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Abstraction Made Flesh
– Immediacy of the Body and Religious Experience.
Derrida, Hegel and Georges de La Tour

Abstract:

The text juxtaposes two different understandings of religion, the first: Hegelian, where it functions as an imaginary representation of the concept, and the second: Derridean, which confronts and radicalizes the idea of the death of God. At the center of their juxtaposition is the process of abstraction and the religious figure of the “desert” which both authors use to illustrate it. Central to Derrida’s thinking of religion, understood as a figure of relentless negativity in search of difference, a “desert” can also be found in Hegel’s exploration of “unhappy consciousness,” where it is used in reference to the crusaders and serves as a metonymy of the futile imaginary association of Christ’s divinity with his actual, individual body. The text sets out to complicate what Hegel understands as the abstract nature of Christ’s body and body in general with reference to Derridean gesture of religious purification and through the analysis of *Saint Thomas*, a work by a baroque painter, Georges de La Tour which is analyzed as an embodiment of the complex relations between religious abstraction and image.

Keywords:

religion, image, abstraction, Hegel, Derrida

Abstraction is a religious phenomenon – this is what Derrida convinces us about from the very beginning of his excursion on *faith and knowledge*, given at a symposium in Capri¹. And so does Hegel who distinguishes between religious abstraction and the concrete character of philosophical notion. But while the model and metaphor of Derridean understanding of abstraction is the desert, for Hegel it is the body, with Christian idea of God's incarnation being not just any example, but the paradigm of religious frame of the spirit – its “quasi-pictorial [form of] representation.”² These two stances could not possibly seem more disparate, connoting entirely different definitions of religion. Derrida plunges into infinite emptiness of differentiation, while Hegel tackles the last vestige of alienation, Christ's body fully incarnating the spirit and thus holding it back with its obstinate finitude. The aim of this text is to stage a confrontation of these opposites: the fragile finitude of the body and the groundless desert, glowing hot with abstraction. Abstraction made flesh, which is the notion of religion proposed here, is this confrontation become identity – the identity of a body-deserter whose preliminary sketch I wish to offer.

Derrida's essay identifies two sources of modern reflecting faith – the death of God and Heideggerian indebtedness which requires a living and felt divinity. In fact, late-modern theology combines these two motifs, with living difference indebted to the death of God. Drawing on Heidegger and Derrida, John Caputo identifies the death-of-God formula with the death of the onto-theological paradigm. “So my theology is prepared to concede, if not exactly the death of God, at least the mortality or the historical contingency of the name of God, the separability in principle of the event from the name, like a spirit leaving the lifeless body behind.”³ The spirit left the mortifying reign of sovereign presence behind, inspiring theology to hope for what Caputo defines repeatedly in *The Weakness of God* as an anarchical *kingdom of différance*.

Here things are governed, not by a powerful and overarching *arche*, not by a positive, princely *principium* decked out in purple that holds all things mightily in its sovereign sway, but rather the opposite. This kingdom is organized around the power of the powerless, by forces that are weak, not strong, by a sustained sensitivity for the exceptional and singular, for the different and the left out, the foreigner and the immigrant.⁴

The Hegelian take on religion is both similar and different in this respect. Here too, the Holy Spirit ultimately leaves the lifeless body of God and enters the collective body of a community. However, this process marks a dialectical moment of sublation whereby religious representation is supplanted by the transparency of the idea. And, to correct Caputo's over-optimistic stance *avant-la-lettre*, Hegel shows that the dying God – rather than being “the very name, the very model, of the logo-centric love of presence and the effacement of the trace”⁵ – is the weak God of the gospels. “He has however taken our finite nature in order to slay it by His death. It is a proof of infinite love that God identifies himself with what was foreign to His nature in order to slay it.”⁶ He has to die, for real, in order to release the spirit from its alienation, which is necessarily connected with the representative form of religion.

So far as Spirit in religion pictures itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its picture-thinking. But, in this picture-thinking,

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- 1) The text was prepraed thanks to the funding from the grant 2016/20/T/HS2/00007 awarded by National Science Centre, Poland.
 - 2) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, 176.
 - 3) Caputo, *After the Death of God*, 88.
 - 4) Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 61.
 - 5) *Ibid.*, 66.
 - 6) Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 93.

reality does not receive its perfect due, namely; to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence; and; conversely, because it lacks perfection within itself it is a specific shape which does not attain to what it ought to show forth, namely Spirit that is conscious of itself.⁷

The conscious spirit of religion is the same as the one accommodated by the philosophical idea. And yet it is not the same. It has been torn apart by figuration. Within the context of religion, the body performs a figurative role, it serves as an image of the spirit for the subject. Yet this image is inadequate, enclosing its infinity within the limited space of a figure. Thus, pointing to the spirit's truth, the image abstracts from it. It points to something else, to its own imaginary self.

