

*The Sacred Opening*

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If our present phase of late modernity is its own *Götterdämmerung*, playing out the final act of a perpetual cycle, then its libretto must consist of that still persistent antagonism that sets ‘religion’ against ‘the secular’. The drama, in the fading light of the gods, finds its dynamic in religion’s fight for survival, even if the secular too betrays its own fallibility. That fight is the West’s fight; but then, the antagonism is the West’s antagonism. As Nietzsche said, “World” is a Christian term of abuse.<sup>1</sup>

But if, in the idolisation of this world, the secular has now too become an idol, then the passage from *Götter* to *Götzen* is circular, insofar as the movement of the one seems to inhere in the movement of the other, just as the twilight of the one seems to invoke the twilight of the other. All religions will at some point succumb to idolatry; all idolatries will at some point succumb to religion. Nietzsche saw this right at the beginning of positivism: ‘I am told that that cleverest of Jesuits, A. Comte, who wanted to lead his Frenchmen to Rome via the detour of science, found his inspiration in this book [*De Imitatione Christi*]. I believe it: “the religion of the heart”.’<sup>2</sup>

The priests of both sides, religion and the secular, thus persist in their antagonism precisely because they persist in a dalliance. (Is this not the dynamic of all opera?) Much effort has recently been given to show the choreography of this dalliance by those who study ‘religion’ as a discipline. In these current critical appraisals, both sides, as ‘categories’, fall under suspicion. We should no more speak of a religious fight for survival than we should a secular retreat. And if we can’t lose the distinction, we at the very least should lose the confliction.

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Case of Wagner’, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 646.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Twilight of the Idols’, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954; Viking Penguin, 1982), p. 515.

The theologian, it has been thought, does not participate in this circle, by virtue of having already sold herself to religion's cause. But we know that theology has always had its own dynamic of internal struggle and self-overcoming, one which long precedes all modern antagonisms, and if the religion/secular divide, or its collapse, is supposed to mark out our deepest challenge now, the theologian has been facing that challenge ever since the first emergence of monotheism. The gods and their idolatry became the ever-threatening challenge of the profane upon the sacred, but it soon emerged that the sacred/profane had its own circularity, one already at work within the structure of monotheism. For if that structure attempts a more radical separation of the divine from this world, that separation becomes, at its outer reaches, a loss. Nancy reminds us of Schelling's insight: 'Monotheism is an atheism.'<sup>3</sup> The theologian has intuitively known this; the mystic has intuitively taught it. Even the Christian form of monotheism, which reverses the separation, deconstructs itself precisely because it dares to bring God back into this mortal world, and there is nothing more profane than a divine power willing to give itself to death. Nietzsche's madman understood this irony better than the orthodox Christian.

The term 'sacred', therefore, carries something far more potent than the term 'religion'. The latter comes into its own only in conjunction with the secular – that is, religion as a concept is fulfilled only when we can envision a world free from divine engagement, a world de-saturated of godly things. And only then can we speak of religions in the plural, where distinctions are possible because they assume that adherence to one thing over another is possible, even if the one thing is a reality flushed of the gods.<sup>4</sup> The sacred never dispenses with its counterpart because, by contrast, the sacred/profane operates within a cosmos that assumes no ultimate disengagement from that which gives both sides its meaning. It therefore does not involve a choice of adherence: the profane is leavened into the very structure of the sacred, so that by choosing one we are necessarily caught in the other. This is why, as we saw in the Introduction, Nietzsche's Zarathustra can speak of a sacred No at the same time as a sacred Yes.<sup>5</sup> This is why we could point out the double nature of the sacred as it is drawn from the Latin *sacer*,

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> This is what stands behind Peter Berger's remark in his theorisation of religion within *The Sacred Canopy*, where religion – he never questions the use of the term – is subject to the increasing forces of pluralisation and secularisation: 'the crucial sociological and social-psychological characteristic of the pluralistic situation is that religion can no longer be imposed but must be marketed' – *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 139.

which can mean both ‘sacred’ and ‘accursed’, referring to something either beneficent or maleficent, to something inducing either peace or violence.<sup>6</sup> And this is why Agamben can expound the sacred, following both Durkheim and Freud, in terms of a fundamental contradiction or ambivalence, whereby exclusion and inclusion are enfolded into each other, and the *homo sacer* is the one who is banned or abandoned *within* the community.<sup>7</sup> Where religion requires separation, a separation even from itself (and in spite of its own etymology), the sacred embraces, harbours, indwells in its own diremption, its own undoing. So too its ‘opposite’: to stand before the temple (*profanus*) is to presuppose the temple’s existence, even to quake before its internal power.

