties across the world (2009: 45). As Shakespeare rightly suspects, if Derrida's thinking leaves space for the theological, 'it is theology of a very unsettling kind' (2009: 41). In what follows, I dive deeper into the debates surrounding Derrida's relationship with theology in order to evaluate the extent to which his suspensive approach to the divine can be associated with apophaticism. My aim in so doing is not to give an account of the various theological responses to Derrida's thinking (for such an account, refer to Altizer and others 1982 and Shakespeare 2009: 175-208). Rather, I aim to shed light on the threat of theological contamination to which Derrida's thinking appears to be exposed, a threat which, Derrida cryptically argues, 'heureusement *et* malheureusement, est aussi une chance' (1987: 537).

'On m'a très tôt accusé, plutôt que félicité, de ressasser [...] les procédures de la théologie négative', Derrida remarks at the opening of his 1986 lecture 'Comment ne pas parler : Dénégations' (1987: 536-537). If Derrida had been aware of these accusations for more than twenty years at the time, it is in this lecture that Derrida first addresses the question of his relationship with apophaticism, as if giving in to the pressing international demand for clarification on the matter. How could he have *avoided speaking* any longer, indeed? Derrida starts by acknowledging the undeniable resonance between deconstruction and the syntax of negative theology:

A supposer [...] que la théologie négative consiste à considérer que [...] seule une attribution négative ('apophatique') peut prétendre approcher Dieu, [...] on reconnaîtra quelques traits, l'air de famille de la théologie négative, dans tout discours qui semble recourir de façon insistante et régulière à cette rhétorique de la détermination négative (1987: 536).

By approaching the divine as *neither* fully present *nor* absent as part of a thinking that can be described *neither* as theistic *nor* as atheistic, Derrida adopts a negative syntax reminiscent of apophaticism. For Derrida, however, this resemblance ends with what he describes as the 'surenchère ontologique de l'hyper-essentialité' (1987: 541). Whereas Derrida deploys a negative syntax so as to shed light on the im-possibility of presence and essentiality, negative theologians including Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart strip God of predicates in an attempt to conceive of Him according to a superior mode of being beyond being. Hence Derrida's assertion that 'la différence n'est pas théologique, pas même de l'ordre le plus négatif de la théologie négative' (1972b: 6). Associating *différance* with negative theology would thus not only result from a misreading but also come down to a *postsecular*—given how suited the syntax of negative theology is to making space for the divine in a world dominated by God's death—recuperation of Derrida's thinking. Such would be the case of the identification in Derrida's thinking, by scholars such as Susan Handelman and Eve Tavor Bannet, of 'a deconstructed God, the Jewish God become pure *Ein Sof* and pared down to the mystery of his infinite Otherness' (Bannet 1989: 184). One could also refer to the *Christian* approach to *différance* by scholars such as Carl Raschke, Don Cupitt, Thomas Altizer, and Mark C. Taylor, for whom deconstruction 'is in the final analysis *the death of God put into writing*' (Raschke in Altizer and others 1982: 3; Taylor M. 1984; Madden & Towsey 2002: 407).

I contend, however, that the continuing preponderance of—and intellectual currency afforded to—these interpretations should prompt us to be more cautious in the

analysis of Derrida's relationship with apophaticism. Derrida himself nuanced his position admitting that '[p]eut-être y a-t-il [in apophaticism], cachée, remuante, diverse, hétérogène en elle-même, une multiplicité de possibles auxquels, trop massive et trop floue, l'unique expression de "théologie négative" resterait encore inadéquate' (1987: 545), a multiplicity of potentials to which *différance* can be more readily associated. In particular, Derrida identifies in apophaticism a taste for the secret similar to his own, that is to say, an interest in the secret *beyond knowledge* (see Derrida & Ferraris 2018). For Derrida, the secret is not 'une réserve de savoir potentiel' (1993a: 62), but the experience of what can never be *determined*. Much as the promise remains unfulfillable, the secret touches on what exceeds revelation. In his 1986 lecture, Derrida notes that, in apophatic writings too, 'il n'est pas fait mystère, si on peut dire, de la nécessité du secret—à taire, à garder, à partager. Il faut se tenir à l'écart, trouver le *lieu* propre à l'expérience du secret' (1987: 552). He supports this observation with an analysis of three stages of negative theology: the Greek, the Christian and the Heideggerian.⁴⁰

Turning to Plato, first, Derrida remarks that the hyperessentialisation operated in the *Timaeus*, by locating the Good beyond being and knowledge, is contradicted by 'une autre manière de traiter l'au-delà (*epekeina*) de la limite, le troisième genre et le lieu. Celui-ci se nomme ici *khôra*' (1987: 566). At the end of the previous chapter, we saw that this term acquires crucial importance in Derrida's later approach to religion. It is in Plato's *Timaeus* that Derrida first encounters the term, depicted as a place beyond being and knowledge, *the place of the secret*, 'non le désert de la révélation, mais un désert dans le désert' (2001a: 29). This desert, Derrida stresses, proposes 'ni un dernier mot ni la médiation au service d'une dialectique, une élévation vers un sens positif ou propre, un

⁴⁰ These stages have been referred to as pre-Christian, Christian and post-Christian (Bulhof 2000: 208). One may wonder whether Jewish and Muslim apophaticisms, which Derrida rarely mentions, follow the same pattern (see Norton 2015).

Bien ou un Dieu' (1987: 570). Rather, it is a receptacle which functions as an originary 'default' of origin similar to *différance* (1987: 566-567). *Khôra* thus resists theological determination and stretches theology almost beyond recognition. As Caputo stresses, what Derrida identifies in Plato, then, is 'another voice of negative theology, outside its hyperousiological voice' (1997: 27).

Derrida also identifies such a non-hyperousiological voice in the Christian stage of negative theology, Pseudo-Dionysus's approach to prayer and Augustine's gesture of confession both testifying to an ascetic withdrawal from determination. In 'Comment ne pas parler', Derrida highlights that Pseudo-Dionysus conceives of prayer as a gesture of 'ascèse discursive, le passage par le désert du discours, l'apparente vacuité référentielle' (1987: 572). Prayer is said to function as an *epochè* of sense and certainty, including regarding the prayer's addressee, opening a space of faith beyond determination. It thus consists of an address to what remains 'tout autre', to God, *for example*, rather than to the exemplary God. In *Sauf le nom*, Derrida remarks that Augustine's confession thus 'n'appartient pas essentiellement à l'ordre de la détermination cognitive', as one could have first thought (1993a: 23). Rather, it functions as an *open address* that aims to "exciter" l'amour' (1993a: 23).⁴¹ As Caputo stresses, however, Derrida observes that 'prayer contains another element, of encomium or praise, which not only speaks *to* God, but *of* God, so that prayer preserves a relationship with a predicative content' (1997: 39). As for Augustinian confessions, they inevitably also function as a testimony 'à destination des frères, de ceux qui sont appelés à se reconnaître comme les fils de Dieu' (Derrida

⁴¹ These Christian modes of address to the wholly other recall deconstruction itself, which, as Kevin Hart remarks, 'has a partial heritage in Luther's word *destructio* in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) which is formed as a response to Paul's words "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise"' (2004: 56). The non-hyperousiological voice of prayer and confession testifies to the self-deconstructive character of Christianity; a character to which I turn more explicitly in chapter 3. It also explains why negative theologians have sometimes been judged heretical by the Church: the non-hyperousiological voice of negative theology stretches the limits of theology and 'tient aussi à se rendre indépendant de la révélation' (Derrida 1993a: 85-86).

1993a: 25). Much as Marion identifies the giver with the Christian God, Pseudo-Dionysus and Augustine end up *determining* the addressee. They thereby betray the secret which they sought to preserve, by re-inscribing it in the order of (Christian) revelation.

Derrida makes a similarly contrasted reading of Heidegger's assertion that, should he write a theology, he would avoid using the term 'being', his theology remaining *without theology*. As Derrida explains, '[la théologie] concerne l'étant suprême, l'étant par excellence, fondement unique ou *causa sui* en sa divinité. [La théologie, quant à elle,] est une science de la foi ou de la parole divine, telle qu'elle se manifeste dans la révélation' (1987: 586). In line with his desire to think being as *es gibt*, Heidegger argues that faith can be thought without recourse to a Higher Being or even being-as-such, which requires rethinking the conditions of possibility of revelation. Hence his distinction between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*. I have already noted that, in *Foi et savoir*, Derrida warns about the postsecular threat associated with Heidegger's privileging of the latter (2001a: 26). Heidegger identifies *Offenbarkeit* as the unique origin of the possibility of revelation, which it guarantees. According to Derrida, then, Heidegger proposes 'une théologie avec et sans Dieu' (1987: 592), without the God of *Offenbarung*, but with the prime mover that is *Offenbarkeit*, whom Heidegger refers to as 'the last god' (1999: 289). Derrida thus reaches the same conclusion as in 'Violence et métaphysique': Heidegger anchors his thinking to the metaphysics of presence; he limits *es gibt* to a *horizon of expectation*. 'Il a fait ce dont il a dit qu'il faudrait éviter de le faire' (Derrida 1987: 592).

In the three considered stages of negative theology, then, Derrida identifies a double transmission, 'd'une part indicible, secret, interdit, réservé, inaccessible (*aporreton*) ou mystique (*mystiken*), [...] d'autre part philosophique, démonstratif (*apodeiktiken*)' (1987: 556-557). If Derrida condemns the latter hyperousiological voice, he does recognise his kinship with the former. The proximity between Derrida's thinking and apophaticism,

however, goes beyond their shared commitment to keeping the secret. ‘*Comment ne pas divulguer un secret ?*’, Derrida asks (1987: 557), visibly perplexed about the possibility of keeping the prayer’s addressee safe from determination, or theological colonisation, as Watkin would say (2011: 12), *including in his own thinking*. As Caputo notes,

That brings us back to the subtitle of the lecture, ‘*dénégations*’, which is misleadingly translated as ‘denials’. [Echoing the im-possible gift,] [a] secret is a negation (a nondisclosure) that is itself de-negated—i.e. unnegated or divulged—as soon as it is constituted as a secret (1997: 33).

How, in these conditions, could one *avoid speaking*—in the sense of confessing—indeed? Derrida’s approach to prayer is no exception. In 2002, Derrida confessed to Sherwood, Hart and Caputo that, in contradiction with his assertion that ‘to the extent that I pray, if I pray [...] [,] [i]t is absolutely secret’ (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 30), his prayers are ‘a mixture of something that is absolutely singular and secret—idiomatic, untranslatable—and, on the other hand, a ritual [...] that uses a common, intelligible language’ (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 30). Derrida’s prayers combine two modes of transmission, which simultaneously bracket *and* determine the prayer’s addressee. One corresponds to ‘the experience of a nonbeliever, [...] someone who asks, “To whom am I praying? Whom am I addressing? Who is God?”’ (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 30), while the other identifies the addressee with Judeo-Christian images of God ‘as a Father—a severe, just Father with a beard—and also, at the same time, images of a Mother [...] who is ready to forgive me’ (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 30). Derrida’s prayer thus shares the twofold suspensive *and* *determining* value of Pseudo-Dionysus’s, as well as of negative theology more generally.

One may also wonder whether the suspensive value of Derrida’s *a(-)dieu* is not compromised by a risk of determination associated with the naming of God. On several occasions, Derrida has shown interest in a possible association of the name of God with

both the ontological God *and* His (divine) suspension. In his 1965 essay ‘La Parole soufflée’, for instance, he remarks that Artaud had perceived the *différential* character of language, as testified by the latter’s assertion that ‘Un quelque chose de furtif [...] m’enlève les mots *que j’ai trouvés*’ (1970: 36). This dispossessing value is given the name of God: ‘Dieu est donc le nom propre de ce qui nous prive de notre propre nature, de notre propre naissance et qui par la suite, à la dérobée, aura toujours parlé avant nous’ (Derrida 1967b: 269-270). The God of ontology, against whom Artaud rebels, is confronted with ‘[l]’Autre, le Voleur, le grand Furtif’ (Derrida 1967b: 268), in much the same way as Apollo and the crucified are confronted with Dionysus in Bataille’s thinking. Like the latter, but also like Derrida’s *différance*, the Furtive God prevents—*always having spoken before us*—the emergence of the subject and identity, that is to say, of God/Homogeneity. A similarly deconstructive figure is found in Derrida’s 1964 essay ‘Edmond Jabès et la question du livre’. According to Derrida, Jabès’s poetry exposes the way in which ‘Dieu déjà se contredit’ (1967b: 107), thereby recalling Bataille’s self-interrupting God (1967b: 103). This God is found twenty-one years later in Derrida’s rewriting of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In this text, Derrida argues that God’s multiplication of tongues and dispersion of humanity affects the name of God itself: ‘la guerre qu[e] [Dieu] déclare, elle a d’abord fait rage au-dedans de son nom: divisé, bifide, ambivalent, polysémique: *Dieu déconstruit. Lui-même*’ (1987: 207). To be sure, Derrida keeps some distance from the biblical text and never makes Artaud’s or Jabès’s words his own. Yet by *naming*—and thereby summoning, given that, for Derrida, ‘to name is to call’ (into presence) (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 38)—the self-deconstructing God on several occasions throughout his works, Derrida threatens to make space in his thinking for a God who kills the ontotheological God *in Him*; the deconstructive layer of Derrida’s prayer echoes

Bataille's prayer to the self-interrupting God, and similarly threatens to divulge the secret, determine the addressee and ground the *khôra* in a theological discourse.

Derrida himself draws a parallel between the self-deconstructing God he touches on throughout his works and Judeo-Christian doctrines. In 'La Parole soufflée', he associates the Furtive God with the Cabbalistic motif of 'souffle' (*ruach*). As for the self-weakening God found in Jabès's poetry, He echoes the Cabbalistic doctrines of *Tzimtzum* and *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, which respectively shed light on divine concealment and on the broken Tablets as symbols for the shattering of the ideal world of purity (1967b: 112; Drob 2009: 56-61). Moreover, as with Bataille, the self-deconstructing God who haunts Derrida's works is aligned with the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*. It even conforms with the Augustinian assertion that *deus est qui deum dat*: for Derrida, in prayer, one ultimately 'demande à Dieu de se donner lui-même plutôt que de donner quoi que ce soit' (1993a: 57). Other Judeo-Christian motifs could be mentioned, including *messianicity*, grace, and the Pauline and Jewish approaches to circumcision. What I believe should be retained from these is that Derrida does not hesitate to discuss concepts and gestures within his works using religious vocabulary, drawing examples from biblical stories and establishing connections with theological doctrines. So much so that Derrida's thinking has been accused of being itself structured like a religion, with its prayers and parables (Caputo & Scanlon 1999: 4; Caputo 1997: 149-150), an accusation which interrogates the possible advent of a *deconstructive theology* or even of a *natural religion of deconstruction*. In *Miracle and Machines*, Naas thus observes that *Foi et savoir*, which was first presented in a conference in Capri, not far from Rome, borrows features from a papal encyclical (2012: 42-44). Hélène Cixous has even referred to Derrida as Saint Jacques (2001; Horner 2013: 102). The theological imprint of Derrida's thinking thus seems to justify, at least to some extent, the kenotic and Cabbalistic interpretations of

Derrida's thinking mentioned earlier, as well as the temptation to read the latter as a *postsecular* re-activation of apophaticism in the modern secular world. It also justifies Hart's suggestion that deconstruction might be a Judeo-Christian *victory*, thereby returning a critique Derrida made about Nancy's approach to the self-deconstruction of Christianity against Derrida himself (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 32; Derrida 2000: 68). Could living between the Greek and the Jew—as 'le dernier des Juifs', as Derrida designates himself (2014)—translate as living as a *Christian*? (Nancy 2003a: 303). Christianity did emerge out of the encounter between Greek philosophy and Judaism (Lamy-Rested 2018); it is the religion of Jesus, who is both the last of the Jews and the central figure of the kenotic incarnation-crucifixion dyad. However tempting this interpretation may be, I contend that it has limitations: despite their proximity, Derrida's thinking diverges from Judeo-Christian apophaticism on the question of what one does when uttering the word God, a question to which I now turn.

(2.5) Auto-Immunity

As I have mentioned above, despite his numerous references to a self-deconstructing God, Derrida never directly associates *différance* with the name of God, a nuance which tends to be overlooked by critics who hope to find God in Derrida's thinking. To be sure, Derrida never explicitly dissociates *différance* from the divine either, limiting himself to replying to suspicions of a conflation between the two, stating that: 'Je n'ai jamais dit ça' (2018), thereby leaving it to his readers to 'discerner—fût-ce en clignant des yeux—un trait divin dans la différence' (Nancy 2005a: 165). One might, at this stage, wonder why Derrida does not clarify his position. Maintaining doubt as to whether *différance* can be given the name of God exposes his thinking to a risk of determination which he himself

associates with radical evil. I believe that Derrida's refusal to settle on this issue, and the ambiguity this generates with regards to the theological value of his thinking, may be accounted for by his uncertainty about whether the word 'God' *refers* to someone in particular, or whether it gestures towards a space *beyond reference*.

This question is central to *Sauf le nom*, in which Derrida remarks that the name of God, unlike any other name, attempts to name the unnameable, for the name designates the Supreme Being in excess of any finite name. The naming of God is thus a profoundly aporetic gesture: it requires one to either abandon the name or compromise the unnameable reality which one sought to name. 'Comme s'il fallait à la fois sauver le nom et tout sauver fors le nom, *sauf le nom*' (Derrida 1993a: 61). Accordingly, Derrida suggests that '[t]he word "God" has an essential link to the possibility of being denied' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 37). The only thing that the word 'God' *names*, indeed, is the impossibility of naming what it is that it attempts to name. Derrida thus describes God's name as *auto-immune*, in reference to the abnormal—suicidal—behaviour of an immune system turning against itself. As Derrida explains, 'Nous sommes là dans un espace où toute auto-protection de l'indemne [understand, God as *proper* referent] [...] se protég[e] contre sa propre protection, sa propre police, son propre pouvoir de rejet, son propre tout court, c'est-à-dire contre sa propre immunité' (2001a: 67). Nancy remarks, however, that if the name of God is not a *proper* name, it nevertheless *signals* 'l'ouverture du nom à sa propre non-signifiante' (2005a: 174). The name of God gestures towards the *différance* that, to re-write Artaud's point, quoted earlier, about the 'furtif', *m'enlève les noms que j'ai trouvés* (1970: 36). Such an interruption of the *proper* is illustrated in the opening page of *Sauf le nom*, which stages the dialogue between *indeterminate* voices. The text starts with a hiatus, which reinforces the feeling of indeterminacy. Moreover, the voices stress that speaking requires a plurality of voices, 'exemplairement quand il s'agit de

Dieu' (1993a: 15). According to Derrida, indeed, 'il n'y a pas de *simplicité* de Dieu' (1967b: 103). The name of God *is* confusion, like the term 'Babel' which, Derrida notes, 'en tant que nom propre, devrait rester intraduisible mais, par une sorte de confusion associative [...], on put croire le traduire [...] par un nom commun signifiant ce que nous traduisons par confusion' (1987: 204). Similarly, as the opening of the name to its non-signification, 'le nom propre de Dieu se divise assez dans la langue, déjà, pour signifier aussi, confusément, "confusion"' (1987: 207).

Unlike negative theologians, however, Derrida also admits that naming God *always* comes with a risk of determination: although the name 'God' 'n'est rien, en tout cas, [...] pas la "chose" qu'il nomme, [il] risque aussi d'enchaîner, d'asservir ou d'engager l'autre, de lier l'appelé' (1993a: 112). According to Derrida, we are condemned not to know what one is doing when speaking about God: one might simply be *mentioning* a word, thereby referring to nothing but the word 'God' itself and its auto-immune (non-)signification, but one might also be *using* this word in allusion to a proper referent. I contend that it is here, precisely, that the irresolvable difference between Derrida's thinking and negative theology lies. Unlike Derrida, negative theologians do not acknowledge that naming God comes with a risk of determination. Rather, they approach God as a pure, self-enclosed secret, which can never be determined positively, but thereby end up *determining* God, negatively. Negative theologians, in other words, fall in the same dialectical trap as that in which Derrida locates Levinas's hyperessentialising approach to the Wholly Other/God in 'Violence et métaphysique'. Determination is *realised* in apophaticism, albeit negatively, which is why it qualifies as theology, whereas it remains as a *risk* in Derrida's thinking. Running the risk of determination does allow Derrida to make space for an auto-immune secret, one that always threaten to denegate itself. As Shakespeare elucidates, 'As soon as it is formulated as a secret, it has already begun to manifest itself; but as soon

as it manifests itself, it is dissembled once more, because there is nothing to tell' (2009: 103). Derrida thereby makes room for an *inextinguishable* secret that recalls the 'inachèvement' of Bataille's inner experience. We now understand why the *risk* of determination—like the *possibility* of radical evil—is, for Derrida, 'aussi une chance' (1987: 537), in the twofold sense of the term. The *beneficial* value of this risk lies in the fact that it prevents purity, throwing whoever agrees to run it into the play of *chance*. It thereby prevents Derrida's thinking from closing onto itself so as to qualify as a theology, or even as a natural religion based on a deconstructive gesture. Derrida maintains the aporia of God's name in such a way that no resolution—no *proper* referent—can ever be found down the line, whether positively or by negation. I agree with Horner, then: '*Il n'y a pas de Saint Jacques*' (2013: 96). Crucially, echoing Bataille's strategic cultivation of an undertone of homogeneity, what could have appeared as a misstep in Derrida's deconstructive approach reveals itself as necessary to his suspensive endeavour. When it comes to the name of God, undecidability does partake in Derrida's *a(-)dieu* to the divine. It conditions the messianic *promise* of God found in the event of every *other*, and by extension, '*l'ouverture à l'avenir ou à la venue de l'autre [...] sans horizon d'attente et sans préfiguration prophétique*' (2001a: 30).

In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida stresses that such an openness is a "*structure générale de l'expérience*" [...] [qui] *n'appartient en propre à aucune religion*' (2001a: 31). It is found in ethical gestures of trust and fidelity, such as demonstrations of hospitality, friendship and a commitment to democracy and justice. Yet Derrida also recognises that this openness has traditionally been associated with religious faith; hence his use of the term 'messianicity' (2001a: 52). A—surprising—implication of Derrida's deconstruction, then, is that faith is shown to depend on undecidability with regard to God as proper referent, an approach which goes against the mainstream understanding of belief as

certainty without proof: ‘However paradoxical it may sound, [...] It is in the *epochè*, in the suspension of belief, the suspension of the position of God as a thesis, that faith appears’ (Derrida in Sherwood & Hart 2005: 46-47).⁴² Derrida explains this paradox by referring to the call (to presence) implied in the act of naming God: ‘Some nonbelievers say, “Well, you are just calling. That’s just mentioning a name.” Others would say, “The fact that I call is already not a proof but a sign that God is the one who makes me call to God”’ (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 38). But the latter answer cannot go without the former, for to call implies not to be sure that someone will respond. We only call someone if he or she is not fully present. The ascetic reticence that Derrida demonstrates when it comes to naming God, which reflects the undecidability he calls for in the face of alterity, appears to condition faith. Hence Caputo’s assertion that ‘[d]econstruction thus turns out to be not the final nail in the coffin of the old God, but rather the affirmation of the religious’ (Caputo & Scanlon 1999: 4). In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida argues that the ‘religious’ itself should be seen as auto-immune for it emerges out of the confrontation of two sources: ‘1) l’expérience de la *croyance*, d’une part (le croire ou le crédit, le fiduciaire ou le fiable dans l’acte de foi, la fidélité, [...]), et 2) l’expérience de l’indemne, de la *sacralité* ou de la *sainteté* d’autre part’ (2001a: 52). These sources mutually imply and exclude each other: as we have just seen, faith in God is conditioned by the sacrifice of divine unscathedness (2001a: 80). Adding to Caputo’s comment, then, it appears that deconstruction unfolds as an affirmation of the religious *insofar* as it puts a nail in God’s coffin. Derrida here meets Bataille again: for the former, too, ‘*La religion est la mise en question de toutes choses*’ (Bataille *OCV*: 321), including of itself. For de Vries, this explains the—quantum-like, as we will see—‘paradox that the subject of religion

⁴² The episodes of spiritual dryness welcomed by mystical traditions as a crucial stage in the believer’s relationship with God, including the ‘*nuit obscure de l’âme*’ described by John of the Cross and Therese of the Child Jesus, support Derrida’s point.

evaporates as it is approached from ever more methodological angles' (1999: 3), a paradox which I have evoked in the introduction. What is *proper* to religion, indeed, comes down to a resistance to the *proper*.

Derrida remarks that such an auto-immunity is visible in the form of 'ruptures' at the heart of every religion he considers throughout his works, whether the latter admits a transcendent divine or not. According to Derrida, Abrahamic religions, animist traditions as well as ecological and vegetarian 'spiritual' commitments all display an aporetic combination of experiences of the fiduciary and the unscathed (2016: 71; 2001a: 78; 86-87). Looking at Abrahamic religions, for example, Derrida notes that their respect for life—le "Tu ne tueras point" (du moins ton prochain, sinon le vivant en général), l'interdit "intégriste" sur l'avortement, l'insémination artificielle, l'intervention performative dans le potentiel génétique' (2001a: 77)—is contradicted by a sacrificial vocation—'sans même parler des guerres de religion, de leur terrorisme [...] [c]e fut naguère [...] le **sacrifice** humain, y compris dans les "grands monothéismes". C'est toujours le sacrifice du vivant, [...] à l'échelle de l'élevage et de l'abattage de masse' (2001a: 77-78). Such an aporia recalls that of God's name: much as the unnameable divine exceeds the finite name of God, that is to say, God Himself as proper referent, 'la vie ne vaut absolument qu'à valoir plus que la vie, plus qu'elle-même, en somme, voilà ce qui ouvre [...] les dimensions de la supplémentarité auto-immunitaire et autosacrificielle' (Derrida 2001a: 79). This refers us back to Derrida's assessment, in 'Violence et métaphysique', that 'avec ou sans Dieu il n'y aurait pas la guerre' (1967b: 158). Like ethics, religion compromises what it makes possible. This sheds new light on Derrida's references to Judeo-Christian motifs. Abrahamic religions—among others—display inner ruptures which act as *différentials* in an otherwise stable dogmatic structure. These ruptures, which notably manifest as the doctrine of *kenosis*, the Cabbalistic *Ein Sof* and apophatic traditions,

cultivate, *from within*, a gesture of self-deconstruction. Hence Derrida's appreciation of these doctrinal elements. He also remarks that the contemporary televisualisation of religion repeats this self-deconstructive gesture, for it furthers the *kenotic* 'spectralisation du corps mort du Christ' through the remote diffusion of the religious message (2016: 22). If an emphasis is put on Christianity, due to its historical affiliation with deconstruction and active recourse to the media (Derrida 2016: 14-16), Derrida warns that this 'doesn't mean that Christianity is more deconstructive than other religions. I can imagine Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim theologians saying to me, "Deconstruction—we've known that for centuries!" People have come to me from far Eastern cultures telling me just that' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 33).

It should be noted that Derrida's approach on the matter is not always consistent, however, torn as it is between the postsecular temptation of Christian *exemplarity* when it comes to self-deconstruction and the deconstructive necessity to approach Christianity as an *example* of auto-immunity. Indeed, despite his intention to promote the latter approach, as demonstrated by the quotation mentioned above, Derrida never renounces the logic of exemplarity, regularly stating that 'Christianity is the most plastic, the most open, religion, the most prepared, the best prepared, to face unpredictable transformations' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 33; Derrida 2016: 38-39; 65). He sometimes demonstrates reluctance to even use the term 'religion' to refer to other traditions than Christianity: 'Je ne sais pas s'il y a un mot pour "religion" en arabe, mais ce n'est certainement pas une traduction adéquate de "religion". Le judaïsme, est-ce une "religion" ? Le bouddhisme n'est certainement pas une religion' (2016: 49). One might thus, again, be tempted to associate Derrida's thinking with a postsecular re-activation of the Christian *via negativa*. According to many theologians, including Altizer (Altizer and others 1982: 155-156), deconstruction does offer the promise of a new beginning for

Christianity in the modern secular world insofar as, by shedding light on the latter's auto-immunity, it 'désigne le désenchantement comme la *ressource même du religieux*' (2001a: 99). As Derrida himself admitted in a 2002 conference in Toronto: 'I have the secret hope that [the self-deconstructive gesture found in Christianity] affects this tradition' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 32). Don Cupitt went so far as to argue that a 'deconstruction of all false, nostalgic, otherworldly and metaphysical styles in theology is now needed in order to purify religion' (1985: xii). Given that, for Derrida, religion requires a suspension of unscathedness, such a purification might even be said to proceed through the development of a theology without theology, à la Heidegger. It should now be clear, however, that Derrida's messianicity is not independent from or prior to determinate revelations, as is Heidegger's *Offenbarkeit*. The risk of determination to which Derridean messianicity is exposed implies leaving the question of the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit* hanging, for one can never know whether calling the name 'God' implies that God exists as a proper referent or not. One can never rule out the possibility that a determinate revelation first opened the general structure of faith. For Derrida, then, '[i]t is th[e] limit of the pertinence of the distinction between mention and use which makes religion possible' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 37); both *religion* and *religions*, neither of which can ever exhaust the possibility of the other.

This might even explain Derrida's repeated self-contradiction on the question of whether Christianity should be seen as exemplary or as an example of auto-immunity: like Bataille, Derrida 'accrédit[e] deux postulats contradictoires' (2014: 123), *without admissible outcome*. Derrida's undecidability when it comes to the name of God—which translates as undecidability with regards to the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit*—guarantees that a gap remains 'entre l'ouverture de la *possibilité (comme structure universelle)* et la *nécessité déterminée* de telle ou telle religion' (2001a: 88). This gap is

the *khôra*, a space of resistance between the Greek and the Jew, ‘entre une sacralité [*Offenbarkeit*] sans croyance [*Offenbarung*] (indice de cette algèbre : “Heidegger”) et une foi dans une sainteté [*Offenbarung*] sans sacralité [*Offenbarkeit*], en vérité désacralisante, faisant même d’un certain désenchantement la condition de l’authentique sainteté (indice : “Levinas” [...])’ (2001a: 98). The ‘without’ in ‘messianicity *without* messianism’, then, is neither privative nor hyperessentialising—as is Augustine’s approach to God as ‘measure without measure’. Rather, it builds on the non-dialectical ‘without’—or step not beyond [*pas au-delà*]—of Blanchot’s ‘rapport sans rapport’ (1969: 66), ‘mort sans mort’ (1981: 56), and ‘être sans être’ (1999: 290; Derrida 1986: 90-91), which suspends the terms of the negation by putting them in a relation of *mutual implication*, thereby guaranteeing that Derrida’s thinking never closes onto itself so as to propose a *theology* of disenchantment, unlike postsecular and negative theologies, including Heidegger’s.

Most importantly for the purpose of my thesis, I contend that respecting the *khôra* allows Derrida to propose a definition of religion which, unlike traditional and postsecular ones, does not depend on transcendence. According to Derrida, ‘La religion, c’est **la réponse**’ (2001a: 44). It is the response to the ethical call, the act of making oneself available for an ethical encounter with alterity, like Mary answering ‘yes’ to the angel. Derrida identifies such an act of faith in otherness to-come in every religion he considers, whether revealed or not, with or without a transcendent divine, even if he never renounces the possibility that Christianity might be exemplary on the matter. He also warns that one ‘doit, s’exposant aussi abstraitement, s’attendre (*attendre sans s’attendre*) au meilleur comme au pire, l’un n’allant jamais sans la possibilité ouverte de l’autre’ (2001a: 30). The response must, therefore, remain scrupulous, a weak ground on which no tyranny can ever establish itself. As with ethics, indeed, ‘La possibilité du **mal radical** détruit et institue à la fois le religieux’ (2001a: 99). Derrida’s scrupulous definition of religion thus

not only centres on a general structure of faith which requires one's ethical opening to the *wholly other in every other*, and by extension, the eternally re-instated impossibility of the transcendence associated with pure presence, identity and completion, but also sidesteps the postsecular and ethnocentric re-introduction of transcendence that usually comes with attempts at defining religion in the singular. Unlike the theologies of disenchantment with which deconstruction has been compared, the religious in Derrida's thinking can never close onto itself in the form of a reality independent from constituted religions, for it can never claim priority over the latter. Derrida thus liberates the philosophy of religion from the hitherto axiomatic notion of transcendence and offers a way out of the definitional impasse evoked in the introduction: one can still speak of religion in the singular without compromising its contemporary diversity as an eternally repeated gesture of self-deconstruction, as *auto-immunity*. Crucially, Derrida does so by demonstrating 'a genuine respect or reticence before such a subject, a fear and trembling before it, says Derrida, citing Philippians 2:12 but also already evoking Kierkegaard' (Naas 2012: 48). Such an ascetic undecidability, Derrida notes, is already *faith-ful* insofar as '*la halte du scrupule (religio)*' denotes a commitment to auto-immunity *as* religion (2001a: 29). If Derrida may indeed be called Saint Jacques, then it is on the condition that his sainthood is understood as an exemplary(?) commitment to the general structure of religiosity that is auto-immunity. For Nancy, Derrida's take on this issue may have been the following: 'Je veux bien consentir à l'auréole, mais cette sainteté ne sera pas visible ni nommable, croyez-moi ! Elle ne permettra aucune hagiographie' (2007: 47). An assertion to which any *faithful* reader of Derrida will reply: 'Mais croyez-vous qu'il en aille autrement de la sainteté véritable ?' (Nancy 2007: 47).

I thus argue that, if Derrida may be described as Saint Jacques, it is on the condition that his holiness is understood as that of a *faithful deicide*, in the threefold sense of the

term. (i) He is faithful in attempting to have done with God in a way that is neither imitative of theism nor dialectically preservative of God's shadow. In Derrida's thinking, God's transcendence is *suspended*. (ii) In doing so, Derrida does *not* erase all traces of the divine. Disproving Watkin, his suspension of God retains some sense of the religious, which is not limited to transcendence. God remains as the effect of the trace; transcendence therefore only manifests as a promise. Crucially, such a suspensive logic corresponds to the general structure of religiosity, which itself depends on undecidability when it comes to the name of God, that is to say, on the *epochè* of divine transcendence. Countering the contemporary post(-)secular re-centring on transcendence, Derrida identifies the religious in the eternally re-enacted im-possibility of transcendence. As Shakespeare stresses, '[i]f God is an "example" of difference, then we are invited to think the sacred as dispersed from any centre or controlling point of reference. This is not the same as the abolition of the sacred' (2009: 94). (iii) One might, therefore, describe Derrida as a *faithful* disciple of Nietzsche, if one considers, as does Derrida, that deconstruction stems from a desire to 'être fidèle aux thèmes et aux audaces d'une pensée' (1967b: 125), to approach the questions that the author raises *without knowing it himself or herself*. I argue that, like Bataille's *dei interruptio*, Derrida's approach to God proves faithful to the word of Nietzsche 'God is dead'. For Derrida, too, at bottom, it is only the God of ontotheology that has been, not overcome, but suspended or—non-dialectically—sacrificed in the face of the particularity of the particular.

(2.6) The Last of the Jews

That Derrida may be described as a faithful deicide does not mean, however, that his thinking should be considered as having no theological *potential*. It simply means, I

argue, that Derrida's thinking leaves the door open, and even acts as a resource, for reformist theologians to revitalise transcendent religions in the modern disenchanted world, *without itself proposing a postsecular theology*. This is evident from Derrida's response to Hart's question regarding the new possible directions of Christian theology today: 'Obviously, if there is an answer to this question, it must be yours! As you say, "thinking God in a Christian manner is my concern, not yours"' (Sherwood & Hart 2005: 47; de Vries 1999: 432-433). Only a minority of scholars did respect Derrida's refusal to engage with religion in a theological manner, including John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Catherine Keller, Bruce Ellis Benson, Ellen Armour and James Smith. Yet I suspect that even these thinkers regularly fall for the temptation to draw Derrida back to the theological side of the Rubicon (see Shakespeare 2009: 175-204).⁴³ Hart may have gone the farthest in acknowledging Derrida's ascetic withdrawal from theological debates by suggesting that Derrida's thinking provokes theologians to wonder 'if [they] could develop messianicity *with* messianism [...], [thereby] tak[ing] a path that Derrida indicated but did not follow himself' (2004: 62). What Derrida also indicated, however, is that no theology is safe from criticism. Given that religion is auto-immune, indeed, 'on pourra toujours critiquer, rejeter, combattre telle ou telle forme de sacralité ou de croyance, voire d'autorité religieuse, au nom de la plus originaire possibilité' (2001a: 88). Without promoting postsecularism, Derrida provides theologians with a resource to think religiously today, while warning them that their reflection will exhaust neither the possibility that there may be a universal structure of religiosity nor the legitimacy of other religious traditions. Derrida's thinking, in other words, acts as a reminder that *determination will never exhaust the secret*. Hence Hart's suggestion that one should

⁴³ I here refer to Falque's *Passer le Rubicon. Philosophie et théologie : Essai sur les frontières* (2013), which examines the way in which contemporary French thinkers increasingly tend to explore the borderlands between philosophy and theology.

approach negative theology as a form of deconstruction, rather than the other way round (1989: 186). Apophaticism does—or, at least, ought to—act as a self-deconstructive gesture at the heart of the tradition to which it is affiliated (1989: 95). Going back to my earlier interrogation as to whether one could find in Derrida, ‘if not a new theology, at least a thinker who provokes us to consider the possibility of doing theology otherwise’ (Shakespeare 2009: 47), the answer now appears to be a conspicuous *yes*. If Derrida neither develops a theology nor inscribes his thinking within a theological framework, his asceticism does provoke theologians to do theology otherwise, in a way that cultivates atheistic doubt regarding God’s existence as referent. As Derrida puts it, ‘Mon athéisme progresse dans les églises, toutes les églises’ (in Derrida & Malabou 1999: 99).

‘Cela ne veut pas seulement dire qu’il faut compter avec la religion’, Derrida stresses in *Foi et savoir*, ‘mais qu’il faut changer les manières de compter les fidèles’ (2001a: 83-84). For Derrida, being faith(-)ful to a religious tradition paradoxically implies sacrificing the self-identity of this tradition to a universal structure of religiosity, which self-identity is, in turn, compromised by the particularity of determinate revelations. As with Bataille, then, being genuinely—if I may use that term—faithful requires one to be *faithfully heretical*, ‘un monstre de fidélité’ (Derrida 1980: 29). Derrida sets his ‘appartenance sans appartenance à la judéité ou au judaïsme’ as an example (2014: 81). He borrows these terms from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi who, in *Freud’s Moses*, argues that ‘Judaism’ refers to a determinate community united around a set of rituals and beliefs, whereas ‘Jewishness’ corresponds to an indeterminable affirmation of hopeful openness to the other to come (1991: 89-90; Derrida 2014: 120-121). Yerushalmi insists that this messianicity, while being strictly Jewish, survives the disenchantment of modern societies. He thereby displaces the object of Jewish exemplarity from Judaism to Jewishness, from revelation to revealability, in much the same way as Kant and Heidegger

with regard to Christianity. In *Mal d'archive*, Derrida notes that such a postsecular displacement sheds light on the auto-immunity of 'being Jewish', for a commitment to Jewishness stretches beyond the limits of Judaism. Derrida admits feeling drawn to this messianic *Jewishness* in excess of *Judaism* (1995b: 117-118), just as he feels drawn to *Offenbarkeit* beyond *Offenbarung*. As Horner notes, 'You did not circumcise your sons, apparently, yet you [...] still kept the white *kippa* in your pocket...' (2013: 98). Derrida, however, remarks that the affirmation of openness that is Jewishness prompts one to challenge the residual determinacy of Jewishness. 'Being Jewish' thus appears as an experience of the im-possibility of exemplarity. Hence Derrida's self-designation as 'le dernier des Juifs' (2014), in the twofold sense of the term. Insofar as he embraces the im-possibility of Jewish exemplarity, Derrida appears as:

le Juif le plus indigne, le dernier à mériter le titre de Juif authentique, et en même temps, à cause de cela, [...] celui qui joue à jouer le rôle du plus juif de tous, le dernier et donc le seul survivant destiné à assumer l'héritage des générations, à sauver la réponse ou la responsabilité devant l'assignation, ou devant l'élection, toujours au risque de se prendre pour un autre (2014: 88).

