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BOOK PROFILE: *GODHEAD AND THE NOTHING*

A profile of Thomas J. J. Altizer's *Godhead and the Nothing*. SUNY Press, 2003. 165pp.
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THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER'S *Godhead and the Nothing* begins with the name and namelessness of God inextricably interwoven. While we lack a proper name for God, there is nonetheless an actual naming of namelessness which is the naming of nothingness. The synthesis which Altizer brings about, however, is more than linguistic: the naming of God takes place in a world devoid of truth and knowledge. In a post-Nietzschean world we are confronted by the emptiness of our myths, for we have abandoned ourselves to the abysmal depths of a profound mystery. Altizer locates this mystery in the depths of a fully transfigured subject, and so it is that the naming of God is the inevitable naming of ourselves. The mystery is entirely dialectical; it is the speaking and naming of God as the historical actualization of God. For Altizer, then, it is the absolute turning away from us and from God that ensures an absolute negativity which is likewise, by that very negativity, an apocalyptic naming of the nameless.

Rejecting God, turning away from the outside or the invisible, is an active process. It depends upon a certain tension between the self and other, or the inside and outside, which does not immediately resolve itself in the act of rejection. It is that tension between opposites which maintains the presence of absence even in the rejection of an absolute outside: "[T]his is that pure transcendence which is reversed in a uniquely modern atheism, an atheism impossible apart from this very transcendence, and hence an atheism essentially related to that transcendence, so that our atheism is a true heterodoxy, and as such inseparable from Christian orthodoxy" (5). There is no historical process of namelessness, including that of atheism, which frees itself from the negativity of naming. By naming 'atheism' as the concrete practice of heterodoxy, Altizer confirms its historical situatedness vis-à-vis Christendom. It therefore seems to follow that the transcendence of Christian orthodoxy is reinvented through its one-sided repudiation: the actual namelessness of God is the historical naming of

its antithesis. Secularism, from modernity to postmodernity, is the gradual development of this dialectical process. In the context of apocalyptic self-consciousness, this implies that the movement of absolute sacrifice proceeds from a deep dichotomy. God is both affirmed and negated in the grounding of an absolutely groundless totality of self-consciousness. What seems to us to be most alien to our innermost destiny is in fact nothing other than that destiny: absolute sacrifice, understood here as the irreversible transfiguration of subjectivity, is the deepest actuality of our interior emptiness and groundlessness. In other words, postmodern heterodoxy is the historical embodiment of its transcendental antithesis. By virtue of this embodiment the transcendental other is transformed and sacrificed: the infinite, unknowable nature of God is realized as the supreme sacrifice of emptiness. Hence, for Altizer, the progression of atheistic consciousness unites the dualities of good and evil, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, otherness and sameness.

A hard truth thus arises. Opening ourselves to the atheistic realization of unconditional sacrifice ineluctably substantiates the necessity of evil. The end of history embodies an absolute nothingness which annuls and destroys the subject: "[I]f we can know or envision an absolute abyss as an absolute nothingness, we thereby can know an absolute nothingness as an absolutely inescapable nothingness, for while such nothingness can be diluted or disguised, this can occur only by way of a pure passivity, a passivity engulfing our world, thereby abating or annulling or dissolving what we once knew as the subject or the center of consciousness" (132). Firstly, then, the presence of God coincides with the presence of an absolute abyss. This cannot be avoided: from the beginning an original self-negation or self-sacrifice made possible the development of self-realization. The end of history is contained within a violent beginning. Primordial sacrifice is in this way the foundation of ethics, thinking, and consciousness itself. Secondly, the stage of historical consciousness which is pure passivity is the totalization of nothingness that dissolves every distinction between good and evil (38). The question of evil cannot even be raised because it is meaningless. In this stage, the death of God and the death of Man are equivalent: the subject has been reversed and displaced beyond recognition. But this is essential to Altizer's dialectical thinking: the affirmation of existence demands an irrevocable affirmation of evil. He thus refers to a coincidentia oppositorum of Satan and Christ: they are mutually defining as antithetical polarities (36). A comprehensive view of totality necessitates an affirmation of all things: good and evil, presence and absence, happiness and suffering. The modern and postmodern process of demythologization must therefore be embraced. The absolute banishment of truth and morality introduces an even deeper dichotomy than all others previously encountered. An empty, passive, immanent world contains within itself the beginning of another: it is only by

excluding the nameless and unknowable that we ourselves become nameless and unknowable. Immanence is a dialectical reality, and it is created by excluding all things transcendental. But this exclusion is a form of concrete negation, which implies that its ritualized enactment of nothingness belongs to a unique historical perspective.