If we have now, amid our various twilights (of gods, of idols, of traditional binaries), seen a re-acknowledgement of religion, or an ‘anatheism’ in Kearney’s term,<sup>8</sup> it is not towards some comprehensive rehabilitation or restoration of religion. Religion in the West will never be the same, if by the concept we understand a choice: one chooses one’s religion, or chooses to *leave* one’s religion, like one chooses charitable organisations to support or ignore. What we give to in the name of religion, just as much as what we give to *as* the name of religion, is now ineluctably altered by the very fact that it *can be* altered, that it can be devised differently (in the great legacy of Luther). But even the philosophers admit that the questions we have been asking in the (late) name of religion have never gone away, were always there, even if we have dispensed with the doctrinal, ecclesiastical, even *theistic* manner by which we have asked them. Any philosophical return to religion was simply a rediscovery of something that agitates the questions – we might even say *any question* – after the secular debates had exhausted themselves.

Sacrality is not a philosophical concept.<sup>9</sup> It does not share in the same rational pieties as Reason. Yet, like Reason, neither does it separate itself

<sup>6</sup> See again René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 257, 264–5.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 71–80.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See also *Reimagining the Sacred*, ed. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), which is an extension of *Anatheism* in dialogue with key philosophical contemporaries.

<sup>9</sup> This *pace* Bradley Onishi in his *The Sacrality of the Secular: Postmodern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), who offers a strong reading of how, upon the demise of secularisation theory first put forward by social anthropology, more recent appropriations of continental philosophy, beginning with early Heidegger, have allowed for a return of a sacrality within the secular, even in the name of a philosophy of religion.

from the world, either phenomenally (Kant) or phenomenologically (Hegel). If it belongs more to *Glauben* than to *Wissen*, it is, as Nancy suggests, 'that which in faith could previously open the world in itself to its own outside (and not to some world-behind-the-worlds, to some heaven or hell)'.<sup>10</sup> Nancy is clear to state 'previously', for he argues that philosophy – philosophy in and from the Enlightenment – has since not been able to fulfil what Wittgenstein had come to realise: 'the sense of the world must be found outside of the world'.<sup>11</sup> But the possibility, again, of opening the world to its own outside is maybe precisely what a certain kind of philosophy has returned to in its so-called reconciliation with religion, even if it has been unable fully to articulate this 'outside', an outside that nevertheless remains integral to the world's ownmost inner structure. Is this because it has yet to grasp 'the sacred'? What if, instead of being a strange otherness we find 'out there', as Kearney understands it,<sup>12</sup> the sacred were this very opening, the opening of the world in itself to its own outside, like the phenomena of more recent phenomenology that is not just saturated but *over-saturated*? And if it were, what could the 'own' properly mean here in its excess?

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David Jasper is both a theologian and a priest. The sacred to him should thus, as they say, come naturally. But after a life spent in the Academy, with scholarly endeavours in multiple disciplines and sub-disciplines – not only in theology but equally in literature, as well as in philosophy, art, cultural studies, critical theory and hermeneutics – the question of the sacred, as it has been posed especially since Romanticism (Jasper's doctoral dissertation was on Coleridge), could not be taken up *naturally*. If we can speak of a sacrality in a world beyond the inherited designations of modernity ('postmodern', 'post-ecclesial', 'postsecular', 'postfeminist', 'posthuman', etc.), it will not be from any natural disposition. It is rather a dispossession that figures more accurately. We have been dispossessed, if not of the sacred, then of any right to speak of it, or of any discourse that would now properly situate it. To work out one's faith, one's salvation, would here be attested to *in extremis*: the sacred, in any form, no longer comes naturally. That is to say, there are no 'unreflected actions that follow from being

<sup>10</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, p. 2. Cf. John D. Caputo: 'If we say a revelation is *tout autre*, that does not mean that it breaks in upon us from *another world* but that it comes as *another worlding* of the world, another way the world itself opens up, is reconfigured, is "revealed" in an unforeseeable and unanticipated way' – *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, p. 5.    <sup>12</sup> Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred*, p. 16.

embedded in a context of practice'.<sup>13</sup> Even as priest, one must rework the context, one must reconsider the actions, one must cultivate anew – like the bread and wine of the Eucharistic sacrament, which also, of course, in their elements, do not come naturally.