The question remains whether 'being Jewish' is exemplary of such an im-possibility of exemplarity or merely an example among others. Derrida's asceticism prompts us to leave this question hanging: we will never know whether Judaism (*Offenbarung*) first opened the im-possibility of exemplarity (*Offenbarkeit*) or whether the latter is prior to the former. As Derrida argues, 'l'oscillation et l'indécidabilité continuent, et j'oserai dire, *doivent* continuer de marquer l'obscur et incertaine expérience de l'héritage' (2014: 123). 'Being Jewish' therefore requires one to doubt Jewish exemplarity, to prove somewhat unfaithful to Judaism, as well as to recognise the legitimacy of other religions as another challenge set to exemplarity. Is this not one way of saying that 'being Jewish'

implies being a *wa/ondering* Jew,⁴⁴ ‘le dernier des Juifs que je suis, [...] dans l’espace indécis d’une errance non annulable’ (Cixous 2001: 80)? It is, at least, Derrida’s way of making sense of circumcision as the cut that inaugurates one’s identity as a Jew while opening an incurable wound in this identity. Based on Derrida’s observation that attending to *différance* means ‘rouvrir la plaie de ma circoncision’ (1991a: 212-213), Cixous stresses that ‘[l]a Circoncision l’a perdu. D’où tous ces écarts, ces ec, ces arts, ces rac, tous ces écartements de moi, je m’écarte dit-il, je m’écartèle, je m’écarte d’elle, je m’ec- comme dirait Genet, je me mets en morceaux’ (2001: 68). This recalls Nancy’s discussion of the hyphen in the term ‘judéo-chrétien’: ‘[l]e trait d’union passe sur un vide, qu’il ne comble pas’ (2003a: 305); it links two components while being ‘un trait tiré pour espacer toute union’ (2003a: 321), and, thereby, to respect the gap of the *khôra*. Similarly, circumcision indicates that there is no *proper* Jew but the *improper* Jew, no proper faith but heresy. I contend that Derrida’s undecidability with regard to God’s name, Christian exemplarity, as well as his own identity as an Algerian Jew, partakes of this gesture of circumcision and prompts every one of us, whatever our religion, to being ‘toujours et malgré nous à la fois fidèles et infidèles sans jamais pouvoir juger de la valeur ou de la limite entre fidélité et infidélité’ (Cohen & Zagury-Orly 2003: 260).

In *Sauf le nom*, Derrida remarks that this faithful heresy ‘a quelque affinité [...] avec le *skepsis* du scepticisme’ (1993a: 78). It is such an affinity that provokes me into describing Derrida’s undecidability as a form of *agnosticism*. Unlike both skepticism and mainstream agnosticism, however, Derrida’s is not simply negative. Against Handelman, Dufrenne, Milbank, Habermas and many critics whom I could not mention in the limited space of this chapter, I argue that Derrida’s asceticism is primarily *affirmative*; it affirms *différance* and undecidability before any response, faithful agnosticism before the belief

⁴⁴ I will return to the question of wonder in the conclusive chapter of this thesis.

in God as proper referent. Crucially, I contend that Derrida's *affirmative* agnosticism, much like Bataille's, lays the foundations for an inclusive alternative to secularism. In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida himself suggests that his faithful heresy opens new horizons of *tolerance* (2001a: 35), insofar as it encourages religions to cultivate doubt with regard to their own relation to the general structure of religiosity and, therefore, to remain humble enough to recognise the legitimacy of other religious traditions. Derrida's agnosticism thus counters dogmatism, including how it manifests today, as a post-secular return to religion sometimes coupled with a terror threat, '*une figure exemplaire et inédite du mal, voire du mal radical*' (2001a: 10). As Hart highlights, with Derrida, 'We pass from revealed faith to reflective faith, from theology to philosophy; and in so doing, we keep fanaticism at bay' (2004: 60-61). Derrida adds a caveat, however: the term 'tolerance' '*fut imprimé, émis et mis en circulation au nom de la foi chrétienne et ne saurait être sans rapport avec l'ascendance, chrétienne aussi, de ce que Kant appelle la "foi réfléchissante"*'—*et la moralité pure comme chose chrétienne*' (2001a: 36). Voltaire also suggested that '[d]e toutes les religions, la chrétienne est sans doute celle qui doit inspirer le plus de tolérance' (1835: 270; Derrida 2001a: 37). Derrida's agnosticism queries Christian exemplarity. It therefore points towards '[u]ne autre "tolérance" [qui] s'accorderait à l'expérience du "désert dans le désert"' (2001a: 37); one which would *not* be ascribable to a determinate religion but would rather guarantee the possibility of both a general structure of religiosity and an infinite number and diversity of religions, whether these admit a transcendent divine or not.

This tolerance even stretches beyond what is traditionally described as religious coexistence. Given that Derrida calls 'religion' any aporetic combination of experiences of faith and the unscathed, and by extension, any faithfully heretical approach to identity, I argue that his agnosticism provokes us to re-think our way of *belonging*, not just to a

religious tradition but also to an ethnic group, a nation, a legal or moral system, and any identity group, in terms of a '*une culture universalisable des singularités*' (2001a: 31). The latter has its root in Derrida's experience of being a Jewish boy in French Algeria: 'Dans un pays dont le nombre et la diversité des communautés historiques furent aussi riches que dans Jérusalem, d'ouest en est, cet enfant [...] rêv[ait] d'une pacifique multi-appartenance culturelle, linguistique, nationale même' (2014: 35). Derrida specifies that multi-belonging cannot simply be thought of in terms of a universal *fraternity*, a point on which he opposes Nancy. Like 'tolerance', 'fraternity' has a heavy Christian heritage. In particular, Derrida observes that this term furthers the Christian privileging of male authority, that of the *brother* '(qui est aussi un fils, un mari, un père), le généalogique, le familial, la naissance, l'autochtonie et la nation' (2003b: 87); it thereby functions as yet another mechanism of exclusion of the foreign, the female, the bastard, the *other*. To 'fraternity', then, Derrida prefers 'vivre ensemble', 'deux mots qui vont ensemble sans s'enfermer dans un ensemble' (2014: 19). In order not to come down to a fusion of singularities into a tyrannical whole, indeed, every community, whether traditionally considered religious or not, must betray its own aspiration to homogeneity, to the 'comme-un' (Derrida & Ferraris 2018: 30). A universal culture of singularities supposes 'la rupture avec l'appartenance identitaire, totalisante, assurée d'elle-même dans un ensemble homogène' (Derrida 2014: 36). It supposes, in other words, the cultivation of what Derrida describes as a form of '*auto-co-immunité*' (2001a: 79). To be sure, Derrida remarks that 'vivre ensemble' is always threatened by individuals' tendency to privilege the well-being of kin over that of other individuals. Yet this tendency is deemed acceptable provided that it is accompanied with some degree of undecidability. One must admit that: 'Je ne pourrai jamais ni renoncer et dire non à une préférence pour les "miens", ni, inversement, la justifier, la faire approuver devant la loi d'une justice universelle'

(2014: 58), just as one can never justify one's preference for or condemnation of a given religion in the name of a universal structure of religiosity. Derrida stresses that '[a]vouer cette aporie ne suffit pas, mais, c'est la première condition d'une lucidité responsable et un premier geste pour entamer la meilleure négociation possible' (2014: 60).

It would be a mistake to consider that Derrida's texts function as a ready-made recipe for 'vivre ensemble', putting an end to ideological oppression and communal violence, including those traditionally labelled as religious. Rather, I argue that Derrida's ethics should be seen as one of negotiation, compromise and (non-dialectical) sacrifice. As a matter of fact, these are the essential elements on which democracy is built (2001a: 17-18; 1993a: 108-109). Democracy emerges from a compromise of authority: authority must be established in order to guarantee that the natural preference of individuals for their kin does not override the ethical imperative of 'vivre ensemble'. This necessary authority comes as a form of violence, embodied in the rule of law, the police and other institutions which sacrifice (certain) individual freedoms to the universal. In a democracy, such a sacrifice remains reticent, attentive to and respectful of the particularity of the particular. As Lucy explains, 'democracy calls us to conceive of social relations in terms of responsibility rather than of obligation, which rules out any hope of responding to others by reference to a periodic table of social or moral prescriptions' (2004: 18). This implies that democracy, like ethics, can never be pure (Derrida 1994: 111). Against de Tocqueville's suggestion that the United States are an *ideal* democracy, Derrida argues that democracy remains *to come*, for it involves rules which are sacrificed every time one makes responsible decisions (2003b: 33-35). Much as one cannot but run the risk of determination that comes with the naming of God, then, one can never overcome the possibility of radical evil. What one *can* do, however, is 'prendre en charge, on pourrait dire en gage, la *possibilité* de ce **mal radical**' (2001a: 71), by submitting one's decisions,

sense of belonging and identity to the ordeal of undecidability, in a healthy critical awareness of every instant. Derrida's agnosticism is hard work; an endless effort which 'reste une souffrance' (Derrida 2018). Yet this effort alone might allow us to cultivate an imperfect coexistence which nonetheless promises to be more inclusive than that currently *secured* by secularism. I argue that Derrida's ethics is, thereby, no different than Camus's in *La Peste*: like his fellow Algeria-born writer, he calls us to keep in mind that radical evil remains to come,

que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais, qu'il peut rester pendant des dizaines d'années endormi dans les meubles et le linge, qu'il attend patiemment dans les chambres, les caves, les malles, les mouchoirs et les paperasses, et que, peut-être, le jour viendrait où, pour le malheur et l'enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse (Camus 1947: 279).

(2.7) A Quantum God

At this stage, critics might retort that quietism hinders the potential of Derrida's thinking when it comes to promoting 'vivre ensemble'. To be sure, unlike with Bataille, Derridean undecidability does *not* suffer from a confinement to somewhat elitist activities but extends to any ethical attention to alterity. Derrida's quietism is of a different kind: it is based on his critique of the metaphysics of presence. That is, at least, what Habermas suggests in 'Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins'. Among the many (false) accusations he addresses to Derrida, including that of proposing 'an inversion of Husserlian foundationalism' (1987b: 178), Habermas suggests that Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence leads him to retreat from the ontic and abandon a consideration of present matters in favour of both 'a past that has never been present'

(1987b: 179)—the trace—and a future that will never come to be. A similar critique is developed by Badiou, whose exasperation with Derridean messianicity is well-known:

Comme est irritant le style post-heideggérien de l'annonce perpétuelle, de l'à-venir interminable, cette sorte de prophétisme laïcisé ne cesse de déclarer que nous ne sommes pas encore en état de penser ce qu'il y a à penser [...] ! Comme on a envie de dire : 'Écoutez, si cette pensée est encore tout entière à venir, revenez nous voir quand au moins un morceau en sera venu !' (2004: 15-16).

More precisely, Habermas argues that Derrida's ascetic withdrawal (of being) from presence and the importance he grants to undecidability before responsible decision-making 'degrades politics and contemporary history to the status of the ontic and the foreground, so as to romp all the more freely, and with greater wealth of associations, in the sphere of the ontological' (1987b: 181). As Derrida himself argues, from his thinking, 'on ne peut sans doute *déduire* aucune politique, aucune éthique et aucun droit. Bien sûr, on ne peut rien en *faire*. On n'a rien à en faire' (2003b: 14-15).

Yet Derrida nuances this: 'irait-on jusqu'à en conclure que cette pensée ne laisse aucune trace sur ce qu'il y a à faire' (2003b: 14-15)? *Certainly not*. I disagree with Habermas and Badiou on the basis that, as Leonard Lawlor stresses, 'Derrida's emphasis upon the undecidability inherent in all decision-making does not want to convey inactivity or a quietism of despair, and he has insisted that the madness of the decision also demands urgency and precipitation' (2019). I have even demonstrated that undecidability—as an ethics of critical awareness—*conditions* 'bien vivre ensemble'. It may also seem contradictory to suggest that Derrida retreats from presence and the present considering that the latter's quasi-ontology relies on a thinking of the *event*. That does not mean, however, that Habermas and Badiou are entirely mistaken. I suspect that they do have a point, which Watkin summarises in these terms: given the messianic inflexion of

Derrida's thinking, the latter 'remains ascetically [...] vulnerable to the accusation that justice can no longer determine ethical and/or political decisions' (2011: 8). If Derrida's asceticism should not be seen as a mere philosophical privileging of the ontological over the ontic, we must nevertheless acknowledge that Derrida tends towards isolating himself in an ivory tower, his thinking losing (some of) its connection with—and potential impact upon—individuals' day-to-day issues and life experience. Here lies, I think, a crucial divergence between Bataille's and Derrida's thinking: whereas both thinkers adopt a neither/nor position in relation to identity and its complete alteration, Bataille proposes to interrupt both through *self-contradiction* while Derrida suspends them through *reticence*. To Bataillean strategic oscillation, in other words, Derrida prefers undecidability, a position which suspends or, at least, defers the element of *passage à l'acte* that was present in Bataille's strategic missteps. Derrida is more thoughtful, reserved, but also thereby less spontaneous; an attitude which Bataille would certainly locate on the side of Apollonian rationality. If undecidability undoubtedly fosters decision, then, I suspect that it proves weak when it comes to accounting for—and promoting—*genesis*, the leap into the unknown and *passage à l'acte* that is required in any demonstration of faith and decision-making.

Derrida's reaction to the events of May 1968 is telling in this regard. Whereas, as Patton and Protevi remark, 'May '68 was a turning point in the lives of many who belonged to this post-war generation' (2003: 7), Derrida warned in an interview that:

Je n'ai pas été ce qu'on appelle un 'soixante-huitard'. Bien que j'aie à ce moment-là participé aux défilés ou organisé la première assemblée générale du moment à la rue d'Ulm, j'étais réservé, inquiet même devant une certaine euphorie spontanéiste, fusionniste, antisindicaliste, devant l'enthousiasme de la parole enfin 'libérée', de la 'transparence' restaurée, etc. (1992: 358).

Given that revolutionary outbursts do not always lead to social improvements and can quickly descend into violence, I consider that Derrida's reticence in the face of the events of May 1968 is praiseworthy. Yet such a healthy reticence is not only primarily reactive but also explains nothing about the events themselves, nor can be said to substantially partake in the latter. Derrida's agnosticism, unlike Bataille's performative approach to 'inachèvement', consists in *an ethics of withdrawal*, which is difficult to sustain without a supplementary thinking of genesis and innovation. To be sure, none of this is meant to deny that Derrida did often intervene in terms of political and institutional action. Besides May 1968, one thinks of the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Enseignement en Philosophie, the Collège International de Philosophie, the Parlement International des Écrivains, the creation of 'villes-refuges', the support of Czech dissidents, his interventions around migration and the 'sans-papiers', etc. Rather, I wish to emphasise that Derrida's activism is combined with a reserve about commitment to a positivist politics.

Paul Patton and John Protevi have—rightly, I think—diagnosed Derrida's reticence as 'a sort of anxiety of influence on the part of Derrida, leading to the redoubtable caution and reflexive awareness of his writing' (2003: 6). Whereas Deleuze and other thinkers of Derrida's generation confidently tackle traditional concepts, Derrida admits that:

devant tous ces grands concepts philosophiques de la tradition, [...] j'ai toujours eu le réflexe de fuir, comme si j'allais, au premier contact, à *nommer* seulement ces concepts, me trouver, comme la mouche, les pattes engluées : captif, paralysé, otage, piégé par un programme (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 168).

Derrida develops a strict ascetic discipline in view of protecting *différance* from recuperation within the metaphysics of presence, like the fly hoping to steer clear of a paper roll full of honey. Yet I suspect that he thereby trades one paralysis for another: by refusing to get stuck in honey, he gets stuck in asceticism.

I must, however, acknowledge that a crucial aspect of Derrida's thinking is an exception to this ascetic rule: as I have evoked in section 5, when it comes to designating Christianity as merely an example or as exemplary of auto-immunity, Derrida adopts self-contradiction rather than his usual reticence before the *passage à l'acte*. Like Bataille before him, Derrida simultaneously 'accrédit[e] deux postulats contradictoires' (2014: 123). Could this misstep 'save' Derrida's thinking from quietism by reintroducing spontaneity and a sense of *passage à l'acte*? I fear this is not sufficient. In fact, I argue that self-contradiction here further testifies to the residual reactivism—and perhaps even ethnocentrism—looming over Derrida's thinking. A genuine commitment to the strategic suspension of decision when it comes to the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit* does require one to keep an open mind as to whether other religions than Christianity also match the definition of religion as auto-immunity. However, Derrida gives *very* little detail about how exactly the Eastern religions and New Age 'spiritual' commitments he mentions throughout his work combine experiences of the fiduciary and the unscathed in an aporetic fashion. These are only mentioned in passing in *Foi et savoir* and *Surtout, pas de journalistes*, as if only as a way for the thinker to artificially extend Judeo-Christian-centred conclusions to other religions. To be sure, that Derrida mainly focuses on Christianity, Judaism and, to a lesser extent, Islam among all religious traditions is understandable considering his familial and intellectual background. Moreover, scholars with a deeper knowledge of non-Western religions have now carefully explored and emphasised the resonance between, for instance, deconstruction and a variety of Eastern 'spiritualities' (see Coward 1990, Wang, Youxuan 2001; Wang, Youru 2007; Park 2006). Suspicions of reactivism and ethnocentrism however remain: is Derrida touching on a universal structure of religiosity or are the affinities that one finds between non-Western 'spiritualities' and deconstruction found only '*après coup*'—to echo Bataille's critique of

functionalism (*OCXIII*: 342)—that is to say, artificially, possibly in *reaction* to the fact that religious traditions across the world increasingly model themselves on Christianity as part of a process of *mondialatinisation*?

It is not even certain that the answer to this question matters at all, for the impact of Derrida's thinking upon the way one thinks about religion seems largely hindered by his obscurity. As Shakespeare nuances, stylistic opacity is 'central to his project to call into question the ideas of clarity, certainty, foundation, self-evidence and presence that he believes are at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition and of so much of its political, ethical and religious thought' (2009: 21), much like Bataille before him. Yet it also exposes his thinking to misinterpretation and recuperation. If asceticism does prevent Derrida from being carried away by his own spell, by contrast with the sorcerer's apprentice, ascetic discipline obscures Derrida's point. I thus wonder whether stylistic obscurity does not turn Derrida—and Bataille—into soft targets, their thinking being easily corruptible and recuperable as a result. The fact that, nowadays still, both Bataille and Derrida are often misread as post(-)secular confirms my point. I therefore argue that Derrida should be described as *the last of the ascetics*, in the twofold sense of the term: the strictest of all the ascetics, the one who—paraphrasing Derrida—plays the role of the most ascetic of all, but thereby also sheds light on the limits of asceticism, on the fact that one must betray ascetic discipline to avoid the recuperation that the latter hoped to escape.

A quick detour into science might be helpful, at this stage. Just like Bataille and Derrida, quantum mechanics profoundly challenged the classical approach to the world as precision clockwork immediately accessible to knowledge, and ended up facing similar challenges as a result.⁴⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s, physicists observed that the equations describing how things move at everyday dimensions and speeds cannot account for what

⁴⁵ I am not the first to identify this connection. See, for instance, Froula 1997.

happens on an atomic and sub-atomic scale. For instance, while in classical physics objects exist in a set time and place, Danish physicist Niels Bohr pointed out that a given particle is in *more than one* place or state at a time. This is the principle of superposition which recalls Derrida's concept of the trace, both present and absent simultaneously (on the idea of 'plus d'Un' or 'n+1', see Derrida 2001a: 99; Lawlor 2019; Nancy 2007). Crucially, particles only settle for point A or point B when they are measured. Attempts to gain knowledge of particles alter the quantum state of these particles, which therefore remains in excess of knowledge. This is the thrust of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. For the physicist, precise measurement of two complementary values—such as the position and momentum of a subatomic particle—is impossible: the more precisely one variable is known, the less precisely the other can be known. Nothing can ever be known completely or for sure, in line with Bataillean *inachèvement* and Derrida's *undecidability*. Such an apparent break with traditional logic has been fiercely criticised. As with Bataille and Derrida, however, I find most of these criticisms unsatisfactory, for they largely oppose quantum mechanics based on critics' inability to step beyond the reassuring (ontotheo)logic which has constituted the very frame of their entire worldview. This is how I read Einstein's attempts at developing a unified theory that would leave no room for indeterminism. Despite the impressive experimental success of quantum physics, which he himself contributed to develop, Einstein clung to the conviction that the Universe must be the deterministic system that Newton depicted. According to Einstein, God 'does not play dice', an assertion which prompted Bohr to retort, 'Stop telling God what to do!' Derrida and Bataille would probably agree with Bohr here, adding that God—if *there is any*—might be nothing but the thrown dice itself.

One critic, however, has touched on what is, I think, a common weakness in quantum physics, Bataille's and Derrida's thinking. In a now famous thought experiment,

Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger imagined putting a living cat in a sealed box, along with a flask of poison, a radioactive source and a Geiger counter. This counter is set up so that, as soon as an atom decays, the poison is released from the flask and kills the cat. Common sense tells us that, when once we open the box, the cat will be found *either* dead *or* alive. Yet, according to quantum mechanics, atoms are in a state of superposition before they are measured. So long as the box remains sealed, then, the atom is both already and not yet decayed, the poison is already and not yet released, and the cat is simultaneously dead *and* alive. Schrödinger's cat is no different than Bataille's and Derrida's 'Dieu mort-vivant' (Derrida 2016: 44). In Bataille's sealed box, there is simultaneously God *and* 'RIEN' (*OCVIII*: 300). As for Derrida's God, if there is any, He is absent *and* present, in a similar state of superposition as Schrödinger's cat. Crucially, as with quantum physics, any attempt at gaining knowledge of Bataille or Derrida's God comes down to *artificially* settling on either an idea of revelation or the proclamation of God's death. This explains the 'paradox that the subject of religion evaporates as it is approached from ever more methodological angles' (de Vries 1999: 3). By contrast, both Bataille and Derrida strive to maintain the box sealed—a box which Derrida calls *khôra*—by promoting an agnosticism that remains without messianism and exceeds revelation, yet without exhausting the latter's possibility. Schrödinger, however, conceived of his thought experiment as a way of reminding us of the fundamental gap that exists between quantum physics and the laws governing bigger objects, including cats. Quantum physics is only valid on a micro scale: though its validity has been proven countless times by mathematics, the principles of quantum mechanics can hardly affect the way people think about existence and the world, unlike the Copernican revolution and Newton's works on gravity, for instance. Richard Feynman eloquently phrased this issue: 'I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics' (1995: 129). Can we not say the same thing

about Bataille's and Derrida's work? Though theoretically resilient, their thinking is not easily transferable and hardly intervene in individuals' lives. In classic Derridean fashion, what makes these thinkers' work—and quantum physics—powerful and innovative is also what makes them weak. Hence a suspicion of quietism and dialectical recuperation.

What is to be done, then? If Derrida does solve some of the issues found in Bataille's work, his thinking still appears to be hindered by a number of weaknesses which make it at least just as problematic. One may be tempted to finally get rid of the negative: Derrida and Bataille similarly struggle to maintain a non-dialectical, non-reactive negativity. As we will see in the final chapter, Deleuze doubts that the latter even exists. Before we reach this chapter, though, we should give negation one more chance, by wondering with Watkin 'what sort of ontological claims can be made when deconstruction has (not) happened' (2009: 6). Inaugurating *différance* as an ontological condition might, indeed, help strengthen deconstruction, reinforcing its affirmative value and avoiding both quietism and recuperation as a result. Ontological claims might allow Bataille's and Derrida's thinking to avoid quantum decoherence and more easily intervene into the sphere of the ontic, *on the condition that* they do not circumscribe openness within a horizon of expectation or originary revealability the way Heidegger's approach did. I argue that two French thinkers prompt us to rethink ontology in this way. Now that I have spent the first two chapters considering the possibility of an *ethics* of non-dialectical negation, I move on, in chapters 3 and 4, to interrogate the value of the differential *ontology* proposed by Nancy and Deleuze. Starting with the former, I contend that Nancy's approach to being as 'singular plural' and his analysis of the deconstruction of Christianity respond to the strengths and limits identified in Bataille's and Derrida's thinking, while opening perspectives for thinking the singular plurality of religion today.

Chapter 3 – Jean-Luc Nancy: The Faithful Intruder⁴⁶

In 1991, Jean-Luc Nancy underwent a heart transplant. In *L'Intrus*, published nine years later, he walks his readers through this 'processus complexe tissé d'étrangers et d'étrangetés' (2017a: 21), from the failure of his heart—'mon "propre" organe' (2017a: 15)—to the intrusion into his open body of a heart 'ven[u] d'ailleurs' (2017a: 22). Thirty years after the transplant, Nancy continues to defy any negative prognoses for his survival. Already in 2005, he observed thus: 'je n'ai plus un intrus en moi : je le suis devenu, c'est en intrus que je fréquente un monde où ma présence pourrait bien être trop artificielle ou trop peu légitime' (2017a: 47). Yet with countless articles and more than eighty books published, the intruder has become one of the most active philosophical voices of contemporary France. As James rightly remarks in *The Fragmentary Demand*, such a productivity may seem surprising in light of the extended periods of illness that Nancy has gone through as a result of his transplant (2006b: 5). Although we cannot exactly determine how these ordeals have affected Nancy's work, I argue that they have confirmed, in the most direct and violent of ways, 'une loi générale de l'intrusion' which he had intuited as early as in the 1970s (2017a: 31). For Nancy, '[l]'intrus n'est pas un autre que moi-même et l'homme lui-même [...], intrus dans le monde aussi bien qu'en soi-même' (2017a: 45). It is this ontological law that I study in this chapter. It is my contention, indeed, that Nancy's approach to being as *singular plural*, 'tissé d'étrangers et d'étrangetés' (2017a: 21), unfolds as a rigorous approach to the death of God, one which lays new foundations for a thinking of religion in its *singular plurality* today.

I start by examining Nancy's irruption (intrusion?) into the French intellectual scene. As I explain in four initial sections, although the first few decades of Nancy's

⁴⁶ An early version of material from this chapter has been published in Chabbert 2021.

career testify to a direct lineage between Bataille's, Derrida's and his own thinking, Nancy's *ontological* approach to human finitude comes as 'un trouble dans l'intimité' of the three thinkers (2017a: 12). Crucially for my purpose, Nancy associates this ontological dynamic of intrusion with 'une configuration complète de la mort de dieu' (2017a: 42), one which breaks with the dialectics of a/theism and allows for a thinking of the religious that requires no reference to a transcendent beyond. Like Bataille and Derrida, however, Nancy is exposed to postsecular recuperation: his analysis of the deconstruction of Christianity and identification of a universal structure of religiosity, which he calls 'faith' or 'adoration', threaten to circumscribe difference within a horizon of determination. I argue in sections 5 to 7 that the resilience of Nancy's thinking in the face of this threat provides us with new resources for thinking religious plurality today, as the effective equality of incommensurables.

(3.1) Resurrection Will Not Take Place

'[L]e jour où j'ai découvert en 1964 pour la première fois le texte de Derrida [on Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*] [...], j'ai senti que quelque chose éclatait' (Nancy 2013: 20). Evoking in these terms his first encounter with what would soon be called deconstruction, Nancy highlights his early affinity with Derrida's thinking: 'En lisant [...] je me disais : "Mais bon Dieu, c'est vrai !", il n'y a pas de présence à soi pure et simple, il n'y a pas de pureté de l'être à soi, en soi' (2013: 27). Eager to *graft* himself to this line of thought, Nancy made his debut on the French intellectual scene as an assiduous disciple of Derrida, questioning the foundational argumentation of the big names of the history of metaphysics and tracing the perceived im-possibility of presence back to the (un)workings of language. Nancy's early works all point to this Derridean conclusion,

indeed: ‘la philosophie s’étrangle de littérature impossible—d’une littérature qui est *son propre* impossible’ (2001c: 10).

In *La Remarque spéculative*, Nancy’s first non-collaborative work, for instance, the young philosopher observes that, in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, the term *Aufhebung* ‘ne présente pas son sens [...] dans la pure transparence de sa présence de mot’ (1973: 78), a conceptual instability which signals that the dialectical gesture fails to reach a point of closure. While the totalising vocation of philosophical thinking, as Hegel sees it, dictates that a clear definition be provided for *Aufhebung*, the dynamic of mediation characteristic of dialectics forbids him from pinning down sublation in language by granting it a univocal meaning. As a result, Nancy argues, ‘la relève n’a pas *tout à fait lieu*’ (1973: 29). The foundations of knowledge that Hegel hoped to secure crumble under his feet; as they do under Kant’s. That is what Nancy argues in *Le Discours de la syncope*. Prefiguring the later failure of his heart, Nancy suggests that Kant’s presentation of the foundations of knowledge ultimately *skips a beat*. While the foundational vocation of philosophy, as Kant sees it, dictates that concepts be presented as clearly as possible, Kant admits that this presentation remains inadequate, its dependency on the sensible qualities of language preventing it from attaining mathematical exactitude (see James 2006b: 41). Presentation (*Darstellung*) is *syncopated* by an element of invention (*Dichtung*), which thwarts the possibility of identifying a stable ground for knowledge and experience (Nancy 1976: 94). The same goes for what has come to be considered as ‘[la] *terre ferme*’ of metaphysics (1979: 27), namely, the thinking subject. In *Ego Sum*, Nancy notes that Descartes conceived of his *Discours de la méthode*, ‘comme une fable’ (Descartes 2013: 3; Nancy 1979: 68-69). On Descartes’s own admission, the self-grounding of thought depicted in the *Discours*, which culminates with the phrase ‘je pense donc je suis’, is but a *story* of foundation (James 2006b: 56). Descartes prefigures Freudian psychoanalysis

as he stresses that ‘le sujet se racont[e] lui-même, il advient par son récit’ (Nancy 2010a: 146). For Nancy, this implies that the *cogito* only *feigns* itself as grounded: ‘*nous figurons et nous nous figurons ainsi*’ (1979: 58). The subject finds and unfinds itself in the selfsame gesture. In Derridean terms, the condition of possibility of philosophical thinking understood in terms of *logos*, that is, its development in language (*muthos* or *narratio*), also conditions its impossibility.

This issue is not limited to the work of Descartes, Kant and Hegel. For Nancy, ‘[les “grands” philosophes] ne proposent jamais une “vision du monde” sans faire en même temps le geste de toucher à la limite de toute vision du monde’ (1986: 75). Much as Nancy came to live with ‘un ailleurs “en” [lui]’ as a result of his transplant (2017a: 22), metaphysicians have built their philosophical systems around an unsealable breach, as if hosting an intruder who, placing a foot in the door, maintains an inadequacy of presence and challenges the supposedly grounded edifice of metaphysics. An intruder, as Nancy later elucidates, challenges the demarcation between the inside and the outside as it barges into a system which it henceforth prevents from closing in on itself. Referring to ‘his’ new heart, Nancy thus remarks that the intruder is an inside threat, ‘justement étranger parce qu’il était dedans’ (2017a: 17). Although, in the 1970s, Nancy only had intuitions of this dynamic, I argue that his early works already bear the trace of an interest in intrusion, which testify to his attempt at furthering Derrida’s—and Bataille’s—efforts to shed light on non-recuperable difference at the heart of metaphysics. To quote Lamy-Rested again, for all three thinkers, indeed, ‘[l]e système est percé du dedans’ (2018).

Crucially for my purpose, in Nancy’s thinking, too, this inadequacy of presence is framed in terms of the death of God: the God of the philosophers—the *Logos* with a capital L—fails to fully realise Himself in language; His condition of possibility also conditions His impossibility. From the 1980s, Nancy even traces this inadequacy of *logos*

to *muthos* back to a central anthropological episode of divine death, namely, that of the gods of polytheism. If Nancy is still in line with Derrida, his work here takes on a Bataillean-inspired anthropological inflection, as testified by his interest in the sacred language of myth in *Le Mythe nazi*, ‘La Communauté désœuvrée’, ‘Le Mythe interrompu’ and *Des lieux divins*. In these works, as well as in the later *Un jour les dieux se retirent*, he highlights that the end of polytheism functioned as a retreat of the divine from effective presence in the world, a retreat which rendered truth unnarratable. Once the gods have left, he writes, ‘leur histoire ne peut plus être simplement vraie, ni leur vérité être simplement racontée. Il y manque la présence qui attesterait l’existence de ce qu’on raconte en même temps que la véracité de la parole qui raconte’ (2001c: 8). *Logos* and *muthos* thus emerge as distinct categories, a distinction which initiates the *disenchantment* of the West: before the gods’ flight, the adequacy of *logos* and *muthos* allowed for the existence of magic—whose spells function as the unfolding of truth in language—and myth, which consists in the structuration in language of a cosmos seen as well-ordered, pure and proper, as per the etymology of κόσμος in Ancient Greek, that is to say, as *Logos* (1979: 98). As Nancy writes, ‘Le mythe est l’ouverture d’une bouche immédiatement adéquate à la clôture de l’univers’ (1990a: 126). The withdrawal of divine presence, which marks, for Nancy, the birth of the modern West, came however with a loss of foundation which exhausted both magic and mythical speech, leaving Westerners with what Hegel calls ‘*unhappy consciousness*’ (2004: 126), that is, the acute perception of having lost all existential foundation, of being henceforth abandoned to finitude.

According to Nancy, the entire history of the modern West can—and should—be read in light of this unhappy consciousness, for it has led Westerners to develop various strategies to attempt to find consolation for their finitude through gestures of self-founding. Nostalgia for mythical foundations, Nancy writes, ‘concentre peut-être à elle

seule toute la prétention de l'Occident à s'appropriier sa propre origine [...] pour pouvoir s'identifier enfin, absolument, autour de sa propre profération et de sa propre naissance' (1990a: 117). Building on Heidegger's study of ontotheology, Nancy remarks that metaphysics and monotheistic theology, in particular, have set out to achieve what myth was no longer able to do, that is, to provide humanity with a firm foundation or 'paradigme principal' (2005a: 29), whether in the form of the God-*Logos* of the philosophers or of the One God of Abraham. We have already seen that, as far as Nancy is concerned, when it comes to metaphysics, such an endeavour 'proprement *mythante*' has systematically failed (1990a: 115): the metaphysical systems of the big names of the history of Western philosophy all fail to inaugurate a stable ground for human existence. Turning more explicitly to the study of religion from the end of the 1980s, starting with *Des lieux divins*, and later in the two volumes of his *Déconstruction du christianisme*, Nancy comes to the same conclusion about monotheism. Drawing attention to the passage from polytheism to monotheism, he remarks that the rise of the monotheistic God should not be interpreted as a mere numerical reduction of the number of the gods, but rather as a transformation of divinity itself through a *mything* gesture of abstraction and hyperessentialisation: 'de puissance ou personne présente, [l'unicité] [...] change [la divinité] en principe, en fondement et/ou en loi' (2005a: 36). This is exemplified by the 'étrange nom mi-propre, mi-commun' of the God of monotheism (1997: 8). Whereas polytheist religions give *proper* names to their gods, whether it be Osiris, Neptune, Quetzalcoatl or Amaterasu, monotheist religions refer to God using the *common* name which designates all divine entities. As Nancy remarks, 'C'est comme si on disait qu'un peuplier s'appelle "arbre". [...] [Dieu] n'est pas le nom propre de quelqu'un, il désigne le divin comme tel' (2009: 21-22). The God of monotheism is thus conceived of as the *alpha* and *omega* of the world. As suggested by Nancy's use of myth-like phrasings in

Un jour les dieux se retirent, which was published in the peculiar format of 19 x 32 centimetres arguably in order to evoke ancient sacred texts, monotheism effectively divinises the ‘absencing’ of the gods of polytheism.

Nancy is quick to note, however, that it is not sufficient to approach the advent of the monotheistic God as a mere transferral of the identical, or return of the Same. As with metaphysics, the *mything* gesture that gives rise to monotheism meets with an insurmountable inadequacy of presence and, thereby, ‘désigne en creux, au-delà de lui, le lieu de ce qui devra finir par se dérober à l’alternative primaire du théisme et de l’athéisme’ (2003b: 10). We have already seen that, by renouncing its effective presence in the world, the divine has relinquished its right to a proper name; after the flight of the gods of polytheism, Nancy writes, ‘Dieu est toujours par définition absent ou retiré dans le fond de l’être’ (2005a: 36). To be sure, in Judaism, God has a name, but this name cannot be spoken. In Islam, God even has a hundred names, but ninety-nine of these are superlatives while the hundredth designates God as the Unknowable. As for Christianity, the proper name ‘Jesus’ applies to a fraction of the Trinitarian divine. Far from simply referring to God using a common name, then, the three monotheisms appear to deny the simple possibility of nomination (see Nancy and others 2012: 329). In *Des lieux divins*, Nancy warns that this lack of divine names should not be mistaken for ‘un défaut de surface qui dissimulerait et qui manifesterait la profondeur d’un sacré tenu en réserve’ (1997: 13). As with Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, terminological instability rather testifies to the inability of the *logos* to inaugurate itself as *muthos*. Sense cannot close in on itself so as to reach plenitude in the form of divine names. The unfolding of divine truth in language is always already im-possible: paraphrasing Nancy, *le God-Logos n’a pas tout à fait lieu* (1973: 29). I use this phrasing on purpose: the default of divine names can also be approached as a default of divine *places*. For Nancy, that the divine renounced its *place*

in the world ‘ne veut pas dire, ainsi qu’une ruse dialectique est toujours prête à nous le suggérer, que le vide des temples nous offre à présent le divin’ (1997: 47), or that there exists a place beyond the world where the divine ascended. It simply signals, Nancy suggests, that ‘il n’y a pas de lieu pour recueillir ni le mystère ni la splendeur d’un dieu’ (1997: 48). Space cannot close in on itself to create the transcendent place of God. This explains, I think, why *Des lieux divins* starts with paragraph 0: Nancy thereby replicates the withdrawal of ground from under God’s feet by ‘syncopating’ the *origin* of his list.

What the lack of divine names and places tells us, then, is that the monotheistic sublation of divine ‘absencing’ ultimately fails to reach a point of closure. According to Nancy, this should not come as a surprise for the sublation of divine ‘absencing’ that gave rise to monotheism carried within itself the seeds of its own exhaustion. Insofar as it is not *given* but *posited* through a *mything* gesture, indeed, foundation can only be established as an exception to its own rule—contrary to everything that follows it, it cannot be accounted for on its own terms—or else it sinks into an infinite regression, constantly trying to confirm its principle, the principle of its principle, and so on and so forth (2005a: 37). The unicity of the God of monotheism was therefore condemned to be subsumed by the unity of the principle, to withdraw in the depths of being, as Nancy puts it (2005a: 36), thereby facilitating the passage from monotheism to atheism. In line with Bataille and Derrida, Nancy argues that this is most visible in Christianity, as the religion of the death of God. We have also seen in the previous chapters that the Christian doctrine of incarnation has been read as a *kenotic* retreat of God from Himself, while God’s Trinitarian nature prevents Him from being viewed as a sufficient subject or an all-absorbing totality. According to Nancy, by withdrawing the ground from under God’s feet, Christianity paves the way for its own exhaustion. That is what he calls ‘the deconstruction of Christianity’, playing on both senses of the genitive: the deconstruction

of Christianity (subjective genitive; Christianity deconstructs) functions as a deconstruction of Christianity (objective genitive; Christianity is deconstructed). Nancy thus agrees with Marcel Gauchet: Christianity is ‘la religion de la sortie de la religion’ (2005a: 207). Nancy’s *tour de force*, however, lies in the assertion that the exhaustion of monotheism was also bound to affect atheism. Given that mainstream atheism only replaces God with humanist and rationalist placeholders which similarly stand for the *alpha* and *omega* of the world, it too lacks a confirmation of its own principle. In turn, Nancy observes, ‘le principe même du principe [...] s’effondre de lui-même et, dans cet effondrement, signale la possibilité, voire l’exigence et l’appel d’une toute autre configuration anarchique’ (2005a: 39). On Nancy’s account, then, if the history of religion in the West is driven by ‘la nécessité d’une résurrection qui restitue et l’homme et Dieu à une commune immanence’ (1990a: 31), this resurrection—or ‘transfert de l’identique’ (2005a: 9)—however, *n’a pas tout à fait lieu* (1973: 29). Metaphysics and monotheism equally fail to provide humanity with a new principal paradigm.