Though it functions as a medium, the imaginary body rivets the subject and obstructs its view of the spirit. Hegel warns what happens if the image is not left to die, if religious representation of the savior's body lingers after his crucifixion. The ultimate embodiment of the abstract character of religion is the corpus of Christ, buried and deserted in the sands of the Holy Land. Dry and lifeless, it nevertheless has the power of engaging subjective life. Of making it feel forever and infinitely dependent for the contact with universality. The crusaders, a dead-end religious community, whose relation to absolute Hegel nicknames *unhappy consciousness*, mistake this body deserted in the grave for the living spirit of religion.

The Unhappy Consciousness, on the other hand, is, conversely, the tragic fate of self-certainty that aims to be absolute. It is the consciousness of the loss of all essential being in this certainty of itself – the loss of substance as well as Self [with the loss of Christ on the cross], it is the grief which expresses itself in the hard saying that “God is dead.”⁸

Therefore, within the context of religion, the body constitutes the ultimate instance of which is at the same time a negation. It deserts its representative function and lures the crusaders into the desert to retrieve a corpse – a substitute of the spirit. This substitute still represents infinity, otherwise it would cease to be a substitute. And yet, the spirit is substituted with an irretrievable *loss of substance as well as Self*; the actual tomb of Christ is the ultimate expression of the tomb-like opacity of his body which separates the spirit from itself. This separation is abstraction; the imaginary body tears the spirit asunder and misappropriates it.

The more concrete and solid the image feels, the more abstract it becomes, with its opaque finitude holding back the infinity of the spirit, as a maximally differentiated principle of reality. The corporeal limitation signifies here a limitless desolation, sheer emptiness of negation. Hegel demonstrates that religious image is a misguided revelation of absolute truth, as it indicates alienation in place of the concreteness of spirit. Thus religion proves to repeat the empty gesture of sense certainty, the first stage of Hegelian odyssey of experience.

Because of its concrete content, sense-certainty immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found, either when we reach out into space and time in which it is dispersed, or when we take a bit of this wealth, and by division enter into it. Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the truest knowledge; for it has not as yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety. But, in

7) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 412.

8) *Ibid.*, 455.

the event, this very certainty proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth. All that it says about what it knows is a pure “This.”⁹

Religion repeats the pattern of sense certainty: “Absolute substance is in the form of individuality, as a Thing, an object of sensuous consciousness that simply is – as pure language or coming-to-be of a shape whose existence does not go outside itself, but is purely a *vanishing* object.”¹⁰ Catherine Malabou believes that Hegel gets carried away here, not following the rule he, himself, established:

Because it is based on the reduction of the divine presence to a present entity, a “thing” (*res*), the Hegelian critique of a reified divine presence runs into an unavoidable paradox. For as “thing,” accessible in the here and now (*hic et nunc*), this presence would be more immediately assimilable than the Eucharistic host, understood as a symbol and promise of the body of Christ. In essence, the dialectical notion of God permits the very thing which Hegelian other respects shows to be impossible: a presentation of the divine presence as sense certainty. A gift to the believer in the proximity and absolute intimacy of the present, no longer mediated through the actual and reified dimension of the host, the divine essence would become an object possessed intimately, enjoying a proximity to the self which no spatial relation – no relation to the external could begin to change.¹¹

Yet, the immediacy which Hegel attributes to religion is of the same abstract nature as the one experienced by sense-certainty. He clearly points this out, referring to its linguistic character and *vanishing* objectivity (a term he often uses to describe the mechanism of sense-certainty). “The immediate existence of Reason which, for us, issued from that pain [of the Unhappy Consciousness], and its peculiar shapes, have no religion, because the self-consciousness of them knows or seeks itself in the immediate present.”¹² The difference is that in case of religion, which is the penultimate stage of phenomenology of the spirit, abstraction is applied to the dialectical process as a whole. Therefore, what is closest to the full realization of the spirit is at the same time the most alien; the *immediate present* of the spirit in a dead body freezes what Malabou identifies as its *plasticity*, which is “first of all the excess of the future over the future while ‘temporality,’ as it figures in speculative philosophy, will mean the excess of time over time.”¹³

Religious image is the alienation of the dialectics in a nutshell. Crusaders roam an actual desert, but the true religious desert is Christ’s figurative body, stretching across the spirit, as far as the eye can see. A single and singular dead body, a pure “This” standing for the living reality of the spirit and dissociating it from this reality.

This element of Thought is the movement of descending into existence or individuality. The middle term between these two is their synthetic connection, the consciousness of passing into otherness, or picture-thinking as such. The third moment is the return from picture-thinking and otherness, or the element of self-consciousness itself. These three moments constitute Spirit; its dissociation

9) Ibid., 58.

10) Ibid., 456.

11) Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 99.

12) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 410.

13) Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 6.

in picture-thinking consists in its existing in specific and *determinate* mode, but this determinateness is nothing else than one of its moments.¹⁴

The religious attachment refuses to *return from picture-thinking* and the state of dissociation – self-estrangement of the spirit as a mortal body. What Hegel defines as religious *passing into otherness* should not be modeled on mystic experience, but on the experience of alienation. Material opacity of the figurative body gets hold of negation and defines its form in a down-to-earth manner. Its emptiness is devoid of any possible transcendent connotations. The imaginary representation has deserted the spirit (*the element of Thought*), not surpassed it. Yet, being its representation, it remains tied to the spirit – in its deserted form. The dialectical logic of definite negation drafts the body deserter and the deserted spirit in, to define one another. What joins them together is therefore their mutual estrangement, the body's act of desertion. Thus the abandoned spirit ceases to be an encompassing whole, the universality reconciling the contradictions. It regresses to the position of the opposite of body. Religion is therefore the space of dispirited dualism.

Thus Christ's corpse amid the desert announces the advent of the body-mechanism, conjures the modern concept of matter, deserting sensuality to join the body with reason and science. Both Hegel and Derrida speak of religion in the context of modernity, a cultural formation which deserted nature and the immediacy of meaning and being. Nancy thus describes the Hegelian world:

It is, in every respect, the world of exteriority from which life withdraws, giving way to an endless displacement from one term to the other that can neither be sustained nor gathered in an identity of meaning. Never again can this displacement regain the movement of transcendence that would raise it toward the supreme signification. It knows "the possibility of death which has no inner signification," that is the possibility of death of the signification itself. The transcendence – being raised high beyond its pure and simple given – has distanced itself in the void of abstraction.¹⁵

The immediate sense-certainty of the body, which is the first to appear in this void – opening Hegelian phenomenology of life's withdrawal – is not just non-natural, but the least natural and most estranged element of the experience of modernity, its corporeality defined as abstraction, *pure Thing*. The spirit departs from it; beginning in the void of signification, the final goal of its dialectics is the reinstatement of nature within the context of universality, as no longer contradictory but complementary to the spirit. This negated, non-natural naturalness is the regained sense of immediacy. A modern individual is to experience it in relation to social universality which is its environment, the natural habitat in which it now lives. This reconstruction of nature is constituted by its seeming opposite, the idea which is defined in opposition to religious image – in terms of absolute transparency. Yet, this transparency should not be understood as metaphysical presence. On the contrary, it is a state of universal permeability of relations which constitutes the system of varying differences. Here is an appropriate comment from Malabou:

By "letting go" the fixity of its self-positing, thought lets go its hold, just like a hand which opens up and relinquishes what it has been holding. From this comes a relaxing of the tension that had separated thought from its object and preserved their encounter only by maintaining them in this divide. Speculative abrogations first of all an act whereby the "I" renounces itself, renounces its

14) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 464.

15) Nancy, *Hegel*, 3.

power of preservation and mastery. Yet the difference between thinking and what is thought is not in fact reduced because of this letting-go. Rather the relationship between them becomes supple or fluid: they are no longer two “sides” frozen or fixed in their opposition, as an “I” or “pure certainty of self,” opposing all that is objective and determinate, the “differentiated content.”¹⁶

The welcome death of God gives up the fixity on his particular body, making it free to become really alive to its fluid spirit, a multifarious and multidimensional relationality. God’s body already contains this fluidity, as it is a fully relational entity, a supple union of man and God, particular and universal. By means of its death, it strives to live up to it and readjust its form adequately. Thus, Hegel flatters religion into resignation.

Derrida, who undertakes these themes in the essay “Faith and Knowledge,” interprets this spiritual renaturalization in contemporary terms, identifying “Christianity as the experience of death of God and tele-techno-scientific capitalism.”¹⁷ If for Hegel Christianity is the dead God, whose death and therefore true resurrection as renaturalized social universality cannot be accepted from within the context of religion, for Derrida it is this death already accomplished and fully integrated with modern Western universality, the *Christian domesticity* as Derrida nicknames it.¹⁸ Therefore, the analogy with late modern capitalism is not conceived to question the relational and differential outcome of God’s death, “the (dis) order of the deconstruction of presence.”¹⁹ It serves Derrida to demonstrate the ambivalent character of this very deconstruction, it is not-so-innocent an engagement as an ontological condition of global economy where, as Haraway demonstrates, “control strategies ... concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries – and not on integrity of natural objects” and where “all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange.”²⁰ In short, where difference is effectively fought with difference.

Connecting the death of God to late modern capitalism, Derrida calls the prophets of the *kingdom of différance* on their abstraction, as they do not register the duplicity of the death of God whereby the plasticity of excessive future overflows the actual future with infinite expansiveness of globalized economy, perfectly adaptable and feeding on its crises. A similar operation is conducted in the *Spectres of Marx* where spectral transparency, understood as the ability to haunt the dominant order with difference, is replicated by the transparent nature of this very order, culminating in the financial sector: “In question is a spectralizing disincarnation. Apparition of the bodiless body of money: not the lifeless body or the cadaver, but a life without personal life or individual property.”²¹

In this case, “should one save oneself by abstraction or save oneself from abstraction?”²² Derrida’s answer is of course: both. Exposing the involvement of the death of God in the abstract procedures of contemporary capitalism, he proposes his own religious abstraction: a cleansing of Christian mock-universality, which is a global fundamentalism producing other religious fundamentalisms in response. He preaches a consistent negation of the insufficiently different difference, a differential fasting in the blinding desert “which makes possible, hollows, or infinitizes the other. Ecstasy and existence of the most extreme abstraction.”²³ This text shares in the Derridean diagnosis. It proposes its own strategy though, its own manner of abstraction from

16) Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 157.

17) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 52.

18) *Ibid.*, 59.

19) Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 67.

20) Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 163.

21) Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 51.

22) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 42.

23) *Ibid.*, 55.

the treacheries of the spirit. Instead of conjuring the space “impassible and absolutely heterogeneous to all the processes of historical revelation,”²⁴ I opt for the dispirited particularity of Christianity, regressing to the dead body of God, rather than advancing with the process of His death. This movement is not nostalgic; if it was, the bizarre nostalgia would be for alienation. It is not a simple move backwards; religious picture-thinking is used here to stray from and desert the spirit, in order to put its duplicitous logic of difference in disarray.

Dispirited, stripped of spirit, the particularity of Christianity is also discouraged, deserted by the fundamentalist conviction of its universality, which disturbed Derrida, who sought to purify the universal, by freeing it of any positive content. “The chance of this desert in the desert ... which is that in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in atheologizing it, this abstraction, without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality.”²⁵ Taking a different path to abstraction, I look at the universality of Christ, not to be confused with the expansive universality of Christianity. It is a universality which consists in renouncing universality in favor of the most abstract confinement – squeezing divinity into a particular body. “But because in religion consciousness is posited essentially in the determination of self-consciousness, the shape is perfectly transparent to itself; and the reality it contains is shut up in it and superseded in it.”²⁶ This shutting off the spirit from itself, spiriting it away into the desert, is what prevents its renaturalization which Hegel advocates. This renaturalization shuts off otherness by fully identifying it with the spirit: the universal movement of immanent differentiation. Hailed by the death-of-God theologians, the plasticity of this movement numbs rather than heightens the sense of difference, distracting it into nets of relations – so dispersed, that they can no longer be experienced as different. Hegelian language of nature, retrieved as spirit’s full transparency, expresses this discharged, see-through difference, which spirits itself away in the wake of the death of God.

Thus Derridean impulse toward abstraction which purges this monistic differential structure. Yet, this purge is too far-gone to perform its function. Derrida’s application of abstraction as a strategy of rarefying and hollowing the difference makes it subtler, more just, maybe, but at the cost of its experience. Derrida defines abstraction as the state of passive impassivity, a relational structure where impassivity defines the heterogeneous openness of the desert superseding a limited, fundamentalist universality, and passivity is a stance of religious reverence and infinite patience that the individual adopts toward this openness. Yet, the absolute terms in which both passivity and impassivity are defined decides that this relation becomes a non-relation. Consciously following the structure of Hegelian spirit, Derrida repeats its universalizing gesture: “it is from this ‘last’ desert that we can glimpse that which precedes the first.”²⁷ Yet, such liminal abstraction can only define itself by being carried away with abstraction, too abstract even to be abstract. The openness, Derrida is after, becomes entirely self-absorbed. And untraceable, thus turning subjective passivity into unresponsiveness: witnessing without witnessing anything.

“The messianic exposes itself to absolute surprise... At issue here is the general structure of experience.”²⁸ The structure of experience ready to be surprised ought to be endowed with immediate responsiveness to abstraction; Derrida goes after it, though he takes the wrong dialectical turn. This is because his deep suspicion of Hegelian spirit is at the same time a deep suspicion of the body; therefore, a spectralization of the former is always a spectralization of the latter which is seen as a potential presence and therefore a threat. Even difference, in order to remain discriminative, needs to be meaningless and to that end haunted. If necessary, by tribal identity and death, like

24) Ibid., 58.

25) Ibid., 57.

26) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 412.

27) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 59.

28) Ibid., 56.

in case of *Shibboleth* which I am referring to here. I am not so much attempting to prove that Derrida's suspicions are unfounded, especially as I have just used his suspicious nature against the assumptions of the death-of-God theology. But, I am now pleading ignorance to his suspicion of the body, in order to see if its material presence can carry off abstraction. This is because this difference to the death which then *Shibboleth* further deconstructs, this obsession with liminality which relentlessly repeats its "withouts" ever present in Derrida's writing – all of this amounts to a flirtation with death which is no longer deconstructible. Hegel poses an infinity of limits which the spirit crosses with ease, mirrored by the ease of Derrida's deconstructive word-plays. But, for a finite, individual spirit which is always tied to a body, the mortality of the latter is always a limit, one precise limit of no return.