Jasper's Sacred Trilogy – *The Sacred Desert* (2004), *The Sacred Body* (2009), *The Sacred Community* (2012) – is a certain kind of exercise. We might even say a *spiritual* exercise, in the manner of an Ignatius or, earlier, the *paideia* of the Church Fathers. It attempts, in its way, to work out the question of the sacred as a question we direct to our world as much as a question directed at us by living in our world. It is an exercise that is neither purely and strictly scholarship, nor criticism, nor reflection, nor meditation, nor homily. Nor is it vision, either in the prophetic sense or in the Romantics' fragmentary sense. And yet it carries all of these along with it, sometimes in profound disguise, even perhaps deception. It is an exercise with manifold risks, as it weaves through various disciplines, weaves in manifold voices, and weaves around, elusively, the straightforward thesis. Here there is no postulated argument, no systematic explication of a specific problem set forth. What emerges, through its own erudition – 'its own' because though knowledge is in abundance, it is always in service of something that defies knowledge (*Wissen*) – is rather more akin to what Nietzsche called a tonality (*Stimmung*), a certain pitch and vibration of both mind and sense (the 'sense of the mind', in all senses), as it tries to attune itself to the mediations (and thus the hermeneutics) of the sacred. This of course is what Nietzsche really meant in his subtitle to *Götzen-Dämmerung*: the 'hammer' of '*wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*' is less the destructive sledge as it is the tuning fork.<sup>14</sup> But whereas Nietzsche sounds out idols (even if the εἶδος is something to behold with sight – and this is Nietzsche's point: the privilege of the visible must give way), Jasper taps those points at which the sacred has come to us, perhaps unexpectedly: desert, body and community. These sites create a different tone, a different kind of voice; they take us not to conventional harmonics (scholarly or otherwise) but to St John of the Cross's *musica callada*, a 'silent music'. There is a tap – on the literary text, on the visual work of art, on the theological doctrine, on the philosophical concept – and a stillness is disturbed, but not towards a fuller aesthetical or theological or

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), p. ix.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols', p. 466: 'This little essay is a great declaration of war; and regarding the sounding out of idols, this time they are not just idols of the age, but eternal idols, which are here touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork [*Stimmgabel*].'

philosophical elaboration. The stillness reverberates in its emptiness. An emptiness that spreads across all these domains. And from that shared hollow – and the sharing is necessary, crucial – a sacrality might be sensed.

Jasper's sacred is thus bound to the mystical. But in what sense should we say this? Does it mean, first, that the sacred can now only come to us through the mystical, however we understand that term (and Jasper's Trilogy is certainly one such way)?

If mysticism is at play throughout Jasper's sacred triptych, it is so only in embodiment. If the mystical requires ascetic retreat, it is not a retreat from the physicality of our existence. If one retreats to the desert, the desert is still very much a physical space, even if it is characterised by the absence of living things, and just as St Antony could say that in the desert the absence of the book is something we come to read,<sup>15</sup> so in the desert the absence of living things becomes life itself in the plenitude of existence. If one retreats from the body in *askesis*, in *kenosis* or *ekstasis*, that retreat is its own incarnation, a sacrifice that 'becomes an exemplary body, capable of radical transformation'.<sup>16</sup> And if one retreats from community, it is only into a solitary existence whose very nature is constituted by a worldly ensemble, one's self offered and 'absorbed into the stuff of all creation', like the singular bread of the Eucharist, ingested by the Church body.<sup>17</sup>

Asceticism is thus *liturgical*, so that radical isolation enacts the work of the people. Mysticism becomes the practice of existence, working out what is outworking the solitary self. The nature of this work is public and cultural: a cultivation of the communal in the isolate, even the desolate. This is what Jasper's theology strives for in its own *epektasis*.

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The pre-Christian understanding of liturgy in the Greek world was one of public service, especially of the wealthy, whose duty, by virtue of their wealth, was to certain sponsorships beneficial to the polis as a whole. The *chorēgoi* of the Athenian plays produced for the Greater and Lesser Dionysian festivals of Athens were one such version of this service, rich citizens appointed to fund a specific play, and its chorus. Thus the work (ἔργον) of the people (λαός) within this liturgical system was both individual – the selected citizen of means – and communal – private service

<sup>15</sup> David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> David Jasper, *The Sacred Body: Asceticism in Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> David Jasper, *The Sacred Community: Art, Sacrament, and the People of God* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 29.

meant to promote the common weal of the city (sporting events, religious festivals, naval development, etc.).