(3.2) The Interruption of Myth

I contend, however, that it is the *political* implementation of Westerners’ *entreprise mythante* that most clearly exposes the limits of Westerners’ nostalgia for foundation. In ‘La Communauté désœuvrée’, Nancy observes that, given that myth provides a holistic explanation for the workings of the universe, it has the power to make human beings recognise their shared belonging. It is in myth, James explains, that ‘the existence of lived community is founded and perpetuated, and upon a shared myth that political institutions gain their sense, their purpose and their legitimacy’ (2005: 340). Echoing Bataille’s *Théorie de la religion*, Nancy therefore remarks that, insofar as it interrupted the

foundational value of myth, the flight of the gods of polytheism also led to the interruption of community (1990a: 145), an interruption which prompted the development of political ideologies seeking to restore the lost immanence of man to man, and of community to community (1990a: 14). ‘Jusqu’à nous,’ Nancy notes, ‘l’histoire [occidentale] aura été pensée sur fond de communauté perdue—et à retrouver ou à reconstituer’ (1990a: 29).

Nancy remarks, however, that such a *politique mythante* is twice totalitarian, both (i) in its form, given that it is self-imposed and that it does not tolerate anything outside of itself, and (ii) in its content, for it provides a holistic explanation for everything that exists (1990a: 142-143). It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that nostalgia for communal fusion has given rise to deadly political ideologies. ‘C’est le sort de la communauté sans dieu’, Nancy argues, ‘[...] elle se prend pour la présence dévastatrice de Dieu’ (1997: 40). In totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and the religious States of medieval Europe, for instance, the only permissible convictions were those of the ruler—or *mythmaker*. Yet if community is to be understood as the coming together of *individuals*, communal fusion is ‘cela même qui, si cela avait lieu, supprimerait à l’instant la communauté’ (1990a: 35). As already discussed in chapter 1, Nazism’s attempt at reviving the mythical Aryan community thus not only led to the extermination of the perceived ‘sous-homme extérieur à la communion du sang et du sol’ (1990a: 36), but also aimed to sacrifice ‘tous ceux qui dans la communauté “aryenne” ne satisfaisaient pas aux critères de la pure immanence’ (1990a: 36; Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1991: 31-32). When politically implemented, then, nostalgia for foundation proves *suicidal*; its sacrificial logic ‘nous promet au piège de la mort’, to use Bataille’s terms again (*OCXI*: 485). In *La Déclosion*, Nancy remarks that this is precisely what is happening with Islamic fundamentalism today: its terrorist enterprise builds on ‘la conjonction du désespoir et d’une volonté Uni-fiante’ (2005a: 62), a unifying will which turns against

the Muslim community itself—the majority of victims of terrorism today are Muslims who have been judged ‘impure’. One may also think of other violent ideologies: the Christchurch shooter and Bataclan terrorists pursued the same goal, that is, the suppression of the difference standing in the way of absolute cohesion within an identity group. To be sure, these are extreme examples. Yet Nancy warns that this logic applies to *every* immanentist ideology: ‘les entreprises politiques ou collectives que domine une volonté d’immanence absolue ont pour vérité la vérité de la mort’ (1990a: 35-36).

For Nancy, this should draw our attention to the twofold foundational *and* fictional value of myth: ‘La pensée mythique, en effet [...] n’est pas autre chose que *la pensée d’une fiction fondatrice, ou d’une fondation par la fiction*’ (1990a: 133-134). If, when politically implemented, *mything* gestures throw humanity on the path to suicide, the perfect adequation of *logos* to *muthos* that these gestures seek to restore is exposed as incompatible with human existence and, indeed, plainly undesirable. Could it be, then, that modern mytho-logy *invented* the golden age of an adequation of *logos* and *muthos* to make sense of human finitude in terms of the *loss* of an originary foundation? The deadly horizon of foundational ideologies suggests that *there simply never was any foundation to re-establish*. Already in the third century BC, Cecidas of Megalopolis stated that ‘Les dieux sont partis depuis longtemps’ (Nancy 1997: 43). The hazy temporality of myth—its ‘once upon a time’ and ‘in the beginning’, which refer to an indefinite past—even raises the question of whether the event of departure ever took place. What we do know is that ‘[I]es Grecs ont été ceux qui ont perçu l’absence là où se proposait cette présence [divine]’ (2010a: 36). Western history thus seems to have started when the Greeks *invented* the *story* of the gods’ departure. Nancy admits that this point is not exactly innovative. Since Johann Herder in the eighteenth century, generations of mythologists such as Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Schlegel and Károly Kerényi, have highlighted that myth

functions as ‘la performance du paradigme, telle que le *logos* se la fictionne pour y projeter l’essence et le pouvoir qu’il pense comme siens’ (1990a: 138). Schlegel’s tautegorical approach to myth thus posits fiction as a *theogonic power*. Unlike these thinkers, however, Nancy’s interest in myth’s fictionality lies elsewhere than in its foundational potential. In light of the deadly consequences of Westerners’ *politique mythante*, he even argues that so long as fiction is approached as a foundational tool, ‘nous n’avons plus rien à faire avec le mythe. Je serais tenté de dire : nous n’avons même plus le droit d’en parler, de nous y intéresser’ (1990a: 117). In line with Sartre’s depiction of Bataille as a new mystic and Milbank’s critique of Derrida’s supposed pursuit of purity, as discussed in the previous chapters, one may be tempted to interpret such a statement as inaugurating a myth of ‘*l’absence de mythe*’, as Bataille puts it in a 1947 article (*OCXI*: 236), and *the absence of foundation* as a new foundation. It should be clear from chapter 1, however, that what the later Bataille means by ‘absence’ is not dialectical non-presence but *interruption*; hence his assertion that ‘L’absence de mythe est peut-être ce sol, immuable sous mes pieds, mais peut-être aussitôt ce sol se dérochant’ (*OCXI*: 236). Bataille even argues that the value of myth itself lies in its interruption. He writes that ‘parce qu’un mythe est mort ou meurt, nous voyons mieux à travers lui que s’il vivait’ (*OCXI*: 236). What we ‘see’ is not the ‘absencing’ of a foundation that used to be present, but the fact that the ground is *withdrawn* from under our feet, what Bataille has referred to as being’s intrinsic insufficiency. I argue that Nancy follows in Bataille’s footsteps.

Building on his observation that the *foundational* endeavour of Western political, religious and metaphysical history paradoxically exposes the *un-founding* of human existence, that is to say, its finitude, Nancy argues that “‘le mythe’ désigne, par-delà les mythes, voire contre le mythe lui-même, quelque chose qui ne peut pas simplement disparaître’ (1990a: 119). Playing on the double value of the genitive, he suggests that the

interruption of myth (subjective genitive; myth interrupts), that is, the fact that it is *but a story of foundation*, interrupts the foundational value of myth (objective genitive; myth is interrupted). If the foundational tool that is myth is revealed as only ever a fiction, indeed, we are in a position to realise that the principal paradigm which Westerners strive to secure is ‘syncopated’ by a primordial finitude that recalls both the ‘default’ of origin and insufficiency of being identified by Derrida and Bataille, respectively. According to François Raffoul, Nancy’s indebtedness to Heidegger’s *Destruktion* clearly appears on this point: for Nancy, far from proposing a dialectical ascent (*übersteigt*) towards higher truths, myth proposes, *through its interruption*, ‘a “descent” [*zurücksteigt*], as Heidegger would write in his “Letter on Humanism”, into the poverty of essence’ (2012: 50; Heidegger 1993: 231). The interruption of myth highlights, through what Nancy calls a ‘*déclousion*’, that is, ‘le geste d’une ouverture ou d’une réouverture en direction de ce qui doit avoir précédé toute construction’ (2005a: 116), that ‘Il n’y a rien de retiré dans le tréfonds de l’origine, *rien que le rien d’origine*. Celle-ci [l’origine], par conséquent, ne peut être perdue’ (2002: 90), let alone restored or resurrected.

Nancy thereby strikes a terrible blow at Westerners’ *entreprise mythante*, and by extension at God in all forms. That does not mean, however, that he should be accused of renouncing all values and/or of turning his back on the history of metaphysics and monotheism in the West. Nancy greatly values (interrupted) myth, insofar as it highlights that the *logos* only ever exists as ‘syncopated’. Metaphysically speaking, this implies that, in Nancy’s thinking as well as in Derrida’s, ‘la valeur de vérité [...] [n]’est jamais contestée ou détruite, seulement réinscrite dans des contextes plus puissants, plus larges, plus stratifiés’ (Derrida 1990a: 270). Nancy speaks of an *exemption of sense* (2005a: 179), for ‘la vérité du sens [like the truth of myth] n’est pas un accomplissement, une plénitude signifiante, mais [...] le suspens’ (2010a: 78). He even suggests, like Bataille and Derrida,

that suspense *conditions* communication, for it frees sense from the horizon of Absolute Knowledge. If myth is the opening of the mouth that closes sense in on itself, its interruption guarantees the *un-folding* of sense, that is to say, the opening of the mouth in the first place. By extension, the finitude of sense gets in the way of any ‘projection auto-instituante’ of the subject (2005a: 183). Confirming his early study of the Cartesian *cogito* and building on Hegel’s observation that the subject’s transappropriation depends on a *finished* system of knowledge, Nancy remarks that, if sense cannot reach plenitude, ‘Au lieu de parfaire une signification, [le *soi*] récite sa propre signifiance et c’est en elle qu’il a sa jouissance dont le sens devient le “point de fuite”’ (2005a: 186). Both sense and the subject unfold as open mouths. The God of the philosophers ‘s’étrangle [...] d’une littérature qui est *son propre impossible*’ (2001c: 10), indeed.

Crucially for my purpose, given that religion, as it is traditionally understood, depends on the possibility of revelation, that is to say, on the uncovering of the *Logos* in its full presence, an exemption of the God of the philosophers translates as an exemption of the God of monotheism. As far as Nancy is concerned, that monotheism fails to provide humanity with a new principal paradigm does *not* imply that God is dead, inexistent or impossible. The fact that there is no name nor place for God does *not* imply that the divine has moved from presence to absence with the flight of the gods of polytheism. Rather, he argues, ‘ce défaut révèle la divinité elle-même comme suspendue’ (1997: 13). The divine *only ever exists* as an open mouth choking on the word ‘God’ as ‘le nom d’un Nom impossible’ (1990b: 358). Nancy finds confirmation for this interpretation in the interruption of the Christian myth of resurrection. In *Noli me tangere*, he draws attention to Christ’s instruction to Mary Magdalene not to touch his resurrected body. This instruction is surprising considering that Jesus had never refused to be touched before. Nancy therefore suggests that death must have altered Christ’s body, rendering it

untouchable. He even wonders: ‘n’est-ce pas ainsi qu’apparaît un mort ? [...]—[comme] l’apparaître de ce(lui) qui proprement n’apparaît plus [?]’ (2003b: 48). Evoking Zarathustra’s cry that ‘God remains dead!’ (Nietzsche 2007: 120), Nancy argues that Christ’s ‘*noli me tangere*’ testifies to the fact that ‘le corps mort reste mort’ (2003b: 29-30), which leads to a recasting of the Christian thinking of resurrection: the latter should not be seen as death vanquished, as the return of the Same, but rather as the raising up—*anastasis*, in Greek—of the *dead God*. In his 1986 ‘*Dei Paralysis Progressiva*’, Nancy had already referred to Nietzsche’s paralysis as the *anastasis* of the one who has passed: ‘la scène de Turin nous fait voir quelqu’un qui “s’est rendu deux fois à ses propres obsèques”’ (1990b: 356). Both the paralysed and arisen body signal the appearing of the disappearing. ‘Il n’y a aucune survie, aucune résurgence, aucune reviviscence. Mais “résurrection” au sens de levée du salut, de l’adieu’ (2005a: 152). Such an approach resonates with the rewriting of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return as a radical contestation of identity popularised by thinkers of the so-called second and third ‘moments français de Nietzsche’ (Le Rider 1999), including Bataille and Klossowski. Nancy argues that the *interrupted* myth of Christ’s resurrection sheds light on the fact that nothing remains self-identical in its own return, including God Himself. After the flight of the gods of polytheism, the divine *only exists in and as its own passing*. Playing on the French word ‘pas’, which refers both to a step and a gesture of negation, Nancy suggests that ‘Dieu est le passant et le pas du passant [...] qui, en passant, *winkt* et *se diffère*’ (2005a: 170). Like Heidegger, Nancy thus approaches the monotheistic God as the ‘last god’, ‘au sens d’extrême, et cette extrémité, en tant qu’extrémité du divin, délivre le divin de lui-même dans le double sens de l’expression : le libère du théologique et le dégage dans son geste propre’ (2005a: 169).

What Foucault says about Bataille's atheology is therefore also true of Nancy's thinking: both thinkers approach the death of God '[non] comme la fin de son règne historique, ni le constat enfin délivré de son inexistence, mais comme l'espace désormais constant de notre expérience' (1994: 235). Far from offering consolation for unhappy consciousness by identifying a new foundation on to which humanity can hold, Nancy sheds light on human finitude as the experience of self-withdrawal, a dis-enclosure of the *logos* or step *not* beyond but back down to God's 'syncopation' (2010a: 114). For Nancy, it is from this *adieu*, or resurrection-as-retreat, that the world must now be thought (1990a: 118). He therefore calls himself an atheist, yet only insofar as 'Être athée ne signifie plus nier un divin qui s'est de lui-même résorbé' (1993: 239). Nancy's atheism does not feed off nostalgia for foundation, but rather implies attending to the interruption *of* myth, the deconstruction *of* Christianity, the exemption *of* God in both senses of the genitive. It implies embracing 'un avenir du monde qui ne serait plus ni chrétien, ni anti-chrétien, ni monothéiste ni athéiste ou polythéiste, mais qui s'avancerait précisément au-delà de toutes ces catégories' (2005a: 54); a future which, in *La Création du monde*, Nancy calls 'provisoirement ou à titre d'essai, *absenthéiste*' (2002: 54). We will return to this term and Nancy's (justified) wariness of seeing in it anything more than a provisional, working concept. For now, however, I argue that Nancy does appear to qualify as a faithful deicide.

(i) Like Bataille and Derrida before him, he attempts to come to terms with the death of God in various forms by shedding light on the interruption *of* the myth of a transcendent God-*Logos*. (ii) That is not to say, however, that he erases all traces of the divine. If the divine fails to inaugurate itself as *Logos*, it nevertheless remains in the form of a divine exemption *of* God. (iii) Nancy thereby proves faithful to Nietzsche's word 'God is dead', a word which Nietzsche betrayed, according to Heidegger. In Nancy's thinking of

finitude, too, at bottom, it is only the God of ontotheology that has been, not overcome—as this implies a dialectical *übersteigt*—but exempted (*zurücksteigt*), in His own return.

(3.3) A Religious Victory?

Nancy's insistence that the truth about the human finite condition is found exemplarily in the (self-)deconstruction of Christianity threatens, however, to circumscribe his thinking within a *postsecular* horizon of determination. The fact that he illustrates his recasting of resurrection by turning to an episode from the Gospel of John, in particular, raises the question of whether his approach to the *anastasis* of the dead God should be considered as a Christian parabola—in *Noli me tangere*, Christ is the one calling us to acknowledge His passing. Yet if, as Nancy argues, 'Seul peut être actuel un athéisme qui contemple la réalité de sa provenance chrétienne' (2005a: 205), his approach to deconstruction may be accused of *keeping the Christian God alive* and of guaranteeing Christianity's relevance in the modern world. As Derrida observes in *Le Toucher*, indeed, following Nancy's approach to the deconstruction of Christianity, '[l]a déchristianisation sera une victoire chrétienne' (2000: 68). This accusation finds strength in the fact that, though Nancy asserts that he stands completely outside any religion (2009: 23), he received a Jesuit education and has been involved in the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne (see Nancy & Ferrari 2020: 242-243). To be sure, his relationship with Christianity hit a wall in 1956, when Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne was condemned by the Pope for its support of the decolonisation of Algeria. 'Ce fut un tremblement de terre pour tous les militants.' Nancy recalls, 'La question a été posée de savoir ce que l'on faisait : rester ou partir' (2013: 16-17). Though he claims to have chosen neither option in order to focus, instead, on the study of 'en quoi et jusqu'à quel point [*nous tenons*] au christianisme' (2005a: 203), his

suggestion that ‘*toute* notre pensée est de part en part chrétienne’ (2005a: 207-208), seems enough to justify accusations of residual Christianity.

In 2010, however, Nancy issued a clarification of his position with regards to Christianity. In the second volume of *La Déconstruction du christianisme*, entitled *L’Adoration*, he nuances sentences from *La Déclosion* which he recognises as misleading, such as that which states that ‘le geste de déconstruction [...] n’est précisément possible qu’à l’intérieur du christianisme’ (2005a: 215-216). Building on the Bible study training he received as a youth, which presented the Bible as an infinite reserve of sense, including of sense exceeding institutional teachings (2013: 14), Nancy explains that he never meant to imply that the experience of dis-enclosure characteristic of the human finite condition is *essentially* Christian but rather wanted to suggest that it is a *deeper* truth than Christianity found *within* the latter. In one of his first essays, his 1967 ‘Catéchisme de persévérance’, Nancy had already noted that ‘au-delà de toute nécessité institutionnelle, au-delà peut-être même de l’appartenance à l’Église, il y [a] quelque chose dans quoi il fa[ut] persévérer’ (2013: 19). Thirty-six years later, in *Noli me tangere*, Nancy continues to draw attention to ‘le mouvement le plus propre que ce nom [de ‘christianisme’] aura recouvert’ (2010a: 35), in both senses of the term, that is to say, what Christianity, through its ambiguous combination of gestures of deconstruction *and* dialectical attempts at self-founding, included *and* masked, indicated *and* obscured, namely, a gesture of self-withdrawal. Nancy’s clarification has however largely failed to convince for, as Watkin observes in *Difficult Atheism*, ‘the very move of discerning in Christianity a truth deeper than itself once more repeats a Christian move, namely the opposition between the outward appearance and the heart (*kardia*) and a preference for the latter’ (2011: 40). That is not to say that Nancy’s ‘catéchisme de persévérance’ should be mistaken for a *post-secular* ‘rousseauisme du christianisme’ seeking to return to a supposedly ‘purer’ version

of Christianity. Nancy does not isolate ‘un bon christianisme primitif, pour en déplorer ensuite la trahison’ (2005a: 218). Yet he seems to extrapolate the dis-enclosing gesture from the internal logic of Christianity. Derrida might therefore be right to remark that ‘Il n’y a pas ici à être indemne, sauf, sauvé, à chercher un salut ou une immunité hors du christianisme. Ces valeurs seraient encore chrétiennes’ (2000: 248-249).

One should keep in mind, however, that Nancy identifies a divine exemption of God in other religions than Christianity. As early as in *Des lieux divins*, he remarks that Judaism and Islam deny the possibility of naming God in much the same way as Christianity. In the last decade, he has even started to describe the gesture of self-surpassing through self-withdrawal as a universal structure of religiosity. ‘Un tel dépassement’, he argues in his 2018 ‘Religion sans passé ni avenir’, ‘n’est ignoré d’aucune forme des religions d’Occident, dont l’islam, ni du bouddhisme, de l’hindouisme ou du shintoïsme’ (2018c: 4). Commenting on a draft of this thesis, Nancy has confirmed that, when it comes to the religious, ‘Je me dis de plus en plus qu’il y a bien une chose identique à elle-même (pour parler contre Derrida sur ce point) qui revient partout et toujours’ (2019, personal communication, email from October 1st; see Derrida 2001a: 56). I believe that this intuition already informed Nancy’s critique of Marion’s postsecular dissemination of the divine in *Des lieux divins*. According to Nancy, insofar as it preserves God under an infinite number of names, Marion’s approach to the religious unfolds as a form of ‘polyatheism’. ‘Y a-t-il désormais un propos sur le divin qu’on puisse [...] ne pas confondre avec un autre sur... “le sujet” (ou son “absence”), “le désir”, “l’histoire”, “autrui”, “l’Autre”, “l’être”, “la parole”, “le sublime”, “la communauté” que sais-je encore ?’, Nancy asks, demonstrating a clear dissatisfaction with an approach to the religious which ‘montre par son amplitude son insuffisance à opérer le partage qu’on attend’ (2018c: 2). In contrast with Marion’s polyatheism, Nancy does propose a

definition of the religious *in the singular*: he argues that ‘la disposition religieuse est avant tout disposition au dépassement infini’ (2018c: 4). Nancy thereby radically breaks with traditional definitions of religion in terms of transcendent *belief*, that is to say, in terms of adherence to a fixed signifying message, albeit without proof. He rather locates a general structure of religiosity in the *faithful* gesture of openness to what remains without access, of trust without postulation—as per the Latin etymology *fides*. In *La Déclousion*, Nancy illustrates the distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ by drawing attention to two different readings of the story of Abraham, by Paul and James the Less. Paul, Nancy observes, focuses on the fact that Abraham *believed* that God could give him a son, ‘[s]on acte a donc dépendu d’une postulation d’un savoir [...] [:] Abraham a jugé que Dieu pouvait’ (2005a: 78-79). James, by contrast, emphasises the fact that Abraham decided to offer Isaac in sacrifice without postulating anything. ‘D’une certaine façon,’ Nancy remarks, ‘l’Abraham de Jacques ne croit rien’ (2005a: 79). He simply makes himself available to hear God’s call, as Derrida puts it in ‘Violence et métaphysique’. Like Derrida, Nancy suggests that faith depends on a suspension of belief as signifying content, and by extension, of the God-*Logos* as proper referent of our prayers.⁴⁷ Hence Nancy’s insistence that faith should not be mistaken with *idolatry*. Faith, for Nancy, is a form of *adoration*, ‘c’est le “amen” ou “amîn”’ (2010a: 90), a ‘parole adressée à ce que cette parole sait sans accès’ (2010a: 11), in other words, ‘Rien qu’une bouche ouverte’ (2010a: 32) or ‘une foi de rien du tout’ (2005a: 89). The distinction between belief and faith thus mirrors that between *croire à* and *croire en* in French (see Pouillon 1993). Whereas the former consists in the immediate adherence to a content made present, the latter consists in a letting go of assurance. From this, Derrida should have deduced that there can be no

⁴⁷ We will shortly see that Nancy diverges from Derrida on the nature of this suspension. Whereas Derrida conceives of suspension in terms of a phenomenological *epochè*, Nancy sees it as a primordial *ontological* ‘syncopation’.

‘victory’ in Nancy’s thinking. There is no ground nor any religion to return to, only an emphasis placed on the *faithful* opening to the withdrawal of ground. Nancy is categorical: for him, ‘Il ne s’agit pas de sauver la religion, et bien moins encore d’y faire retour’ (2005a: 9). On the contrary, faith emerges as a force of *exhaustion* or self-withdrawal of the religious. It implies putting a nail in God’s coffin.

That was not enough, however, to dispel Derrida’s doubts. In one of his last published books, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, Derrida argues that, Nancy’s thinking ‘continue, fût-ce avec la rigueur de quelque cruauté, de consoler. Elle postule [...] l’existence de quelque Dieu’ (2003a: 11). In the introduction to this thesis, I have suggested that referring to a universal structure of religiosity—be it a gesture of self-surpassing through self-withdrawal—may be judged as a largely ethnocentric and *foundational* move which threatens to flatten out the plurality of the religious through an artificial but comforting privileging of the principle of identity. The question therefore arises whether, by dodging one postsecular bullet, namely, the recuperation within the limits of a given religious revelation (*Offenbarung*), here, Christianity, Nancy is hit by another one, namely, the identification, like Heidegger before him, of a general structure of revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) at the heart of, and conditioning, every revelation. Derrida warned Nancy against this trap: ‘Est-ce que tu ne remplaces pas, en quelque sorte, le plein du dieu unique du monothéisme par l’ouverture à laquelle lui-même doit se soumettre ?’ (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 188). Nancy does describe faith as *openness* to the withdrawal of ground and writes in *La Déclosion* that, through the self-deconstruction of God, ‘ce qui est révélé est le révélable, l’Ouvert comme tel’ (2005a: 214). Derrida’s criticism of Heidegger would, therefore, apply to Nancy as well: both thinkers would propose ‘une théologie avec et sans Dieu’ (1987: 592), with the prime mover and ‘last god’ that is *Offenbarkeit*, who emerges through and as the exemption of the God of *Offenbarung*.

(3.4) Ontological Intrusion

It will be recalled that a similar risk hung over the Bataillean sacred and Derridean faith, which arguably motivated their strategic undecidability about whether God's name refers to someone in particular or gestures towards a space beyond reference. I have suggested in the two previous chapters that this oscillation between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* partakes of a rigorous approach to the death of God by fostering an affirmative and uncompromising agnosticism which allows Bataille's and Derrida's thinking to escape recuperation. It is here, I argue, that Nancy diverges from the thinking of his predecessors. *Contra* Bataille and Derrida, he stresses that the divine exemption of God comes with the exhaustion of faith's institutional vehicle: 'Un monde ouvert est un monde [...] sans religion', he writes, 's'il faut entendre par ce mot l'observance de conduites et de représentations qui répondent à une demande de sens comme demande d'assurance, de destination, d'accomplissement' (2010a: 58). To be sure, it should now be clear that Nancy deserves the title of direct intellectual heir of both Bataille and Derrida. At times, Nancy's alignment with the former is such that, as if exposed to another cardiac intrusion, Nancy states, quoting Bataille but also referring to the latter, that: '*Le cœur de B. est dans mon cœur*' (2012b). On Derrida's own admission, his and Nancy's thinking are also so closely intertwined that they can be described as kissing on the lips, kissing on the eyes (2000: 347-348). I contend that Nancy should even be considered as the missing hyphen between Bataille and Derrida, for his thinking links Bataille's anthropological interest in myth with Derrida's attention to the differential value of language, a point which Derrida himself never discussed. Upon a first reading, then, the graft seems to have been a success: Nancy's name cannot henceforth be excluded from the Bataille-Derrida-Nancy

line of thought. Yet I argue that Nancy never reached a point of complete assimilation into the latter either insofar as he refuses to maintain an oscillation between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*. According to Nancy, Bataille's and Derrida's strategy is problematic insofar as it implies poles between which one oscillates. Regardless of whether the sacrifice that allows one to navigate between these poles is interrupted, as is the case with Bataille, or whether navigation itself is prevented by ascetic restraint, as is the case with Derrida, suspension, for Nancy, preserves the nostalgic memory of foundation.

Looking at Bataille, first, Nancy remarks that, if sovereignty is 'RIEN', as per Bataille's own terms (*OCVIII*: 300), there is nothing to sacrifice nor to be sacrificed for (1990b: 101). Though interrupted, Bataille's sacrifice still relies on binary oppositions: individuality and communion, sense and non-sense are suspended in an oscillation that remains *inachevée*. Yet building on Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Nancy suggests that 'inachèvement' implies that 'l'Un, n'advenant pas, ne p[eut] être l'Un qu'il doit être' (1983a: 181). Hence his assertion that 'L'"hégélianisme sans réserves" que Derrida repérait chez Bataille ne peut pas ne pas être soumis, au bout du compte, à la loi hégélienne d'une réserve toujours plus puissante que tout abandon de réserve' (1990a: 62-63), which is confirmed by Bataille's lifelong nostalgia for immanence. At this stage, one may be tempted to see an interrupted sacrifice in Nancy's dis-enclosing gesture. One may, indeed, associate Nancy's exemption of sense with Bataille's inner experience 'du sens du non-sens, se renversant en un non-sens du sens, puis à nouveau...' (*OCVI*: 160), which Derrida describes as an 'époque de l'époque du sens' (1967b: 393). This interpretation however overlooks a crucial difference between Nancean exemption and phenomenological époque. In *Le Sens du monde*, Nancy highlights that, in his works, 'il n'y a pas d'époque du sens, pas de "suspension" d'une "thèse naïve" du sens' (1993: 36), for there is neither a pre-existing sense founded in *logos* to suspend, nor an *other* of

sense—non-sense or the ineffable—to be reached through suspension. For Nancy, ‘L’*époque* elle-même est déjà prise dans le sens’ (1993: 36), as the finitude that conditions *and* withdraws it. Unlike Bataille’s inner experience, then, Nancy’s exemption of sense leaves no signification in reserve: rather, it ‘syncopates’ the polarity on which sacrifice depends, and therefore proves more attentive to the finitude of sense as *système* ‘*inadvenu*’ than Bataille’s ‘système inachevé du non-savoir’ (*OCVIII*: 558).

The same could be said of Nancy’s attention to the finitude of being. One may first be tempted to see an interrupted sacrifice in Nancy’s assertion that ‘l’homme est donc un sujet [...] qui ne peut se poser comme tel’ (1979: 154). In line with Bataillean ‘inachèvement’, Nancy’s phrase *seems* to suggest that *l’homme ne peut être le sujet qu’il doit être* (1983a: 181). That would, however, be missing Nancy’s point: in his 1979 study of Descartes’s *cogito*, he argues that the self cannot transappropriate because it only ever emerges through its own interruption. Nancy’s heart transplant confirmed this intuition. As he clarifies, ‘Ce n’est pas qu’on m’ait ouvert, béant, pour changer de cœur. C’est que cette béance ne peut pas être refermée’ (2017a: 35), neither by the wires holding his sternum together, nor with immunosuppressive medication, which, while preventing his body from rejecting ‘his’ new heart, generated a lymphoma. This is the thrust of Nancy’s *Corpus*. Published a year after the transplant, this essay—which consists of a *corpus* of fragments rather than a unified *body* of text—opposes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘corps propre’ and describes the body—‘Non pas le corps de l’“ego”, mais *corpus ego*’ (2000b: 25), moving beyond the Catholic dichotomy between flesh and soul (Esposito 2004: 155)—as ‘une collection de pièces, de morceaux, de membres, de zones, d’états, de fonctions [...], dont l’unité reste une question pour elle-même’ (2000b: 153). Such a collection emerges through interactions with a *milieu* and other bodies, interactions which are facilitated by both the five corporeal senses and intelligible sense. Nancy focuses on

touch as what Ricœur describes as the ‘juste distance’ between the absence of contact and the immediacy of fusion, which both feed the myth of self-enclosed substances (Watkin 2009: 150). *Corpus ego* is touched *and* touching, individual *and* excessive, singular *and* plural, ‘fait de rencontres et de survenues, de pièces et de morceaux, d’ajouts et de retraits’ (2017a: 58). The transappropriated subject therefore remains ‘*inadvenu*’; and so does community for, as Nancy stresses, ‘tout “être soi” (d’une personne, d’un pays, d’une langue, d’une pensée [indeed, of any identity group]) implique une foule d’intrusions’ (2017a: 61). We have seen in section 1 that, by shedding light on the interruption of myth, Nancy challenges myth’s power to bind communities (1990a: 145). More precisely, the interruption *of* myth highlights that community only ever emerges as interrupted, unable to inaugurate itself as the absolute immanence of man to man. It is ‘[non] plus la clôture qui exclut, mais le réseau coupé multiple d’où n’est exclue que l’exclusion’ (1989: 200). If Nancy recognises that ‘Bataille est sans doute celui qui a fait le premier, ou de la manière la plus aiguë, l’expérience moderne de la communauté [interrompue]’ (1990a: 50), as testified by Bataille’s recognition that nostalgia for immanence is misleading, Nancy accuses Bataille of having compromised his finding by approaching the insufficiency of being in terms of the lovers’ erotic suspension between subjectivity and communal fusion, that is to say, with a reference to the One that being *should have been*.⁴⁸ By contrast, Nancy’s approach to the self and community as syncopated by ‘un régime permanent de l’intrusion’ leaves no identity in reserve (2017a: 40).

Nancy’s critique of Derrida’s thinking develops along the same lines. In spite of the

⁴⁸ We have seen in chapter 1 that Blanchot adopts a different reading of Bataille. By arguing that inner experience ‘n’est jamais [...] [l’espace] d’un sujet’ (1983: 33), but rather prevents being from closing in on itself, Blanchot brings inner experience closer to Nancy’s ‘syncopation’ of the closure pursued by Westerners’ *mything* endeavour. Derrida is categorical, however: Bataille’s thinking ‘reste prise dans une philosophie classique du *sujet* et surtout dans [l]e *volontarisme*’ (1967b: 391-392).

latter's insistence that 'tout autre est tout autre' (1999: 110), Nancy suspects that Derrida's undecidability overdetermines the interaction between two poles, the Same and the Other, presence and absence, the Greek and the Jew, thereby running the risk of re-introducing a sense of the *proper*. At stake here is the Levinasian-inspired hyperessentialising potential of Derrida's undecidability. In *Des lieux divins*, Nancy warns that 'Il faut se méfier de la retenue' (1997: 13), for an attitude of *reserve* leaves something, precisely, *in reserve*. He even directly told Derrida: 'je pense que chez toi, il y a un propre, une *appropriation* toujours plus enfouie, toujours plus abyssale, toujours plus impossible, et en même temps, possible dans cette impossibilité' (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 2006: 93-94). This crucial divergence between Nancy and Derrida is particularly visible, I think, in their respective treatment of divine self-deconstruction or auto-immunity. As I have explained in chapter 2, and as Nancy stresses in *Des lieux divins*, Derrida associates the auto-immunity of God's name—and of religion, more generally—with the fact that God is 'innommable au sens métaphysique de l'être inaccessible à tous les noms, de l'être qui transcende tous les noms' (1997: 10). For Derrida, the two sources of religion imply and exclude each other—*faith* in God is conditioned by the sacrifice of divine *unscathedness*—for God can never be the proper referent of our prayers. Either His unscathedness or name can be saved, not both. For Nancy, by contrast, 'Dieu n'est pas innommable en ce sens-là, car en ce sens-là l'innommabilité résulte d'un excès sur les noms et sur le langage, tandis que l'innommabilité du dieu auquel je m'adresse (si je le peux) résulte d'un défaut de nom' (1997: 10). In Derrida's thinking, God remains as the effect of the trace. Though He is contradicted by each event, He remains in the form of an *undeconstructible* Wholly Other *to come*, a messianic horizon. For Nancy, this implies that Derrida's God is safely stored in Schrödinger's box. '[P]our ma part,' he stresses, 'je reste réservé envers ce lexique du

messianique. [...] A Jacques Derrida en particulier, je dirai que [...] après le Messie ne vient aucune espèce de messie' (2001a: 14). Against Raffoul (2012: 57), I argue that nothing in Nancy's thinking is ever left *to come*. Ever since the advent of monotheism, the coming of the Christian Messiah, 'le sacré comme tel n'advient plus' (1997: 13); or *plus que* as a 'syncopation' of the proper. Yet if no sense of the proper pre-exists deconstruction, nothing is *undeconstructible*; one is left with a primordial finitude which 'syncopates' the polarity or neither/nor positioning of Derrida's and Bataille's thinking.

This signals a major disagreement between the three thinkers about *difference* itself. As Watkin elucidates, in Nancy's thinking, '[t]here is no Other, but a diuresis or dissection of the self (*soi*) that precedes any relation to the other' (2009: 183). Alterity only exists as an *intruder* who prevents the closing in on itself of the proper, including in the form of the Wholly Other. It is a 'différence qui n'en est pas une' (2018b: 108), 'impossible à refermer sur une identité' (1996: 48). Nancy thereby denies the status of ethics as first philosophy. Unlike Blanchot and Levinas, who argue that the ethical responsibility to the Other precedes any sense of self, Nancy argues that ontological openness precedes any responsibility to alterity (1990b: 261). He thereby goes further away from the Jew and closer to the Greek than Derrida did with his quasi-ontology. Whereas both thinkers build on Heidegger's ontology, Nancy refuses the polarity of a suspension 'dans la différence entre le Juif et le Grec' (Derrida 1967b: 227), as well as the undecidability of an hauntological '*peut-être*', to rather inaugurate an ontology '*à partir du singulier pluriel des origines, c'est-à-dire à partir de l'être-avec*' (1996: 45). Watkin notes that 'Nancy claims no major theoretical innovation here, insisting rather that being-with is always already implied in [Heideggerian] being-there' (2009: 178). Nancy recognises that 'L'être modalisé *mit-da* [...] n'est rien d'autre que l'être partageant ou *se partageant* selon le *da*, qui s'efforce de désigner l'"ouvert"—l'"ouvert" de l'ex-posé. En sorte qu'être-avec est

la même chose qu''être-ouvert' (2000a: 10). It is through this Heideggerian re-turn that Nancy establishes himself as a faith(-)ful *intruder* in the Bataille(-Blanchot)-Derrida line of thought. Much like Nancy's new heart, his thinking 'ne cesse pas d'être à quelque égard une intrusion : c'est-à-dire d'être sans droit et sans familiarité, sans accoutumance, et au contraire d'être un dérangement, un trouble dans l'intimité' of these three thinkers (2017a: 11-12). Their alignment on the question of difference, conceived of as primordial, irrecoverable and framed in terms of the death of God, is challenged by a disagreement about whether there can be a 'tout autre'.

Crucially, by unsettling the Levinasian inflection that Derrida (and Blanchot) gave to this line of thought, Nancy addresses some of the issues I have identified in the previous chapters. In particular, Nancy makes deconstruction less of a balancing act by anchoring the insufficiency found at the root of each being to an ontological condition. To be sure, the idea that irrecoverable difference is *guaranteed* comes with problems of its own, to which I turn in the next section. Like Heidegger before him, Nancy is exposed to accusations of residual foundationalism by proposing what at least looks like a *grounded* and *grounding* general structure of revealability in the form of 'être-ouvert'. Nancy however seems confident that embracing deconstruction as ontology is less exposed to recuperation and quietism than Bataille's and Derrida's undecidability. One may also argue that Nancy's ontology is less hindered by stylistic obscurity for it does not cultivate self-contradiction or ascetic reticence. He does not even walk on eggshells around the traditional concepts of metaphysics: through what Derrida recognises as a *tour de force*, Nancy sheds light on the intruder that prevents concepts including the *logos* from reaching a point of closure (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 167). Instead of *rejecting* these concepts, Nancy sheds light on their ontological openness. Hence my disagreement with Irving Goh (2015): the reject is hardly an appropriate motif to approach Nancy's thinking. What is at

stake in the death of God, for Nancy, is neither a reject nor a murder, neither a lack nor a loss, but a *chance* in both senses of the term (2001c: 11). Nancy points to a new epoch, after that of the *cosmos* and that of the unhappy consciousness, one in which God's death 'n'est pas manque, mais puissance[,] [...] pas vide béant, mais ouverture' (2010a: 124); one in which, instead of losing itself in the pursuit of foundation, humanity accepts itself as 'tissé[e] d'étrangers et d'étrangetés' (2017a: 21).

(3.5) Divine *Expeausition*

Let us give Derrida some credit, however: we have seen in the previous chapter that he did consider ontology but refused to go down this Heideggerian road for fear of a dialectical reintroduction of foundation. A justified reticence, indeed: critics including Simon Critchley, Alain Badiou and Robert Bernasconi have highlighted that foundationalism looms over Nancy's 'être-ouvert'. Taking Derrida's and Blanchot's side in the 'ethics vs ontology' dispute, Critchley argues that Nancy's ontology is oppressive to singularity, the ethical responsibility implied in the Levinasian face-to-face being flattened out by the relationality of the 'with' which Nancy sees as having the priority (1999b: 251). That is also what Bernasconi suspects, observing that Nancy's 'refusal of the Other' ties his thinking to immanence (1993: 12). Nancy's community is one 'd'où n'est exclue que l'exclusion' (1989: 200), 'as if a community without exclusion was not itself another form of immanentism, another form of totalitarianism' (Bernasconi 1993: 13). Badiou concurs, criticising Nancy's reintroduction of the One under the guise of finitude (2004: 18).⁴⁹ Nancy's dis-enclosing gesture is accused of climbing *back down to*

⁴⁹ Badiou has similar reservations regarding Deleuze's differential ontology, which, he argues, reintroduces the One under the guise of becoming. I return to this in chapter 4.

a foundational ‘être-ouvert’ and of, thereby, erecting a new natural religion of the Open with a capital O. Both Nancy and Heidegger did associate the gesture of self-withdrawal with a universal structure of religiosity and the figure of the ‘last god’, who is ‘not the end but the other beginning of immeasurable possibilities for our history’ (Heidegger 1999: 289). Despite Heidegger’s assertion that ‘Here no redemption takes place’ (1999: 290), his suggestion in a 1966 interview that ‘Only a god can save us’ seems to leave open the possibility of the redemptive potential of the last god (1981: 57; Greisch 2008: 261). Nancy himself came to acknowledge to Derrida that ‘L’ouverture, je te l’accorde, est un mot vraiment embêtant’ (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 191). By extension, so is ‘absentheism’. Only a few years after first using this term, Nancy recognised that ‘L’horizon d’une soustraction, d’un retrait, d’une absence, voire l’horizon de ce que j’ai moi-même parfois nommé “absentéisme” pour l’opposer à l’athéisme, continue à faire horizon—c’est-à-dire limite, impasse et fin du monde’ (2005a: 32). If I agree with Nancy that Bataille’s and Derrida’s strategic undecidability about the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit* threatens to keep foundation in reserve, then Nancy’s faith(-)ful embracing of being’s ontological openness to the withdrawal of ground does not seem—at first sight, at least—to be more successful at escaping (postsecular) recuperation.