No pasarán, which Derrida returns to, refers just as much to them, as to me. And you. They cannot pass, as you cannot either – both blocked by your own body. And the only way to stop them from you, and me, is to proclaim death, however deconstructed, as an unacceptable model of movement. *No pasarán*. The dead body of Christ, in contrast to the ongoing process of death which is retrieved from it – the unhappy uniqueness of a human God who wept for Lazarus and who is no longer here – proclaims this as the gospel. This is why I choose to put my faith and knowledge in it, performing a regressive abstraction to its universality which is outright ridiculous, because there is no universality against death as there is no meaninglessness which is not death – shibboleth being the assertion, and a never ending example.

"In this way the incarnate word spells the death of God who alone is God."²⁹ Taylor considers this statement to be uni-directional, his a/theology advances the dispelling of any form of God's presence and the a/God is no one, none else than the act of dispelling – pure and simple. Yet, if treated dialectically, the logic of the phrase is quite different. The dead God alone *is* God – it is his dispirited body that is God. The act of dispelling the stability of meaning is not uni-directional, but circles back to God's body, where it is abstracted and showcased. The incarnated word spells out abstraction giving it the figurative form of a single God's body. If the dead God alone is God, the act of faith requires desertion from the front line of negation and retrieval of this corporeal dimension – a pure thingness of abstraction. Above, I disagreed with Malabou who argued that a Hegelian concept of religion allowed the experience of immediacy, dismissed by Hegel in his account of sense-certainty. I take it back now, in a regressive move; religious experience is indeed immediate, but, unlike in Malabou's account, it is the immediacy of abstraction.

Of course, desertion is a risky, careless thing to do and its dispirited, regressive nature has to be carefully probed. Yet, its abstraction need not be dialectically mitigated in any way – an *utter withdrawal of life* which we saw Nancy recognize to be the Hegelian point of departure. Derridean remarks on mechanization set us on the right-wrong course in this respect – regression brings us back to the structure of Cartesian dualism. It is the most obsolete of modern concepts of matter, conceived as a product of separation between modern world and nature, epitomized in Cartesian *methodical doubt*: the big bad wolf of metaphysics blowing away at the universe. The body that survives this blow is the counterpart of *cogito*, an empty spirit asserting nothing but its own existence. The withdrawal of life is reproduced within the structure of dualism itself – separated from nature, the body is also immediately alienated from the spirit and thus made mechanical. Therefore, it becomes an immanent, down-to-earth desert of rather mediocre kind, which makes for a strange company to perform an act of religious desertion in.

However, the structure of dualism is indeed the same as that of Hegelian religious figuration. In both cases, body is a space of abstract separation of the spirit from itself. Still, this idea of abstraction seems to be the opposite of figuration, never mind the actual suffering of the dying God. And yet, the dispirited Cartesian concept of matter figures as a body of a martyr. A simple square and its diagonal – that's all it takes to become

29) Taylor, *Erring*, 106.

one. At least, this is how a martyr is represented in *Saint Thomas*³⁰ by Georges de La Tour, Descartes' contemporary – a work which I want to invoke as a model structure of abstracted faith. This reference to a very peculiar early modern painter sets in motion the derogatory Hegelian definition of religion as *picture-thinking*, imaginary and abstract at the same time. Representing a figure in both abstract, geometrical, and representational sense, de La Tour's painting maps very precisely the multiply awkward position of religion in the Hegelian system.

Incarnated in de La Tour's *Saint Thomas*, the spirit manifests itself as a square and a diagonal – matter which deserted spirit up to the point of incarnating its own death, divesting materiality in favor of abstraction. Thomas' head forcefully squeezed between the shoulders has the sole purpose of fitting the side of a square, whose three other sides are formed by the figure's posture. The spear which allegedly killed Thomas and made him a martyr – in keeping with the spear that inflicted Christ's wound and triggered the saint's faith – is just a diagonal. A square and its diagonal – this is what the painting intimates and nothing more. A deserted square, alienated not by the universal, which is concrete, but by the striking poverty of its own reality. Looking at de La Tour's painting, we experience the physical crudity with which abstraction handles the modern body. We face the dull paradox of a finite desert – absolute emptiness having nothing of the infinite, but only of the simplistic. A negation lacking in determinateness and thus inexorable.

Yet, de La Tour's dispirited painting is unlikely to be called dispirited. We immediately recognize the square as the body of a martyr, both sturdily material and inspired. Material crudity of abstraction, I have spoken of just now, turns out to be literal as well, with massive limbs and torso of the saint who has the look of a peasant rebel. Simultaneously, this massiveness gives him an aura of focused religious intensity, with geometrical lines vividly expressing his religious ardor. His faith is made tangible; it can be read from the calm and clean outlines of his robust posture, constituting material sturdiness of his spiritual life. His thickset body is a firm frame of mind, thick with divine inspiration. And the diagonal is at the same time a wounding spear, an instrument of martyrdom.