Perhaps this is why, by the time philosophy appropriated the term, the ἔργον was able to manoeuvre in several, often competing, directions. In the early stages of Plato's *Republic*, for example, the ἔργον, most often translated as 'function', is tied to virtue (ἀρετή) in such a way that the understanding of justice becomes necessarily connected to the individual soul: just as the ἔργον of the eye is to see, and its ἀρετή is to see well, so the ἔργον of the soul is to live, and its ἀρετή is to live well, to perform its function in excellence, so that excellent living is just living, living that promotes the good of the Republic (Book 1, 352d–353e). Now the question of whether the ἔργον of the soul as it leads to ἀρετή and δικαιοσύνη (justice) is more an analogy of the good state, the Republic, or whether the ἔργον of the good state is more an analogy of the good soul, the individual in its psychological self-consistency and happiness, is a matter of centuries-old debate that goes to the heart of this long Platonic dialogue. For the soul and its community cannot be separated, since, as with the liturgists of the Athenian system, both sides profit and excel when their ἔργον is performed well.

As bequeathed to Aristotle, the ἔργον develops further its own manifold function. In the *Metaphysics*, the ἔργον of any one part – say an internal organ of the body, or the external hand – is only its own proper self when it functions or performs in accordance with the greater whole (1035b, 15–20; 1036b, 28–32 – and in both cases, Aristotle points out, that whole for any particular living body part is constituted by αἴσθησις, that is, sense-perception, the aesthetic dimension of sensing with the body). So 'being' is proper to itself not merely in its quiddity alone but in its ἔργον, to which Aristotle attaches both power (δύναμις) and entelechy (ἐντελέχεια) (1045b, 31–5). Thus in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the ἔργον becomes that activity which is proper to any one thing's or one person's purpose, and this includes human occupations. Hence the frequent use of examples from craftsmanship or artistry. The work proper to anything can be the product itself – the house in the case of the housebuilder, the sculpture in the case of the sculptor – but it can also be the producing, the *making* of the house or sculpture.<sup>18</sup> This ambiguity between producer and produced gives the ἔργον a certain plasticity, as Hegel might say, a movement between the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1109a, 25, for example – to be good is a hard and serious ἔργον – with 1133a, 10 – the builder receives the shoemaker's ἔργον as the shoemaker does the builder's ἔργον. See further Jakub Jirsa, 'To ergon tou anthropou', *Filozófiai Szemle. The Politics of Aristotle: Reconstructions and Interpretations*, 4 (2013), p. 12.

active and the passive: that which enacts is also, constitutively, that which is enacted. Thus later in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, directly after discussion about true poets in relation to their poems (1168a, 1–3), Aristotle can say, boldly, ‘the product [ἔργον] is, in a way, the producer in his actualization’ (1168a, 8).<sup>19</sup>

In the *Poetics* the ἔργον of the poets receives an even bolder claim. There Aristotle tells us exactly what the function (the ἔργον) of the true poet is (1451a, 37): the intended output is to describe not what has happened (τὰ γενόμενα), but that which *might* happen (γένοιτο) and could happen (τὰ δυνατὰ) according to what is likely (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς) or necessary. The poet’s ἔργον as function is therefore to produce an ἔργον as a product not yet in existence, or whose very existence is the fact that it is conditional, something not yet actual and only related to the truth (as τὸ εἰκὸς, with its sense of similitude), yet something nevertheless convincing. If this ἔργον, as both producing and produced, is the actualisation of the poet, then the poet actualises his own conditionality, as Homer’s Odysseus might have been said to do before Polyphemus, when he renders himself Οὔτις (no one). This is why Aristotle praises Homer as unsurpassed in ‘the art of framing lies in the right way’ (1460a, 20).<sup>20</sup> The poet is there to envision not what has been or what is, but what convinces us in its impossibility. (Polyphemus still claims he will eat this Οὔτις, in a scene that has sacramental potency.) ‘A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility’ (1460a, 26).<sup>21</sup> And this requires a certain withdrawal, or asceticism, or sacrality.

If this ἔργον informs the core of liturgy, as it extends out to the people of the community in the λειτουργία, we might grasp a better sense of Jasper’s liturgical emphasis, or liturgical space: ‘a space that invites us to the impossible possibility of absolute vision’.<sup>22</sup> This is why the ‘true poet’, as Jasper carefully deems it, sides with the desert dwellers, and in that companionship speaks not of the present but of future possibility. This possibility is the practice of existence that is liturgical outworking, as it outworks the present language even of orthodox liturgical practice. Here Jasper speaks of a renewed theology. ‘At this point, theology must turn

<sup>19</sup> The translation here is by Terence Irwin – *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), p. 252.