Nancy refutes such an accusation. He stresses in *La Création du monde* that, for him, ‘L’ouverture n’est pas la fondation ni l’origine. L’ouverture n’est pas non plus une sorte de réceptacle ou d’étendue préalable pour les choses du monde’ (2002: 93). A second, closer look at Nancy’s ontology is, therefore, needed at this stage. More specifically, a crucial question must be asked: ‘qu’est-ce qu’une ouverture qui ne s’abîmerait pas dans sa propre béance ? [...] Comment tracer à nouveaux frais une ouverture *délimitée*, une figure, donc, qui pourtant ne soit pas une captation figurative du sens (qui ne soit pas Dieu) ?’ (Nancy 2005a: 226). I argue that an answer is given by

Nancy as part of his efforts to distinguish his thinking from Heidegger's. Although Nancy is profoundly indebted to the latter, Watkin is a little hasty in stating that 'Nancy claims no major theoretical innovation' when it comes to his ontology of 'être-ouvert' (2009: 178). Nancy himself stresses that 'je ne suis sans doute pas très à l'aise avec le thème de l'Oouvert chez Heidegger' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 191). He takes issue, in particular, with Heidegger's dissatisfaction with what he has described as *Dasein's* 'thrownness'. In section nine of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that '*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence*' (1962: 67). As Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz explains, 'Existence is thus freed from essence and, at the same stroke, freedom is redefined as just this essential existence, a being given over to an existence that is not governed by any idea, essence or model' (2015: 95), a definition which echoes Bataille's sovereignty. As Nancy observes, however, in the second division of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that, if *Dasein* is abandoned to existence, a being-thrown-into-the-word, '[il] est "seulement" [...] *Schicksalhaftigkeit*, c'est-à-dire *capable de...*, *susceptible de recevoir les coups du sort*, dont sa mort fait partie' (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 2006: 89). Nancy emphasises the adverb 'seulement' to signal that Heidegger approaches *Dasein's* finitude—its abandonment to existence—in terms of *limitation* and *isolation*. '[O]n apprend aussi', Nancy continues, 'que cette *Schicksalhaftigkeit* n'est pas encore la *Geschicklichkeit* [the destiny of being], laquelle ne peut avoir lieu que dans la mort au combat pour le peuple' (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 2006: 89). For Heidegger, sacrificial death for the *Volk* allows *Dasein* to *save* itself from limitation and isolation by *opening* itself. Heidegger thus navigates dialectically between 'le *Dasein* solitaire et le *Dasein* dans le *Volk*' (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 2006: 89), as part of a *redemptive* project of reappropriation of *Dasein's* openness.

Much as Derrida believes that Heidegger's approach to being as *given* testifies to his unwillingness to give up on the proper, Nancy argues that Heidegger's approach to *Dasein* in terms of sacrificial *gift* precipitates him into the same immanentist trap as the early Bataille. That is even how he accounts, using Arendt's terms, for *the banality of* Heidegger's drift towards Nazism (2015a). Heidegger's promotion of 'le *Dasein* dans le *Volk*' does resonate with Nazism's project to restore the Aryan community. We have seen in chapter 1, however, that Bataille's immanentist tendencies—and early inclinations towards fascism—were trumped by his willingness to 'sortir par un projet du domaine du projet' (*OCV*: 60). In line with Bataille, Nancy argues that *Dasein*'s openness should be kept 'bien en deçà de tous nos projets, volontés et entreprises' (1990a: 87). Turning Heidegger's argument on its head, Nancy suggests that being-thrown-into-the-world should not be seen as a source of limitation to be overcome but as *the condition of* openness. He accuses Heidegger of having overlooked the fact that openness depends on delineation: 'l'ouverture', Nancy writes, 'c'est ce qui demande son contour pour s'ouvrir, comme la bouche s'ouvre et donne son contour, et pour cela prend donc elle-même des contours' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 191). Hence the importance that Nancy grants to *skin*. As discussed in section 3, he argues that the self, or *corpus*, is always already '*tourné vers l'extérieur*' (2000b: 117). Nancy draws attention to *skin* as what 'excède l'ordre propre de l'organisme : il n'assure pas une fonction à l'intérieur d'un système autonome : il expose (on peut écrire en français "il exposeuse") cette autonomie à tous les dehors possibles' (2020: 145). *Skin* is the contour that conditions being's ability to touch and be touched. For Nancy, then, 'la peau, c'est toute la vérité d'un corps' (2017b: 78). To be sure, Heidegger too pays crucial attention to the motif of the contour, as Derrida rightly notes (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 191). Yet Nancy warns that 'chez lui, cela semble toujours être refermant au lieu d'être justement cela, ce qui est ouvrant' (Derrida & Nancy 2004:

191). For Heidegger, *contours* delimit being, condemning it to a solitary life and death. Ontological openness would thus be found *beyond* and *against* the privative contours of the *Dasein*, from which only a god, the Open with a capital O, could save us.

Nancy remarks, however, that ‘Dire “l’ouvert” est déjà un abus de langage’ (2010a: 58), for the substantive itself functions as a *clôture*. As he highlights in an interview with Danielle Cohen-Levinas, thinking the openness of the open requires not approaching it in terms of a fixed originary *ouverture*, but rather as ‘ça s’ouvre, ça n’ouvre sur rien puisque ça ne constitue un dehors que par et dans l’ouverture même’ (2010c: 125). Put otherwise, Nancy thinks about openness in terms of a ‘dépassement [...] tel que par nature il ne peut pas s’imposer comme dépassement accompli [...]. Il ne peut pas s’imposer parce qu’il n’est pas fait pour s’accomplir : il s’emporte chaque fois lui-même dans l’infini auquel il s’ouvre’ (2018c: 4). *Contra* Heidegger, Nancy draws attention to *Dasein*’s contours or skin as what guarantee the latter’s ‘aréalité’ (2000b: 39), that is, its emergence as an *area* which cannot close onto itself, or *lacks reality*, as per the privative prefix a-. Nancy speaks of ‘l’être-extatique de l’être lui-même’ (1990a: 23). This term, he warns, ‘ne définit aucune effusion, et moins encore quelque effervescence illuminée [mais] [...] l’impossibilité [...] d’une immanence absolue’ (1990a: 22). It defines *Dasein*’s openness as a spasm of ‘dis-position’ (2002: 98), a gesture away from closure, a dynamic spacing. *Dasein* is never *accomplished*. Rather, to quote Nancy again, ‘il s’emporte’ (2018c: 4). I therefore agree with Hoffman-Schwartz’s remark that ‘Nancy’s thinking of freedom [is] at the very limit of what might be indicated by the term “ontology”’ (2015: 95). Freedom, for Nancy, is ‘celle de l’être-libre de l’être’ (1988: 174), in both senses of the genitive: being is free, *including from itself*; it is an existence without an essence. Nancy thus reads Heidegger against himself, doing justice to being as thrown—*abandoned*, not *given*—into the world, thereby sidestepping the totalising trap that usually comes with ontology.

Being is ‘l’être abandonné’ to its own contours, that withdraw it (1983b: 144). Nancean finitude functions like a hyphen, ‘un trait tiré pour espacer toute union’ (2003a: 321). Crucially, this implies that there is no need to approach openness in terms of a project, as an *œuvre* to be realised: *Dasein* is always already *expeaused*, being-touched-and-touching, *Mitsein*. That is why Nancy speaks, after Blanchot, of ‘la communauté désœuvrée’ (1990a). Community *is* implied in being, in the *expeausition* of *corpus*. That is not to say that finitude should be considered a communal nature or shared attribute, however. As Watkin and Ignaas Devisch remark, that is Todd May’s mistake in *Reconsidering Difference* (1997: 41-42; Watkin 2009: 192; Devisch 2000: 254). If finitude is thought of as a force of deterritorialisation, to use Deleuzian vocabulary, a line of flight, ‘seule la limite est commune, et la limite n’est pas un lieu, mais elle est le partage des lieux, leur espacement’ (Nancy 1990a: 182). *Contra* Badiou, then, I argue that Nancy’s ontology should *not* be caricatured as a recuperation of finitude in the form of a foundational ‘être-ouvert’. Nancy ‘syncopates’ the very possibility of closure; his thinking of openness does not, unlike Heidegger’s, provide a new horizon for the world but rather attends to its opening according to the technics—or *ecotechnics*—of the articulations of bodies, ‘la factorielle de toutes nos peaux’ (2020: 148).

At this point, one may still be tempted to depict Nancy’s ‘ça s’ouvre’ as a prime mover opening new possibilities for our world. Nancy did write in *Être singulier pluriel* that ‘L’origine est un écartement’ (1996: 35). At stake here is the *genetic* value of finitude-as-spacing. In Western thought, *genesis* is usually approached with reference to the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, understood as ‘the production of something from nothing, whereby “nothing”, as the material cause of “something”, necessarily supposes a prodigious efficient cause and the prior existence of a creating subject [...] who would create with a view to a certain end’, as James explains in *The Fragmentary*

Demand (2006b: 233). In Nancy's thinking, by contrast, finitude—the *nothing* of existence—is not thought of in terms of *telos* or *outside* but is implied in *ex*-istence. As *Dasein*'s contour, finitude implies that 'On ne peut pas [...] "faire retour" sur [l'être] : il est toujours, déjà, là, mais ni sur le mode d'"être" (comme une substance), ni sur le mode du "là" (comme une présence)' (Nancy 2008a: 109). Rather, being is thought of in terms of a movement of *passing*—or *passage*, as per the French term used by Nancy in *La Déclosion* (2005a: 168; 176). Nancean finitude is not the *nihilo* out of which everything is created, but the creative force of/as existence: 'Le *ex nihilo* ne contient rien de plus, mais rien de moins, que l'*ex*- de l'*ex*-istence ni produite ni construite, mais seulement *étante*' (2002: 95). In Nancy's thinking, existence and the world are created through their *own* un-folding. Hence his use of a genitive in the title of *La Création du monde*: the creation *of* the world (objective genitive; the world as creature) is the creation *of* the world (subjective genitive; the world as creator). This *self*-creation is that of a black hole. As 'l'espacement de l'espace lui-même' (2005a: 230), the world is like 'un astre qui s'éteint et s'effondre de lui-même en lui-même, ouvrant dans l'univers, au centre de l'astre et de sa densité inouïe, le *trou noir* d'une absence de matière' (2000b: 66).

This recalls the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*. We have already seen that, whereas the doctrine of *homoousia* approaches the incarnation as the manifestation or *representation* of divine spirit through the production of substance, that of *kenosis* centres on the material *presentation* of God's withdrawal, in other words, on His *expeausition*. In 'Verbum caro factum', Nancy builds on the Greek *logos sarx egeneto* to stress that 'Si le verbe *a été fait* chair, ou bien si (en grec) il l'est *devenu* [...], c'est bien qu'il n'a pas eu à pénétrer à l'intérieur de cette chair tout d'abord donnée hors de lui' (2005a: 126). The body should not be seen as the envelope of a soul which it seeks to *represent*. Rather, *corpus* is the place, or taking-place (*l'avoir-lieu*), as flesh, of the alienation of God from

himself (2005a: 127). Nancy associates this divine alienation with ‘l’apparaître du monde’ (2005a: 100): ‘Dieu s’anéantit comme “soi” ou comme être distinct pour se “retirer” dans son acte—qui fait l’ouverture du monde’ (2002: 93). Nancy spots this approach to creation in all three Abrahamisms, if only in their mystical traditions. The Cabbalistic doctrine of *Tsim-Tsum*, for instance, states that God creates the world by *spacing* Himself (2002: 93). The Abrahamic *myth* of creation *ex nihilo* or, as Nancy puts it, ‘la fable d’un producteur supposé produire sans matériau’ (2005a: 100), appears to be haunted by ‘un *nihil* ouvert en monde’ (2005a: 100). Creation may thus be said to constitute a point at which monotheism withdraws the ground under its feet, provided that the latter resists the temptation of maintaining a residual privileging of the creator in regard to its creation as part of an emanating model of genesis. For Nancy, “‘Dieu est mort” veut dire : Dieu *n’a plus de corps*. Le monde n’est plus l’espace de Dieu ni l’espace en Dieu : il devient le monde des corps’ (2000b: 53-54; see Alexandrova 2012: 279). Hence his assertion that ‘après le Messie ne vient plus aucune espèce de messie, et vient une autre venue’ (2001a: 14). *Contra* Derrida’s ever-delayed God to come, Nancy thinks a *divine coming* in and as world, a *divine expeausition*.

In *La Création du monde*, Nancy initially referred to this divine coming in terms of *absentheism*. If this terminological choice was motivated by the will to avoid the dialectical baggage of the term atheism, Nancy quickly realised that ‘absentheism’ could be misread as inaugurating a *theism* of divine absencing (see Watkin 2011: 113-114). This misreading is all the more tempting given that Nancy draws a parallel between the ‘nothing’ of the event of worldly dis-enclosure and Hegel’s thinking of the good infinite, understood as ‘la présence actuelle et active du *rien* en tant que chose (*res*) de l’ouverture même’ (2005a: 20; see James 2012a: 258). It should now be clear, however, that Hegel approaches the good infinite as the *dialectical* union of the finite and the infinite with a

view to *totality*. By describing being in terms of passing or ‘passage’, and suggesting that ‘L’être [or, the world] n’est pas quelque chose : il est que ça continue’ (2001b: 61), Nancy decisively goes against the Hegelian dream of totalisation. Yet he must not be accused of embracing the bad infinite either. Nancy is categorical: there is no permanence in being’s self-withdrawal or ‘passage’, for the latter ‘ne vient pas sans effacer la Présence que la représentation voudrait désigner (son fond, son origine, son sujet)’ (2008a: 109). ‘Un éclair... puis la nuit !’, Baudelaire writes in ‘À une passante’ (1918: 242). This echoes my earlier discussion of *Noli me tangere*: Nancy uses the metaphor of Christ’s resurrection to highlight that any attempt at a transferral of the identical exposes the fact nothing ever returns *but that which does not return*. He thereby suggests that the logic of the return should *not* be seen as a guarantor of *stasis* and essentiality, but rather as an ontological *dynamic* which unfolds through *repeated* gestures of self-withdrawal or *expeausition*. If, in *Noli me tangere*, Nancy describes the movement of passing (or ontological ‘passage’) in terms of *continuity*, as ‘le prolongement infini de la mort’ (2003b: 73), it is not because death is eventually vanquished (as it would be the case according to the good infinite) or even infinitely expanded (as it would be the case according to the bad infinite), but because it is eternally re-enacted, in each ‘pas’ of the *passant*: Nancy conceives of ontological ‘passage’ in terms of a Rimbaudian eternity found again through the return of passing instants (2005a: 177). To re-write Rimbaud’s famous statement: ‘Je est un autre’, *at each instant, in each event, in each pas of the passant*. A helpful illustration is found in *L’Évidence du Film*. Nancy remarks that the continuity of a film arises from the discontinuation of images coming one after the other (2001b: 61). Such an observation resonates with Deleuze’s reversal of Platonism, which I study in chapter 4. ‘[L]’identité n’est pas première,’ Deleuze argues, ‘mais secondaire ; elle tourne autour du Différent’ (1968a: 59). In *L’Oubli de la philosophie*, Nancy similarly

stresses that ‘la différence ne s’oppose pas à l’identité : elle la rend possible’ (1986: 98-99). Being should not, therefore, be approached in terms of the good or the bad Hegelian infinite. Rather, in Nancy’s thinking, being appears as *infinitely finite*. By extension, he also conceives of creation itself as ‘chaque fois singulièrement surgissante’ (1996: 35). The creation *of* the world unfolds as the movement by which the world surpasses itself according to a transcendence ‘qui ne sort pas d’elle-même en transcendant’ (1994: 63), according to a *transimmanence*, an eternally repeated step *not* beyond God.⁵⁰

Contra Derrida, then, I argue that Nancean finitude has nothing to do with a prime mover. It is not the *alpha* and *omega* of the world but its inoperative spacing, the *ex* in *ex*-istence. In Nancy’s thinking, then, being’s openness ‘ne s’abîm[e] pas dans sa propre béance’ (2005a: 226). It is an ‘ouverture blanche’ (2011: 106), as he writes in reference to the *blank* space that both spaces and links, like a hyphen. Opening un-folds as an *infinitely repeated* presentation of being’s contours: ‘ça s’ouvre’ as well as ‘ça passe’. That critics, including Badiou and Derrida, overlooked this crucial point and described Nancy as ‘le “lieutenant” de Heidegger’, as Francis Guibal puts it (2004: 90), reminds me of Hollier’s reduction of the Batailleian *force* of excretion to the fixed concept and reachable realm of Heterogeneity with a capital H, as discussed in chapter 1. Critics seem to find it difficult to admit that finitude can be thought of as *dynamic* rather than *static*, *inoperative* rather than *functional*, which testifies to the resilience of identity in modern thought. By contrast, Nancy prompts us to think ontology otherwise than as the circumscription of being within a horizon of determination. He makes deconstruction less of a balancing act by anchoring the insufficiency found at the root of each being to an

⁵⁰ Hence my disagreement with Hutchen’s approach to Nancy’s thinking in terms of ‘open immanence’ (2005: 167). By omitting to mention the transcendence that opens immanence from within, Hutchens risks obscuring the dynamic of worldly unfolding central to Nancy’s work. One can mistake ‘open immanence’ for an immanent *Open*.

ontological condition *without however* succumbing to the totalisation that Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas see as inherent to ontological thinking. As Watkin eloquently puts it, Nancy's ontology of *expeausition* 'is neither grounded nor groundless' (2009: 174).

(3.6) To Touch or Not To Touch

An additional threat looms, however, over Nancy's ontology of *expeausition*: critics have highlighted its—supposed—vulnerability to what Derrida calls 'radical evil'. The coronavirus pandemic has recently emphasised that skin facilitates intrusions which are not necessarily benevolent. In *Corpus*, Nancy himself draws attention to the 'corps de misère, corps de famine, corps battus, corps prostitués, corps mutilés, corps infectés, corps bouffis, corps trop nourris, trop *body-built*, trop bandants, trop orgasmiques' that populate our modern world (2000b: 69), and remarks that they are 'surtout des corps sacrifiés' (2000b: 70). They suffer from *concentration*, as Nancy writes in reference to Nazi concentration camps, a mechanism which pursues '[n]on pas d'abord la multiplication des corps, mais l'unicité, l'uniformité de la plaie' (2000b: 69). Put otherwise, these bodies are thrown on the path to *closure*. This should not come as a surprise: given that being has no essence decided for it in advance, *expeaused* existence admits the free decision of closure. In 'La Décision d'existence', Nancy stresses that 'L'existence est décision d'exister (et/ou de ne pas exister)' (1990b: 113). One is free to decide to sacrifice oneself for the *Volk*, to erect new idols, to abuse the fragile skin of the world, 'dont tous les pores seraient enduits d'un mastic d'autosuffisance organique ou technique' (2020: 150). *Expeausition* thus comes with the possibility of its own undoing.

We have seen in chapter 2 that Derrida similarly considers that one's ethical opening to alterity comes with an exposure to the possibility of radical evil. He also

argues, however, that cultivating undecidability allows one to keep the latter at bay. Nancy, by contrast, has been accused of leaving us at the mercy of radical evil. As Ian James explains, insofar as it is conceived of ‘as an ontological given, our shared being would seem to be posited prior to any order of political decision or commitment, action or inaction’ (2005: 334). Nancy himself insists that ontological *expeausition*—and, by extension, any matter related to community and *être-les-uns-avec-les-autres*—must only ever be approached in terms of *désœuvrement*. This led political theorist Andrew Norris to argue that Nancy ‘is too content to rest with deconstructive aporias, and not sufficiently attentive to the inevitability, the necessity, and the dignity of political judgement’ (2000: 274). This seems to be confirmed by Nancy’s approach to the ‘retrait du politique’, a concept which he developed with his friend and collaborator Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. In 1980, the two thinkers set up the Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique. A necessary endeavour, they claim, in light of ‘the withdrawal of the field of political possibilities (*le politique*) such that a determinate [*mything*] form of politics (*la politique*) fills the whole political horizon’, as Watkin explains (2011: 183-184). The two thinkers’ philosophical attempt at countering the retreat of the political—by retracing it—has, however, been accused by Nancy Fraser, Simon Critchley and Bruno Bosteels, among others, of bordering on a retreat *into* the political, a privileging of the ontological over the ontic which overlooks the empirical reality of politics (Fraser 1984: 149-150; Critchley 1993: 84; Bosteels 2009: 192-193; James 2005: 333-336). Nancy’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s approach to the political may even be interpreted as requiring the dissolution of every institution, ideology or political construction.⁵¹ We have already seen in section

⁵¹ This accusation was also addressed to Deleuze (see Badiou 1977: 42). Avoiding radical evil implies exposing oneself to the possibility of lines of flight degenerating into a gesture of self-annihilation and anarchy, a possibility which Deleuze describes in terms of black holes scattered on the plane of immanence. I return to this in chapter 4.

3 that Nancy's approach to faith understood as openness to the withdrawal of ground comes with and as the exhaustion of its institutional vehicle. Even democratic institutions fail to attract Nancy's favour, for the latter still respond, Nancy argues, to the myth of the dissolution of community and rely on the myth of a subject 'maître de ses représentations, volitions et décisions' (2008b: 25; 1993: 141-142). 'Read crudely', Gerald Moore stresses, 'Nancy's speculation on the end of democracy would articulate the incompatibility of his concept of community with any form of modern democratic politics' (2011: 160). This not only feeds accusations of political quietism but also raises the question of Nancy's residual essentialism. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley argues that Nancy's distinction between politics and the political looks like a pursuit of the *essence* of the political, which is utterly at odds with his deconstructive endeavour (1999a: 201)—an accusation which extends to Nancy's approach to faith in the singular.

In light of Nancy's study of the dangers of Westerners' *entreprise mythante*, which I have discussed in section 1, it should be clear that Nancy's wariness of a co-implication of philosophy and politics is justified. In line with James (2005: 333) and Watkin (2009: 153-156), however, I do not think that such a wariness induces political quietism on Nancy's part. If from his thinking as well as from Derrida's, no determinate politics can be inferred, the former nevertheless proposes 'l'idée directrice, discutable et transformable, d'un guide élémentaire à l'usage de tous' (Nancy 2015b). The key to such a guide lies, I argue, in Nancy's cultivation of a sense of responsibility, responsibility not to shield from being's movement of passing, but rather to accompany it. If there is no essence but existence, *Dasein* is responsible for its own existence. *Désœuvrement* therefore requires *action*. In *Que faire ?*, Nancy exhorts his readers: 'ne vous contentez pas de lire. Faites quelque chose' (2016: 10). As Watkin notes in *Phenomenology or Deconstruction?*, however, looking at texts such as 'Dies Irae', 'La Décision d'existence',

and *L'Expérience de la liberté*, 'Nancy is clear that there can be no assumption about the values in relation to which a decision is to be made. The only free decision is the decision free of criteria of decision' (2009: 153). *Faire*, as Nancy understands it, is strictly intransitive (2016: 76-77): what matters is *that* one does, not *what* is done. Such an approach to decisionism recalls that of Derrida (James 2005: 345). As discussed in chapter 2, Derrida argues that responsible decisions cannot derive from mere compliance with a given norm for, in that case, 'ce n'est plus une décision responsable, c'est [...] le simple déploiement mécanique d'un théorème' (1999: 43). Critics doubt, however, that this is enough to foster responsible decision-making. David Ingram, in particular, has remarked that 'without some global idea of the good to be attained, of the subject to be emancipated, or of justice pure and simple, there would probably be no reason for judging at all, let alone engaging in politics' (1988: 116). If Nancy's thinking provides us with conceptual tools to articulate freedom of judgement, it does leave us without criteria for decision.

That does not mean, however, that it leaves us at the mercy of radical evil. In *L'Expérience de la liberté*, Nancy stresses that 'Refuser que la liberté se présente comme un arbitre placé en face de valeurs ou de normes transcendantes à sa propre transcendance finie, cela ne revient pas à refuser que la liberté, en décidant, décide du bien *ou* du mal' (1988: 174). Nancy does not simply reject the concepts of 'good' and 'evil', much as he does not simply reject the traditional concepts of metaphysics. Rather, he highlights that each decision *effectively decides* about good and evil, thereby reconsidering what other decisions have decided. This is why he associates decision with surprise and disappointment. In the absence of any transcendent value, each decision emerges as a 'secouss[e] qui déjou[e] nos attentes et dérang[e] nos accoutumances' (2016: 16; 1988: 183). Nancy's approach to *virtue* thus appears to rely on the term's etymological sense: it is not the moral quality of being oriented towards a fixed idea of 'the good', but 'l'élan,

poussé par une “valeur” qui n’est pas simplement un “bien” disponible et déterminé mais qui vaut à la mesure de cette poussée qui emporte précisément au-delà du déterminé’ (2010a: 72). Taking my cue from Nancy’s fondness for the double value of genitives, I argue that this virtue may be framed in terms of the responsibility *of* freedom: ontological freedom comes with responsibility towards our own existence, which is also responsibility towards the cultivation of this freedom. Our responsibility is not towards ‘the good’, but rather to decide in such a way as to allow further decisions to be made, as so many ‘possibilités de dérangement’ (2016: 57). Far from being guilty of quietism, then, I argue that Nancy calls upon our ontological responsibility to *faire*: responsible decision-making partakes in, and fosters, the creative unfolding of the world, thereby keeping recuperation at bay. It is in this way that, for Nancy, ‘l’*ethos* n’est rien d’extérieur ni de surimposé à l’être, il ne s’y ajoute pas et ne lui survient pas, il ne lui donne pas non plus de règles venues d’ailleurs’ (2001a: 105). Ethics, for Nancy, *is* ontology.

In *Le Toucher*, Derrida suggests, however, that Nancy’s emphasis on *touch* gets in the way of the responsibility *of* freedom. Embarking upon a study of the history of this concept, Derrida notes that a shared theological and metaphysical trajectory, which he describes as ‘hapto-onto-théo-téléologie’ (2000: 279), has identified touch not only as the measure of substance but also as the condition of its experience. As James stresses in ‘Incarnation and Infinity’, touch depends on ‘a transcendence of the infinite, its alterity and discontinuity in relation to the finite, but also at the same time its immediate presence within and its contact with the finite’ (2012a: 251-252). Building on Jean-Louis Chrétien’s study of Aristotle’s assertion that the human intellect *touches* the intelligible and Thomas Aquinas’ attention to the primacy of the intelligible over the sensible, Derrida remarks that the metaphysics of presence grounds the intelligibility of phenomenal appearance in ‘the touch of something radically other that modifies it,

namely, the pure intelligible, infinite spirit, the divine' (James 2012a: 251). Put otherwise, finite perception appears to depend on a transcendent infinite *making itself available for contact*. This recalls the Christian doctrine of hypostatic union. As James highlights, Jesus is 'a presence who touches the world with divinity and who allows divinity to be touched' (2012a: 250). This gives rise to an ontotheological law of touch, which Derrida phrases thus: 'On ne *touche* pas si on ne touche rien, si on ne touche à rien' (2000: 276). As testified by the need felt by the doubting Thomas to touch Christ's arisen body, touch functions as a measure of presence. In a rather defiant tone, arguably directed at Nancy, Derrida states that it is '[a]ux autres de démontrer, s'ils peuvent en apporter la preuve, qu'ils n'ont rien à voir, à faire, à toucher avec l'histoire de cette vérité' (2000: 278). By associating his ontology of being-touched-and-touching with the *kenotic* withdrawal of presence, indeed, Nancy appears to go against the millenaries-old *homoousian* 'intrigue philosophique du toucher' (Derrida 2000: 159). Yet Derrida doubts that the language of touch can be cleared of its ontotheological baggage.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Nancy speaks approvingly, in *Noli me tangere*, of Christ's instruction 'not to touch him'. Turning to the Greek of John, he remarks that the phrase '*Me mou haptou*' implies a refusal of being held back from *passage*, saved from the *anastasis* of death. Christ's *noli me tangere* means: 'ne cherche pas à toucher ni à retenir ce qui essentiellement s'éloigne' (2003b: 30). Refraining from touch is therefore aligned with Nancean deconstruction as a way of attending to being's infinite finitude. Not touching means accepting to 'se-tenir-debout devant et dans la mort' (2003b: 34), which echoes the Batailleian imperative to stand, through inner experience, 'à hauteur de mort' (*OCVII*: 242). Nancy thereby aligns himself with Hegel's suggestion that 'the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death [...], but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it' (2004: 19). Yet reading Hegel against himself, he

rewrites death away from the closure in which the history of metaphysics has put it. ‘Si la mort a fasciné la pensée de l’Occident,’ Nancy notes, ‘c’est dans la mesure où celui-ci a cru pouvoir construire sur elle son paradigme dialectique de la présence/absence pure’ (2008a: 107). Whereas Hegel approaches death as the driving force of his dialectical system, and whereas Heidegger *uses* it as a pivot between ‘le *Dasein* solitaire et le *Dasein* dans le *Volk*’ (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 2006: 89), Nancy describes death as the *contour* of life which *expeauses* it. Transposing Hollier’s point about Bataille’s relationship with Nietzsche, I argue that Nancy thereby proposes a *repetition* of Hegel that is ‘authentique jusqu’à la négation de l’authenticité’ (1973: 91-92; Nancy 1990b: 358-359), a heretical faithfulness which extends to Heidegger. By shedding light on the imperative *not to touch*, not to hold life back from death, Nancy does justice to being-toward-death, which Heidegger developed *and* betrayed. He thereby demonstrates a wariness of touch similar to Derrida’s, in what *seems* to be a contradiction of his ontology of *expeausition*. By suggesting that being is not simply exposed to the possibility of intrusion but itself relies on an ontological regime of touch, indeed, Nancy may be accused of contravening the responsibility *of* freedom, condemning his *kenotic* ‘ça s’ouvre’ to being circumscribed within the horizon of a closed Open. As James observes, ‘what is really at stake here is whether the “God who empties himself” of kenosis can ultimately be [...] recuperated by the “supreme God” who creates the world and maintains it as substance and grounded presence’ (2012a: 255). Put otherwise, does Nancy’s ontology of touch stand guilty of resurrecting God?

I believe that an answer is found, again, in *Noli me tangere*, where Nancy clarifies that, much as resurrection must not be reduced to the return of the Same, touch must not be restricted to a token of immediate presence. Reflecting on his recasting of resurrection as the *anastasis* of death, he notes that respecting Christ’s untouchability is what allows

Mary Magdalene to *touch on* ‘sa vérité de ressuscité’ (2003b: 28), the truth of the *anastasis* of death. Touch, in this case, is the opposite of holding back: it acknowledges departure. Like a hyphen, it brings into contact while respecting a distance, like Jesus raising his hands in the direction of Mary Magdalene so as to keep her at a distance, as is visible in Giotto’s, Alonso Cano’s and Jacopo da Pontormo’s respective rendering of *Noli me tangere* (2003b: 57-59). Nancy describes this *spacing* touch as a ‘*touche vraie*’ (2003b: 82), which hacto-onto-theo-teleology recuperated. The appropriative touch is also appropriated touch. Against this recuperation, Nancy draws attention to the spacing that conditions touch, ‘la ligne qui écarte le toucher du touché et donc la touche d’elle-même’ (2003b: 25). Far from invoking a higher truth of touch, he argues that the latter’s value lies in its suspension, one that is not performed ‘*après coup*’ (*OCXII*: 342), as Bataille would say, leaving touch *inachevé*, but rather unfolds as the truth of touch, its *inavènement*. As with myth, Christ’s instruction *not to touch* draws attention to—allows to *touch on*—the interruption of touch (subjective genitive—touch interrupts), the fact that touch brings into contact while always keeping at a distance, which leads, in turn, to the interruption of touch (objective genitive—touch is interrupted), the interruption of hacto-onto-theo-teleology. Nancean touch cannot, therefore, be said to carry the possibility of redemption: it does not *save* God from departure but rather *waves Him goodbye*. Using Derrida’s terms, Nancean touch functions as a ‘*salut sans salvation*’ (2000: 348). If *expeausition* comes with vulnerability, then, Nancy suggests that abandoning ourselves to our ontological condition of being-touched-and-touching keeps radical evil at bay. According to Nancy, paraphrasing Hegel (2004: 19), the life of Spirit is not the life that keeps itself *untouched* by devastation, but rather the life that lets itself be *touched* and *touches* according to a touch that is both interrupted and interrupting; it is the life that dares to *touch on* its own infinite finitude, its own passing, by simply waving

goodbye. Whereas ‘Derrida entend toucher avec une distance sceptique ou rabbinique’ (Nancy 2003b: 26), at the risk of keeping an idea of God unscathed, Nancy sheds light on our *responsibility to touch on what remains untouchable*, and thereby to keep in touch with our ontological condition, to ‘prendre en charge, on pourrait dire en gage, la *possibilité* de ce **mal radical** sans lequel on ne saurait bien faire’ (Derrida 2001a: 71). Against appropriation, which precisely creeps in when we lose *touch* with our being-touched-and-touching, Nancy calls us to hear *and respond* to a divine call; not the call of a divinity but a call that is, itself, the divine resonance of a world in diffraction.

It is here, finally, that we realise that faith, ethics and ontology, in Nancy’s thinking, are different names for the same (a-)reality, calling upon our responsibility to be faithful to being’s movement of passing. This explains why Nancy identifies faith—‘[c]ette vérité en quelque façon non religieuse de la religion’ (2018c: 3)—beyond the institutions of salvation traditionally called ‘religions’, in activities as diverse as the practice of music, the commitment to a social cause, the decision to have a child, or the act of philosophising (2018c: 2). To be sure, these activities may be performed according to calculating determinations, much as religions tend to obscure their faithful heart with *mything* gestures including the establishment of transcendent beliefs. We have seen in the first two sections of this chapter that Nancy is well aware that philosophy, for instance, has often followed, throughout history, an immanentist logic through efforts of systematisation which sometimes contributed to the establishment of totalitarian ideologies. Yet he also remarks that one may strive to think according to what he calls a *finite thinking*, that is, the cultivation of an intellectual gesture of dis-enclosure, a responsible commitment of thought to what remains unavailable and without guarantee, ‘pour le dire à la manière deleuzienne, un devenir-surprise de la pensée’ (Nancy 1995: 28).

(3.7) The Coexistence of Singularities

It should now be clear that this does *not* mean that Nancy calls for the dissolution of every institution and construction, whether political, religious or philosophical, and proclaims, instead, the ontological primacy of a universal structure of revealability. Insofar as he approaches faith as trust without postulation, Nancy breaks with both *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* as structures of *unveiling*. Faith, in Nancy's thinking, is not between or before the decision for the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit*, as Derrida's *khôra* still is through the suspension of these two poles in undecidability. *Khôra*, for Derrida, is the place of a secret that no revelation can exhaust, a place of resistance, of doubt, of affirmative agnosticism.⁵² In Nancy's thinking, by contrast, faith cannot be associated with a third *place*. Rather, it emerges as the ontological *spacing* that prevents space, sense, being, ethics or the religious from closing in on themselves, whether in the form of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit*. It is not between or before the decision for the primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit*, then; it is *otherwise* than this decision; it is the act of decision itself, the authentically free act of decision that breaks with presupposition and all criteria of decision. Nancy's thinking, much as James's epistle, does not postulate anything, including about the supposed essence of faith. It does not even carry within itself the possibility, albeit suspended, of an unveiling to come. Rather, it is 'tout appliquée [...] à l'acte de la foi' (2005a: 72). Crucially, we have seen in section 6 that, in order to be considered virtuous or *faithful*, every decision of existence must be made so that new decisions can be made. Each act of faith therefore calls for another one which, by reconsidering what previous decisions decided, prevents faith—or, indeed, virtue—

⁵² It is, perhaps, to this place that Derrida alludes in the letter to his friends read at his funeral on October 12th, 2004, which states: '*Je vous aime et vous souris d'où que je sois*' (2005: 6).

from closing in on itself in the form of a natural religion or universal Kantian morality. Dispelling any suspicion about a supposed residual essentialism, Nancy approaches faith as a ‘dépassement [...] tel que par nature il ne peut pas s’imposer comme dépassement accompli’ (2018c: 4). More specifically, as an attitude of openness to the infinite passing of the identical, Nancean faith shares the latter’s *continuous discontinuity* or *infinite finitude*: faith as *dépassement* ‘s’emporte chaque fois lui-même dans l’infini auquel il s’ouvre’ (2018c: 4). Much as the continuity of a film arises from the discontinuation—or *passage*—of images coming one after the other, I contend that the sense of continuity that justifies Nancy’s approach to faith in the singular arises from the recurring performance of singular acts of faith. In *Être singulier pluriel*, Nancy does remark that the Latin term *singuli* only exists in the plural for singularity ‘désigne l’un du un par un. Le singulier, c’est d’emblée *chaque un*, et donc aussi chacun *avec et entre* tous les autres’ (1996: 52).

This resonates with his refusal to subsume singular artforms, from poetry and photography to music, portraiture and dance, into a unified theory of Art with a capital A. As Alena Alexandrova explains, art, for Nancy, ‘is, or rather has, the potential of being the activity of creating the world’ (2012: 280). In line with Bataille, Nancy argues that the *artwork* answers the ontological imperative to *faire*, undoing *work* understood as an operation of production (2002: 63).⁵³ Crucially, insofar as each singular artwork and artform partakes in the faithful creation *of* the world, Nancy argues that these must not be subsumed into a unified theory of art in the singular or else their creative potential will be circumscribed and exhausted (1994: 163). If one cannot deny that a sense of continuity

⁵³ This explains why Nancy has shown considerable willingness to collaborate with artists, including choreographer Mathilde Monnier, who co-authored *Allitérations* and *Dehors la danse*. They even performed a ‘danced conference’, where the movements of dancing bodies accompanied those of Nancy’s thoughts, and the other way round (Morin & Gratton 2015: 12). Nancy’s performative writing style reflects such a preoccupation. He once confessed to Pierre-Philippe Jandin: ‘Je suis beaucoup plus touché si des gens me disent : “Je n’ai pas tout bien compris, mais ça m’a fait quelque chose”’ (2013: 29).

emerges from the plurality of singular artforms, Nancy remarks in *Les Muses* that ‘cette identité [...] n’est formée que par l’ensemble des pratiques dans leurs différences, sans que cet “ensemble” résorbe si peu que ce soit leur hétérogénéité’ (1994: 164). I argue that this may be extrapolated to Nancy’s thinking of faith, as testified by his recent admission, which I have already quoted, that, for him, the religious is ‘une chose identique à elle-même [...] qui revient partout et toujours’ (2019, personal communication, 1 October).

More precisely, commenting on a draft of this thesis, Nancy has stressed that:

Il nous faut considérer l'écart entre ‘religion’ au sens ordinaire populaire (rite, croyance) et ‘religion’ comme rapport à ce que vous appelez, et votre formule m’enchante, ‘différence non récupérable’, en tant que cela peut être un rapport dépourvu de tout rite et toute croyance en un ‘kérygme’ quelconque. Parler de ‘religion’ aujourd’hui semble revenir à se tenir entre les deux registres... Que dire de la multiplicité des croyances qui se déclinent de l’Inde aux populations animistes et au Shinto japonais, et puis à l’intérieur même du catholicisme... ? Que dire de cette multiplicité à la fois si hétérogène et en un sens si ‘identique à elle-même’ ? Et puis... que dire d’une Marie Chabbert qui pense et écrit sur la religion en étant aussi religieuse et en ne l’étant pas... (2019, personal communication, 1 October).

Nancean faith does not ‘save’ God from passing by establishing the primacy of *Offenbarkeit*, but rather accompanies God’s infinite passage through the *eternal recurrence of singular faiths*, or *acts of faith*, in the plural.