Thus, within the space of de La Tour's canvases, a physically built sense of relation between absolute and a finite body is identical with radical abstraction, a body dried-out by the vulgar materialism of early modernity, confounding matter with geometry. Just as Hegel describes it, and yet not at all as he describes it, religious truth conveyed by de La Tour is alienated in its own skin, trapped within the bodies of saints, opaque in their sheer emptiness. Thomas' round, sturdy squareness is both abstract and immediately material.

In Hegel's account, the abstract nature of immediacy reveals itself in a gesture of indication:

Sense-certainty itself has thus to be asked: What is the *This*? If we take it in the two-fold form of its existence, as the *Now* and as the *Here*, the dialectic it has in it will take a form as intelligible as the *This* itself. To the question, What is the *Now*? we reply, for example, the *Now* is night-time. To test the truth of this certainty of sense, a simple experiment is all we need: write that truth down. A truth cannot lose anything by being written down, and just as little by our preserving and keeping it. If we look again at the truth we have written down, look at it *now*, at *this* noon-time, we shall have to say it has turned stale and become out of date.

The *Now* that is night is kept fixed, i.e. it is treated as what it is given out to be, as something which *is*; but it proves to be rather a something which is *not*. The *Now* itself no doubt maintains itself, but as what is *not* night; similarly in its relation to the day which the *Now* is at present, it maintains itself as something that is also not day, or as altogether something negative... A simple entity of this sort, which is by and through negation, which is neither this nor that, which is a *not-this*, and

30) de La Tour, *Saint Thomas*, 1620.

with equal indifference this as well as that – a thing of this kind we call a Universal. The Universal is therefore in point of fact the truth of sense-certainty, the true content of sense-experience.³¹

It is the time lapse that proves immediacy to be abstract – plasticity stirs here, calling for the future excess of the spirit. De La Tour's picture-thinking is an even more striking example of abstraction, as sense-certainty indicates abstraction in no time at all, with one and the same pictorial gesture which identifies a weapon harming Saint Thomas with a diagonal. Plastic excess of future hits the wall of abstraction so impoverished that it even lacks its own abstract movement. And yet, the misguided nature of indication twists the picture once again – the relation between geometrization and immediacy proves dialectically reversible, thus rendering the square a vulnerable, ailing body of a martyr.

An abstract gesture of indication opens itself like a wound across the martyr's body. A wound being at the same time a spear; a spear which misses itself, thus hitting the target – a relational unity of immediacy and abstraction. St. Thomas' body is struck by a diagonal, to which it responds vividly, because the weapon is, at the same time, a wound, an epitome of both bodily individuality and openness of engagement. Diagonal performing the dual function of spear and wound is a seminal representation of modern denaturalized physicality, an abstract structure of dualism, which de La Tour gives the religious form of picture-thinking. This structure is not just reproduced but even radicalized by the painting, as the representation of Saint Thomas transfers dualism inside the body which is, quite literally, drained from immediate naturalness by the spear of geometry. Yet, in no time at all, the misguided diagonal twists around, becoming an open wound. Thomas' body is stigmatized by abstraction – a stigma being something intimately alien to the marked body, “the most concrete and accessible but also the most barren and desert-like of all abstractions.”³² The diagonal irritates Thomas' flesh – both opposing and provoking its sensuousness, inflaming it.

Abstraction does not eliminate, but opens the dimension of sensuous vulnerability, a tissue of immediate responsiveness to abstraction. “The nude is the surface of sense and as such it is neither the signifier nor the signified: it is pure signification, and the first exposition.”³³ A pure “This” – naked diagonal, naked spear and open wound. The abstraction filling (and feeling) the body in the religious register is the nakedness of exposition transferred inside. It constitutes an instant intimacy with abstraction, a gut-feeling of the desert.

From the point of view of deconstructive a/theology, the death of God is realized in a radically incarnate word. The disappearance of the transcendental signified creates the possibility of writing. No longer completely bound to, or by, the traditional (theological) structure of representation and signification, writing articulates word(s) by inscribing an errant margin that simultaneously joins and separates opposites. As a play of differences that establishes relations that constitute all that is and is not, the writing is no thing and yet it is not nothing.³⁴

In de La Tour's painting it is the cut of dualism that figures as this errant margin. The spear misses, several times: a diagonal which is a weapon which is a wound which is a dualist opposition. It constitutes a multiple fracture – Thomas' body is broken by abstraction and so is abstraction itself. “Thus while the previous single series in its advance marked the retro-gressive steps in it by nodes, but continued itself again from them in a single line,

31) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60.

32) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 42.

33) Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 12–13.

34) Taylor, *Erring*, 108.

it is now, as it were, broken at these nodes, at these universal moments, and falls apart into many lines.”³⁵ It is this universality broken at the nodes that I want to indicate as the desert, bearing in mind that every gesture of indication fails to hit the mark. It is this failure, an idle meandering among the wreckage of the spirit that is the religious form of universality: a desert whose dried surface is a wound, with sand of abstraction rubbed all over. A desert who is itself a deserter.