<sup>20</sup> This is Ingram Bywater’s translation in the volume *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), p. 660.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661. Colin Whitehead’s character in *The Underground Railroad* (London: Fleet, 2016), in his final speech on freedom, phrases the same axiom this way: ‘Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth’ (p. 285).

<sup>22</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Desert*, p. 127.



towards the future in a move that lies at the heart of all liturgical celebration.’ And this means theology must ‘dare to move towards poetics’. It thus becomes the poet’s ἔργον to envision and to enact this move: ‘The true poet . . . who alone knows the depths of utter solitude, actually overturns theological discourse in a move or journey, repeatedly made and rarely heard, and makes possible [both] the survival of a Christianity that is largely rejected by Christendom itself, and a future for theology.’<sup>23</sup>

Jasper suggests a certain direction for this journey, a future journey that is embodied in the present. That journey begins, as we have seen, in the solitude of the desert, moves to the asceticism of the body, and then to the sacrament of the community. This cannot be a linear movement since each stage involves the others. It is perhaps not even circular. It is repetitive, like liturgy itself, but with ‘unlikely conjunctions’, whose truth ‘gradually dawns only in moments of dialectic and dramatic reversal’.<sup>24</sup> But as much as it is a movement, with however much Hegelian force, it is also a dwelling, with its Heideggerian intimations. And yet it goes still further, for it is ‘the life of *liturgical* dwelling’, described in this manner: ‘to dwell in perpetual transgression, between being and nonbeing, and therefore to dwell in continual excess’. This transgression and this excess must ultimately be practised as something to be read, ‘moving from the language of text to the reinstatement of the theological through a new sense of its vocabulary within the practice of existence’.<sup>25</sup>

This ascetic practice, in all its embodied forms – literature, art, religion, sacrament: the ἔργον as cultural and communal *poesis* – is thus akin to Weber’s *innerweltliche Askese*, an asceticism practised within and by means of the world and its worldliness, rather than by withdrawal. But this is not the sedate and sober rationalisations of Weber’s ascetic Protestantism, which brings the routinisations of monastic life into the marketplace.<sup>26</sup> It is rather the creative, visionary and paradoxical excesses of mystical life brought into the liturgies – the λειτουργία as both public service and private worship – of everyday life. This kind of worldly asceticism is not ‘cut off from and separated from the world, but rather nurtured within it’.<sup>27</sup> Thus it moves and dwells simultaneously: it takes up residence in the world in order to move through it and beyond it; and in moving through it and beyond it, it dwells in the sacred, set apart not from but *in* the very

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 146.   <sup>24</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Body*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 176. For the various proposed ways of dwelling, see pp. 176–8.

<sup>26</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, p. 81.

stuff of life. The ἔργον here is not material goods and their accumulation, and even less the economic and social conditions that turn those goods into Weber's famous 'iron cage'.<sup>28</sup> Nor is it the mere function of an orthodox sacramentalism, the divine shining through material objects in ritualised, hieratic, hagiographic, epiphanic or ultimately soteriological glory. It is rather the cultivation of a silence that operates behind all the verbal and textual and visual productivity of the world, and negates that productivity as the abiding temptation to convert the sacred into an empirical, or technological, or metaphysical Absolute.<sup>29</sup> This is why Jasper can say that, in acting liturgically, we do nothing.<sup>30</sup> We learn to dwell in nothing. Yet a nothing that moves us, profoundly, to the possible.

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The sacred in its proper function dwells within the world, in order to break open the world. The sacred opens the world to its own outside.

But if this sacred is no longer the manifest presence in the world of a specific divine, unique to any of the so-called 'world religions', it is not only because the world has decanted divinity from its possibilities through an increasingly unchallenged and ever-intensifying empiricisation of reality. It is also because religion – whatever we understood of it – has gone outside of itself. Or at least, as we might say alongside Gauchet and others, Western monotheism has gone outside of itself.<sup>31</sup> This is not a result of external forces, as when we say science has vanquished mythology, but of internal proclivities. To put it in an order reversed from what we customarily hear: mythology has subsumed science, and thereby allowed itself to be transfigured, to the loss of its mythological status but not, in the process, of its mythological potency. (The theories of Big Bang or of evolution, along with their ongoing unverifiability, carry all the power of creation myths.) In the same way, religion felt it necessary to divest itself of its own very structures, leaving behind both the enchantment of the world and the separation of the gods, but in doing so, introducing its own internal separation. 'When the gods abandon the world, when they stop coming to notify us of their otherness to it, the world itself begins to appear other, to disclose an imaginary depth that becomes the object of a special quest,

<sup>28</sup> Weber, pp. 181–2.