This explains Nancy’s assertion in *Des lieux divins* that, in his work, ‘Il n’y a pas de retour du religieux : il y a les contorsions et les boursoufflures de son épuisement’ (1997: 33). In *Difficult Atheism*, Watkin reads this sentence as an assertion that there will or should be a *complete* exhaustion of religion. He argues that ‘Nancy [...] must finally acknowledge the impossibility of atheism’s “last step” to completion and consistency, and thereby come up short of a post-theological integration’ (2011: 123). It should now be clear, however, that completion and consistency are not what Nancy seeks. Nancy has

recently clarified that, though he stands by his assertion that ‘un monde ouvert est [...] un monde sans religion’ (2010a: 58), he understands that one may feel the need to use the name ‘God’. ‘Pourquoi les religions ont-elles employé ce mot de “dieu” ? Pourquoi même en dehors de la religion n’est-il pas si facile de se passer de nommer dieu d’une manière ou d’une autre ?’, he asks. ‘Parce qu[’] [...] [à] cette dimension [of existence, being’s movement of passing, our ontological ‘passage’], il faut en effet pourvoir s’adresser, se rapporter. S’adresser, se rapporter, pourquoi ? Pour y être fidèle’ (2009: 27-28). Far from vouching for the disappearance of transcendent religions, Nancy admits that there must still be institutions and constructions, structures and scaffoldings (Forestier 2012). It will be recalled that Nancy never called for the end and final evacuation of myth. As James stresses, ‘the interruption of myth, for Nancy, is not demythologization. Interruption here is not simply the tracking of paradoxes, aporia or insufficiencies within discursive forms or belief systems in order to debunk their ideological underpinnings’ (2005: 342). Rather, James continues, it is ‘an opening towards, an exposure to, or a touching of, the shared world of finite existence’ (2005: 342). The interruption of myth thus carries within itself what James calls a ‘politics of interruption’ (2005: 333), that is, ‘an ungrounded, or post-metaphysical politics, which would displace or rather ceaselessly work to contest and suspend forms of politics premised on quasi-transcendental fictional myth’ (2005 : 347). Looking at religion specifically, Nancy calls us to cultivate the *continuously discontinuous* experience of the exhaustion of religion from within institutions, through the repeated performance of singular acts of faith. By shedding light on the fact that difference is what makes identity possible, Nancy draws our attention to the *struction* in ‘construction’: ‘Il est un pêle-mêle ou bien une “agglomération” [...] dans laquelle ça va dans tous les sens’ (in Forestier 2012). Constructions, including religions, are only ever the sum of a *plurality* of *singular* acts of faith that always already—and must unceasingly

again—challenge what is too often perceived as the unity of their edifice. For Nancy, then, one should never take values, dogmas or institutions for granted for:

la vérité de ‘dieu’ nous attend ailleurs que dans le fétichisme [...] [much as the truth of the political lies elsewhere than in determinate politics]. Ailleurs, vraiment ailleurs, à l’infini—ce qui n’est pas dans un autre monde mais qui s’ouvre ici et maintenant, chaque fois dans ce monde où nous existons. L’‘infini’ n’est rien d’énorme ou d’inatteignable. C’est simplement ceci : ne s’arrêter à rien de déterminé, fixé, identifié, nommé d’un nom supposé propre (2015b).

I argue that, by shedding light on—and fostering—the eternal return of the singular act of faith, Nancy opens religion to the limitlessness that constitutes its truth, to paraphrase the opening page of *La Déclosion* (2005a: 1). He thereby offers a way out of the definitional impasse evoked in the introduction: one can still speak of religion in the singular(-plural), without compromising its diversity. Both immanent and transcendent forms of religiosity do have a place in Nancy’s thinking, to the extent that one keeps *acting* in such a way that they are not left to close in on themselves, whether on a dogmatic structure or a supposed ‘essence’ of religion. More than the critical cultivation of doubt, or affirmative agnosticism, Nancy calls upon our responsibility to *faire* in the intransitive sense, to keep *creating*, thereby countering the dogmatism and universalism that feed post(-)secular currents today and proposing, as he himself suggested, ‘non le modèle mais l’idée directrice, discutable et transformable, d’un guide élémentaire à l’usage de tous *en régime de laïcité, de pluralité confessionnelle*’ (2015b, I emphasise).

This politics of interruption, however, extends beyond what is traditionally called ‘religion’ and religious coexistence. Nancy’s justified reservations regarding determinate forms of politics, including democratic institutions, do not prevent him from fostering a *passage à l’acte*. Rather, these reservations lead him to liberate *praxis* from the ideological postulations that too often circumscribe its field of action, thereby opening

the floor to authentic creation. In *Vérité de la démocratie*, Nancy associates this experience of political freedom and innovation with democracy itself. Clarifying his distrust of the latter, he argues that democracy ‘n’est pas une forme politique du tout, ou bien, et à tout le moins, n’est-elle pas *d’abord* une forme politique’ (2008b: 59), but rather should be seen as ‘un dépassement principal de l’ordre politique’ (2008b: 53). That does not mean that democracy is left ‘to come’, as in Derrida’s thinking, pushed back into an indeterminate future, along with preoccupations proper to the political sphere. Rather, for Nancy, democracy *is* the creative *coming* of the world to which we partake, here and now, through each decision that we make. For Nancy, this implies that the truth of democracy lies in communism, a communism which, he warns, ‘should lose its *-ism*’ (2010b: 150): whether national, familial, linguistic or religious, identity groups or communities should ‘rendre justice à la multiplicité et à la coexistence des singuliers’ (2002: 72), of which they are *con*-stituted. Building on Bataille’s approach to the community of the absence of community, Nancy calls for the advent of ‘une autre communauté, d’une autre *methexis*, où la *mimesis* du partage effacerait la mimique sacrificielle d’une appropriation de l’Autre’ (1990b: 105), that is to say, where the ‘common’ is thought of as an ‘ensemble sans l’être’, as Martin Crowley puts it, in reference to Derrida’s equivocal ‘vivre ensemble’ (2012: 467), or, to use Blanchot’s non-dialectical ‘without’, as an ‘ensemble sans ensemble’. For Nancy, our thirst for belonging must never obscure what he calls ‘le juif en nous’ (2018a), a figure which stands for ‘ce qui se retire de l’appartenance’ (2018a: 45). Echoing Derrida’s *Le Dernier des Juifs*, Badiou therefore calls Nancy ‘le dernier communiste’ (2004: 24): the *ultimate* communist being the one who proves unfaithful to the *-ism* in *communism*, preventing the latter from closing in on itself in the form of an immanentist ideology. What Nancy promotes is not *communism* per se, equality that dissolves into totality, but *community* understood as ‘l’égalité des incommensurables :

des singuliers absolus et irréductibles qui ne sont pas des individus ni des groupes sociaux mais des surgissements, des venues et des départs, des voix, des tons—ici et maintenant, chaque fois’ (2012a: 69). He thereby rethinks what is known in the Judeo-Christian tradition as *fraternity*. ‘Le “prochain” judéo-chrétien-islamique’, Nancy notes, ‘résidait dans le *particulier* et dans l’*universel*, dans la dialectisation des deux, qui ne manque pas de finir dans l’*universel*’ (2000b: 79). By contrast, Nancy approaches ‘thy neighbour’ as the intruder or Jew *within* who never becomes familiar and thereby *expeases* our irreducible plurality. Unlike Derrida, he still speaks of the relation to one’s neighbour in terms of *fraternity*, arguing that this term inherits from the Judeo-Christian tradition *both* its immanentist *homoousian* potential *and kenotic* value (1996: 44). Fraternity, Nancy argues, is inhabited by a spacing hyphen of ‘Judeo-Christianity’.

Fraternity must not be mistaken for tolerance, however. Nancy takes great care to highlight that the Jew within us must not simply be *tolerated*, but *loved*, in line with the Judeo-Christian commandment, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. It should be noted that, as per the title of his essay on the matter, Nancy thinks love ‘en éclats’, that is to say, as (singular-)plural. It includes, but is not limited to, ‘la charité et la volupté, l’émotion et l’obscénité, le prochain et l’enfant, l’amour des amants et l’amour de Dieu, l’amour fraternel et l’amour de l’art, le baiser, la passion, l’amitié...’ (1990b: 226-227). Crucially, breaking with traditional approaches to love which, inspired by the Christian doctrine of redemption, start with an incomplete individual self which strives to—dialectically—reach completion by being united with a loved one, one’s ‘moitié’ as the French states, Nancy argues that love not only preserves but celebrates and fosters the singularity of each of the parties involved for what is loved in the other is precisely his or her singularity, or as he puts it, ‘le fait que l’autre soit’ (2009: 104; 1990b: 225). Love thus marks the culmination of our ontological condition of being singular-plural for ‘Dans l’amour,

l'autre ne devient pas moi [...], mais les deux sont inséparables, ils ne peuvent pas se passer l'un de l'autre comme on dit, sans pour autant faire un, en étant justement deux' (2009: 99). To love is to love our *shared-but-not-common* singular plurality, that is to say, the equality of incommensurables. It is an expression of *faith* in what remains unavailable, as testified by the exchange of marital vows and the *engagement*, 'les fiançailles' in French, which shares the same etymological origin as *faith*. In *Noli me tangere*, Nancy thus translates Christ's command not to touch him into the following: 'aime ce qui t'échappe, [...] aime qu'il s'en aille' (2003b: 61). I therefore argue that Nancy's thinking of fraternity calls us to love our neighbour not *in the same way that* we love ourselves, but rather according to the *equality of incommensurables*. Nancy calls us to love our neighbour, *the fact that he or she is*; for this means embracing our singular plurality.

That I feel the need to refer to a Christian command to elucidate Nancy's approach to coexistence may, once again, arouse suspicion. Bernasconi may be right to suggest that Nancy 'is not always as intent on trying to avoid nostalgia as he might be, in his incessant insistence on recalling and reconstituting the West [and monotheism] as the destiny of humanity' (1993: 18). Nancy does sometimes fall for the temptation of keeping the divine alive in his thinking. In a 2002 discussion with Derrida and Guibal, for instance, he suggests that if he were to have a motto, it would be Eckhart's dictum 'Prions Dieu de nous tenir libres et quittes de Dieu' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 194). Guibal is quick to remark that Nancy has argued in *Des lieux divins* that 'Si nous devons passer un jour par-delà notre athéisme, ce sera pour ne plus même prier Dieu de nous délivrer de Dieu' (1997: 36). Having acknowledged the validity of Guibal's point, Nancy confesses his willingness 'de faire ou de mettre tout autre chose... "à cet endroit là", quand même' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 194), unusually using *faire* as a transitive verb. He even admits: 'j'essaie peut-être de ne pas dire autre chose que ça : il y a là [...] une certaine place et un

certain temps en tant que place et temps de... disons donc du divin, de la révélation, de l'ouvert' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 194). Nancy would thus fall for the temptation of keeping a *place* for the self-deconstructing divine of monotheism in his thinking.

Crucially, although he has always included Judaism and Islam in his analysis of the deconstruction of monotheism, Nancy refers to Christianity as 'la religion de la sortie de la religion' (2005a: 213). If he stresses in *L'Adoration* that 'Ce que je dis du christianisme ne lui confère pas un privilège' (2010a: 39), his suggestion that '[c]ela reviendrait plutôt à désigner en lui la moins privilégiée des religions, celle qui retient le moins bien, le plus difficilement, l'énergie proprement religieuse' (2010a: 39) does clearly signal a singling out of Christianity. Christianity appears throughout Nancy's works as *exemplary* of deconstruction and, by extension, as the most effective vehicle for faith. That it took Nancy no less than twenty-three years—from 1995, when 'La Déconstruction du monothéisme' was first published, to his 2018 'Religion sans passé ni avenir'—to explicitly extend his conclusions to non-Abrahamic traditions is also revealing. To be sure, that Nancy concentrates his analyses on monotheism, and Christianity in particular, is understandable given his education and intellectual background. Like Derrida, however, Nancy may be accused of only mentioning non-Abrahamic traditions in passing, in order to grant his conclusions a universal value. Besides, he gives very little detail about how exactly non-Abrahamic religions and the other supposedly 'virtuous' activities he mentions in 'Religion sans passé ni avenir' qualify as 'faithful'. Nancean faith, like Derrida's, seems to be modelled on *Christian* faith, its affinity with other religious traditions and virtuous activities being found '*après coup*' (Bataille *OCXII*: 342).

Even Nancy's critical distancing from the other identitarian facet—or *mything* potential—of Christianity has been accused of coming down to mere reactivism. Let us not forget that intrusion is, by definition, conceived of in relation and *reaction* to a system.

It is *infinite resistance from within*, as Nancy himself suggests (1990a: 198); resistance to closure, to identity, in other words, resistance to the main tenets of the ontotheological tradition. To be sure, Nancy's call to *désœuvrement* and his approach to abandoned being are better described as *a resistance to resistance*. Yet I agree with Watkin that it may now be time to acknowledge that Nancy's thinking still 'relies on the continuing existence of what it seeks to eradicate [though I find this term excessive when it comes to Nancean deconstruction]; it is unable to see beyond the horizon of resistance' (2011: 197). In *Que faire ?*, Nancy himself cites Alexander Garcia Düttmann, who notes that 'La résistance finit toujours par revenir à une intraitable tautologie. Elle ne fait que résister' (2016: 14). Keeping an eye fixated on the past, letting thought be burdened with old concepts and feeling responsible for resisting, suspending or deconstructing them does sustain a negative dynamic that somewhat hinders philosophy's differential potential. Based on the previous chapters, I believe that this also applies to Bataille and Derrida. Bataille, Derrida, and Nancy all promote difference *in reaction to* and *against* the undivided reign of identity. Their thinking thereby remains anchored to the tradition they wish to dis-enclose. To be sure, I am convinced that Bataille, Derrida, and Nancy went farther than any other thinkers in the pursuit of a rigorous approach to God's death, and by extension, of a thinking of difference that is not ultimately recuperated. That does not mean, however, that this is far enough. The question that remains is whether difference can ever be thought of other than in reaction and as resistance to the history of philosophy which has hitherto repressed it. Is it possible to wipe the slate clean, to stop looking back and think difference *in itself* without constantly referring to—and striving to distinguish oneself from—the tradition that enslaved it? If such a thinking of difference exists, I believe it must be in the work of the thinker who designates himself as 'le plus dénué de culpabilité de faire de la philosophie' (Deleuze 1990: 122), namely, Gilles Deleuze, to whom I now turn.

Chapter 4 – Gilles Deleuze: The Innocent Iconoclast

In 1995, at the time of Gilles Deleuze's death, Derrida and Nancy testified to a profound affinity with Deleuze's endeavour, announced in the Foreword to his 1968 *Différence et répétition*, to 'penser la différence en elle-même, et le rapport du différent avec le différent, indépendamment des formes de la représentation qui les ramènent au Même' (1968a: 1-2; Derrida 1995a; Nancy 1998: 116). Despite what Derrida describes as 'une proximité [...] presque totale dans les "thèses"' (1995a), however, Deleuze is not commonly associated with the Bataille-Derrida-Nancy line of thought. Insurmountable differences—'des distances trop évidentes dans ce que je nommerais, faute de mieux, le "geste", la "stratégie", la "manière"', as Derrida admits (1995a)—separate Deleuze from other thinkers of difference. Central among these is the fact that he refuses to let himself be suffocated by the history of philosophy, whose legacy has weighed upon the shoulders of generations of philosophers in the form of an injunction which Deleuze voices thus: 'Tu ne vas quand même pas oser parler en ton nom tant que tu n'auras pas lu ceci et cela, et cela sur ceci, et ceci sur cela' (1990: 14). In the second half of the twentieth century, this legacy has even turned into a curse: faced with the closure of metaphysics, Deleuze's *contemporains* feel responsible for deconstructing their predecessors' systems and striking a fatal blow to God so as to open new horizons for thought. By contrast, Deleuze admits feeling blithely unconcerned by the overcoming of metaphysics (1990: 122). In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, he and Félix Guattari even express their surprise that many thinkers still concern themselves with God's death (2005: 89). As far as Deleuze is concerned, philosophy has its own raw material that allows it to think difference without feeling responsible for suspending or deconstructing old ontotheological concepts. By Deleuze's own admission, he should, therefore, be considered as 'le plus naïf parmi les

philosophes de [sa] génération. Chez nous tous, on trouve des thèmes comme la multiplicité, la différence, la répétition. Mais j'en propose des concepts presque bruts, tandis que les autres travaillent avec plus de médiations' (1990: 122).

One may, however, wonder how Deleuze proposes to think difference in itself if not by deconstructing, first, the legacy of ontotheology. Given his conspicuous lack of interest in the death of God, and in religious matters more generally, it may also seem contradictory to include him in a thesis that centres on figures who qualify as deicides. In what follows, I delve into the constellation of Deleuze's works, whether written alone or with Guattari, to justify my description of Deleuze as a faith(-)ful deicide. I start by demonstrating that his approach to difference unfolds as a 'tranquil' form of atheism, as per Deleuze's own terms (1988b: 7), one which relies on a redirection of belief—or 'conversion de la croyance' (1985: 224)—away from transcendence towards *this* world. As I highlight in sections 3 to 5, however, Deleuze's *ontological* thinking, his reliance on Spinoza, Leibniz, and Bergson as primary philosophical inspirations and his desire to overcome nihilism raise legitimate suspicions of foundationalism and residual idolatry. In sections 6 and 7, I therefore turn to the 'geological' ethics that Deleuze develops with Guattari in *Mille plateaux*, an ethics which pursues *both* lines of flight *and* processes of territorialisation, and argue that it not only escapes recuperation but also opens new perspectives for thinking (religious) pluralism in a way that does not rely on the tenets of mainstream secularism, but rather unfolds as a faith-ful ethics of becoming-secular.

(4.1) The Judgement *of* God

Deleuze opens *Différence et répétition* with the assessment that one of the greatest failures of the history of philosophy is to have badly posed the question of difference by

approaching it as 'la figure du Mal promise à l'expiation' (1968a: 44). With this remark, Deleuze aligns himself with the thinkers of his generation who, having read Heidegger, denounce ontotheology's privileging of identity over difference. More specifically, he signals that philosophy has, so far, been hindered in its capacity to think difference by a *moral* stance inherited from Plato. By locating the essence of things in the non-physical realm of Ideas, Deleuze argues, Plato contributed to structuring our view of the world in terms of a comparative play of two similitudes: 'la similitude exemplaire d'un original identique et la similitude imitative d'une copie plus ou moins ressemblante' (1968a: 166). Plato judges things and beings of this world based on their *resemblance* with an essence. The more the copy differs from its model, the more negatively it is judged. As for the copy which has lost all resemblance to its model, namely, the simulacrum, it is rejected. In the *Sophist*, Plato takes philosophy itself as an example. He lists presuppositions on what it means to think. 'D'après cette image,' Deleuze notes, 'la pensée est en affinité avec le vrai, possède formellement le vrai et veut matériellement le vrai' (1968a: 172). As per Plato's theory of Ideas, then, 'true' philosophers may be distinguished from imposters based on their affinity with truth. As for sophism, it is rejected as a *simulacrum* of philosophy for it only pretends to dispense truths, professing contradictions instead. Plato thereby appears to inaugurate what Deleuze terms 'une théologie représentative' similar to that of Christianity four to five hundred years before the latter (1968a: 41). Christian theology does posit that human beings were created in God's image and considers *sinful* every action that may lead us to lose our resemblance to God's divine qualities (1968a: 167). Insofar as it has lost all resemblance to its *idol*, the simulacrum is considered 'demonic' within Plato's theory of Ideas. Philosophy itself is required to reject it, if it is to conform to its idealistic image. With Plato, philosophy inaugurates itself as *idolatrous* and *representative*, which condemns difference to only ever being conceived

of negatively, in relation to and rupture with the order of representation. Put otherwise, difference itself becomes a blind spot of thought. Even rebellious attempts at pursuing difference-as-sin are doomed to fail, for they recognise, and thereby dialectically serve, the order of representation. Though only a teenager, Deleuze was in the audience when, on March 5th, 1944, during what is now known as the ‘Discussion sur le péché’, Klossowski warned Bataille that ‘Être tombé dans les mains du Dieu vivant, c’est d’abord se reconnaître coupable devant lui’ (Bataille *OCVI*: 328; Dosse 2007: 116). So long as an action is considered *sinful*, the moral order remains. In *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze argues that this is how St Paul facilitated Christianity’s success in the first place. By suggesting that God died to redeem the sins of the humanity that put Him to death, he diverted God’s murder from its critical purpose, imbuing Christianity with guilty conscience and guaranteeing God’s survival as humanity’s eternal creditor (1983b: 162).

We have seen in the previous chapters that this dialectical logic is what led the later Bataille, as well as Derrida and Nancy, to search for ways of approaching God’s death more rigorously.⁵⁴ Deleuze shares these thinkers’ concern as he, too, wishes to have done with the image, or *idol*, of thought. Thinking difference itself does require the liberation of thought from its commitment to resemblance and representation. Anticipating Nancy’s thinking of/as *désœuvrement* and ‘finite thinking’, Deleuze may be said to vouch for a *naïve* or *raw* form of thinking, one that would not have to comply with a preconceived image of what it ought to be. He therefore assigns philosophy a twofold *critical* and *creative* task. As Deleuze stresses, ‘Les conditions d’une véritable critique et d’une véritable création sont les mêmes : destruction de l’image de la pensée qui se présuppose elle-même, genèse de l’acte de penser dans la pensée même’ (1968a: 182). The question

⁵⁴ Rather frustratingly, Deleuze will go on to misconstrue Bataille’s work as that of a ‘séminarist[e] sous la loi d’un pape ou d’un curé’ (Deleuze & Parnet 1996: 58), limiting himself to a consideration of Bataille’s interwar pursuit of difference-as-sin.

remains how to propose such a *genetic critique* of the idol or image of thought while staying clear of *moral judgement*. In the previous chapters, I have argued that Bataille, Derrida, and Nancy go to great lengths to come up with a non-dialectical *critique* of God, and by extension, with a thinking of difference that is not ultimately recuperated within the order of representation. However, Deleuze considers that an interruptive or deconstructive approach—such as the one evidenced, I contend, by the Bataille-Derrida-Nancy line of thought—grants too much importance to what (or whom) one seeks to turn one’s back on (1983b: 197). Bataille, Derrida and Nancy may be accused of losing sight of difference itself by keeping their eyes fixated on the object of deconstruction. It should now be clear that the most faithful deicide is *not* the one whose hands are stained with divine blood and whose nights are haunted by the memory of this holy murder, much as the most violent iconoclast is *not* the one who throws idols into the fire. We saw with Bataille that a non-dialectical gesture of sacrifice requires that the sacrificer and all those who attended the ritual die in turn. No witness should be left alive to mourn the departed, and thereby facilitate his or her survival. The most faithful deicide, who finally has done with God’s moral order, must therefore be *innocent* of God’s murder. In *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze thus suggests that thinkers of difference should not strive to kill God or burn the image of thought, but rather to think a concept of difference which ‘n’irait pas ou “n’aurait pas à aller” jusqu’à l’opposition et la contradiction’ (1968a: 2). Why should one attempt to free difference from the identitarian legacy of ontotheology when one can rethink difference positively without any reference to an idol, *whether dead or alive*?

According to Deleuze, the existence of an idol against which difference is judged is not at all self-evident. He argues that it is *only* because Plato needed to establish criteria for distinguishing ‘true’ pretenders from ‘false’ ones that he came up with his theory of Ideas (1968a: 166). In the *Sophist*, Plato himself recognises that simulacra have not

resemblance but *difference* as their internal principle. '[S]i le simulacre se rapporte lui-même à un modèle,' Deleuze notes, 'ce modèle ne jouit plus de l'identité du Même idéal, [...] il est au contraire modèle de l'Autre, l'autre modèle, modèle de la différence en soi' (1968a: 167). Whereas copies are conceived of in relation to a model, simulacra emerge outside of a relationship of resemblance, likeness (or lack thereof) being identified 'après coup', to use Bataille's vocabulary (*OCXII*: 342). For Deleuze, then, resemblance to an idol should be seen as a working criterion that Plato arbitrarily posited so as to distinguish between pretenders. Having done with Plato's moral order therefore does not require any negation of the idol. It implies approaching difference positively, *before* any mention of resemblance, in what may be described as a 'reversal' of Platonism. Difference should not be judged according to a pre-existing moral order, nor gain its freedom through the latter's deconstruction, much as thought should not be judged according to its idealistic image, nor gain its freedom through the latter's deconstruction. Rather, both emerge as *innocent*: neither judged (by idols) nor judging (of idols), but *irresponsable* (1983b: 25). Only by having done with the judgement of God in both senses of the genitive may philosophy 'sortir de sa caverne', and difference, 'cesser d'être un monstre' (1968a: 45).

A priority for Deleuze is, therefore, to rethink critique itself, in such a way that it does not rely on external criteria of judgement—on *idols*. In the work which first gained him recognition, namely, his 1962 *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze remarks that Kant initiated such a metacritique by suggesting that 'on ne devrait pas chercher dans la raison des erreurs venues d'ailleurs, corps, sens ou passion, mais des illusions provenant de la raison comme telle' (1983b: 104). Kant's critique of reason is *immanent*. Deleuze notes, however, that it is still driven by a desire to judge. Kant displaces judgement from the outside to the inside, 'fai[sant] de la raison à la fois le tribunal et l'accusé' (1983b: 104). This displacement is incomplete because Kant conditions the workings of reason to the

power of synthesis of a transcendental subject. His critique allows for an interiorisation of the identitarian order, a gesture that partakes of the imitative replacement of the God-Man by the Man-God in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as discussed in the introduction. Yet Deleuze asks, 'Croit-on qu'en installant en nous le prêtre et le législateur, nous cessions d'être avant tout des fidèles et des sujets ?' (1983b: 106).

Against Kant, then, Deleuze turns to Nietzsche, who, he argues, develops an immanent critique that breaks with the judgement *of* God in both senses of the genitive. This might seem surprising in light of Nietzsche's texts which condemn the Christian moral order for its devaluation of life (God judges, subjective genitive) and stage violent confrontations between Dionysus and the crucified (God is judged, objective genitive). In 'The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead', Heidegger even suggests that Nietzsche's *dualist opposition* to the Christian God extends to the realm of Ideas, which is preserved by negation. Yet Deleuze nevertheless maintains that 'on défigure Nietzsche quand on en fait le penseur de la mort de Dieu' (2004b: 138). To be sure, Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche starts like Heidegger's: both describe Nietzsche as a thinker of immanence. For Deleuze, however, Nietzsche does not conceive of immanence *as opposed to* transcendence but rather approaches all that is (phenomena, organisms, and so on) as the symptom of an *immanent synthesis* of forces of different quantities: active forces have a greater quantity than, and therefore dominate, reactive ones which, having a lesser quantity, obey other forces (1983b: 58-59). This synthesis is not a chance encounter of forces within an immanent milieu ontologically prior to the forces themselves and with a reality of its own opposed to transcendence. In Nietzsche's thinking, by contrast, 'toute réalité est déjà quantité de force' (1983b: 45). *Contra* Heidegger, then, Deleuze argues that Nietzsche's thinking is *pluralist* rather than *dualist*, and that his approach to immanence has nothing to do with a dialectical opposition to transcendence.

To be sure, the dichotomy between reactive and active forces does *look* like a form of dualism (1983b: 9). Echoing my critique of Hollier's reading of Bataille's distinction between appropriation and excretion in section 4 of chapter 1, however, Deleuze argues that these must not be confused with emanating grounds within a dualist system. Whereas Bataille sheds light on the eternally recurring mutual interruption of the forces of heterogeneity and homogeneity, which maintains them in a state of 'inachèvement', Deleuze draws attention to the fact that, in Nietzsche's thinking, active and reactive forces themselves depend on a *differential*: 'Rappelons-nous que l'essence de la force est sa différence de quantité avec d'autres forces, et que cette différence s'exprime comme qualité de la force' (1983b: 56). If there is a point of origin in Nietzsche's ontological system, then, it is not the force itself, nor its quality, but a *differential of quantity*. Unlike Bataille's insufficiency of being, Derrida's originary 'default' of origin and Nancy's primordial finitude, which unfold as gestures of self-withdrawal, Nietzsche's differential in forces' quantity *positively generates* forces' quality. It is, as Deleuze puts it, 'la différence dans l'origine' (1983b: 8). In *Logique du sens*, Deleuze highlights that Nietzsche inherited this line of thought from the Epicureans, who traced the encounter of atoms in the vacuum back to the *clinamen*, which stands as 'la détermination originelle de la direction du mouvement de l'atome [...] : une différentielle de la matière' (1969: 311). In Nietzsche's thinking, this differential is called the 'will-to-power'. Historically, the concept has been associated with a thirst for power (*pouvoir*). The manipulation of Nietzsche's theses by the Nazis to accommodate their bellicose worldview is to blame. By contrast, Deleuze argues that the will-to-power 'wills' nothing in particular, especially not power. Rather, the will-to-power is the differential and genetic element of force, its inner will and creative power (*puissance*) (1983b: 57).

According to Deleuze, Nietzsche's philosophy of the will 'est la vraie réalisation de la critique, la seule manière de réaliser la critique totale' (1983b: 1). By suggesting that everything exists as the symptom of a synthesis of forces which depends on a creative *puissance* within the force, a *puissance* which can never reach satisfaction for it admits no object, Nietzsche does propose a fierce immanent critique of equilibrium and terminal states. Forces can never be considered as fixed emanating grounds, and all phenomena, things and beings of this world should be seen as *becoming* rather than *being*. Even transcendent values must be considered in light of the forces of which they are but a symptom. 'Contre ceux qui soustraient les valeurs à la critique, se contentant d'inventorier les valeurs existantes ou de critiquer les choses au nom des valeurs établies' (1983b: 2), Deleuze notes, Nietzsche suggests that 'ce sont les valeurs qui supposent des évaluations, des "points de vue d'appréciation", dont dérive leur valeur elle-même' (1983b: 1). I argue that he thereby allows for a rethinking of critique—a reevaluation of values, as per Nietzsche's terms (2005: 11)—similar to that which I have found in Nancy's work in the previous chapter. Both Deleuze('s Nietzsche) and Nancy displace critique from the reactive operation of selection based on pre-determined values to the active and genetic ontological gesture that gives values their values and transforms them. Both thereby challenge transcendent moral orders and prevent the very positing of idols by anchoring values to what Deleuze calls an ontological plane of immanence.

(4.2) A Tranquil Atheism?

However, I argue that Deleuze does not react in the same way as Nancy to the fact that their rethinking of critique challenges transcendent moral orders. While Nancy stays at God's bedside with a half-veiled feeling of loss, as discussed in chapter 3, Deleuze argues

with Guattari that ‘L’athéisme n’est pas un drame, mais la sérénité du philosophe et l’acquis de la philosophie’ (2005: 89). For Deleuze, thinkers like Nancy are unprepared to face the twilight of idols due to their attachment to Hegelian negativity. ‘Comme d’autres ont le vin triste,’ Deleuze writes, ‘une telle pensée a la destruction triste’ (1983b: 206). By focusing their philosophy on the interruption or deconstruction of God, Bataille, Derrida and Nancy risk losing sight of difference itself. Their efforts to shed light on the ‘default’ of origin may even be accused of serving the *judgemental* purpose of exposing the ideal of identity for being a dangerous illusion. By contrast, Deleuze is uninterested in the tragic fate of the idol—or indeed, of the ideal of identity. He argues that ‘la philosophie de la volonté selon Nietzsche doit remplacer l’ancienne métaphysique : elle la détruit et la dépasse’ (1983b: 95). For him, philosophy does not need to refer to any transcendent values or idols, whether dead or alive, but should rather accompany the will-to-power by becoming an ‘art critique’ (1983b: 121). As Deleuze writes, philosophy should strive to ‘rapporter toute chose, et toute origine de quelque valeur, à des valeurs ; mais aussi rapporter ces valeurs à quelque chose qui soit comme leur origine et qui décide de leur valeur’ (1983b: 2). Through this exercise in *genealogy*, as Deleuze puts it (1983b: 2), philosophy itself takes part in the process of evaluation from which values arise: ‘L’élément différentiel n’est pas critique de la valeur des valeurs, sans être aussi l’élément positif d’une création’ (1983b: 3). Philosophy sheds light on, *and accompanies*, the will-to-power at work within all that exists, thereby itself adopting differential genesis rather than resemblance as its internal principle. For Deleuze, *this* is the only way to ‘faire de la philosophie à “coups de marteau”’ (1983b: 1), as per the subtitle of Nietzsche’s iconoclastic *The Twilight of Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Hence my disagreement with Mazzino Montinari (1996), Joseph Ward (2010: 102-103) and Paolo D’Iorio (2000). If they are right to remark that Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche relies on fragments from the French edition of *The Will to Power* which have been revealed

To be sure, such a differential approach to thinking resonates with that of Nancy. As explained in chapter 3, Nancy fosters ‘un devenir-surprise de la pensée’ (1995: 28), a responsible commitment of thought to ontological genesis. Yet as Nancy himself admits, a gap remains between their two approaches: whereas he focuses on a gesture of passing, hollowing out, or ‘creusement’ (1998: 122), Deleuze recentres philosophy on creation, the event of difference itself, *with no consideration for what is lost in the process*. ‘[C]’est la même chose, pas le même négatif’, Nancy explains (1998: 122). Deleuze’s iconoclasm is joyful or Dionysian; it does not ever look back. Unlike Bataille’s practice of joy in the face of death, Deleuze’s joyful destruction is not even thought of as *sinful*. For Deleuze, Dionysus is not the god of sin but ‘le dieu pour qui la vie n’a pas à être justifiée’ (1983b: 18), the Great Irresponsible, whose actions *differ* from those of the crucified without reaching contradiction within a pre-established dualist order (1983b: 221; see Norman 2000: 194-195). Deleuze thus inaugurates ‘une philosophie pour qui [...] l’inexistence ou même la mort de Dieu ne sont pas des problèmes, mais au contraire des conditions qu’il faut considérer comme acquises’ (1988b: 7). At odds with mainstream forms of atheism, God’s death is not acquired in blood, nor thought of as a condition of thought to which one constantly refers back. Rather, it is assumed as part of a thinking of/as differential genesis. As Daniel W. Smith notes, this ‘tranquil’ form of atheism comes with ‘neither the antagonism of the “secular” who find the concept of God outmoded, nor the angst or mourning of those for whom the loss of God was crisis-provoking, nor the faith of those

as editorial errors, I argue that this should not be held against Deleuze. For Deleuze, being a philosopher implies ‘manier l’élément différentiel comme critique et créateur’ (1983b: 3). *Nietzsche et la philosophie* should not, therefore, be judged based on whether it identifies the ‘true’ meaning of Nietzsche’s concepts. Echoing Bataille’s, Derrida’s and Nancy’s faithfully heretical approach to their predecessors, Deleuze argues that doing philosophy implies ‘arriver dans le dos d’un auteur, et lui faire un enfant, qui serait le sien et qui serait pourtant monstrueux’ (1990: 15). To be sure, that Deleuze speaks favourably of monstrosity here arouses suspicions of a residual moral standpoint. I return to this in section 5.

who would like to retrieve the concept' (2001: 167). It remains *without drama*, which for Deleuze is 'seul principe d'un violent athéisme' (1983b: 4).

As early as in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, however, Deleuze nuances his atheism by noting that theistic forms of thinking, too, may foster joyful destruction. Dionysus, after all, is a god and the crucified himself 'se définit par un joyeux message, il nous présente une vie qui n'est pas celle du christianisme' (1983b: 164), which rather owes its guilty conscience to St Paul. In a 1980 lecture, Deleuze even remarks that the monotheistic God has long been used by philosophers and artists as a springboard for creation. Reversing Dostoyevsky's famous statement that *without God*, everything is permitted, Deleuze highlights that, with God, who transcends the world as we know it, philosophers and artists have an opportunity to transcend the constraints of illustration and representation: concepts and forms 'perdent toute nécessité d'être vraisemblables, d'être exactes, de ressembler à quelque chose' (1980). For Deleuze, this implies that 'l'athéisme n'a jamais été extérieur à la religion: l'athéisme, c'est la puissance-artiste qui travaille la religion' (1980). This line of argument recalls that which led me, in the previous chapters, to suspect Bataille, Derrida and Nancy of promoting postsecularism. Like these thinkers, who shed light on the heterogeneous heart of religion (respectively, the self-deconstruction of monotheism and the auto-immunity of religion), Deleuze attends to the atheistic force that deconstructs monotheism from within. One may therefore wonder, as Derrida did with respect to Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity, whether Deleuze's (not-so-tranquil) atheism is not itself a *religious victory*, that is, the realisation of religion's creative potential. One could even go so far as to suggest that Deleuze values the immanent potential of religions in much the same way as a mystic or an apophatic theologian. As a matter of fact, in the last decade, Deleuze's work has become increasingly popular among reformist theologians, as testified by publications

such as Christopher Ben Simpson's *Deleuze and Theology*, F. Le Ron Shults' *Iconoclastic Theology* and Kristien Justaert's *Theology After Deleuze* (for a comprehensive list, see Roberts A. 2016: 152-160). Islamic theologian Reda Benkirane also sees Deleuze as a primary source of inspiration for his 'reconquête du sens' within Islamic thought, along with Averroes, Ibn Khaldun, Spinoza, and Iqbal, among others (2017: 20).

One should not, however, jump to the conclusion that Sartre's description of the early Bataille as a 'new mystic' applies to Deleuze. Already in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze clarifies that religions disavow themselves in their own atheism. He even argues that 'chaque fois que Nietzsche nous parle [...] d'une religion sans ressentiment ni mauvaise conscience, il s'agit d'un état où la religion se trouve précisément subjuguée par des forces d'une tout autre nature que la sienne' (1983b: 165). In *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that: 'Il y a religion chaque fois qu'il y a transcendance, Être vertical, État impérial au ciel ou sur la terre, et il y a Philosophie chaque fois qu'il y a immanence' (2005: 46). The atheistic force deconstructing religions from within would thus be of *philosophical* nature. 'Peut-on parler d'une "philosophie" [...] juive, islamique ?', they ask. 'Oui, dans la mesure où penser se fait sur un plan d'immanence' (2005: 89). Yet does not Deleuze's insistence on the philosophical forces within religion testify to a postsecular attempt at 'saving' religion from itself in stark contradiction with his supposedly tranquil atheism? Does not Deleuze expose himself to transferring theological categories of thinking from given revelations (*Offenbarung*) to the creative *puissance*, or revealability (*Offenbarkeit*), associated with philosophy, as the capital P of 'Philosophie' in the above-mentioned quotation seems to suggest (2005: 46)?

It will be recalled from the previous chapters that Bataille and Derrida kept their eyes fixated on the God of transcendent religions, refraining from providing an answer to the question of the ontological primacy of *Offenbarung* or *Offenbarkeit* in order not to

fall into the trap of foundationalism. Like Nancy, Deleuze does not take such precautions, arguing, instead, that the destabilisation of all systems—including religions—has its roots in the ontological system itself. Nancy and Deleuze resist foundationalism, however, by suggesting that the point of origin of their ontology is ‘un écartement’ (Nancy 1996: 35) or ‘la différence dans l’origine’ (Deleuze 1983b: 8). By stressing that the synthesis at the roots of all that is (or becomes) is that of a pluralism of forces, Deleuze distances himself from the thinking of the One: he does not conceive of multiplicity as the fragmentation of a greater whole, nor as the emanation of a pre-existing entity, but rather as *synthesis*, thus initiating the Copernican revolution associated with the reversal of Platonism: ‘l’identité n’est pas première, mais secondaire ; elle tourne autour du Différent’ (1968a: 59). However, we have also seen that he identifies a differential and genetic element within the forces from which the difference in the origin *ensues* (1983b: 56). One may thus be tempted to describe the will-to-power as the origin and motor of the force. Like Heidegger’s ‘last god’ (1999: 289), the will-to-power opens possibilities for our world.

This is a serious allegation, for it amounts to accusing Deleuze of replicating the identitarian order he seeks to escape. It amounts to seeing his philosophical ‘child’ with Nietzsche as a new Messiah; not a Derridean one, who always remains to come, but one who inaugurates the rule of a new *idol*. This seems to be confirmed by Deleuze’s choice of vocabulary when he signals that neither he nor Nietzsche ‘ne laissons rien subsister de la place [transcendante de Dieu] elle-même, [...] nous voulons un autre idéal à une autre place, [...] une *toute autre volonté*’ (1983b: 113). As Todd May remarks in *Reconsidering Difference*, Deleuze may be compared to Levinas insofar as he threatens to replace the tyranny of the Same, or the One, with the tyranny of the *Wholly Other*, Difference with a capital D (1997: 2). Deleuze himself admits that, by suggesting that philosophy has differential genesis rather than resemblance as its internal principle, he proposes a new

image of thought centred on difference itself (1983b: 123), which seems utterly at odds with his iconoclastic endeavours. According to Badiou, Deleuze's fiercest opponent and critic, Deleuze should thus ultimately be seen as an enemy of difference: he undermines the possibility of radical change by limiting everything there is to a *monism* of becoming which, as Deleuze and Guattari did write, is 'déjà accompli en tant qu'il procède' (1973: 458; Badiou 1977: 40-41). Slavoj Žižek similarly wonders whether Deleuze's philosophy of/as becoming does not 'effectively render a kind of Plotinian process of emanation' (2004: 28-29). For both Badiou and Žižek, among other critics, Deleuze may be accused of proposing a theology with *and* without God, as Derrida wrote about Heidegger's work (1987: 592), without the God of *Offenbarung* but with the prime mover that is the will-to-power identified as life's creative *puissance* (*Offenbarkeit*).