Our age, needless to say, is deeply problematic. And yet I am not certain that the reader of Altizer will be convinced that our times are nihilistic times. According to *Godhead and the Nothing* we have reached an extreme threshold of atheism, our traditions and mythologies have been assaulted like never before, and radical iconoclasm has shattered "every historical world upon this horizon" (128). To be sure, in light of certain critiques of late capitalistic society, there is an element of truth to the notion that we have reached a stage of pure simulacrum in which all values have been obliterated. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that religious and political institutions are still thriving even in this post-industrial, post-nationalistic epoch of ours. So it is not clear that we inhabit an altogether immanent world.

Nevertheless, Altizer is right that evil needs to be taken up again by the philosophers: "One could search in vain in our philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias for a serious treatment of evil, and in the twentieth century (as opposed to the nineteenth century), no major philosopher has even examined the question of evil as such. This is despite the fact that, in our common understanding, evil has never been so incarnate as it has been in the twentieth century" (32). The death of God, which is closely linked to evil, was most directly felt by the moderns. Perhaps we are no longer shocked by this momentous event. Perhaps, as Altizer has argued, we have isolated ourselves in the passivity of a world which threatens to tear us apart. In which case, if we were indeed to take another hard look at evil, it might occur to some of us that it is not so easily reconciled to its antithesis. This may in fact explain why those who take evil seriously are not always taken seriously themselves. Georges Bataille is one such example. His thinking of evil is very close to Altizer's in at least one respect: good and evil belong to the same dream of nothingness. For Bataille, however, the anguish of evil resides in its uselessness. As soon as we expect an advantage from it we have thus transformed its nature into something rational, beneficial, and idealistic. It would be unfair to say that Altizer's characterization of evil is perforce idealistic, but it would look dramatically different if we took the Bataillean path by uniting good and evil in a sacrificial movement of transgression. In Bataille's case the idealistic objection is avoided because the movement of self-destruction necessarily involves an unconditional loss which cannot be recuperated into a rationalized system of utilitarian goods. But looked at from another perspective, it might be argued that the move away

from idealism (i.e., any system of thought or practice which disavows the limit of unconditional loss) opens up Bataille's sacrificial violence to the possibility of projecting that violence against the outside, against those, for example, who belong to marginalized groups. So we are confronted with two options: we accept either the permanent historical possibility of violence, including that violence which cannot be rationally justified or the presence of an absolute abyss that signifies nothing other than what is absolutely right.

Now, if we turn back to Altizer's *Godhead and the Nothing*, it seems like it would be reasonable for us to pose the same dilemma. If the affirmation of nothingness cannot be fully subordinated to our own selfish interests, if it exceeds calculative rationality, then how do we move beyond the "total immanence" of postmodernity if the aimlessness of that age still remains with us in the absolute ending of apocalypse? It may be that the realization of an absolute abyss is a movement of transformation which cannot be separated from its antithetical negations: the immanence of the abyss is perhaps always already included within its teleological actualization. If this, however, is the answer which helps us to unite good and evil in all things, then it is all the more difficult to imagine how Altizer might extricate himself from an idealistic ethics which denies the reality of an unconditional loss. He wants to establish the reality of evil in a primordial self-negation that is affirmed in our deepest ritualistic transformations, but if this is only ever achieved by an absolute transformative experience, "one that is realized in the deepest depths of abyss itself," then it would appear to be the case that the violence of self-negation is thoroughly good (139). An eternally affirmed dichotomy calls forth the silence of unknowing only insofar as that dichotomy is unconditionally good, absolutely transparent, and forever peaceful.

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