<sup>29</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Body*, pp. 16ff. For this reason, Jasper can claim that genuine theology will be one 'that is not a language "about God", but is instantiated *within* language itself, and a language that is both [like the ἔργον] its embodiment and its vehicle' (p. 158).

<sup>30</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 101ff.

containing its purpose and referring only to itself.' Gauchet speaks here specifically in terms of an aesthetic quest: 'an obsessive investigation of the fracturing of everyday life, of the internal transcendence of appearances of the world being expressed as other to itself'.<sup>32</sup> But this 'other' is not wholly beyond religion precisely because the aesthetic has never been beyond religion: in *poesis* resides a 'persistent heritage' that 'stems from the time when the world was populated by invisible forces'.<sup>33</sup> Gauchet thus draws the aesthetic *ἔργον* in parallel with the religious *ἔργον*, whose mutual functions rely on their own internal other:

In order to properly orient ourselves, we must, at the cost of being rigidly methodical, manage to see the world as other, however spontaneously it is given to us. Therefore, alongside the constraint that makes us think that the world yields its truth by being grasped as a nondifferentiated unity, we must recognize the part played by another constraint which structures our imagination and condemns us to seek the world's beauty in the difference which ruptures the identity of its appearances. The world is to be reduced to sameness in the intelligible sphere, but revealed as other in the sensory sphere.<sup>34</sup>

This recognition, as a revelation and not a reduction, becomes the recognition of the sacred as world other to itself, outside its own non-differentiated unity, indeed, but outside even the structure that sets this unity against its rupture. It is not merely, in Gauchet's political framework, an immanent shift, seeing the transcendent now in purely material terms, so that the artists can finally become the new legislators of reality, as they rupture appearances with their reinventions of how we perceive and ought to perceive, of *aesthesis*. This shift has long been with us, since at least the advent of modernism. It is more that the structure that sets the immanent against the transcendent has itself been ruptured. The 'other' of the world is that which can make co-incident these seemingly opposing fields of existing. The 'other' is no longer limited to the singularised domain outside our normal experience, but envelops the manifold of that which in its hiddenness, and maybe even because of its hiddenness, helps to define our experience. Such is its 'mystical' element – the outside at the heart of the inside, the inside at the heart of the outside. Or, if we must stay within the political, the ascetic in communal venture.

This 'other' shares something with Bataille's inner experience. When Bataille, in speaking of asceticism, says 'Experience at the extremity of the possible nevertheless demands a renunciation: to cease to want to be

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 203.    <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 204.    <sup>34</sup> Ibid.

everything',<sup>35</sup> he is trying to move us beyond that inherited asceticism he saw as the aim of all mystics, a withdrawal precisely in order to possess the fullness of God, and thus of all that is. Such salvation needs itself to be renounced. To lose oneself for gain must not relinquish the loss. The true ascetic must carry that loss into everything, even God.<sup>36</sup> This requires both silence and performance. So Bataille says, 'with precision', that 'the Hindu is a stranger to drama, the Christian cannot attain within himself bare silence', but that to push to the extremity of possibility, as inner experience, as a new kind of mysticism, one has to bring both into play together.<sup>37</sup> Silence and drama. Silence within drama. Drama within silence. And this is why, in 'The New Mystical Theology' of *Inner Experience's* Part Four, he draws upon the fiction of Blanchot, whose *Dehor* (Outside) operates as the silence of drama, as dramatic silence: 'let the night penetrate its centre in order to receive the day from it'.<sup>38</sup>

But as much as there is an extremity in operation here, as the extreme other to religion's (or mysticism's, or theology's) own inside (whether Christian or Hindu – the tradition does not matter), its sacred quality cannot be reduced solely to a tortuous sacrifice, such as Bataille sees at the heart of the Christian drama, whereby violence becomes the chief characteristic.<sup>39</sup> There are thus two ways we can envision the extreme possibility of the sacred. On the one hand, we can see it as the loss that comes about through destructive negation, struggle and contest, like that which a certain (Kojèvean) reading of the Hegelian dialectic lays open, but which nevertheless animates life in its ecstasy or exorbitance. This is the Bataille/Blanchot position that Pascal had earlier perceived: 'Nothing appeals to us except the contest, not the victory.'<sup>40</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>35</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 28. See also Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 1992, 2004), p. 84.