In the previous chapter, I have argued that, in the face of similar accusations, Nancy turns out to be innocent. His ontology does not admit a prime mover, but rather centres on an eternally repeated unbounding gesture of *expeausition*. In what follows, I suggest that Deleuze also escapes accusations of foundationalism by proposing a problematisation of being and thought which, instead of enslaving difference to a prime mover, permits that 'le différent se rapporte au différent *par* la différence elle-même' (1968a: 383).

(4.3) The Reversal of Platonism

To be sure, this assertion seems to be contradicted by the fact that, in the second half of the 1960s, Deleuze builds his ontology on the works of philosophers who are known for their *monism*, namely, Spinoza, Leibniz and Bergson. From Spinoza, in particular, Deleuze inherits a *univocal* approach to being. In contradistinction with scholasticism, which posited that God is superior to, and therefore of a different nature than, the other

beings of this world, Spinoza inaugurates ‘l’égalité de toutes les formes d’être, et l’univocité du réel qui découle de cette égalité’ (1968b: 152), a thinking which *seems* to leave no room for ontological difference, multiplicity being denied in favour of an all-encompassing substance (see Vattimo 1993: 147-148). According to Badiou, Deleuze’s Spinozian assertion that there is ‘[u]ne seule clameur de l’Être pour tous les étants’ (1968a: 389) should be seen as confirmation that Deleuze’s goal ‘n’est certes pas de libérer le multiple, [mais] [...] d’en plier la pensée à un concept renouvelé de l’Un’ (Badiou 1997: 20). Even Nancy distances himself from Deleuze on this point, observing that ‘ce qui nous est commun est précisément ce qui n’est pas de l’ordre de la synthèse’ (1998: 122). I contend, however, that this is confusing *univocity* with *unity*. In *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, Deleuze makes clear that univocity does *not* erase ontological difference and is even the only way to think difference itself. Scholastic thinkers did quickly realise that, insofar as human beings have some knowledge of the divine, being must be *analogical* rather than strictly *equivocal*: it is only because human beings were created by God in His image that they are able to extrapolate from their own essential characteristics the attributes of their model. Difference is thereby locked in a play of resemblance. By contrast, univocity allows one to think a world in which all beings differ *in exactly the same respect*. As Deleuze stresses in *Différence et répétition*, ‘l’essentiel de l’univocité n’est pas que l’Être se dise en un seul et même sens. C’est qu’il se dise, en un seul et même sens, de toutes ses différences individuantes’ (1968a: 53). This sets Deleuze on the path to a reversal of Platonism in which ‘c’est la ressemblance qui se dit de la différence’ (1969: 303). But how can a genetic model of difference admit no ontological distinction between substance and its modes?

According to Deleuze, the answer lies in the concept of *expression*. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that substance can be conceived of (i) by looking at its essential qualities

(attributes) made available to human understanding in the form of substance's *expressive potential*, such as Thought and Extension, or (ii) by looking at the products (modes) of substance's *expression*, that is to say, its actual existence in the world. Spinoza thus stresses that '*The existence of God and His essence are one and the same thing*' (2017: 21), for they are but different viewpoints on a single substance, whether approached as *natura naturans*, nature in its capacity to express itself, or *natura naturata*, nature as it is expressed. Yet he also remarks that modes result from the expression of substance's *different* attributes. Expression is a two-step process by which substance *qualitatively* expresses itself as different attributes, a first step which Deleuze calls 'différentiation' (1968a: 270), before attributes *quantitatively* express substance in the form of modes, a second step which Deleuze calls 'différenciation' (1968a: 270).⁵⁶ This simultaneously accounts for the univocity of being *and* for the difference that exists between actual beings in the world. As Deleuze puts it, 'il y a une univocité de l'Être (attributs), bien que ce qui est (ce dont l'Être se dit) ne soit pas du tout le même (substance ou modes)' (2003: 119). This should be enough to convince critics that Deleuze's interest in univocity does not condemn him to erase ontological difference. Far from being mere predicates attributed to a pre-existing substance, in Spinoza's thinking, attributes are *expressive verbs*, the differential and genetic elements by which God 'natures' nature, producing the infinity of modes that constitute it/Him. Spinoza thus breaks with traditional approaches to the relationship between substance, attributes, and modes: this relationship is neither that between a transcendent creator and its creatures, nor between an emanating ground and its emanations, for there is no ontological demarcation between substance and modes.

⁵⁶ In 'Les Différences parallèles', Nancy remarks that Deleuze and Derrida have both felt the need to 'différencier l'écriture de la différence' (2005b: 15). Yet whereas Derrida's *différance* 'retient l'être de la différence d'arriver à terme' (2005b: 16), Deleuze's ontological distinction between *différentiation* and *différenciation* allows him to 'tracer un trait différentiel et différenciant dans la différence elle-même' (2005b: 16).

There is only the expression *of* substance, in both senses of the genitive: substance expresses itself (*natura naturans*) and is, thereby, expressed (*natura naturata*).

Crucially, Deleuze remarks in *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* that 'La notion d'expression n'a pas seulement une portée ontologique, mais aussi gnoséologique' (1968b: 10). As one of the only two attributes of substance known to human beings, thought is one of the ways in which substance *expresses* itself. As Deleuze and Guattari will later remark in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, 'C'est en ce sens qu'on dit que penser et être sont une seule et même chose' (2005: 41). Yet even though thought is *the same thing* as being, it also problematises it—not only by *différentiation*, but also through the creation of concepts or ideas (*différenciation*). Spinoza remarks that 'Les pensées singulières, autrement dit cette pensée-ci, ou celle-là, sont des modes qui expriment la nature de Dieu' (quoted in Deleuze 1968b: 10; Spinoza 2017: 46). Thought therefore unfolds as a genetic and different/cial element of substance. Against the dogmatic image of thought, Spinoza lays the ground for an approach to thought in terms of *action* rather than *reaction*, different/ciation rather than representation. As Claire Colebrook stresses in *Understanding Deleuze*, according to Deleuze, 'We create concepts not in order to label life and tidy up our ideas but to transform life and complicate our ideas' (2002: xix).

However, this is not quite enough to bring about the reversal of Platonism for which Deleuze calls. In *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze remarks that 'la substance spinoziste apparaît indépendante des modes, et les modes dépendent de la substance' (1968a: 59). Spinoza maintains some hierarchy between substance's essence and its existence as modes, in contradiction with the univocity of being. More specifically, Robert Peirce explains in 'The Spinoza-intoxicated Man' that Spinoza 'seems to view *natura naturans* as a potential which *does* get realized in *natura naturata*' (1996: 279). As Deleuze observes, Spinoza suggests that 'toutes les idées s'expliquent formellement par la

puissance de penser' (1968b: 127). Although Spinoza does describe thought as differentiating, he also frames it as part of an emanating scheme in which an *a priori* thinking *puissance* realises itself through the creation of concepts, multiplicity being thereby related back to a unique source or monist prime mover. Like Deleuze's approach to the will-to-power as the differential *motor* of force, Spinoza's understanding of attributes as the differential *potential* of substance seems to carry a residue of foundationalism and idolatry.⁵⁷ I believe that this explains why Deleuze and Guattari describe Spinoza as the 'Christ' of the philosophers (2005: 59). They thereby not only express their admiration for Spinoza's thinking, but also draw attention to the fact that his ontology brings God down from His transcendent place, incarnating Him among/as the beings of this world, *while cultivating a residual attachment to the idol, God-the-Father*.

I suspect that critics are thrown, once again, by Deleuze's suggestion that it is rather the 'Bergsonian' who deals a fatal blow to the idol. Indeed, at first sight, Bergson's distinction between the virtual and the actual replicates the potential-realisation divide which anchors Spinoza's thinking to idolatry. As Colebrook explains, the virtual allows Bergson to think something that is neither present in the world nor a mere possibility (2010: 9-10). In the order of representation, in which difference is conceived of in relation to identity, the possible is made up of all the differences which one can extrapolate from identity in its actual forms. By contrast, Bergson conceives of the virtual as *potentiality*. Far from being a reserve of differences inferred from reality and ready to realise themselves in turn, thereby 'doublant le semblable par le semblable', as Deleuze puts it

⁵⁷ A similar issue is found in Leibniz's thinking (see Deleuze 1988a: 78). According to Leibniz, the world is made of monads which each corresponds to a singular viewpoint on the world. Together, they form a network of incommensurable *folds* which expresses the world in its entirety. Leibniz thus touches on a thinking of expression through infinite folding. Like Spinoza, however, Leibniz shoots himself in the foot by suggesting that God planned the world's unfolding *a priori*. God thus serves as the ground for particular expressions in the monads. He is the expressive potential and Great Architect of the best possible world.

(1968a: 273), the virtual corresponds to life's expressive *puissance*, which Bergson calls the 'élan vital'. Just like substance and modes in Spinoza's thinking, the virtual and the actual emerge as two ways of approaching reality, by focusing either on its expressive *puissance* or on the *product* of such potential's actualisation. Crucially, Deleuze notes that, since it is not limited to the representation of a possibility, 'l'actualisation a pour règles, non plus la ressemblance et la limitation, mais la différence ou la divergence, et la création' (2004a: 100). Echoing Spinoza's ontology, actualisation unfolds as a genetic model of difference through the determination, or *différentiation*, of the virtual as expressive *puissance*, followed by its actual expression by *différenciation*.

We seem here to be back at square one. In Bergson's thinking, too, differences seem to depend on the actualisation of life's expressive potential. In *Deleuze. 'La clameur de l'être'*, Badiou thus argues that the virtual should be seen as a model for—and origin of—actual differences as well as, as Keith Ansell Pearson notes in *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, 'the ground of itself as the "being of virtualities"' (2002: 97; Badiou 1997: 70-76). For Badiou, Bergson's thinking unfolds as an arborescent vitalism in which a Neoplatonist One generates the Multiple. Deleuze's admiration for Bergson's theses would, therefore, signal that, for the former, '[c]'est à la venue de l'Un [...] que se consacre, dans sa plus haute destination, la pensée' (Badiou 1997: 19-20). Deleuze would fail to reverse Platonism, inaugurating a *Platonism of the virtual* instead, even a mystical philosophy. Indeed, in *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*, Bergson suggests that, unlike 'static' religions, which shield themselves from becoming, 'dynamic' religions cultivate the *élan vital* through mystical experiences. In *Le Bergsonisme*, Deleuze himself presents the mystic as the servant of a God whose characteristics match those of the *élan vital* (2004a: 118). As with Spinoza, then, Deleuze would make a rod for his own back by identifying Bergson as one of his primary philosophical inspirations.

In his introduction to Deleuze's and Guattari's thinking, however, Philip Goodchild argues that Deleuze ultimately distances himself from Bergson's thinking by recognising that 'Bergson's thought generated its own incorrigible illusion' in the form of a monism of the *élan vital* (1996: 27). I agree with Michael Goddard that this is a serious misreading of Deleuze's relationship with Bergson (2001: 61): Deleuze takes the more innovative step of proposing that 'Il n'y a pas contradiction entre ce monisme et le dualisme' (2004a: 95). This is best understood, I argue, by turning to Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice*, in which Bergson clarifies that, if he approaches the *élan vital* as 'un centre d'où les mondes jailliraient comme les fusées d'un immense bouquet,—[ce centre] n'est pas une chose, mais une continuité de jaillissements' (1909: 270). According to Bergson, the continuity of *élan vital*, what has been perceived as its *monism*, arises from the synthesis of multiple 'jaillissements'. He even writes that 'l'ordre "vital", qui est essentiellement création, se manifeste moins à nous dans son essence que dans quelques-uns de ses accidents [...] ; ils nous présentent [...] des répétitions qui rendent la généralisation possible' (1909: 251). These repetitions are not a return of the identical but consist of each actual being which 'repeats' life by differentiating it. The fact that there are no two identical beings on earth supports Bergson's point. This also explains, I think, why Bergson chose 'évolution créatrice' rather than 'élan vital' as the title for his masterpiece. Life, for Bergson, corresponds to the synthesis of *unceasing creative transformations* rather than to a monist prime mover: 'il n'y a plus de tout coexistant;' Deleuze stresses, 'il y a seulement des lignes d'actualisation' (2004a: 104), which do however still have something *in common*, namely, their own repetition. Deleuze thus identifies repetition as the only synthetic law of a world in which different relates to different by means of difference itself (de Beistegui

2004: 235): Bergson's repetition is 'la seule identité, mais l'identité comme puissance seconde, l'identité de la différence, l'identique qui se dit du différent' (1968a: 59).⁵⁸

Deleuze thereby also exposes '[l'] [i]nutilité de l'alternative fini-infini' (1968a: 409), rewriting infinity as the *eternal repetition of the different*. This should not be confused with the dialectical union of the finite and the infinite which Hegel deems 'good': if, unlike the 'bad' infinite, Bergson's repetition does still imply synthesis, this repetition does *not* unfold according to a dialectical progression towards a totalising and ontologically prior Absolute Spirit. Rather, it is *infinitely finite* or, as Deleuze puts it, the 'fini-illimité' (2004b: 140). Through his reading of Bergson, then, Deleuze meets the Bataille-Derrida-Nancy line of thought. Each in their own way, the four thinkers rework the articulation of the finite and the infinite in such a way that it reverses Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return. As I have explained in chapter 1, Nietzsche approaches eternal recurrence as that of the Same, which comes down to extending to infinity Plato's scheme of a copy repeating the identity of a model. To be sure, each representation of the Same is more or less accurate and can fall prey to disguises and displacements. But these masks are thought to be 'added' to an otherwise *naked* mode of repetition. It should now be clear that this is *not* what happens with Bergson's creative evolution. In Bergson's thinking, as read by Deleuze, repetition is considered as 'clothed' or 'simulacral': as Daniel W. Smith explains, clothed repetition 'does not refer to something underneath the masks, but rather is formed from one mask to the other, in a movement of perpetual differentiation' (2006: 113). Put otherwise, clothed repetition admits *difference* rather

⁵⁸ I therefore argue that Nancy is wrong to suggest that he disagrees with Deleuze on the question of *synthesis*. As discussed in the previous chapter, in Nancy's thinking, too, continuity only arises from the return of the different, much as a film consists of the discontinuation of images coming one after the other. Nancy's intellectual proximity with Deleuze goes much further than what has been proposed so far, then, including by Nancy.

than *resemblance* as its internal principle. Like Bataille, Derrida and Nancy, then, Deleuze reverses Nietzsche's approach to the eternal return and, with it, Platonism.⁵⁹

This calls for a re-reading of Spinoza's expressionism. Based on Deleuze's reading of Bergson's creative evolution, we are now in a position to realise that '[i]l manquait seulement au spinozisme, pour que l'univoque devînt objet d'affirmation pure, de [...] réaliser l'univocité comme répétition dans l'éternel retour' (Deleuze 1968a: 388). Much as virtuality should only be said of the repetition of actualisation, substance, in Spinoza's thinking, should only be said of the repetition of *différenciation*, that is to say, of *the modes themselves* (1968a: 59). In place of the method which consists in conceiving attributes *a priori*, as the abstract expressive potential of substance, Deleuze therefore substitutes a Bergson-inspired approach to attributes and substance *a posteriori*: 'à partir de cette pensée-ci ou de cette pensée-là, nous concluons à la pensée comme attribut infini de Dieu' (1968b: 37). Deleuze immediately clarifies that 'Les attributs ne sont pas abstraits des choses particulières, encore moins transférées à Dieu de manière analogique' (1968b: 37). Expression is not that *of* substance in the subjective sense of the genitive, for substance does not pre-exist its expression as modes, not even in the form of an expressive potential. Rather, substance *is* the eternal return of expression; and so *is* the will-to-power.

As early as in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze stresses that 'La question de savoir si la volonté de puissance, en fin de compte, est une ou multiple [...] témoignerait d'un contresens général sur la philosophie de Nietzsche' (1983b: 97). If the will-to-power is, as Nietzsche suggests (1968: 332-333), an 'attribute' of force, it is not a predicate. Rather, Deleuze argues, it 'détermine le rapport des forces entre elles, du point de vue de leur genèse ou de leur production ; mais elle est déterminée par les forces en rapport, du

⁵⁹ Ian James has remarked that Deleuze here *repeats* Klossowski's thought of *repetition*, in particular the latter's attention to masks and parody of Nietzsche's eternal return (2009: 348-350; Le Rider 1999: 194-199), which was itself inspired by Bataille's reading of Nietzsche.

point de vue de sa propre manifestation' (1983b: 70). Just as Spinozian substance should not be seen as ontologically prior to its modes, the will-to-power should not be seen as ontologically prior to forces, not even in the form of a creative potential. Rather, it names the clothed repetition of forces. Hence Deleuze's assertion that 'l'éternel retour est la synthèse dont la volonté de puissance est le principe' (1983b: 56): for him, 'la volonté de puissance est l'un, mais l'un qui s'affirme du multiple' (1983b: 97). *Contra* Badiou, among other critics, then, I argue that Deleuze's thinking does *not* admit a prime mover and should *not* be reduced to a postsecular form of theology. Life's creative *puissance* should not be considered as a potential to be realised, nor as an emanating ground for all that exists. Rather, it is affirmed of the eternal repetition of gestures of expression.

(4.4) Believing in This World

Crucially, against the dogmatic image of thought inherited from Plato, Deleuze's different/cial ontology presents thought as strictly non-idolatrous. Far from being reduced to—and hindered by—monism, philosophy of/as becoming derives its unity from the multiple, from the repetition of the creative gesture from which concepts arise. Put otherwise, 'la multiplicité qu'elle constitue n'est [...] plus subordonnée à l'Un, mais prend consistance en elle-même' (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 631). To re-write Deleuze's assertion, quoted earlier, it appears that *si la pensée détermine les concepts, du point de vue de leur genèse ou de leur production, elle est déterminée par la répétition de l'acte de création de concepts, du point de vue de sa propre manifestation* (1983b: 70).

Thought, therefore, does always come with an *image*—of what it does and how it manifests. This new image of thought, however, is far from dogmatic, in line with Deleuze's iconoclastic endeavour. In fact, it should be seen as *minoritarian*, a concept

which Deleuze discusses at length with Guattari in their 1980 masterpiece *Mille plateaux* (see, in particular, 1980: 133-135). As Colebrook explains, Deleuze and Guattari observe that, rather than proposing an alternative standard to that of the majority, ‘minoritarian groups have no grounding standard; the identity of the group is mobilised with each new member. The women’s movement, for example, has constantly questioned whether there *is* any thing such as “woman”’ (2002: xxv). Insofar as it arises from the repetition of the different, philosophy’s identity—or *image*—is similarly mobilised with each new concept. The philosopher, as Deleuze sees him or her, reshapes, through each creation of a concept, ‘l’image [...] de ce que signifie penser, faire usage de la pensée, s’orienter dans la pensée’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 39-40). According to Deleuze and Guattari, he or she should therefore be described as a *cartographer* who *maps* (the image of) thought as it unfolds on, and *as*, a plane of immanence. This map, Deleuze and Guattari stress, is not a grid that would be placed on thought to keep it in check. Rather, it gives consistency—and, therefore, *visibility*—to a world of virtual difference lying underneath the actual particularities of each concept. Hence Deleuze’s assertion that, ‘un concept philosophique fait “voir” des choses. Les philosophes ont un côté voyant’ (entry ‘Idée’ in Deleuze & Parnet 2004). Through the repeated creation of new concepts, philosophers allow readers to ‘see’ that the real world is not limited to the actual, much like the philosopher-genealogist evoked in section 2, and thereby invite them not simply to react to the given, but to open themselves to virtual difference. Philosophers thus foster a new way of thinking which, as Deleuze notes as early as in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, ‘affirme la vie [...], croi[t] à l’éternel retour’ (1983b: 41), understood as the eternal return of difference. They foster *belief* in the different/cial *puissance* of this world.

It should be noted straight away that, although Deleuze uses the term ‘belief’, in contradistinction to Nancy, who prefers to speak of ‘faith’, both thinkers refer to a similar

open ontological trust rather than to an *epistemological certainty without proof*. As Deleuze and Guattari clarify, philosophers foster belief ‘non pas même à l’existence du monde, mais à ses possibilités en mouvements et en intensités pour faire naître de nouveaux modes d’existence’ (2005: 72). I contend that *Mille plateaux* is particularly efficient at fostering such an immanent belief. By stressing at the opening of the book that the chapters, or plateaus, ‘peuvent être lus indépendamment les uns des autres’ (1980: 8), they encourage their readers to navigate between plateaus by generating their own conceptual itineraries, and thereby to partake in the creative unfolding of the plane of immanence through an expression of trust or *belief* in this world’s creative *puissance*.

To critics who, in light of Deleuze’s tranquil atheism, would have started to doubt that his thinking is relevant to the question of religion today, and therefore to my own thesis, then, I point out that there is a ‘religiosity or spirituality *intrinsic to thinking in Deleuze*’, as Joshua Ramey puts it (2016: 79). Far from pursuing a representative goal, and thereby promoting idolatry, philosophy as Deleuze sees it fosters belief in this world’s creative *puissance* according to an immanent redirection or ‘conversion de la croyance’ (1985: 224).⁶⁰ I therefore argue that Deleuze qualifies as a ‘faithful deicide’ in the threefold sense of the term. I have demonstrated in the first half of this chapter that Deleuze comes to terms with the death of God by adopting a ‘tranquil’ form of atheism which relies on an approach to being and thought as relating different to different by means of difference itself. Crucially, I contend that Deleuze’s atheism does *not* erase all

⁶⁰ For Deleuze, such a conversion is also cinema’s responsibility. To be sure, in *Cinéma I: L’image-mouvement*, he criticises pre-World War II filmmakers for having restricted movement to a linear succession of logical sequences in order to ensure the realism of the narration. In *Cinéma II: L’image-temps*, however, he notes that post-war cinema renounced its commitment to representation. Post-war films consist of a succession of experimental sequences and irrational cuts. They thus break with pre-established image of what cinema ought to be. Cinema’s identity is mobilised with every new image, which calls viewers to recognise and *believe in* a world of virtual difference lying underneath the particularities of the image. ‘C’est un cinéma de voyant, non plus d’action’, Deleuze writes (1985: 9).

traces of the religious. At odds with the contemporary post(-)secular re-centring on transcendence, the religious remains in Deleuze's thinking in the form of a belief which 'ne se tourne plus vers un autre monde, elle est dirigée sur ce monde-ci' (1985: 224). Mary Bryden thus stresses in *Deleuze and Religion* that 'The old God is dead for Deleuze. The spiritual, however, remains' (2001: 4; see Barber 2014: 13). Deleuze thereby proves faithful to Nietzsche's word 'God is dead': for him, too, at bottom, it is *only* the moral God that has been, not dialectically overcome, but discarded without regret nor residual sense of mourning. A further proof of this is found, I argue, in the fact that Deleuze associates his *faith-ful* image of thought with non-Western forms of spirituality. In many of his works, whether written alone or with Guattari, Deleuze flags up cosmologies and practices associated with the nomadic spirituality of the indigenous peoples of Australia, as studied by Barbara Glowczewski (Deleuze 1993: 83), the Kachin witchcraft of Burma, as examined by Edward Leach (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 301), the leopard cults of the Mambela of the Congo, as discussed by Paul Ernest Joset (1980: 353), or the healing rituals of the Ndembu, as described by Victor Turner (1973: 197-203), among many others. Two spiritual figures from *Mille plateaux*, however, stand out as emblematic of the new image of thought proposed by Deleuze: namely, the nomad and the sorcerer.

In the twelfth plateau of *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that anyone who engages in a faith-ful mapping of thought by drawing new conceptual itineraries on the plane of immanence resembles the nomad who maps space by traversing it. Far from being content with sedentary life and its parcellation of 'striated' space, 'le nomade ne va d'un point à un autre que par conséquence et nécessité de fait : en principe, les points sont pour lui des relais dans un trajet' (1980: 471). Nomads *detritorialise* space by traversing it, opening lines of flight as they diverge from delineated routes, deep into unexplored steppes and deserts, thereby demonstrating a threefold *belief*: 'en eux-mêmes, au monde

et au devenir' (Deleuze 1993: 112). In their respective studies of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, however, anthropologists Barbara Glowczewski and Deborah Bird Rose remark that nomadic deterritorialisation also *produces* space: the Australian continent is *shaped* and *sacralised* by nomadic itineraries. 'Where they travelled, where they stopped, where they lived the events of their lives, all these places are sources and sites of Law', Bird Rose stresses. 'These tracks and sites [...] make up the sacred geography of Australia' (1996: 36). In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari similarly suggest that nomads produce 'smooth' space as an endlessly shifting map, through each and every step they take. Space is not given over to chaos, but organised *immanently*, as *nomos* rather than *logos*, nomadic distribution rather than rational territorialisation. Eugene Holland takes the example of a jazz band in which 'group coherence arises immanently from the activity of improvising itself, whereas in the symphony orchestra, it is imposed from above by a conductor performing a composer's pre-established score' (2010: 188). Much as the jazz band affirms the virtual multiplicity of musical sequences and combinations of notes through improvisation, and much as the philosopher affirms thought in its virtual multiplicity through and *as* the repeated creation of concepts, the nomad affirms space in its virtual multiplicity through and *as* 'la succession infinie des raccordements et des changements de direction' (1980: 617). Nomadic itineraries thus give consistency and visibility to a world of virtual difference lying underneath the actual particularities of their trajectory, fostering immanent belief in this world's creative *puissance*. It is, perhaps, such a recognition that leads Deleuze to respond to André Flécheux, who doubted the viability of nomadic thought, with a *profession of faith*: 'Vous me demandez si je crois à la réponse des nomades. Oui, j'y crois' (Deleuze 2002: 363).

The nomad is not, however, the only figure from *Mille plateaux* who is said to foster belief in this world by affirming virtual multiplicity. The tenth plateau draws attention to

the sorcerer who ‘condui[t] les transformations de devenir ou les passages de multiplicités toujours plus loin sur la ligne de fuite’ (1980: 305-306). Deleuze and Guattari stress that sorcerers operate their magic not by following a logical order or pre-established goal, but by fostering multiple paths of becoming simultaneously, as testified by the traditional association of sorcery with monstrosity, shapeshifting and animals whose perspective the sorcerer adopts through a process which Deleuze and Guattari call ‘devenir-animal’ (1980: 292). The sorcerer is the *Anomalous* (1980: 301): rather than being outside of a group or divergent within it, which corresponds to the definition of *abnormality*, he is the threshold, ‘l’ultime Porte’ (1980: 308), between a community and its outside, a given state of things and its becomings, as per the Greek etymology of the term—*an-omalie* refers to the ‘coarse’ or ‘undecided’. This explains why sorcerers establish themselves ‘en bordure du village, ou *entre* deux villages’ (1980: 301). Like nomads, they constitute minoritarian groups ‘toujours en bordure des institutions reconnues’ (1980: 302). Hence Deleuze’s and Guattari’s remark, referring to the fact that sorcery is often associated with the female, that ‘c’est moins la femme qui est sorcière, que la sorcellerie, qui passe par ce devenir-femme’ (1980: 304). Sorcery implies a ‘becoming-minority’, that is to say, the affirmation of a world of virtual difference lying underneath the actual. It thereby demonstrates, and fosters, a belief in this world’s creative *puissance*.⁶¹

To be sure, the anthropological validity of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s approach to sorcery and nomadism has been debated (see, for instance, Miller 1993 and Holland 2003). In the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Jon Bialecki notes that Deleuze

⁶¹ This explains, I think, why Deleuze suggests that reading Spinoza’s works is like being presented with ‘un balai de sorcière qu’il vous fait enfourcher’ (Deleuze & Parnet 1996: 22). If Spinoza does not exactly affirm virtual multiplicity, as explained in section 3, he lays the conditions for a genetic model of difference which relies on no primordial unity but rather takes on a consistency of its own. With the help of Nietzsche and Bergson, Deleuze grabs the witches’ broom: he arrives at ‘la formule magique que nous cherchons tous: PLURALISME = MONISME’ (1980: 31), and highlights, as Didier Eribon puts it, that ‘penser, c’est se situer sur une “ligne de sorcière”, c’est-à-dire apercevoir de nouvelles possibilités de vie’ (2005).

and Guattari have been particularly criticised ‘for being quick to catapult from particular ethnographic depictions [...] to ungrounded generalities (“the sorcerer” or “becoming animal” in “Black Africa”), making concrete populations into philosophical metaphors’ (2018). However, one cannot fail to notice that, in the past few decades, an increasing number of anthropologists have turned to Deleuze’s thought when confronted with cosmologies and practices which challenge Western categories of thinking, such as witchcraft (Kapferer 1997), divination (Holbraad 2012), animism and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2014 and Willerslev 2011), which testifies to the resonance of Deleuze’s thought with non-Western spirituality. This resonance is such that one may even be tempted to suggest that, by redirecting belief away from transcendence—‘maladie proprement européenne’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 28)—towards *this* world and by speaking approvingly of non-Western ontologies while criticising Western ontotheology, Deleuze sets the stage for a ‘clash of civilisations’, as Samuel Huntington famously put it (1996). Deleuze would take the sorcerer’s side *against* the priest’s, the nomad’s *against* the coloniser’s, his call to reverse Platonism translating as a mere call to invert the modern world’s power dynamic.

If Deleuze’s nomadic thought or ‘pensée sorcière’, to use Eribon’s terms (2005), breaks with the transcendent moral orders that have so far dominated Western thinking, however, it should now be clear that it does so by *differing* from the latter without reaching contradiction within a dualist ontology. This is evidenced, I think, by Deleuze’s contribution to the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. Anthropologists long suspected that a limit of the ethnographic method lies in the fact that it approaches local contexts, including non-Western ones, using Western categories of thinking. By proposing a new image of thought as the repeated creation of new concepts, Deleuze offers leads on how to rethink anthropology away from ethnocentrism. As Bialecki stresses, this has even

become an anthropological method in its own right under the impulsion of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Martin Holbraad and Rane Willerslev,

new concepts either being framed as creations of the anthropologists that are sufficient to think through ethnographic phenomena in a way that is adequate to the description given by those people they speak to, or [...] granting the thought of the informants themselves with the same kind of stature and formal qualities that are credited to Western philosophy (2018).

Viveiros de Castro (2004; 2007) compares the Deleuze-inspired anthropologist with the Amazonian *shaman*, for both temporarily embrace and translate an other's perspective, be it the jaguar or a foreign people. Like the shaman, as well as the philosopher, the nomad and the sorcerer in Deleuze's thinking, the anthropologist constitutes a threshold between ontologies, for he or she affirms *multiplicity* rather than a supposedly 'right' perspective. I contend that Deleuze therefore does not so much take the side of non-Western ontologies *against* ontotheology as strives to open Western thinking to difference.

The question remains, however, whether such an affirmation of multiplicity leaves *some* space for transcendence or should be limited to ontologies and forms of belief which do not themselves threaten to turn against multiplicity. I have already established that Deleuze's tranquil atheism implies having done with transcendent moral orders, whether they establish their rule 'au ciel ou sur la terre' (2005: 46). As Deleuze explains with Guattari in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, 'Nous n'avons pas la moindre raison de penser que les modes d'existence aient besoin de valeurs transcendantes qui les compareraient, les sélectionneraient et décideraient que l'un est "meilleur" que l'autre' (2005: 72). I must concede to Deleuze's critics, however, that the elimination of transcendent values, beliefs and institutions already functions as a *selection* between modes of existence. Does this not come down to limiting multiplicity and, thereby, to betraying it?

(4.5) Overcoming Nihilism

I contend that the evolution of Deleuze's position on the matter delineates two phases in the trajectory of his thinking. From 1962 until the late 1970s, Deleuze seems largely unconcerned about the issues raised by the elimination of transcendence. He even suggests that 'surmonter les forces réactives qui s'expriment dans l'homme, dans la conscience de soi, dans la raison, dans la morale, dans la religion' is central to his differential endeavour (1983b: 101). That Deleuze takes issue with transcendent moral orders is, indeed, only the tip of the iceberg: as early as in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, he remarks that the fact that the ontotheological tradition condemns as sinful any expression of life's *puissance* is symptomatic of 'le fondement de l'humanité dans l'homme' (1983b: 73). Guided as it is by an imperative of self-preservation, humanity finds in knowledge, reason, and the associated gestures of codification, organisation and territorialisation 'un moyen de conserver et de faire triompher son type' (1983b: 114). By referring actions and expressions to transcendent values and inaugurating structures, institutions and laws, humanity 'donne à la vie des lois qui la séparent de ce qu'elle peut, qui lui évitent d'agir et lui défendent d'agir [...]: à peu près comme l'animal dans un jardin zoologique' (1983b: 114). Humanity strives to *separate life from what it can do*, an endeavour which Deleuze calls nihilistic and associates with the 'becoming-reactive' of forces (1983b: 72).

As discussed in section 1, for Deleuze (reading Nietzsche), all reality is a quantity of forces. Whereas active forces express themselves fully, reactive forces do not go to the end of what they can do. Crucially, if both active and reactive forces express the will-to-power, in the latter case, the will-to-power takes on a negative quality. The will-to-power at work within reactive forces seeks to separate *all* forces from what they can do, turning against life's differential *puissance* itself (1983b: 63-64). Reactivity may, therefore, be

described as contagious and ‘le devenir des forces apparaît comme un devenir-réactif’ (1983b: 72). That is how Deleuze accounts for reason’s ‘appropriative’ quality, to use Bataille’s term: reason draws the unknown to the known and difference to identity, for it is an expression of the negative will-to-power which turns active forces into reactive ones.

As early as in his second published book, then, Deleuze identifies a major obstacle to his different/cial endeavour: even if he were to foster (belief in) life’s creative *puissance* and, with it, the eternal return of active forces—which is what he goes on to do with his *pensée sorcière*, as I have explained in the previous sections—these forces are bound to become reactive (1983b: 192). Sooner or later, the sorcerer is tempted by idolatry: he or she ‘rapport[e] les expressions et les actions à des fins extérieures ou transcendantes, au lieu de les estimer sur un plan d’immanence d’après leur valeur en soi’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 32), separating them from life’s creative *puissance*. Deleuze is thus left with only two options: he must either (i) recognise that his different/cial endeavour is an endless battle, that immanent belief requires constant reaffirmation in the face of the becoming-reactive of forces, or (ii) strive to stop the contagion at its source, to overcome nihilism *once and for all*, by facilitating the elimination of reactive forces—and, with them, of the transcendent values, beliefs and institutions in which these forces are expressed. It is here, I argue, that Deleuze makes a serious misstep: in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, he chooses the second option—an option which is problematic insofar as it unfolds as ‘un moyen de conserver et de faire triompher’ affirmative modes of thinking, to quote Deleuze again (1983b: 114), which is already a nihilistic move—and will stand by this decision until the late 1970s, even though this compromises his own findings.

In order to free thought from the becoming-reactive of forces, Deleuze supplements his ontological approach to the eternal return with a *selective* and *ethical* principle similar to that implied in Nietzsche’s doctrine of *amor fati*. This principle goes as follows: ‘Ce

que tu veux, veuille-le de telle manière que tu en veuilles aussi l'éternel retour' (Deleuze 1983b: 77). For Deleuze, then, the eternal return implies a *selection of willing or thought*. It eliminates the weak desires associated with reactive forces and therefore guarantees that 'si profond que soit le devenir-réactif des forces, les forces réactives ne reviendront pas' (1983b: 80). To be sure, this selection alone is not sufficient to overcome nihilism: the negative will-to-power, which feeds powerful nihilistic desires, passes the selection. It is here, however, that a crucial conversion takes place: '*Les forces réactives brisant leur alliance avec la volonté de néant, la volonté de néant à son tour brise son alliance avec les forces réactives*' (1983b: 200). The *negative* will-to-power converts into an *affirmative* will-to-nothingness. As Deleuze explains, 'la destruction active est l'état des esprits forts qui détruisent le réactif en eux, le soumettant à l'épreuve de l'éternel retour, et se soumettant eux-mêmes à cette épreuve, quitte à vouloir leur déclin' (1983b: 80). With the man who wants to perish, nihilism *both* reaches its completion *and* initiates a becoming-active of all forces, which Deleuze associates with the rise of the Overman.

This raises a first series of interrogations. That nihilism must be lived through to its end in order for the Overman to arise *seems* to follow a dialectical logic. We saw in chapter 1 that Nietzsche describes the *Übermensch* as the redeemer of humankind. It is, therefore, tempting to read Deleuze's assertion that '[la] *destruction active de l'homme qui veut périr et être surmonté* est l'annonce du créateur' (1983b: 204) as a sign that he, too, attributes a redemptive value to the overcoming of nihilism. This seems to be confirmed by Deleuze's approach to suffering. 'Un malheur, une maladie, une folie, même l'approche de la mort ont bien deux aspects', he argues, 'l'un par lequel ils me séparent de ma puissance, mais l'autre par lequel ils me dotent d'une étrange puissance, comme d'un moyen dangereux d'exploration' (2002: 174). Although suffering is usually regarded as a sign of impotence, Deleuze—who himself suffered from respiratory

ailments from a young age—encourages his readers to find opportunities for *puissance* from within suffering itself (see the entry ‘Maladie’ in Deleuze & Parnet 2004), according to a logic which *seems* utterly dialectical. Yet Deleuze asks: ‘est-ce le même malade, celui qui est esclave de sa maladie et celui qui s’en sert comme d’un moyen d’explorer, de dominer, d’être puissant?’ (1983b: 75-76). For Deleuze, someone who approaches illness as an occasion for *puissance* no longer thinks like a human being. The Overman does not *save* humanity, then, but constitutes *an entirely new species* (1983b: 188). This confirms my observation from section 2: Deleuze’s central preoccupation is the event of difference rather than what—or whom—is destroyed in the process. Far from aiming for redemption, Deleuze’s overcoming of nihilism is thought of as ‘le contraire d’une morale de salut, [cela] enseign[e] à l’âme à vivre sa vie, non pas à la sauver’ (Deleuze & Parnet 1996: 77).

The issue is that, following Deleuze, living one’s life paradoxically implies destroying it. As Peter Hallward remarks in *Out of This World*, what is at stake in Deleuze’s work, specifically in his approach to the overcoming of nihilism, ‘is not some sort of enhanced creatural mobility, a set of techniques that might enable more supple or more fruitful modes of actual interaction. What matters is instead the [...] reorientation of any particular creature toward its own dissolution’ (2006: 3). It will be recalled from section 1 that, for Deleuze, everything that is (or becomes), *and not just humanity*, arises from the synthesis of forces of different quantities: both active and reactive ones. We have also seen in section 3 that creative evolution depends on actualisation, a process which relies on organisational gestures of *différentiation* (or determination) and *différenciation*. If Deleuze is arguably right to remark that humanity proves more nihilistic than any other creature due to the workings of reason, the becoming-active of all forces threatens to undo the process that gives rise to *all* that is through counter-actualisation. With the elimination of reactive forces, not only does man perish but so does the actual life of this world. As

Hallward observes, Deleuze tends to forget that ‘though the creature obstructs its creating, there is no other vehicle for the dissipation of this obstacle than the creature itself’ (2006: 64). What Deleuze goes on to describe as ‘belief in this world’ threatens to unfold as an abstract belief in *virtual* difference to the detriment of all the *actual* life of this world—in stark contradiction with his own suggestion that virtuality should only be said of the repetition of actualisation. ‘Seen in this light,’ Ashley Woodward stresses, ‘Deleuze’s conception of the eternal return appears as an even more terrible negation of this world than anything Nietzsche ever criticized’ (2013: 137). Although Deleuze attended the ‘Discussion sur le péché’ in March 1944, he does not seem to have learnt from Bataille’s mistakes; he, too, celebrates ‘[la] joie de l’anéantissement’ (1983b: 201), with apparently little consideration of the ethical *and political* issues this raises.