Looking for Christ’s wounded body and finding Cartesian dualism – on a theoretical level, this text repeats the misguided gesture of sense-certainty and the wild errand of crusaders. And, just as it is with de La Tour’s canvases, it intends for the misguided indication to twist back in a dialectically transformative way. Regression itself is a misguided move, going against the spirit. The death-of-God theologians came to rely on Hegelian deconstruction of the concept of immediacy, identifying immediacy with the totalizing regime of presence. Yet, immediacy has the weakest, and not the strongest, position in a Hegelian system where abstraction is a sign of vulnerability. “This disappearance of the one, a disappearance that is manifest in word and incarnate in writing, is nothing other than the death of God.”³⁶ Yet, immediacy, ailing with abstraction, is not *the one* and *the one* does not disappear, but arrives with the death of God. It is the negation of immediacy that triggers the dialectical movement of the spirit as a whole, the movement that ends in system – and postmodern enthusiasts insinuate themselves into its totalizing flow. Their “errant” path tows the line of the spirit, while the clearly outlined geometry of de La Tour’s painting makes it go awry, breaking its smooth, flowing and transparent identity.

Again, I have to rectify myself on a quote from Malabou, twisting back the interpretation of dialectics as the *plastic* medium of multiplicity. Being just that, dialectics forms an identical, unbroken totality. “Words are incurable, scripture holey.”³⁷ Taylor says, but there are no holes in multiplicity, with its monistic ontological landscape. Pure relationality analyzed in Hegelian terms of a fully transparent notion, a difference understood as permeability without bounds, leaves nothing for the resistance, no opaque surface which could stand opposite the triumphal march of the spirit, which no longer needs to move forward, but revolves in global circles.

Derrida is right to insist on abstraction as the game changer. Yet, in order to function as such, abstraction cannot pursue the course of negation set by Hegel and become another overcoming which Derrida performs in order to purify his concept of religion. Only if embodied and regressive, can abstraction function as abstraction; Hegel captures this in his concept of religion and fights hard to overcome it. Therefore, instead of the *borderline experience*, as Derrida himself refers to religion, I pursue the possibility of its complete, regressive inscription within the limits of reason. This inscription is not a totalization but a misstep, leading the course of negation astray. It twists the negation around and makes it face the spirit in an act of dispirited resistance. This is what religious figuration is – a broken spirit facing itself, as in Thomas’ defiant posture.

Dualism in de La Tour’s painting is not a totalizing structure and abstraction not a totalizing gesture. On the contrary, it is thus confused that the square is shattered in its regularity by its own diagonal which turns it into an open wound. De La Tour shows how (in)appropriate it is for the square to represent divinity. Diagonal, running across a geometrical figure just as it is supposed to, is misled to represent itself as a religious figuration. Abstraction is fragile, malleable; compared to the infinite *plasticity* of the spirit, the fixity of dualism is plastic, as it has the ability to engage the other as truly other and letting itself be cracked open at the nodes – rather than naturalizing and deactivating it within a flow of monistic relationality.

35) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 414–15.

36) Taylor, *Erring*, 110.

37) *Ibid.*, 110.

According to Stoic philosophy as it is given voice by Lucretius and Epicurus we see objects because they shed “films” or “membranes” (*membranae*) that come floating continuously toward us through the ether. The skin is not an abstract marker of a body’s limits, as in Leon Battista Alberti’s perspective, with its geometric forms defined by centric rays and polygonal outlines (*circumscriptiones*). Skins are not the theoretical apparatus of some geometry, or the equations of modern physiological optics. They are the echoes, the ripples, of bodies, and they carry the sense of body toward us together with the details of form.³⁸

In case of de La Tour, these ripples are geometrical lines, malleable as sticking strictly to the *apparatus of some geometry*. Epicureanism is invoked here as an important source for the early modern, mechanistic concept of matter, a companion to Cartesian dualism. Elkins’ reinvention of Lucretius, which he carries in the context of representation, the picture-thinking, diverges from this mechanistic framework. Remaining faithful to his reinterpretation, I want to twist it back to the mechanistic world view. The latter is misleading as a rule, with its atomism: the idea of matter created through deviated abstraction. In a process structurally analogical to the (mis)indication of sense-certainty, atoms form bodies by deserting their course in the void. And de La Tour’s figures are precisely vulnerable *membranes*, created by geometry run wild against the black, voided background of his tenebrist canvases. These canvases are the rippling machines; stitching together the skin and the desert, they work “spontaneously, which is to say, as the word indicates, both as the origin which flows from the source, *sponte sua*, and with the automaticity of the machine.”³⁹ And so is the broken spirit of religion, a figurative membrane created by the universality broken at the nodes.