<sup>36</sup> 'The imitation of Jesus: according to Saint John of the Cross, we must imitate in God (Jesus) the fall, the agony, the moment of "nonknowledge" of the *lama sabachthani*; drunk to the lees, Christianity is the absence of salvation, the despair of God' (*Inner Experience*, p. 52).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30. <sup>38</sup> From Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*, as quoted by Bataille, *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> 'The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking loose, that is, into violence' – Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 52. Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 222: 'on occasion Bataille is able to transcend the decadent estheticism he has so fervently espoused, and explain quite simply that "the prohibition eliminates violence, and our violent impulses (including those resulting from our sexual drives) destroy our inner calm, without which human consciousness cannot exist"'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 138.

we can see the extremity precisely as the *possibility* itself, wherein the loss is the giving up of what we think is before us (even as exorbitance) for what is to be *made possible*, such that another reading of the Hegelian dialectic lies open, one that figures *becoming*. The latter, as I see it, is how Jasper understands the possibility (as much as he draws upon both Bataille and Blanchot). And this is why Jasper elaborates the liturgical. Both approaches involve communication, of course, especially in the intense form of poetic enunciation. But the first communicates a certain exhausted existence – ‘Still, I can only speak with exasperation’<sup>41</sup> – while the second communicates a working into newness of existence – ‘I seek, though in hope only, the extravagance of the pure poet; that is, the one who does nothing but in pure speech undoes or overwhelms the abyss that divides poetry from praxis.’<sup>42</sup> This working is the *ἔργον* whose functioning takes us beyond the limit, and into an impossible possibility.

If we were to extend Aristotle’s radical demand, therefore, the *ἔργον* of the sacred must take us outside our present conditions, communications and dramas, and towards the creation of the im-possible. This becomes possibility as its own negation: becoming possible only by possibility becoming other to itself in the purity of the conditional. Art as *poesis* is always conditional, in that it sets forth the potential of what can be said, and said to be done, and said to be done in *communis* – the *con-dicere* of communicating together towards that which is not yet experienced. But its very condition is embodied, and therefore negated, as the speaking becomes the spoken (the producing the product). The paradox of this im-possible is the sacred.

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Eliciting a poem by Hölderlin, the early pages of *The Sacred Community* posit an audacious claim: literature begins with a necessary act of bad faith.<sup>43</sup> This is not Sartre’s bad faith, the philosopher’s ethical misstep of inauthenticity. Nor is it orthodoxy’s bad faith, straying from the true path by means of errant doctrine. Nor is it to be formulated within the

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 169. Or as Foucault described Bataille’s philosophical language: ‘the void into which it pours and loses itself, but in which it never stops talking – somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of the mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvelous communication that silences it . . . the zone shared by language and death, the place where language discovers its being in the crossing of its limits’ – Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 48. This is summed up shortly after as ‘death *communicated with communication*’ (ibid., p. 52).

<sup>42</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, p. 13.      <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

framework of a wager or leap, whether Pascal's or Kierkegaard's or, more recently, Kearney's. This bad faith is an ἔργον both passive and active: one does not leap, but is thrown down into the dark chasm that lies beneath the living, in order to sing back to the living in liturgical power. Hölderlin's 'Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .' ('As on a holiday . . .') gives us the image:

Yet, fellow poets [Ihr Dichter!], us it behoves to stand  
 Bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,  
 To grasp the Father's ray, no less, with our own two hands  
 And, wrapping in song the heavenly gift,  
 To offer it to the people.<sup>44</sup>

Yet this priestly image is coloured with woe, and this woe is tinted with shame, which at first overwhelms and severs the communication: 'But, alas, my woe, when of / Woe is me!' ('Doch weh mir, wenn von / Weh mir!').<sup>45</sup> Still, the song quickly resumes:

And let me say at once  
 That I approached to see the Heavenly [Himmlischen],  
 And they themselves cast me down, deep down  
 Below the living [die Lebenden], into the dark cast down  
 The false priest [falschen Priester] that I am, to sing,  
 For those who have ears to hear [den Gelehrigen], the warning song.<sup>46</sup>

So the bad priest, the priest who is not a priest, who dares to drink heavenly fire and suffer its scorching force, is the one who, necessarily, must initiate the communication, just as, Jasper writes, 'the true saint is not the one who repents, but the one who knows with utter and infinite pain the impossibility of true repentance'.<sup>47</sup> This impossibility is the impossible of the sacred. And its starting point is not the security of salvation, but the making possible out of the dark chasm of 'the thunderstorm's fruit' ['Die Frucht des Gewitters'].<sup>48</sup> It is the liturgical rite of the false priest, who brings communication to the people, like the whisky priest of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, who lacks the right elements, and who, in the midst of a storm, admits to his captor:

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger, ed. Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 194 and 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194. Hamburger's translation of 'Weh' here stresses the shame: 'But, oh, my shame, when of / My shame!' (p. 195). It is debatable, however, whether 'Weh' should carry shame as its principal semantic force.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196 and 197. <sup>47</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, p. 14.