In *Deleuze et la question de la démocratie*, Philippe Mengue has remarked that Deleuze’s call for a becoming-active of forces is particularly problematic in light of the practical exigencies of life-in-common, for it contributes to presenting institutional constructions as oppressive instruments of the majority getting in the way of becoming, and therefore, as a ‘bloc d’illégitimités à dénoncer’ (Mengue & Cavaillez 2012: 99). This seems to be confirmed by Deleuze’s appreciation for nomadic deterritorialisation, as discussed in the previous section.⁶² If the nomad’s flight from rational territorial organisation may be helpful in preventing the installation of oppressive regimes, it also implies, Mengue argues, that ‘democracy is definitively and for reasons of principle excluded and radically condemned’ (2003: 103). So is the idea of a constitutional state governed by law. Throughout the 1980s, Deleuze repeatedly criticises the renewed

⁶² It should be noted that, whereas Derrida and Nancy designate the Jew—the last of the Jews and the Jew within us, respectively—as a privileged figure of alterity, Deleuze feels drawn to the Palestinians, ‘gens sans terre ni État’ (1978), who act as a war-machine against both what he describes as the ‘modèle de répression’ of the State of Israel and ‘[l]’entente mondiale des États, l’organisation d’une police et d’une juridiction mondiales’ (1978).

interest in human rights in France (see Patton 2005: 412). ‘Aujourd’hui, ce sont les droits de l’homme qui font fonction de valeurs éternelles’, Deleuze argues in a 1985 interview with Antoine Dulaure and Claire Parnet. ‘C’est l’état de droit et autres notions dont tout le monde sait qu’elles sont très abstraites. Et c’est au nom de ça que toute pensée est stoppée, que toutes les analyses en termes de mouvements sont bloquées’ (1990: 166). According to Mengue, following Deleuze’s thinking, community itself is threatened with dissolution for it depends on consensus, that is, on a *majority* of overlapping interests and opinions (Mengue 2003: 43-53; see Goh 2006: 217). In the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant warned against this *anarchist* or *anti-political* temptation embodied by the ‘nomads who abhor all permanent cultivation of the soil’ (1998: 99). In line with Kant and echoing the denunciation of Nancy’s supposed political quietism discussed in chapter 3, Mengue argues that Deleuze devalues every attempt at organising life-in-common.

For Maoist thinkers like Badiou and Robert Linhart, however, the incompatibility of democratic institutions with Deleuze’s thinking is not so much revealing of a disengagement from politics on Deleuze’s part but rather of the intrinsic totalitarianism of his thinking. Badiou remarks that Deleuze’s overcoming of nihilism functions as a ‘répudiation de l’antagonisme’ (1977: 51), which ‘laisse subsister hors de lui, comme sa condition politique soustractive et sa fascination indélébile, le Un du tyran’ (1977: 51-52). By focusing on the advent of the Overman, in particular, Deleuze presents us with the possibility of achieving satisfaction.⁶³ This leads Alberto Gualandi to suggest that Deleuze cultivates ‘ce désir d’éternel que les religions du salut étaient appelées à satisfaire’ (1998: 138-139). In *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze himself describes the

⁶³ Deleuze’s debt to Klossowski’s reading of Nietzsche’s eternal return may have something to do with this. Unlike the later Bataille, who argues that the eternal return of difference is incompatible with any form of satisfaction, Klossowski suggests that, if everything returns *ad infinitum*, human beings are relieved from the burden of responsibility for their actions (1969: 107; see Keenan 2018: 171). He thereby keeps open the possibility of satisfaction.

eternal return as the clothed repetition ‘qui sauve et qui guérit, et qui guérit d'abord de l'autre répétition’ (1968a: 13), namely, Plato’s naked repetition. Yet as Catherine Malabou asks in ‘L’Éternel Retour et le fantôme de la différence’, ‘une machine à détruire la faiblesse, à faire la différence entre deux répétitions n’est-elle pas au fond plus totalitaire, plus menaçante, plus réactive que la dialectique ?’ (2009: 399). Like the Stoics, Deleuze does not expect salvation ‘des profondeurs de la terre ou de l’autochtonie, pas davantage du ciel et de l’Idée, [...] [mais] latéralement, de l’événement’ (1969: 154-155). If his approach to—the event of—difference may be read as a form of relativism, then, it also threatens to inaugurate a moral order in which difference is seen as necessarily ‘good’ while any form of stability is systematically annihilated. Keeping in mind that Plato’s moral order rests on operations of *selection* between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pretenders, it may be argued that, by inaugurating the eternal return as a *selective* thought which isolates active forces while eliminating reactive ones, Deleuze does not make identity turn around the different, as should be the case in a reversed Platonism, but rather *dialectically overturns* Plato’s moral order. In *Économie libidinale*, Lyotard thus ‘redout[e] de voir réapparaître à la faveur de ces dichotomies toute une morale et toute une politique, leurs sages, leurs militants, leurs tribunaux et leurs prisons’ (1974: 54; also see Badiou 1977: 48-49). Like the apprentice of chapter 1, the sorcerer seems to be carried away by his own spell: in seeking to ‘cure’ life of nihilism, Deleuze falls short of his promise to stop thinking difference as part of a moral order. He inaugurates a new form of idolatry centred on the rise of the Overman and devalues the actual life of this world to the point of wishing to destroy it. For Woodward, this implies that ‘Deleuze, or those aspects of his work suggestive of a definitive overcoming, ought to be rejected, and an insistence that we must abandon the idea of overcoming nihilism [...] ought to be preferred’ (2013: 144).

I argue that this is what Deleuze himself goes on to do, though not before the late 1970s. Ten years after the publication of *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, indeed, Deleuze's and Guattari's first collaborative work is still motivated by the desire to overcome a nihilistic approach, namely, that of the 'psychanalystes-prêtres' (1973: 129). Building on Guattari's experience working as a psychotherapist, *L'Anti-Œdipe* sheds light on the fact that psychoanalysis strives to separate desire from what it can do by describing it as an insatiable lack to be contained at all costs. As Colebrook notes, according to the Oedipus complex, in particular, 'we have to renounce our primitive, chaotic and essential desires in order to enter society. We have to abandon our childhood bonding with our mothers and identify with our fathers' (2002: xvi). While this process generally runs smoothly, psychoanalysts argue that mental illness is characterised by an unleashing of desire outside of repressive structures. Deleuze and Guattari, by contrast, seek to depathologise the affirmative expression of desire, which they see as an expression of life's *puissance*.

With their 'schizoanalytical' method, in particular, they propose to accompany desiring forces by taking inspiration from mental 'conditions' such as schizophrenia which, they argue, open new possibilities for life. In line with the philosopher-genealogist evoked in section 2 and the philosopher-*voyant* of section 4, the schizoanalyst seeks to affirm the virtual lying underneath the actual, the 'Corps sans Organes' (or CsO) lying underneath the organism. Deleuze first borrows the concept of body without organs from Antonin Artaud in his 1969 *Logique du sens*. In *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, a title evocative of the intellectual proximity between Deleuze and Artaud, Artaud—whom psychiatric literature generally considers as having schizophrenia—argues that the anatomical *organ*-isation of the body imprisons human beings. He suggests that it is only 'Lorsque vous [...] aurez fait [à l'Homme] un corps sans organes,/ [que] vous l'aurez délivré de tous ses automatismes/ et rendu à sa véritable liberté' (1974: 104). According

to Deleuze, that is precisely what the schizophrenic does. In *Logique du sens*, he remarks that, while the language of the schizophrenic shares similarities with Lewis Carroll's writing style (1969: 102), nonsense is, in Lewis Carroll's case, only explored on the *surface*, in its rupture with sense. Schizophrenic language, by contrast, explores the *depths* of nonsense, upstream from the organic determination that binds language to communication: it centres on the physical act of making unarticulated sounds, 'mots-cris où toutes les valeurs littérales, syllabiques et phonétiques sont remplacées par des *valeurs exclusivement toniques*' (1969: 108). The body is thereby considered *not* in its capacity to *organ-ise* itself in such a way as to produce meaningful or nonsensical forms of communication, but rather as 'un organisme sans parties qui fait tout par insufflation, inspiration, évaporation, transmission fluïdique (le corps supérieur ou corps sans organes d'Antonin Artaud)' (1969: 108).⁶⁴ By making himself or herself a CsO, then, the schizophrenic may be said to recognise, and affirm, a world of virtual difference lying underneath the particular *organ-isation* of the body. 'Sous les organes', Deleuze and Guattari note, 'il sent des larves' (1973: 15). The schizophrenic thereby aligns with the spiritual figures evoked in the previous section, as well as with the philosopher-*voyant* or -genealogist as Deleuze sees him or her. Far from yielding to the transcendent divine of psychoanalysts—'L'inconscient croit à Œdipe, il croit à la castration, à la loi' (Deleuze & Guattari 1973: 352)—the schizophrenic believes in this world's creative *puissance*.

As far as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned, then, psychoanalysis should not seek to 'cure' schizophrenia. In fact, their distrust of psychoanalysis is such that they wonder:

⁶⁴ Deleuze and Guattari argue that the anorexic and the masochist similarly work towards making themselves a CsO. The anorexic diverts his or her desire upstream from the organic determination that binds it to food. As Ian Buchanan explains, desire for food is involuted into 'a desire for the desire for food; the affect food has is suddenly desire for itself, in itself. Meanwhile food, the actual origin of this particular affect, is subject to profound disgust' (1997: 78; Deleuze & Parnet 1996: 132). As for the masochist, he or she uses pain to divert desire upstream from its organic relationship with pleasure (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 155).

‘de quoi sommes-nous malades ? De la schizophrénie même comme processus ? Ou bien de la névrosisation forcenée à laquelle on nous livre, et pour laquelle la psychanalyse a inventé de nouveaux moyens, Œdipe et castration ?’ (1973: 80). Much like Plato’s moral order, then, *L’Anti-Œdipe* appears to rest on operations of selection, this time between supposedly ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ forms of illness. The doctor who ‘wrongly’ declares desire sick is revealed as the one who is ‘truly’ sick. Yet with such a diagnostic, Deleuze and Guattari become physicians themselves. They even present schizoanalysis as that which *cures of the cure* (1973: 80), in a diametrical inversion of the Oedipal order which the title of their book foreshadowed: *L’Anti-Œdipe*, like Nietzsche’s *Anti-Christ*, is exposed to accusations of dialectical recuperation. Without going so far as to agree with Michel Cressole, who describes *L’Anti-Œdipe* as the Bible of a new sect of schizoanalysts (1973: 91; also see Goddard, J.-C. 2002), I concur with René Girard: ‘Deleuze et Guattari pourchassent féroce­ment toute sorte de *piété* mais leur production inconsciente ressemble fort à une nouvelle forme de piété’ (1972: 961). Deleuze and Guattari threaten to inaugurate a new moral order, centred on the idealised figure (*idol*) of the schizophrenic.

This idealisation is all the more problematic in that it focuses on a potentially destructive mental state. The schizophrenic, much like the anorexic and the masochist, threatens to de-organ-ise his or her body to a point of self-destruction—the organic determination that binds the body to communication, food or pleasure functions as a means of self-preservation. As François Dosse remarks, Deleuze and Guattari may thus be accused of ‘survaloris[er] la seule ligne schizophrénique comme intrinsèquement libératrice, expérimentant toutes sortes de lignes de fuite parmi les plus dangereuses’ (2007: 264), in line with Deleuze’s idealisation of the Overman in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*. It seems urgent to recognise that the becoming-active of forces embodied by the schizophrenic and the Overman implies surrendering oneself to (self-)destruction,

which is hardly ethically acceptable. I find the critique addressed to Deleuze by Kostas Axelos telling in this regard: ‘Honorable professeur français, bon époux, excellent père de deux charmants enfants, ami fidèle, [...] voudrais-tu que tes élèves et tes enfants suivent dans leur “vie effective” la voie de ta vie, ou par exemple celle d’Artaud [?]’ (1972). Moreover, it should now be clear that, although nihilistic modes of thinking must be avoided, reactive forces—as well as, by extension, the values, beliefs and institutions in which these forces are expressed—must *not* be eliminated, for this would come down to inaugurating an idolatrous moral order similar to that of Platonism. I agree with Malabou: Deleuze’s call for the overcoming of nihilism ‘règle [...] trop vite la question fondamentale de la complicité du nihilisme et de l’affirmation créatrice’ (2009: 399).

(4.6) A Geological Ethics

Shortly after the publication of *L’Anti-Œdipe*, however, Deleuze and Guattari nuance their call to overcome nihilism. In his 1977 dialogues with Claire Parnet, Deleuze demonstrates a new sense of caution, stressing that ‘On ne fait jamais table rase, on est toujours au milieu de quelque chose’ (Deleuze & Parnet 1996: back cover). Woodward also remarks that ‘the themes of certainty, guarantee, and salvation are largely excised [from *Mille plateaux*]’ (2013: 144). Instead, Deleuze and Guattari develop a ‘geological’ approach which, I argue, finally recognises the co-implication of active *and* reactive forces, the virtual *and* the actual, the CsO *and* the organism, in the advent of difference.

To be sure, the second volume of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* may first be accused of merely taking up the schizoanalytical method developed in *L’Anti-Œdipe*. In the third plateau, entitled ‘La géologie de la morale’, in particular, the protagonist of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Lost World*, Professor Challenger, gives an imaginary lecture in which he

fosters belief in this world's creative *puissance* by excavating the CsO lying underneath the strata that constitute the actual world. According to Professor Challenger, the Earth is a 'soupe primitive' (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 66), the un-organ-ised as such, 'traversé de matières instables non formées, de flux en tous sens, d'intensités libres ou de singularités nomades, de particules folles ou transitoires' (1980: 53-54). Professor Challenger however remarks that the world as we know it is hardly comparable to a primitive soup: the CsO alone does not account for 'toutes les choses stratifiées de la terre' (1980: 58). He therefore stresses that 'en même temps, se produisait sur la terre un phénomène très important' (1980: 54): matter is condensed and fixed into molecules which come together as molar aggregates, thereby giving rise to everything there is, from rocks to rivers, plants and animals. More precisely, echoing the twofold expressionism of Spinoza's ontology discussed in section 3, this process of accumulation, coagulation and sedimentation, that is to say, of *stratification*, is said to follow a double articulation by which the primitive soup is organ-ised through a selection and determination of material (first articulation, or *différentiation*), a material which then becomes fixed into more or less stable structures (second articulation, or *différenciation*). Sandstone, for instance, arises from the selection of particles in suspension in a river, and their determination according to size and weight by the movement of the river, before they 'calcify' into more or less rigid compounds. Stratification is thus recognised as a process which happens *to* and *on* the CsO: 'c'est le CsO, c'est lui, la réalité glaciaire sur laquelle vont se former ces alluvions, sédimentations, coagulations, plissements et rabattements qui composent un organisme' (1980: 197). In line with the philosopher-genealogist and philosopher-*voyant* of sections 2 and 4, the philosopher-geologist or natural scientist that is Professor Challenger refers the strata, and the organisms that arise from the aggregation of strata, back to the CsO of which they are the *actual* (i.e. organ-ised) expression or symptom.

However, and this is where I perceive a shift in the trajectory of Deleuze's thinking, Professor Challenger is quite clear that he does *not* conduct this geological exercise in view of liberating the Earth from stratification, the CsO from the organism. Rather, he approaches this exercise as an occasion to draw attention to the fact that the organ-isation of matter is 'un phénomène très important, inévitable, bénéfique à certains égards' (1980: 54), for it, alone, allows for difference to *actually* arise. We have seen in section 3 that Deleuze intuited in *Différence et répétition* that virtuality is affirmed of the repetition of actualisation. In *Mille plateaux*, he reconnects with this intuition by recognising with Guattari that—to quote Hallward—'The creating alone creates but it creates *through* the creature' (2006: 64). Through an exercise in geology, stratification is revealed as a means of expression, or attribute, of the CsO, and organisms, as its actual expression or modes. What Deleuze and Guattari realise, then, is that 'il ne suffit pas d'opposer abstraitement les strates et le CsO. Car, du CsO, on en trouve déjà dans les strates' (1980: 201). The CsO itself appears to be *actually* expressed by or affirmed of the repetition of gestures of stratification. Hence Deleuze's and Guattari's suggestion that, 'Le CsO n'est pas "avant" l'organisme, il y est adjacent, et ne cesse pas de se faire' (1980: 202). To be sure, Deleuze stands by his observation that organisms threaten to stifle the CsO when 'rapport[és] [...] à des fins extérieures ou transcendantes' (1980: 32). In *Mille plateaux*, however, he and Guattari highlight that, when organisms are 'estim[és] sur un plan d'immanence d'après leur valeur en soi' (1980: 32), that is to say, when they are recognised as an expression of the CsO, they are revealed as an essential part of the process of different/cial genesis.

As Deleuze and Guattari stress, then, it now seems clear that 'Le pire n'est pas de rester stratifié—organisé, signifié, assujetti—mais de précipiter les strates dans un effondrement suicidaire ou dément' (1980: 199). 'Libérez [...] [le CsO] d'un geste trop violent, faites sauter les strates sans prudence,' they warn, 'vous vous serez tué vous-

même, enfoncé dans un trou noir' (1980: 199). That is the issue faced by the schizophrenic, the anorexic and the masochist: '*ils s'étaient vidés de leurs organes au lieu de chercher les points où ils pouvaient patiemment et momentanément défaire cette organisation des organes qu'on appelle l'organisme*' (1980: 199). Once fully de-organised, the body is no longer capable of producing strata, which means that *it can no longer become*. Hence the clinical association of schizophrenia and catatonia: by losing its capacity for production, the empty schizophrenic body becomes passive (1980: 186).

I contend that this recognition leads to a major reorientation of Deleuze's (and Guattari's) different/cial endeavour. Whereas in *L'Anti-Œdipe* desire was brought back to its larval state in order to free it from structure, and whereas *Nietzsche et la philosophie* centred on the becoming-active of all forces in order to overcome nihilism, once and for all, in *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari recognise that affirming difference cannot be done at the expense of stratification, and even depends on one's ability to foster new such gestures. If they still suggest that one should strive to de-organ-ise oneself, taking one's cue from the schizophrenic, then, they now stress that this should *only* be the case *provided that* this allows for new organisms to arise: 'On n'y va pas à coups de marteau, mais avec une lime très fine. [...] Défaire l'organisme n'a jamais été se tuer, mais ouvrir le corps', they write (1980: 198). 'L'organisme, il faut en garder assez pour qu'il se reforme à chaque aube' (1980: 199). Deleuze and Guattari thus recognise the co-implication of forces of stasis (stratification or territorialisation) *and* change (counter-actualisation or deterritorialisation) in the advent of difference, a difference which itself emerges as always simultaneously virtual *and* actual, creating *and* creature, *naturans and naturata*, to use Spinoza's concepts, assembling *and* assembled, that is to say, as an 'agencement', as Deleuze and Guattari put it, playing on the double meaning of the term. As Deleuze stresses in *Cinéma I*, it therefore appears that, when it comes to affirming

difference, 'l'alternative ne porte pas sur des termes à choisir, mais sur des modes d'existence' (1983a: 160). Echoing Bataille's inner experience, which throws the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity into an endless conflict, the task of the philosopher-geologist appears to be to maintain a productive tension between active and reactive forces, the virtual and the actual, *without admissible outcome*. Put otherwise, affirming difference depends on a renunciation of satisfaction and an embracing of unrest.

This alternative of 'spirit' as Deleuze puts it (1983a: 160), recalls the one he intuits in the first chapter of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* between the 'good' and the 'bad' player. Only a few pages before he starts to advocate for the overcoming of nihilism, Deleuze notes that, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche distinguishes two moments in every game of dice: 'les dés qu'on lance et les dés qui retombent. [...] Les dés qu'on lance une fois sont l'affirmation du *hasard*, la combinaison qu'ils forment en tombant est l'affirmation de la *nécessité*' (1983b: 29). As read by Deleuze, the throw of dice functions as a gesture of counter-actualisation: it affirms virtual multiplicity, the 'larval' state of the dice number, which is actualised once the dice falls back on the table.⁶⁵ A 'bad' player, as Deleuze sees him or her, seeks to control the result of the dice throw through operations of calculation: 'il dispose [...] de la causalité et de la probabilité pour amener une combinaison qu'il déclare souhaitable' (1983b: 31), using the advent of the new as an occasion for satisfaction. The 'good' player, by contrast, relinquishes control over the outcome of the game. As Todd May stresses, 'good' players play 'with the knowledge that the combinations are infinite, and are not up to them' (2005: 65). They may thus be said to recognise a world of virtual difference lying underneath the actual particularities of the result of the dice throw. Crucially, like the philosopher-geologist, the 'good' player

⁶⁵ I agree with Todd May that the analogy would have been more rigorous with a dice thrown without any number yet carved onto its faces (2005: 63).

identifies necessity as ‘la combinaison du hasard lui-même’ (1983b: 30). For Deleuze, this implies that necessity does *not* threaten to exhaust chance, but rather calls for new dice throws: insofar as necessity is recognised as affirmed of chance, ‘le résultat du coup de dés [est] l’affirmation de la nécessité, le nombre qui réunit tous les membres du hasard, mais aussi le retour du premier temps, la répétition du coup de dés, la reproduction et la re-affirmation du hasard lui-même’ (1983b: 32). May stresses that this is why ‘good’ players ‘are not afraid to throw the dice, and are not fearful of the dice that fall back’ (2005: 150). They throw the dice with the conviction that the organ-isation of all that is is ‘toujours démontable, connectable, renversable, modifiable’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 32). The risk of stifling the CsO is thus fended off by the eternal return of difference.

Or so Deleuze thought in the first chapter of *Nietzsche et la philosophie*. From the following chapter, he highlights that the player who gives himself or herself over to chance when throwing the dice once may always succumb to the temptation of seeking satisfaction when throwing the dice again. The most active human being, Deleuze notes, is only ever ‘cet homme beau, jeune et fort, mais sur le visage duquel on déchiffre les signes discrets d’une maladie qu’il n’a pas encore’ (1983b: 192). Indeed, it will be recalled from the previous section that the reactive forces at work within every organism of this world—especially within human beings—have a tendency to contaminate other forces, thereby undoing the co-implication of active and reactive forces, necessity and chance, the actual and the virtual that is necessary for difference to arise. Organisms cut themselves off, along with all the actual life of the world, from the CsO which they express and tend to ‘rapporter les expressions et les actions à des fins extérieures ou transcendantes, au lieu de les estimer sur un plan d’immanence d’après leur valeur en soi’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 32). It therefore seems understandable that, from the second chapter of *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze feels the need to advocate for a becoming-

active of all forces. However, it should now be clear that Deleuze's strategy in so doing does not permit the restoration of a productive tension between active and reactive forces, the virtual and the actual, chance and necessity, but rather threatens to eliminate the latter term altogether, in diametrical opposition to the nihilistic man. Much like a 'bad' player, Deleuze controls the outcome of the game through a *selection* which ensures that no new stratification gesture will ever be possible. The outcome of the game of dice which he sees as desirable is the absence of any *actual* outcome. With his selective ethics, Deleuze catches the dice before it falls back on the table, denying necessity, at the risk of interrupting the game altogether, and with it, the advent of difference itself.

What emerges from Deleuze's misstep, then, is that affirming difference requires exposing oneself to the becoming-reactive of all forces, and by extension, to the risk of organisms stifling the CsO. The philosopher-geologist can only counter this threat, time and again, without any hope of achieving safety, by referring all phenomena, structures and organisms of this world, *as they drift towards transcendence*, back to the *puissance* which they express but which they can never exhaust. It is a difficult gesture indeed, for it requires constant vigilance on the part of the philosopher-geologist, against his or her own nihilistic tendencies. If in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Deleuze was rather hasty in distinguishing a 'good' and a 'bad' player, in *Mille plateaux*, he and Guattari recognise that 'on ne peut jamais se donner un dualisme ou une dichotomie, même sous la forme rudimentaire du bon et du mauvais' (1980: 16). No one is ever safe from the temptation of satisfaction; there is no intrinsically 'good' player. Rather, 'Le bon et le mauvais ne peuvent être que le produit d'une sélection active et temporaire, à recommencer' (1980: 16). The eternal return as selective ethical thought proposed in the second chapter of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* gives way to the eternal return of selection as ethical thought: the philosopher-geologist must forever again find the courage to favour 'un choix du

choix [...] [à celui] du non-choix' (1983a: 161), a mode of existence which welcomes opportunities for choice through an 'ouverture spirituelle' (1983a: 165) over one that admits no further possibility of choice by settling for satisfaction. Thinking like a geologist is, therefore, not a one-time effort but a vigilant ethics. It is a '[c]ombat perpétuel et violent' against the becoming-reactive of all forces (1980: 197), one which requires a 'décision spirituelle toujours renouvelée' (1983a: 165).

(4.7) Becoming-Secular

It is such a geological ethics that Deleuze and Guattari adopt, I argue, in the second half of the twelfth plateau of *Mille plateaux*, as they look at a system of strata that holds crucial importance for the purpose of this thesis, namely, transcendent religion. They start by identifying religion as 'une pièce de l'appareil d'État' (1980: 475), which territorialises milieus and organises populations according to imperial hierarchies. Nomadicism and sorcery are thus generally considered as 'une offense contre le prêtre ou contre le dieu' (1980: 475). However, Deleuze and Guattari also remark that 'une simple opposition de points de vue, religion-nomadisme, n'est pas exhaustive' (1980: 475). Transcendent religions generally arise from the actions of a prophet or divine figure whose revealed message challenges the world order. They arise, in other words, from a deterritorialising gesture, a leap into the unknown, which ultimately crystallises into more or less rigid dogmas and institutions. As counterintuitive as this may seem, transcendent belief may thus be said to emerge as an expression of belief in this world's different/cial *puissance*.

If the opposition between the nomad and the priest is not strict, however, this is also, Deleuze and Guattari argue, because the nomadic forces that bring religions into being threaten to de-organ-ise them in turn. The many theological (r)evolutions and

schisms that have shaped Abrahamic religions over the past millennia clearly indicate that ‘la religion monothéiste n’est pas sans ambivalence ni franges, et déborde les limites même idéales d’un État, même impérial, pour entrer dans une zone plus floue, un dehors des États où elle a la possibilité d’une mutation’ (1980: 475). In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari draw particular attention to the mutations brought about by the Holy Wars led in the name of Christianity and Islam (1980: 476). To be sure, they recognise that these wars responded to a desire, by despotic religious States, to extend their rule to other parts of the world. However, they also argue that this rationale was used to account for and legitimise the fact that ‘quand la religion se constitue en machine de guerre, elle mobilise et libère une formidable charge de nomadisme ou de deterritorialisation absolue’ (1980: 476). Historians now widely admit that the fighters who left Europe to conquer the Holy Land during the Middle Ages were not the homogeneous Christian army one may have in mind when thinking of the crusades, but rather gathered in heterogeneous and loosely tied nomadic war-bands. Their encounters and exchanges with local populations brought about formidable economic, political, technological, linguistic, philosophical and theological changes which even affected the theological and territorial organisation of the Christian religion itself (see Adkins 2015: 73). According to Deleuze and Guattari, crusades are, therefore, a good illustration of the fact that the very nomadic forces that led to the emergence of the Christian religion, that is to say, that allowed it to become what it is, also led it to become what it is not (see Colebrook 2002: xxii).

At this stage, it must be noted that Deleuze and Guattari are quite clear that they do *not* shed light on the deterritorialising forces that both generate and continuously traverse religion with a view to undermining and, ultimately, having done with religious institutions and transcendent belief. Rather, they approach this geological exercise as an occasion to draw attention to the fact that deterritorialisation ‘n’appartient pas moins à

l'“essence” de la religion’ than territorialisation (1980: 476). The reader might initially be put off by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s use of the term ‘essence’, here. However, it should now be clear that the essence of religion, for Deleuze and Guattari, is an *agencement*. Far from succumbing to essentialism, Deleuze and Guattari recognise that religion is always already in the process of de-organ-ising and re-organ-ising itself. Religion is said to have two different facets or tendencies, towards stasis (through territorialisation) *and* towards change (through deterritorialisation), which means that it also has a *moving image*, one which is mobilised with each new church, belief, practice or institutional construction.

Crucially for my purpose, this implies that affirming difference and multiplicity does *not* require having done with transcendent religion, as was suspected at the end of section 4, in line with the prevailing orthodoxy within Deleuzian scholarship. When considered in light of the nomadic forces that both condition and continuously transform them, transcendent religions themselves emerge as agents of difference, on a par with immanent ones. I believe that it is now time to recognise that even immanent forms of spirituality always admit some degree of organisation, if only through the establishment of codified ritual practices. In *Cinéma II*, Deleuze thus stresses that immanent belief is never a belief in an abstract creative *puissance* but a belief in this world ‘tel qu’il est’ (1985: 224). This addition, Kathrin Thiele explains, is ‘not an expression of resignation or an ultimate acceptance of the most visible limits that determine this world, [as Badiou or Linhart would arguably suggest,] but the paradoxical formulation of the only movement that might lead to real transformation’ (2010: 35), much like, we might add, Nancy’s emphasis on *désœuvrement*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, Deleuze thereby highlights that creative evolution requires a faith-ful affirmation of this world, not *as it should be*—through the overcoming of nihilism, for instance—but *as the agencement that it always already is*. As Thiele remarks, ‘Belief in the Deleuzian sense

must be understood as [...] an activity for keeping the movement which creates... a world... becoming-other' (2010: 35), a movement which results from a productive tension between active and reactive forces, forces of change and forces of stasis. The difference between immanent and transcendent forms of religiosity would, therefore, simply reside in the ratio of reactive forces to active ones, of forces of stasis to forces of change. Whereas in immanent spirituality, the tendency towards change is dominant, in transcendent religions, the tendency towards stasis prevails (Adkins 2016: 34). Both however always maintain a tension between these two tendencies.

I contend that this offers a way out of the definitional impasse evoked in the introduction: if we recognise, with Deleuze and Guattari, that religion has a moving image, we can still speak of religion in the singular—in terms of *agencement*—while attending to its diversity in the contemporary world. When cultivated from within existing religions, such a recognition even unfolds as an effective vector of pluralism, and an inclusive alternative to secularism, for it keeps dogmatism at bay. Recognising that religion is always already in the process of de-organ-ising and re-organ-ising itself does come down to admitting that every belief, dogma or institution, *including one's own*, is 'toujours démontable, connectable, renversable, modifiable' (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 32). I believe that this calls us to refine what has been said about Deleuze's iconoclastic endeavour and tranquil atheism in sections 1 to 4. In his later works, at least, Deleuze does *not* tell us what we should or should not believe in, whether God exists, or even that belief should be suspended as part of an affirmative agnosticism similar to the one I have identified in Bataille's and Derrida's work in chapters 1 and 2—in *Deleuze and Religion*, Bryden thus (wrongly, I think) identifies in Deleuze's thinking 'the agnostic spirituality which remained as an option for Georges Bataille' (2001: 4). Rather, I argue that Deleuze tells us that our beliefs and values must be approached as ephemeral relays along a

nomadic itinerary. Whether one believes in a monotheistic God, a pantheon of deities, the magic of the sorcerer, or even that there are no such things as supernatural entities, this belief must be embraced as a vector of change and life-affirming unrest rather than as an occasion for satisfaction. In *Cinéma II*, Deleuze thus calls his readers to ‘croire [...] au germe de vie, à la graine qui fait éclater les pavés, qui s'est conservée, perpétuée dans le saint suaire ou les bandelettes de la momie’ (1985: 225). That is also how I interpret Deleuze’s and Guattari’s famous—yet still largely misunderstood—suggestion that God is ‘un Homard ou une double-pince’ (1980: 54). For Deleuze and Guattari, God, much like any other organism, phenomenon or value, must be recognised as the result of the twofold articulation characteristic of stratification, a process which takes place at the level of the CsO. At odds with traditional approaches to the monotheistic God as the uncreated, eternal and immutable creator of all things, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that God must only ever be approached as an expression of life’s *puissance* which has ‘une face tournée vers les strates [...] [et] une face tournée ailleurs, vers le corps sans organes’ (1980: 54), that is to say, tendencies towards stasis *and* towards change. Deleuze and Guattari cannot, therefore, be said to foster atheism *per se*. Rather, they call on believers to stop seeing God as an *idol*; they promote a non-idolatrous approach to transcendent belief.

Deleuze suggests that one may find illustrations of such a non-idolatrous belief in God in the work of two fervent Christian thinkers, namely, Pascal and Kierkegaard. To be sure, in *Nietzsche et la philosophie* and *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze initially suggests that Pascal and Kierkegaard behave like ‘bad’ players by betting on the future in view of achieving redemption (1983b: 42). In the 1980s, however, Deleuze realises, with Guattari, that neither Pascal nor Kierkegaard ‘ne se soucient plus de l’existence transcendante de Dieu, mais seulement des possibilités immanentes infinies qu’apporte l’existence de celui qui croit que Dieu existe’ (2005: 72). As Ronald Bogue explains,

Kierkegaard's leap of faith responds to the observation that 'Some people think they have no choice and hence surrender to a passive mode of existence. Others make a choice, but then feel condemned to a subsequent course of action' (2007: 279). With the leap of faith, by contrast, one chooses to facilitate the return of choice: 'je choisis de choisir, et par là même j'exclus tout choix fait sur le mode de ne pas avoir le choix' (Deleuze 1983a: 161). The leap of faith therefore manifests an openness to, and embracing of, the new. It unfolds as an ethical mode of existence characterised by a belief in this world's creative *puissance*. 'Le pari de Pascal ne dit pas autre chose', Deleuze argues in *Cinéma I* (1983a: 161). Pascal does not merely choose between the existence or non-existence of God, but rather highlights that 'l'alternative de l'esprit est ailleurs, elle est entre le mode d'existence de celui qui "parie" que Dieu existe et le mode d'existence de celui qui parie pour la non-existence ou qui ne veut pas parier' (1983a: 161). According to Deleuze, reading Pascal, only the one who bets that God exists manifests an open mind and may, therefore, be said to think affirmatively. Indeed, both the one who bets that God does *not* exist and the one who refuses to bet have in common that they surrender to a mode of existence in which no further choices can occur. The one who answers 'why not?' to the question of God's existence, by contrast, demonstrates a belief in life's creative *puissance*. With their respective leap of faith and wager, then, Kierkegaard and Pascal break with modes of existence which suppose the absence of choice, either due to a paralysing uncertainty or to the over-certainty of the devout person or the mystic. Instead, they foster 'la simple croyance de celui qui choisit de choisir' (1985: 232). Transcendent belief thus becomes an occasion to foster (belief in) this world's creative *puissance* or, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, a means to 'recharge[r] l'immanence' (2005: 72).

Pascal and Kierkegaard are not isolated cases. I have remarked in section 2 that, throughout his career, Deleuze highlights that many philosophers and artists throughout

history have approached transcendent belief as a vector of difference.⁶⁶ In *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, he suggests that this approach should be considered as an attempt at ‘saving’ religion from itself, for ‘la religion se trouve précisément subjuguée par des forces d’une tout autre nature que la sienne’ (1983b: 165). In the 1980s, by contrast, Deleuze argues that such an approach testifies to a recognition, by artists and philosophers, that ‘l’athéisme n’a jamais été extérieur à la religion’ (1980). God Himself is recognised as an opportunity to transcend the constraints of representation, that is to say, as a force of deterritorialisation. This makes it easier to understand how an atheistic thinker such as Deleuze can admit deeply religious thinkers such as Spinoza, Bergson and Leibniz as his primary philosophical inspirations. ‘[S]i les philosophes nous ont tellement parlé de Dieu—et ils pouvaient bien être chrétiens ou croyants—, ce n’était pas sans une intense rigolade’, Deleuze observes in his 1980 lecture on Spinoza, acknowledging that these philosophers do break with theism as it is traditionally understood (1980). However, Deleuze continues, ‘Ce n’était pas un rigolage d’incrédulité, mais c’était une joie du travail qu’ils étaient en train de faire’ (1980). These philosophers do *not* qualify as atheists. Rather, their transcendent belief in God unfolds as an expression of belief in this world’s creative *puissance*. I therefore prefer to describe their approach, along with Deleuze’s own promotion of a non-idolatrous approach to transcendent belief, in terms of a faith-ful ethics of ‘becoming-secular’, to use Deleuze’s vocabulary. If being secular

⁶⁶ Deleuze mainly refers to *Christian* philosophers and artists. In *Mille plateaux*, he and Guattari also draw most of their examples from the history of Christianity, with the notable exception of the Muslim *jihad*. I suspect that this mainly has to do with Deleuze’s and Guattari’s intellectual background and lack of familiarity with other religious traditions. In *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?*, however, they explicitly suggest that Christianity secretes atheism ‘plus que toute autre religion’ (2005: 89). I argue that this isolated remark, which is supported by no analysis nor attempted evidence but rather seems to be mentioned in passing, is not enough for us to diagnose a residual Christianity on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s part. If there is some degree of Christian exemplarity in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s thinking, then, I argue that it should be recognised as less substantial—and, therefore, less problematic—than that found in Bataille’s, Derrida’s and Nancy’s work.

consists of experiencing life independently from a reference to transcendence, as Charles Taylor suggests (2007: 3-4), becoming-secular consists in cultivating religions' atheistic *puissance*, anchoring them—along with transcendent belief—to the immanent flux of becoming. An ethics of becoming-secular thus not only sidesteps the temptation of calling for the disappearance of religions from the modern secular world but also emancipates the religious from essentialist definitions. It thereby opens new horizons for religion beyond theism *and* atheism, in a way that reflects 'spiritual' transformations currently observable in Western countries and beyond.

It will be recalled from sections 5 and 6, however, that no artist or philosopher—including Deleuze—is ever safe from the becoming-reactive of forces. Human beings will always, sooner or later, be tempted by satisfaction and erect new idols to which organisms can be referred and compared, at odds with the faith-ful ethics of become-secular. It is, arguably, out of an awareness of this looming threat that, in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, he and Guattari make the claim that 'croire en ce monde, en cette vie, [est] devenu notre tâche la plus difficile' (2005: 72). Immanent belief requires constant re-affirmation in the face of the becoming-reactive of all forces, without possible guarantee or hope of ever reaching satisfaction. This absence of guarantee is implied, I argue, in the very definition of belief. I have already pointed out in chapter 2 that even Christian saints experienced periods of spiritual drought. Transcendent religions themselves do admit that belief may be lost and that it is expressed in the form of singular acts of faith, whose return is never guaranteed. *Ceaselessly* striving to foster immanent belief by shedding light, time and again, on the world of virtual difference lying underneath the particularities of the actual, that is to say, by referring transcendence back to the plane of immanence in which it is always already inscribed, may therefore well be our best shot at affirming difference. Far from being tranquil, then, Deleuze's ethics of 'becoming-secular' emerges

as restless: it relies on the eternal repetition of singular acts of immanent faith that fosters pluralism from outside *and within* religious communities.

This ethics, however, also extends beyond what is traditionally called the religious, whether transcendent or immanent. Indeed, it will be recalled that Deleuze and Guattari designate as transcendent religion any institution that establishes its rule in the heavens *or on earth* (2005: 46). What has been said above therefore also applies to political institutions and legal principles. In particular, I argue that Deleuze is *not* fundamentally against consensus, community, institutions, including democratic ones, or the rule of law. If, as I have highlighted in section 5, Mengue is right to remark that Deleuze is critical of democracy and human rights, the former overlooks the fact that the latter only criticises a certain tendency to approach these values of modern political life as ‘des transcendances ou des universaux’ (1990: 208). By contrast, throughout the 1980s and until the end of his career, Deleuze refers these values back to the plane of immanence in which they are always already inscribed, showing them as ‘toujours démontable[s], connectable[s], renversable[s], modifiable[s]’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 32). He highlights, for instance, that every legal principle, even those which inaugurate themselves as uncreated, eternal and universal, emerges in response to the singularity of a given situation. ‘Ce qui est créateur de droit,’ Deleuze stresses, ‘ce ne sont pas les codes ou les déclarations, c’est la jurisprudence [...] [qui] procède par singularité, prolongement de singularités’ (1990: 209-210). Paul Patton has also suggested that Deleuze’s critical approach to democracy relies on the observation that, if, as the government of the people by the people, democracy does rely on the principle of majority rule, ‘the prior question “majority of whom” has always been settled in advance and usually not by democratic means’ (2008: 191). Democracy, according to Deleuze, should not be inaugurated as a transcendent principle, then, but rather approached as ‘Un devenir-démocratique qui ne se confond pas

avec ce que sont les États de droit' (2005: 108). Efforts to transform political institutions and procedures, including the vote and the means of representation, so as to enable the participation of minorities in public life, in particular, emerge as important vectors of 'becoming-democratic'. This does not mean that, in Deleuze's thinking, democracy remain 'to come'—according to a Derridean framework—but rather that democracy is only ever (in) becoming. In contradiction with Mengue, then, Patton suggests that Deleuze's critique of democracy aligns him with proponents of democratic pluralism for whom 'the key to an open-ended democratic process lies in the "productive tension" between majoritarian governance, rights and recognition on the one hand, and minoritarian becoming on the other' (2005: 408). Deleuze's becoming-democratic does open new horizons for pluralism. It does not tell us who to vote for or what bill to support. Crucially, it does not tell us to step away from politics altogether. Rather, it tells us that one should feel free to embrace any value or belief, political or otherwise, *provided that* it is recognised for what it is, that is to say, as an *agencement*, an affirmation of life's *puissance, which it can never exhaust*. Far from being against politics or life-in-common, as some critics have suggested, then, Deleuze's thinking after the late 1970s appears to come with a demand for 'une communauté nouvelle, dont les membres soient capables de "confiance", c'est-à-dire de cette croyance en eux-mêmes, au monde et au devenir' (1993: 112), a community that recognises itself, its institutions, values, beliefs and laws as *agencements*, in an unprecedentedly inclusive form of democratic pluralism.