Therefore, Hegel captured the soul of religious abstraction, but mistook it for a formal drawback. And he was right about it, of course, though he was also right about the absolute truth that the drawback conveys. It is precisely a miscarriage of truth that is its religious revelation – a spear which misses, thus hitting the mark. The position of religious figuration within the Hegelian system is most awkward, with its repetition of the idle gesture of sense-certainty right before the completion of the odyssey of the spirit. It is systematic, as religion represents the relational truth of the spirit; and at the same time it is feral, embodying the most obsolete form of materiality. Following this awkward Hegelian lead, I want to take one last dialectical step and construe a synthesis – albeit one gone awry. Dialectical movement is retroactive by principle and so, after spirit has landed on its full transparency, there is another step to be taken: the system is required to dialectically return to its beginning.

Hegel would claim that this has already happened, with the beginning, the alleged immediacy, gradually filled in, substantialized into a true one. Yet, as it is with every gesture toward immediacy, the announcement of the spirit as immediate is misdirected. Immediacy is treacherous by nature, as it has no nature. Thus, the spirit gropes in the void separating the end and beginning of the system. Instead of itself, a relational completeness of the system, it finds abstraction which drowns the dialectical mediations like a quicksand. There seems to be no possibility of dialectics here, as there seems to be nothing besides the hollow of sense-certainty – now beside itself, on its outer edge. Beside itself, just as it always has been, always amiss.

Yet, this final amystification of immediacy reveals itself as the truth of religion, the deserted, alienated and misguided path the spirit takes to its beginning. Immediacy is a regressive formation. Thus making a step forward and willing to regain it, the spirit takes a step back. And bumps into religion, which is right behind. What I wish to introduce here is the idea of a systematic regression, which functions from within and, observing the limits of reason alone, cuts across them like a wound. The idea of systematic regression is a perverse case

38) Elkins, *Pictures of the Body*, 1.

39) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 57.

of dialectics; it is the return of the system to its beginning in an act of concrete negation of the system. A step forward which is at the same time a step back, the exposition of the system's foremost drawback: as being ahead of the relational organization of the whole.

In its attempt at totality, the immediacy of the Hegelian spirit – its universal permeability – chases the tail of immediacy of sense-certainty only to find itself negated: defined by its alienation. Spirit does not wish to acknowledge the gap alienating it from its beginning. Thus, according to the laws of determinate negation, it is dialectically defined by it. A bare immediacy of abstraction lays bare the abstraction of the spirit, the estrangement of otherness in the form of its full appropriation. Alienation lost in disalienation. This is precisely what the unbounded monistic relationality is – a difference which estranged itself, creating an environment of global permeability. Lacking boundaries which would define differences – the spirit is nothing but an abstraction drained of abstraction. An attempted return to immediacy, the origin of the system, points this out to the spirit and, as always, misses the point. And thus, in a shaky dialectical move, a step forward to the beginning of the system gets the system behind its back – opening a wound of religious figuration which becomes a determinate negation of the system: of its very systematicity as a pretense to naturalness and a negation of the artificial, constructed nature of the spirit. The regression to religion, a systematic repetition of the ultimate poverty of abstraction, is to block the spirit insinuating itself as nature. Immediacy has no nature other than its troubled itinerary as a deserter, shunning the imposition of death as life and reconciliation.

In her interpretation of Feuerbach, Agata Bielik-Robson sets the course I am following and misdirecting now. “Religion disowns man from his best essential part, by projecting a distinct figure of God which embodies it – yet, simultaneously, by projecting it into transcendent regions, it defends this soft fantastical core against the onslaughts of harsh material world. The religious projection, therefore, is *both* alienating and protective.”⁴⁰

What I want to suggest is that religious alienation has to be protective of alienation itself. This hurts, but by growing back the experience of alienation, religious regression regenerates a tissue which separates finitude from the ongoing process of its death. It is painful for the body, both abstracted from and burdened by the spirit: universality which will not deny itself full permeability and therefore revisits the alienated body with fury. The spirit weighs on that which it cannot uplift. Yet, the misplaced, painful reversal of this visitation is the revelation of alienation as a promise, medium, as well as estrangement. This is what the misguided and bitterly limited efforts of the Hegelian crusaders promise: the body defined, broken if you will, by its unbridgeable openness to the other, who is not death but another finite body – the revelation of the, literally, dead end of the Hegelian system as the *holey scripture*.

Derrida, invested in Hegelian obsession with extremities says that “it is from this ‘last’ desert that we can glimpse that which precedes the first.”⁴¹ This text was an invitation to shake this final and more than initial abstraction a little bit, put it in an awkward position which I secured for religion. It is an absurd position of a synthesis which is neither final, nor initial and nor even middle, but last-but-one. A synthesis emerging from a fittingly mismatched dialectical sequence which consists of the spirit, the absolute synthesis, in place of a thesis and the initial immediacy as its negation. It is a synthesis of misplacement, synthesis in the figurative shape of a wound whose painful abstraction, experienced in its stark immediacy, makes the religious subject ever watchful for the “day of the Lord [that] will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thess 5:2).” Or like a deserter.

40) Bielik-Robson, “Dreams of Matter,” 348.

41) Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 59.

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