<sup>48</sup> Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, p. 194.

‘There are good priests and bad priests. It is just that I am a bad priest.’  
 ‘Then perhaps we will be doing your Church a service . . .’  
 ‘Yes.’<sup>49</sup>

The question is how to *communicate* this service, in all its senses, linguistic and liturgical.

How then may we speak of the necessity of bad faith; that without which, as Hölderlin reminds us, there would be no poetry and therefore no liturgical possibility? Do we speak, singing in unison, with communal bad faith in the daring to utter the *Sanctus*, our poor and mortal voices lost in the infinite music of the Eucharistic Thanksgiving? But is not this, after all and above all, pure liturgical space, the sanctuary that is at once wholly set apart and emptied, neither within us nor outside, a space of utter purity, where even the merest traces of knowing are swept clean? Here we are simultaneously lost and found.<sup>50</sup>

How do we find our voices to sing the song, collectively, out of our shared passion amid the twilight of the idols, after the scouring of the gods from our existence? Greene’s false priest, Greene himself as the false priest, amid the raging storm, amid the cataclysm of war, had set the impossible in motion, only to carry it through to the end of his writing, as the priest in *Monsignor Quixote* (1982) goes further and celebrates with no elements whatsoever: ‘with no hesitation at all he took from the invisible paten the invisible Host and his fingers laid the nothing on his tongue’.<sup>51</sup> Jasper too calls us to keep the song and the performance alive as the silent, the invisible ἔργον of our being, framing the lie in the right way, which is to say, as the opening of ourselves to our outside.

And yet . . . we move on. The instant of eternity passes almost at once into a single moment in the history of the world – the night of betrayal. And it is here that we stay to consume and be consumed. Without the act of betrayal, the necessity of bad faith, there is no word of communication, no place for

<sup>49</sup> Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940, 1962), p. 191.

<sup>50</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Jasper writes of this in *Sacred Body*: ‘Yet this deepest presence is always also an absence, the displayed body – *Corpus Domini nostril* – too much too bear, crossing the boundaries of body and spirit. Graham Greene captures this quixotic limit most movingly in the final pages of his novel *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), in which the holy fool of a priest, the priest who is no priest, a *Suspensión a Divinis* having been imposed on him by his bishop, and approaching death, celebrates the sacrament without physical bread or wine: “And with no hesitation at all he took from the invisible paten the invisible Host and his fingers laid the nothing on his tongue. Then he raised the invisible chalice and seemed to drink from it. The Mayor could see the movement of his throat as he swallowed.” Can we ever do more than this even with the fragment of bread and the drop of wine, touching for a moment the deepest interiority of the body – our bodies – with the divine absent presence in an act of pure remembrance?’ (pp. 110–11).

the liturgical community (which is the community of being-toward), in the world. True, its place in the world is to do nothing . . . and yet, for the gift to be given, we must admit our guilt of betrayal as at the very heart of liturgical celebration, admit the truth of the words of Nietzsche's fool in *The Gay Science* (beyond even what Nietzsche's parable intends), that God is dead, and we have killed him.<sup>52</sup>

What can we then do, we who have committed the ultimate profane act? We must move on, and move on by *doing nothing*, an all-important *doing* of an all-important *nothing*, a nothing to which the sacred beckons and by which it is beckoned, as the impossible possibility.

Only here can the perpetual and even unending hermeneutics of our existence cease, and yet at this moment, in this space, and only here, do they aspire to be a remote possibility. We here, who have already, though unworthy, consumed, and been consumed by, the body in anticipation, *do nothing*. It is to this that all our exchanges, all our writings and readings, our stumblings, our wanderings and self-effacements, the moments of impossibility in literature and art – lead us. *And we do nothing*. We who, but moments before, have presumed to sing the *Sanctus* with angels and arch-angels, know that we know in our dim discernment *nothing* in the terrible conjunction of presence and absence.

Only now, and it remains the faintest of all possibilities, the merest trace on the material being of the world and upon our flesh, no sooner recognized but it is gone, may we, you and I, claim (presumption upon presumption) to know the joy of the sacred community, set apart from the world while yet its deepest reality.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Jasper, *Sacred Community*, pp. 15–16.    <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.