Conclusion – On Wonder

(5.1) A Dangerous Mother

‘*Comment “parler religion” ? de la religion ? Singulièrement de la religion, aujourd’hui ?*’ (2001a: 9). I opened my investigation with this crucial question from Derrida’s *Foi et savoir*. Across four chapters, in which I have unpacked and analysed the thinking of Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze, who stand as four of France’s most original—and intricate—modern philosophical voices, it has been my argument that one may still speak of the religious in the singular without compromising its contemporary diversity, by approaching it as an ethics of resistance to the proper, a faith(-)ful mode of existence based on an infinitely repeated gesture of opening to and welcoming of difference. Whilst Nancy may well suggest that ‘Il n’y a pas de retour du religieux : il y a les contorsions et les boursoufflures de son épuisement’ (1997: 33), I contend that his thinking, along with Bataille’s, Derrida’s, and Deleuze’s, fosters a certain return of religion today. This return, to be sure, does *not* follow what I have identified in the introduction as the fashionable ‘postsecular’ trajectory, let alone the more dangerous ‘post-secular’ one. Bataille’s, Derrida’s, Nancy’s, and Deleuze’s rigorous attempt to have done with God(’s transcendent place) and respective fostering of an affirmative and uncompromising form of agnosticism, a gesture of adoration, and a belief in this world as it is, do *not* participate in the re-enchantment of a world which would find its way back to transcendence after a period of secular wandering. Rather, I argue by way of a conclusion that these thinkers’ (re)turn to the question of religion may be approached as an attempt to open, and educate, the disenchanting Western mind to the sustained experience of *wonder*.

Anyone with a fair knowledge of the history of Western thought will immediately ask why the Western mind would need to be ‘educated’ to wonder. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato reports that Socrates himself suggested that wonder—*thauma* in Ancient Greek—is the origin of wisdom, and therefore, of philosophy. In fact, it was Socrates life’s work to educate young minds to the destabilising experience of wonder. By repeatedly asking the question ‘what is...?’, he makes his pupils realise how little they know about what they thought they understood instinctively. When Theaetetus exclaims: ‘By the gods, Socrates, I am lost in wonder when I think of all these things, and sometimes when I regard them it really makes my head swim’ (Plato 1921: 55), Socrates praises his student’s reaction as one that is characteristic of a philosopher. Centuries later, in *Les Passions de l’âme*, Descartes confirms Socrates’s observation and argues that *admiratio*, which designates the capacity to be amazed in Latin, may be considered as the origin of intellectual enquiry insofar as it designates the capacity to be affected by the unfamiliar. ‘Lorsque la première rencontre de quelque objet nous surprend,’ he notes, ‘et que nous le jugeons être nouveau, ou fort différent de ce que nous connaissions auparavant ou bien de ce que nous supposions qu’il devait être, cela fait que nous l’admirons et en sommes étonnés’ (1964: 108-109). For Descartes, wonder admits no opposite, ‘parce que cela peut arriver avant que nous connaissions aucunement si cet objet nous est convenable, ou s’il ne l’est pas’ (1964: 109). Wonder is the degree-zero of passions, what precedes, and conditions, joy, sorrow, love, hatred, desire, as well as intellectual enquiry. It is the primary affect that attunes the subject to the world and to itself. As testified by a possible etymology of the term, which signals a shared ancestry with the German *Wunde*, meaning the gash, the wound (Rubenstein 2008: 9), wonder may be seen as the spacing that gives birth to both passions and thinking—literally, the *vagina*, the *female*, the *mother*.

The question remains, then: why would Western thought need to be opened and educated to wonder, if the latter stands as its own *mother*? The answer may be found, I argue, in contemporary re-readings of the philosophical history of wonder by Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2008), Catherine Malabou (2013), and Genevieve Lloyd (2018)—appropriately, these studies are conducted by women. Rubenstein observes that, although the irruption of the unfamiliar and the resulting ‘disenclosure’ of the self-identical, to use Nancean terms, are widely recognised as facilitating the emergence of philosophical thinking, these phenomena themselves elude intellectual enquiry, which proves utterly uncomfortable to the Western mind. ‘How does one ask, “what is wonder,” when it is wonder that prompts one to ask “what is” in the first place?’, she asks. ‘This sort of puzzle, to make matters even more complicated, is precisely the sort of dilemma that gives *rise* to wonder. Whatever it *is*, it strikes when the understanding cannot master that which it presupposes’ (2006: 12). Wonder’s indeterminacy is precisely what Socrates experiences when trying to determine what knowledge is, as reported in the *Theaetetus*. Starting from Theaetetus’s postulate that knowledge may be approached in terms of true judgement, and after quite a few argumentative convolutions, Socrates admits finding no satisfactory answer to the question of why false judgements occur (Plato 1921: 169).⁶⁷ However, instead of capitulating to the only remaining option, namely, that false judgements—and knowledge, by extension—admit no identifiable essence, Socrates makes a move that Rubenstein deems ‘un-Socratic’ (2008: 6): he artificially posits a theory of false judgement, which he traces back to a misalignment of perception with knowledge. ‘But this definition is no help at all,’ Rubenstein stresses, ‘for the simple reason that Socrates

⁶⁷ I suspect that this has to do with the issue identified by Deleuze in *Différence et répétition* (see section 1 of chapter 4). Socrates cannot identify the essence of false judgement because it is a *simulacrum*: ‘ce modèle ne jouit plus de l'identité du Même idéal, [...] il est au contraire modèle de l'Autre, l'autre modèle, modèle de la différence en soi’ (Deleuze 1968a: 167).

still does not know what knowledge is' (2008: 6). What seems to have happened here is that Socrates felt so uncomfortable in the face of what he could not master that he was willing to bend his own philosophical rectitude to find himself on firmer ground. Once he realises this, Socrates is vexed, and even scared (Plato 1921: 201): he has learnt the hard way that the indeterminacy of wonder is almost impossible to sustain, for it threatens the quest for mastery driving intellectual enquiry as the ontotheological tradition sees it.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that wonder came to be associated with *both* amazement *and* terror throughout the intellectual history of the West. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, for instance, Thaumas the god of wonder is said to father Iris, the rainbow, benevolent messenger of the gods, *as well as* the dreadful Harpies Aello and Oypetes. Rubenstein also remarks that, in the Bible, wonder is approached as a combination of reverent awe and abject horror in the face of a God who eludes human comprehension, a duality which is found again in philosophy in Burke's and Kant's concept of the sublime, Pascal's abysmal awe, Otto's numinous, Blanchot's disaster, Kristeva's abject, and Kierkegaard's *horror religiosus* (Rubenstein 2006: 12-13). I suspect that the terror of philosophers in the face of wonder reaches its height in the face of wonder's (assumed) kinship with intellectual torpor and sustained ignorance. Though Aristotle recognises that 'it was because of wonder that men both now and originally began to philosophize' (1998: 9), he insists in *Metaphysics* that wonder must be *overcome* by gaining knowledge of the cause of one's astonishment. As Rubenstein elucidates, for Aristotle and his medieval readers, from Adelard of Bath and Albert the Great to Thomas Aquinas through to Descartes, 'Wonder ought to be a fleeting experience, lest it leave the wonderer stranded in intellectual complacency, immaturity, or worse, femininity' (2008: 13).⁶⁸ Descartes, in particular, suggests that 'un excès d'admiration [...] ne peut jamais être que mauvais'

⁶⁸ I will shortly return to the parallel between the indeterminacy of wonder and femininity.

(1964: 118). While he remarks that a person who refuses to open herself to wonder is condemned to remain ignorant, unattuned to the world and to her own soul (1964: 119), he also observes that astonishment comes with a certain form of *blindness*. In his reflection on the exhibition of works of art, Stephen Greenblatt thus notes that, when one is struck with wonder, ‘the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices’ (1991: 49). This would explain why, as Socrates himself suggests, the philosopher continuously dazzled in wonder does not know the first thing about the trivial reality of his fellow human beings (Plato 1921: 119).

Yet this blindness is not only a source of ignorance but also a fertile ground for ideological manipulation and dazzled assent to unquestionable doctrines. Much as the sublime experience of limitlessness, as described by Burke and Kant, overwhelms one’s senses to the point that it may feed a dangerous form of ‘enthusiasm’, wonder separates the observer from the triviality of the here and now, with potentially tragic consequences. Once absorbed in wonder at the stars above him, Thales is said to have fallen into a pit: ‘he was so eager to know the things in the sky’, Socrates tells us, ‘that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet’ (Plato 1921: 121). According to Arendt, it is in this very pit that Heidegger fell when he committed to National Socialism. An excess of wonder, she argues, may lead even the greatest thinkers to disastrous political decisions (1978: 303; Rubenstein 2008: 20-21). As far as Arendt is concerned, the blinding powers of wonder get in the way of critical thinking and enlightened decision-making. Much as Aristotle and his medieval readers enjoin their readers to find out the causes of what strikes them with wonder, and thereby to secure the firm ground on which philosophical enquiry depends, then, she argues that the experience of wonder should be limited to a ‘leaping spark’ facilitating the emergence of knowledge *beyond itself* (1990: 97).

(5.2) The Closure of the Western Mind

The history of Western philosophy thus emerges as the history of a matricide or, at least, that of an early weaning, thought being encouraged to develop at a safe distance from its own mother. This approach, to be sure, is in line with the ontotheological understanding of creation discussed in chapter 3. Creation is considered an isolated event, in which a self-identical creator gives birth to what must eventually become a new *independent*, self-identical being. Put otherwise, creation or the event of birth paradoxically unfolds as *an opening that facilitates closure*, a logic that is reminiscent of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. If wonder does still have a place in Western thinking, then, it is only insofar as it is swiftly overcome to serve what Heidegger has identified as the closure of metaphysics.

Beyond philosophy, however, I contend that this also applies to Western scientific thought and practice, whose endeavour to accumulate knowledge of the causes of beings and phenomena of this world is largely inimical to wonder (Ingold 2011: 74). Looking at anthropology, a highly self-aware discipline of the social *sciences* whose mission was historically understood as the acquisition of knowledge of foreign peoples, their beliefs, and behaviours, for instance, Michael Scott has remarked that anthropologists have often tended to approach their interlocutors ‘in the same way that naturalists approach exotic flora and fauna: that is, as marvels or monsters to be explained away’ (2013: 863). Until recently, whenever anthropologists found themselves faced with wondrous claims that contradict the laws of logic, they ‘quickly moved to snuff that wonder—and deny that alterity—under functional, hermeneutical, and cognitive representations of what such “apparent” claims might really be about’ (2013: 863). Such an approach aligns with that of Francis Bacon who systematised the collection of ‘curiosities’ from so-called ‘exotic’

countries in view of discovering their latent meaning or function (Rubenstein 2006: 14). Whether scientific or philosophical, Western thought demands a neutralisation of wonder.

I believe that such an observation may be extended, finally, to Western *theological* thinking. This may seem paradoxical, for religion has long been seen as the one remaining space of wonder in a region of the world which has otherwise banished it—a space which is itself threatened by the process of secularisation. Martin Buber thus suggests that: ‘The philosophizing and the religious person both wonder at the phenomenon, but the one neutralizes his wonder in ideal knowledge, while the other abides in that wonder’ (1946: 75). Even Thomas Aquinas, who agrees with Aristotle that the causes of wonder must actively be sought, makes an exception for miracles, whose divine causation remains beyond human comprehension (Rubenstein 2008: 13). However, it should be clear from Heidegger’s joint reference to metaphysics and theology under the term ‘*ontotheology*’, as well as from the critique of transcendence developed by the four thinkers whom I have considered in this thesis, that religion, as it is traditionally understood in the West, is primarily oriented towards *closure*. Theologically speaking, adoration, the miraculous, awe, as well as the mystical experience discussed in section 2 of chapter 1, imply the surrender to a Higher Truth and, by extension, to a God who, although He remains beyond human comprehension, is recognised as the alpha and omega of the world. Theology thereby does not so much suppress wonder as channel and recuperate it in a dialectical fashion to secure a sense of certainty, the possibility of closure, *in God*.

If the closure sought by philosophy, science, and religion in the West demands that these disciplines recuperate, suffocate and ultimately dispel the very wonder from which they are born, then, I believe that *disenchantment* should not be seen as specific to secular modernity, as Weber seems to suggest in his 1918 ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1946). Rather, I argue that disenchantment is constitutive of the Western *ethos*. Western thought,

whether philosophical, scientific or religious, arises through and *as* a neutralisation of wonder. I therefore contend that it is both incorrect and misleading to speak with Weber of a disenchantment *of the world*, for the world is still full of occasions of wonder; so is the West. The gaze that Westerners lay on this world, on the other hand, may be declared disenchanted. The Western mind has closed itself to the experience of wonder.

Returning to the central preoccupation of this thesis, it is interesting to remark that the criticisms addressed to wonder throughout the history of philosophy, and which are thought to justify the disenchantment of the Western mind, recall those addressed to the thinkers whom I have considered in this thesis. Much as wonder is said to induce intellectual torpor and facilitate a dangerous form of enthusiasm, Bataille has been criticised for the irrationality and ecstatic fervour of his thinking. His frantic promotion of sacred violence—of a *holocaust*—without any regard for the ethical consequences has even been compared with fascist violence. A similar line of argument was used against Deleuze, whose Nietzschean call to embrace active forces to the detriment of reactive ones threatens to annihilate all the actual life of this world. As if wonderstruck, Deleuze's thinking has been accused of leading out of this world. So has Derrida's, though for different reasons. Building on Heidegger's concept of *Verhaltenheit*, which stands as the latter's rendition of the term 'wonder', Derrida develops an ethics of restraint which arguably leads him to lose touch with the reality of his own readers. Crucially, echoing Arendt's critique of wonder, Derrida's attention to the ordeal of the undecidable has been accused of getting in the way of decision-making. That is also true of Nancy's promotion of self-abandonment. As if encouraging his readers to get lost in wonder, Nancy fosters surrender to ecstasy, a gesture which, in light of his intellectual proximity with Heidegger, raises suspicions of vulnerability to recuperation by redemptive ideologies.

As if turning a blind eye to their predecessors' warning against the (allegedly misleading) temptation of wonder, then, Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze, and Nancy all appear to expose themselves to criticisms similar to those addressed to wonder throughout the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, they stand accused of finding themselves, with Heidegger, at the bottom of the pit in which Thales fell a few millennia earlier. The issue is that, as far as I am concerned, and as I have argued in the four chapters of this thesis, the criticisms that are generally addressed to Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze, and Nancy fail to take into account the entirety, and evolving character, of these thinkers' approach, when they are not simply fallacious. Similarly, I contend that the twofold accusation that philosophers have addressed to wonder, and on which the matricidal history of Western thinking relies, does not hold up well to careful examination.

On the one hand, it must be noted that sustained ignorance and intellectual torpor imply a sense of stillness and habituation with which wonder, understood as the disruptive experience of the unfamiliar, can hardly be associated. Wonder is only sustained if difference keeps interrupting—wounding—the self-identical, without ever becoming familiar. Put otherwise, if wonder is to remain wonder, the wound must never be left to heal. If wonder does threaten knowledge, then, it is only insofar as the latter is exposed to the *eternal return* of critical doubt (as testified by the phrase 'I wonder') and thereby, to its own improbability. Far from being contemplative or in a state of torpor, thought is kept on its toes, in an active form of intellectual wandering. By extension, I argue that wonder should not be seen as a source of unreflective assent, or dogmatism. Insofar as wonder suspends—or 'disencloses'—the self-identical, it is incompatible with the certainty and immutability characteristic of fundamentalism. In fact, for Rubenstein, the capitulation to unquestionable ideologies precisely results from a gesture of retreat from what she describes as 'wonder's open sea of endless questioning, strangeness, and

impossibility' (2008: 5), towards the familiar, the certain, the proper, the safe, as testified by Socrates's own misstep in the face of wonder's indeterminacy. To be sure, insofar as it implies exposing oneself to difference before one is able to determine whether the unfamiliar object will turn out to be a grace or a plague, wondering does come with vulnerability. Yet if the political history of the West has taught us anything, it is that no danger is greater than what Nancy calls 'immanentism', closure itself; a 'radical evil', as Derrida puts it, from which wonder precisely keeps us clear, but which looms over the disenchanting Western mind. No fear of indeterminacy justifies, for instance, Heidegger's commitment to Nazism—which, as discussed in chapter 3, arises from an unwillingness to give up on the proper, in spite of his own suggestion that time, space and interpersonal relations prevent *Dasein* from freezing into an abstract being-as-such. Like Theaetetus, we Westerners must be educated to the sustained experience of wonder. This does not mean that such an experience should become familiar to us, and thereby lose its unsettling character, but rather that we must learn to *endure* it as such, to await the unfamiliar, albeit with fear and trembling, and perceive it as a chance, in both senses of the term.

(5.3) Fear and Trembling

It is here, I argue, that Bataille's, Derrida's, Deleuze's, and Nancy's thinking can be seen to be of key significance. Based on my conclusions from chapters 1 and 2, in particular, I contend that Bataille's and Derrida's approach to religion centres on the fostering of an ethics of fear and trembling, one which requires for the self to voluntarily submit to a destabilising—*wondrous*—experience of indeterminacy. Although Derrida opens *Foi et savoir* by wondering: '*Comment "parler religion" ? [...] Comment oser en parler au singulier sans crainte et tremblement à ce jour ?*' (2001a: 9), it quickly appears that

neither he nor Bataille suggests that religion must be approached without fear nor trembling. In the first chapter of this thesis, I have observed that, from the early 1940s, Bataille locates the sacred in the joyful, yet anguished, experience of exposure to one's finitude, an experience which comes with 'un mal au ventre continu' (*OCVIII*: 189). Much as wonder is said to function as an aporetic wound that opens the self-identical (or prevents its closure), Bataille observes that, 'précipitée vers un point où le possible est l'impossible même, extatique, haletante, [...] l'expérience [intérieure] ouvre un peu plus chaque fois l'horizon de Dieu (la blessure)' (*OCV*: 122). The subject is exposed to the impossibility of a complete Hegelian self-appropriation, as well as, by extension to the *inachèvement* of knowledge. Crucially, Bataille stresses that, throughout this experience, 'C'est la peur qui me porte, la peur—ou l'horreur—de ce qui est en jeu' (*OCV*: 240), namely, one's exposure, and vulnerability, to the eternal return of chance. Bataille may, therefore, be said to approach religion with, and *as*, fear and trembling.⁶⁹

It should be clear from chapter 2 that this also applies to Derrida. As far as he is concerned, 'la halte du scrupule' (2001a: 29), the Heideggerian *Verhaltenheit*, partakes of a definition of religion in the singular. Building on Bataille's suggestion that 'La religion est la *mise en question* de toutes choses' (*OCV*: 321), Derrida calls religion the ascetic gesture of retreat from presence. Crucially, insofar as it admits two rival sources, namely, the experience of faith and that of the unscathed, the religious unfolds as the very experience of auto-immunity. In Derrida's thinking, the religious lies in a faith-ful gesture of resistance to closure, and thereby of openness to the other to come, a gesture which de Vries reads as 'an *à Dieu* and an *adieu*, a going toward God and a leave taking' (1995: 217). 'La religion?', Derrida asks in *Foi et savoir*. 'Réponse: "La religion, c'est **la**

⁶⁹ Coincidentally, in English, Bataille's privileged term for the religious, namely, the 'sacred', and the adjective 'scared' are only distinguished by the displacement of the letter 'c'.

réponse” (2001a: 44). It is the response to an ethical call, the act of making oneself available for an encounter with alterity by accepting to renounce certainty and guarantee, that is to say, by accepting to tremble, to doubt, to wander, in other words, to *wonder*.

In *Hope in the Secular Age*, David Newheiser argues that this gesture testifies to a secular form of hope. I agree that hope understood as being directed towards a future that remains unfulfilled does capture many aspects of the Derridean faith-ful ‘response’. However, I argue that, in addition to being too closely associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition for Derrida’s taste, much like the concepts of fraternity and tolerance discussed in chapter 2 (Derrida 1993b: 266-267; Newheiser 2020: 38-39), hope comes with a confidence that does not adequately reflect the destabilising, dizzying character of one’s exposure to the event of difference. As Malabou highlights in ‘On Wonder’, for Derrida, the ‘I’ who responds to the ethical call, and opens itself to wonder, is not the Cartesian *cogito* affected in its pre-established identity, as the history of philosophy generally has it (2013: 10). Wonder proceeds neither from auto-affection, a self-surprising of the subject who, thereby, both opens and appropriates itself, nor from hetero-affection, the encounter with, and intrusion of, the other into one’s soul. Rather, it proceeds from what Derrida calls ‘auto-hétéro-affection’ (2000: 328; 42), that is, ‘la possibilité ou la nécessité, pour [le] “je”, dès lors qu’il se touche, de s’adresser lui-même, de se parler, de se traiter, dans un soliloque d’avance interrompu, *comme un autre*’ (2000: 47). Much as Bataille’s inner experience exposes the subject to its own insufficiency, Derrida argues that the self is coming to itself as an *other*, a vertiginous and uncanny experience, indeed.

Based on chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, Nancy’s and Deleuze’s respective approach to religion may arguably be judged less distressing, for it admits an ontological anchorage. Nancy conceives of religion as a universal ‘disposition’ to self-surpassing through self-withdrawal (2018c: 4). Though this disposition implies one’s abandonment to an endless

movement of exhaustion, Nancy's ontological perspective allows him to speak of this infinite passing *without fear nor trembling*, as humanity's way of partaking in the creation of the world, in the two senses of the genitive (the world creates and is, thereby, created)—a courageous attitude which Derrida welcomes with an '*émerveillement reconnaissant*' (Derrida & Nancy 2004: 167, my emphasis). Deleuze's understanding of religion is also integrated within an ontological framework: building on Nietzsche's thinking, he argues that everything that *is* arises from the assemblage (*agencement*) of forces of stasis and forces of change. Every phenomenon, structure, and organism of this world, including religious institutions and ideologies, should be seen as *becoming* rather than *being*, for they are always already involved in an endless fight between forces that lead them to transform and others that lead them to crystallise, albeit momentarily, into actual structures. For Deleuze and Guattari, God himself must be recognised as 'un Homard ou une double-pince' (1980: 54). Although He traditionally stands as the uncreated, eternal, and immutable creator of all things, the monotheistic divine also carries the seeds of an active mode of existence which, insofar as it relies on a joyful embracing of change, testifies to a *belief* in this world's creative *puissance*. Both Nancy and Deleuze may thus be said to radically break with Derrida's trembling restraint and Bataille's fearful anguish.

That does not mean, however, that their thinking of religion is devoid of a sense of wonder: the absence of fear does not necessarily imply the absence of genuine destabilisation in the face of the event of difference. As a matter of fact, Nancy describes faith as a commitment of thought to what remains unavailable, 'pour le dire à la manière deleuzienne, un devenir-surprise de la pensée' (1995: 28). Although he recognises, in *Être singulier pluriel*, that 'Les thèmes de l'"étonnement" et de la "merveille de l'être" sont suspects, s'ils renvoient à une mysticité extatique qui prétend s'évader du monde' (1996: 28), he associates wonder with 'l'ouverture du sens ou bien l'ouverture au sens'

characteristic of what he will later describe as an attitude of adoration (1986: 100). In *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, he remarks that 'L'étonnement lui-même est une espèce de signe sans signification, et le signe—ou l'indice, ou le signal—de ce que la signification touche à sa limite, et de ce que le sens est mis à nu' (1986: 104). As Rubenstein rightly explains, for Nancy, wonder signals the opening and passing of sense; it implies 'thinking at the limits of thinkability and making sense at the fault lines of sensibility' (2008: 125), as well as, Nancy argues, 'nous dérober à nous-mêmes' (1986: 101). Like Bataille and Derrida, Nancy associates wonder with the experience of a '*Se toucher toi* (et non "soi")' (2000b: 36). As Derrida explains in *Le Toucher*, for Nancy, 'toucher, c'est de toute façon toucher au cœur, mais au cœur en tant qu'il est *toujours* le cœur de l'autre. Et même le *se-toucher* touche au cœur de l'autre' (Derrida 2000: 308). Wonder thus arises from the experience of '*l'être-extatique de l'être lui-même*', as Nancy puts it (1990a: 23), of one's intrinsic involvement in the *expeausition*, or unfolding, of the world.

Out of the four thinkers considered in this thesis, however, Deleuze is the one who has most directly addressed the question of wonder. At first sight, this has little to do with religion, and everything to do with cinema. Looking at the close-up in *Cinéma I*, Deleuze remarks that this cinematic technique functions as a becoming-imperceptible or 'laying-bare' of the face: 'le gros plan fait du visage un fantôme' (1983a: 141). What Deleuze means by this is the fact that the close-up strips the face of its social and individual characteristics, returning it to 'une zone d'indétermination, d'indiscernabilité, [...] ce point pourtant à l'infini qui précède immédiatement l[a] différenciation naturelle' (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 163-164). For Deleuze, the close-up thereby renders apparent the primary characteristics of the face, its capacity to express *feeling* and *thinking*—not a feeling or something intellectual, Malabou stresses, but rather the affect of feeling and thinking as such (2013: 47). 'Ce que fait un visage c'est deux choses [...]', Deleuze

argues. ‘Un visage ressent, et un visage “pense à” [...] : il désire, ou bien—ce qui revient au même—il aime et il hait. [...] Et il pense à, il pense “à” quelque chose’ (1982a; 1983a: 127). Crucially for my purposes, Deleuze remarks that the English term ‘wonder’ names the crossroads between these two primary characteristics of the face: ‘les Anglais ont un mot qui nous convient là, les Français ne l’ont pas hélas. Je le dis avec mon accent le meilleur : “I wonder”. C’est “j’admire” mais c’est aussi “je pense à”’ (1982a). Building on Descartes’s description of wonder as both the first of all passions *and* the origin of intellectual enquiry, Deleuze argues that wonder should be considered as ‘le degré zéro des mouvements expressifs’ (1982b). According to Deleuze, then, the close-up does not empty the face, but rather undoes its actual particularities, revealing it as the wondrous site of multiple possibilities of affectivity, through counter-actualisation. For Malabou, this testifies to the fact that, in Deleuze’s thinking, ‘there is no constituted subject in the first place and neither is there the affected subject that would have come afterward’ (2013: 48). Wonder itself stands as the degree-zero of subjectivity. This also explains why, in *Cinéma II*, Deleuze writes that ‘Nous redonner croyance au monde, tel est le pouvoir du cinéma moderne’ (1985: 223). By uncovering a *wondrous* world of virtual difference lying underneath the actual particularities of the face, the close-up fosters belief in this world’s *puissance*. I agree with Scott: in Deleuze’s thinking, wonder stands as ‘the mood of multiplicity’ (2013: 869), the mood of the anomalous sorcerer and her wondrous spells, that of the nomad wandering the steppes, that of believers in this world as it is.

(5.4) Becoming-Woman

All things considered, then, I contend that Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze foster a return of religion understood as a faith-ful gesture of exposure to the destabilising

experience of wonder. They thereby find themselves at odds with the matricidal history of Western philosophy. 'Encore faut-il, précisément, *rester* dans l'élément de l'étonnement —c'est-à-dire dans ce qui ne peut pas proprement faire un "élément", mais bien un événement', Nancy warns (1995: 25), drawing attention to the dialectical temptations looming over wonder, and by extension, over their own approach to religion.

Bataille and Derrida are well aware of this risk. While they approach the wondrous experience of the undecidable and the *inachevé* as a '*structure générale de l'expérience*', (Derrida 2001a: 31), they also stress that it is impossible to determine once and for all whether this structure is ontologically prior to, and independent from, given revelations. As an ethics of resistance to the proper, the religious '*n'appartient en propre à aucune religion*' (Derrida 2001a: 31), nor can be said to provide the ground for the establishment of a new, natural religion. Hence Bataille's suggestion that '*La religion est la mise en question de toutes choses*' (*OCV*: 321): indeed, this questioning extends to religion itself. Yet if it is unable to secure itself in a stable structure, the religious ethics of wonder that Bataille and Derrida foster appears to depend on *repetition*: religion relies on an effort of every instant, on the eternally repeated submission to the ordeal of the undecidable.

Dispelling Derrida's residual suspicion of a self-grounding of openness in Nancy's thinking, Nancy similarly suggests that faith understood as the wondrous experience of infinite passing is *never guaranteed*. For Nancy, one must make an effort to maintain oneself in wonder. This seems to contradict Nancy's observation, in *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, that 'Que cela nous arrive et qu'il y ait à s'étonner : cela implique de la passivité' (1986: 105). However, as he clarifies, 'passivity', here, 'n'a rien d'une contemplation béate, c'est un ensemble difficile, complexe, délicat, de décisions, d'actes, de positions, de gestes de pensée et d'écriture' (1986: 103). What matters for Nancy is not so much the content of these decisions and acts, but rather that they are made in such

a way as to allow further decisions and acts to be made, that is to say, in such a way that one remains faithfully open to the event of difference. Put otherwise, wonder requires *désœuvrement*: ‘C’est [...] un “faire”, et pourtant ce n’est pas une production’ (1986: 105). This explains why, as discussed in chapter 4, Nancy argues that the religious gesture of self-surpassing through self-withdrawal implies a ‘dépassement [...] tel que par nature il ne peut pas s’imposer comme dépassement accompli’ (2018c: 4). The religious disposition, for Nancy, does not risk closing in on itself—it is already a ‘*dis*-position’, as he likes to put it (2002: 98)—for its singularity is only ever extrapolated from the repetition of singular faith-ful decisions. Similarly, in Deleuze’s thinking, wonder depends on a ‘*décision spirituelle toujours renouvelée*’ (1983a: 165). From the late 1970s, Deleuze and Guattari warn that belief in this world must always be oriented towards a facilitation of the world’s creative evolution, to use Bergson’s terms. In other words, belief in this world must not justify the final eradication of the forces of stasis in favour of a triumph of the forces of change. Rather, belief must facilitate the *repeated* emergence of new *agencements* through the recognition of the co-implication of forces of stasis and change in the advent of difference. Every phenomenon, structure and organism is thus recognised as having a moving image: religion itself is only ever *becoming*.

For each one of the four thinkers considered in this thesis, then, religion understood as an *ethics of wonder* implies hard work. Faith demands—and even arises in—repetition, for it can never achieve safety without losing itself. In Deleuzian terms, faith should, therefore, be considered as *minoritarian*: it admits no grounding standard. By extension, I argue that a faithful ethics of wonder may be approached in terms of a ‘*devenir-femme*’ (1980: 304). As briefly evoked in section 1, the matricidal history of wonder resonates with the historical devaluation of women, who have traditionally been perceived as ambivalent, contradictory, and therefore elusive to self-identical attributes. In *Éperons* :

Les styles de Nietzsche (1978), Derrida highlights that women are considered a threat to the Cartesian mind for they have historically been approached both in terms of lack (lack of a penis) *and* excess (through diagnoses of hysteria, for instance), virginal purity *and* menstrual impurity. Through their very existence, women question whether there is any such thing as a grounding standard. By taking the side of wonder and its indeterminacy, against the grain of the history of Western thinking, I argue that Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze, too, challenge majoritarian approaches and the very concept of the standard. They even move away from traditional narratives of the birth of thinking for they refuse to approach creation as a one-off event, where a self-identical creature is born to a dangerous *woman* from whom the offspring must become independent. Instead, they propose an ethics of creation which implies continuously seeking to *become woman*, by repeatedly exposing oneself to that which eludes actual identification by the metaphysical question ‘What is...?’. Creation emerges as a process, an infinite unfolding through the eternal return of singular gestures of exposure to indeterminacy. With Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze, creation emerges as an endless effort to become woman.

Far from being contemplative, and leading out of this world, then, as per Arendt’s critique of wonder, Bataille’s, Derrida’s, Nancy’s, and Deleuze’s approach to religion as an ethics of wonder relies on—and fosters—the return of decision-making, action, *praxis*. As Rubenstein stresses, when considered rigorously, wonder therefore ‘neither allow[s] a capitulation to uninterrogated doctrines, nor open[s] an escape-hatch into some stratospheric other-world. It [...] rather transform[s] the wonderer’s relationship to *this* unusually usual world, revealing the extraordinary *through* the ordinary’ (2006: 16). *This*, I argue, is the re-enchantment proposed by Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze: the re-enchantment of the gaze that Westerners cast on existence and the world. Not a *retreat from*, but a *re-tracing of* the world; a new way of approaching and participating in it.

Abdenmour Bidar is thus right to suggest, in *L'Islam face à la mort de Dieu*, that 'L'Occident et l'Orient croient l'un et l'autre que la modernité est un événement profane, qui "profanise" le monde, alors qu'il est peut-être ce qui vient seulement le "déreligioniser" pour le spiritualiser autrement' (2010: 33-34). Modernity, as envisioned by Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze, is neither profane nor sacred, neither atheist nor theist, but *wonder-sustaining* rather than *wonder-occluding*. I agree with Scott, whose own work focuses on the study of wonder among the Arosi of Makira, in the Solomon Islands, then, 'wonder-spotting may be a good way of tracking and identifying new forms and practices of religion in a supposedly disenchanted world' (2013: 861).

(5.5) Pol/Ethics of Wonder

Wonder-occluding habits, however, die hard. Often when presenting my investigations to an audience, my conclusions were met with fearful reactions, and rejection. At stake is the transcategorical nature of Bataille's, Derrida's, Nancy's, and Deleuze's definition of religion as I identify it in this thesis. It is my argument that, as if responding to Talal Asad's critique of religion understood as an anthropological category before it was even uttered, Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze reconceptualise the religious in such a way that it does not, in itself, constitute a determinate category of reality separate from politics, economics, art, and so on. Rather, as I have just suggested, religion may be found *across* those categories through an exercise of wonder-spotting. 'But is this not incompatible with secularism?', I am often asked. 'How, in these conditions, can the political sphere be protected from the manipulative grip of religious institutions and ideologies?'. When presenting my work in France, where the government is on the lookout for a supposed rise in '*islamo-gauchisme*' in academic circles, whatever this fashionable concept means,

these (legitimate, though misguided) interrogations have turned into accusations: ‘Are you not essentially surrendering our Western countries to obscurantism by allowing for religion to contaminate spheres of human existence such as those that relate to scientific enquiry and, worst of all, politics?’, critics ask. As I have explained in the introduction, secularism in the West today does depend on the definition of religion as a determinate anthropological category that can easily be separated from other spheres of human reality such as economics, scientific enquiry, and politics. Have I joined Thales and Heidegger at the bottom of the pit of wonder by digging secularism’s grave?

I do not think so. In fact, I argue that, by refusing to approach secularism as an *ideal* model for peaceful coexistence, and by drawing attention to its improvability, instead, my reading of Bataille’s, Derrida’s, Nancy’s, and Deleuze’s approach to religion addresses some of the most important issues currently faced by Western secularism and even lays the ground for what I take to be a more inclusive alternative. For many years now, scholars from the social sciences—anthropologists, in particular—have warned that the secular separation of religion from the public sphere in order to guarantee the neutrality of the State fails to accommodate the variety of immanent ‘spiritualities’ found across the world. Besides, I believe that it is now time to recognise that, although secularism does provide an effective obstacle to religious fundamentalism, it has proven helpless in the face of the dogmatism of secular ideologies such as Nazism or Stalinism. Indeed, *religious* manipulation is not the only threat weighing over pluralism and the freedom of consciousness of citizens across the world. I believe that this is precisely what thirteen French intellectuals, including Jean Baubérot, Jean-Louis Bianco and Nicolas Cadène, had in mind in June 2021 when, in the face of a growing anti-religious misuse of the *laïcité* principle, they published an opinion piece in *Le Monde* to stress that pluralism ‘implique que le pouvoir politique ne se fonde sur aucune transcendance religieuse ou

idéologique et que la puissance publique ne peut ni ne doit imposer un régime particulier de vérité' (Abel and others 2021). *Dogmatism is transcategorial*. It is, therefore, only appropriate that a response to this issue be so too: our priority should not so much be to keep religion and politics separate, but rather to prevent *any* form of dogmatic thinking.

I therefore suggest that one should learn from the work of Bataille, Derrida, Nancy, and Deleuze. By fostering a faith-ful mode of existence based on a repeated gesture of opening to, and welcoming of, difference, they provide civil society with 'non le modèle mais l'idée directrice, discutable et transformable, d'un guide élémentaire à l'usage de tous en régime de laïcité, de pluralité confessionnelle', as Nancy himself claims (2015b). This guide relies on a relentless effort to sustain the experience of wonder understood as a movement through which the unfamiliar, the new, the different, is endured and awaited as such, an effort which must be made both from within and outside what is traditionally identified as a 'religious' community. Though such an ethics *must* be accompanied and facilitated by institutional, political, and legal levers, it primarily calls on citizens' responsibility and individual action, and therefore relies on widespread education in critical thinking. Through constant vigilance against closure and repeated efforts to welcome pluralism, all forms of dogmatism, whether they are traditionally described as religious or not, may be fended off. Far from being regarded as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence, then, the religious thus reconceptualised emerges as the key to '*bien vivre ensemble*', to use Derrida's terms again (2014: 31), for it not only functions as an obstacle to *closed* forms of thinking, but also makes space for the non-transcendent forms of religiosity that secularism has so far failed to accommodate.

If this suggestion is still to make its way into philosophical circles, and more importantly, in the political sphere, Scott has remarked that it has already motivated the emergence of a new subfield of anthropology called the anthropology of ontology. As if

they had been educated to wonder by their field interlocutors, anthropologists such as Terry Evens, Martin Holbraad, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Rane Willerslev, and Tim Ingold have started ‘not simply studying [...] wonder-friendly ontology in non-Western contexts [...] [but] attempting personally to embrace and live it’ (2013: 860), to the point that, Scott continues, ‘much of the anthropology of ontology may be said to be religious’ (2013: 865). Throughout his ethnographic accounts, Ingold thus draws attention to, and celebrates, ‘the sense of wonder that comes from riding the crest of the world’s continued birth’ (2011: 74). Though he recognises that wonder comes with vulnerability, Ingold argues that wonder should also be recognised as ‘a source of strength, resilience and wisdom’ (2011: 75). For him and his colleagues in anthropology of ontology, indeed, a wonder-sustaining mode of being allows one ‘to respond to the flux of the world with care, judgement and sensitivity (2011: 75). Put otherwise, it lays the ground for a rethinking of the way in which humanity understands itself and its place in the universe, in line with contemporary ecological demands. Human beings are called upon to stop thinking of themselves as ontologically separate from, and in a dominant position over, a world thought of as ‘out there’, but rather to see themselves as being (part of) this world.

That is also what recently work in philosophy of science suggests. In *The Technique of Thought* (2019), Ian James has recently identified a turn to science in contemporary French thought, fuelled by the legacy of Georges Canguilhem and Gilbert Simondon, a turn which marks the emergence of a new perception of scientific thought and practice liberated from their traditional attachment to the logic of mastery, totality, and identity. Bruno Latour, in particular, has gone a long way towards challenging the traditional association of science with closure in the Western tradition. Crucially for my purpose, Latour thereby initiates a *rapprochement* between faith and scientific thought (see, for instance, Latour 1996; 2002; 2004). Though I was not in a position to dwell on this issue

in the limited space of this thesis, I contend that Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy similarly blur the boundaries between these centuries-old rivals and contribute, with Latour, to inaugurating the Post-Anthropocene, a dawning new era which sees humanity striving to reweave its relationship with nature and the physical laws of the universe in a way that exchanges logical absolutes and technical mastery for a faith(-)ful openness to and participation in the world. That is what I intend to study as part of my new research project entitled 'Becoming-World: Thinking Science with Religion in the Post-Anthropocene'.

94,985 words

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