The Open Where Not to See

Emilie Bouvier

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THE OPEN WHERE NOT TO SEE

by

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THESIS ADVISER: DAVID FREDRICKSON

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This thesis may be duplicated.
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I will not start this section with the notion of indebtedness – for that would do nothing but inscribe the kind of inspirational exchange in an encumbering economy of obligation. In these acknowledgements I want to express not debt-filled gratitude, but a joy and celebration of certain people for their contributions and companionship in the development of this work. First and foremost I would like to recognize my advisor, David Fredrickson, whose scholarly innovation and boldness of speech have engaged my intellect and nourished my academic exploration in profound ways. Other faculty members who have informed and transformed my thinking include my two thesis readers, Mary Hess and Sarah Henrich, as well as Guillermo Hansen and Gary Simpson. I have also found myself surrounded by wonderfully encouraging and inquisitive friends and colleagues, who have provided much support and meaningful conversation in the process of developing this thesis: Peter Bauck, Mariel Vinge, Jessi LeClear Vachta, and Sam Peterson-Perlman. Finally, it is a joy to name the friends who offered their faces for the photographs that constitute a portion of the exhibition. They continue to astound me with the depth of their beauty and otherness: Elise Tweeten, Mat Brutger, Gwen Paul, Alex Bouvier, Susie Voss, and Pat Boland. Lastly, I have been wonderfully blessed by the institution of Luther Seminary and the opportunity to study theology and create art that my time as a student and Resident Artist has afforded me. I hope and pray that the intersections between faith, philosophy, history, tradition, art, and innovation, continue to be growing edges that flourish and give life in this place.
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CHAPTER 1
ORIENTING THOUGHTS: ON MEANING AND STREAMS OF DISCOURSE

As both an aspiring artist and theologian, meaning-making drives my pursuit of these two different disciplines. I am endlessly fascinated by the ways that individuals and communities create meaning, the images and ideas they use to orient our lives, and the language through which they name experience. Yet even more, I have become well attuned to the profound impact that these meanings and paradigms have on the way they orient their understanding of themselves, their interactions with others, and their actions collectively in society.

In the process of doing art and theology, both endeavors in meaning making, I have felt a pull to step back and look at the process of how these discourses create meaning in the ways they structure thought and evoke images. This move of stepping back to analyze meaning and systems of understanding is a very philosophic one. Philosophy is thus a third discipline I am inviting into this discourse on meaning-making because it undergirds the entire system in the Western world. Despite its influence and focus on explicit discussion of meaning and systems, the history of philosophic discourse has become an invisible, embedded part of Western culture and society. To invite an conversation between philosophy, theology, and art is to look at the very values and assumptions that orient the ways cultural discourses ask questions about and seek to make sense of the human experience. Exploring the confluence of these disciplines is no small task, and I am admittedly working in broad strokes and with insufficient time and
space to do justice to the depth and complexity of the topic. Yet, the interplay of philosophy, theology, and art is too important to simply ignore or simplify despite its breadth. After all, what is at stake is the core of theological reflection itself: how individuals and communities create meaning and orient living. The texts—and I mean texts in the sense of semiotics, including both linguistic and visual signifiers—from which people draw meaning and understanding are of deep importance. I'm convinced that if theology wants to be a locus of liberation and life rather than oppression, it needs to look intentionally at its textual hermeneutics as it speaks meaning into the flux and fluidity of human experience.

In my study of theology – of various images, structures, and paradigms for understanding the divine, the self, and the community/world, which orient the practice of religion – I have been astounded to discover the influence of philosophy in the Christian tradition. The way that theology asks and addresses the questions of divine/self/world and meaning has often worked from philosophy’s assumptions and structures, which have permeated Christian thought throughout its historical development. The history of connectivity between Christian theology and philosophic thinking came as a bit of surprise to me because today there is seemingly a chasm between theologians and philosophers. John Caputo, an anomaly as a scholar in both theology and philosophy, writes both to the religious and nonreligious audiences, apologizing to each for disrupting their assumptions.¹

There wasn’t always such a chasm between philosophy and religion. In fact, Christianity developed directly within the Greco-Roman culture of philosophy, in which

there were often philosophers speaking on street corners, in the marketplace, and of course, in the agora. The New Testament itself holds together both the philosophical discourse of the Greco-Roman world and the theological discourse of early Christian communities – at times in creative tension and at times in syncretic conflation. There has been much recent scholarship focused on understanding Paul’s writings in light of his philosophic context. Abraham Malherbe’s scholarship on Paul argues that Paul was “thoroughly familiar with the traditions used by his philosophic contemporaries… [and] used the philosophic traditions with at least as much originality as his contemporaries did.” Paul was working within the paradigms of the Greco-Roman world but doing something quite different from that of the philosophical schools of the time, working creatively with but counter to the philosophic tradition. Malherbe also shows that the author of Luke-Acts situates the figure of Paul directly within the framework of philosophic discourse in the Greco-Roman world in the way that Paul is described and publically situated in giving his speeches. This New Testament author, Malherbe argues, intentionally does not depict the ways that Paul worked with and challenged the philosophic tradition, but rather fits him nicely within it, portraying him as a learned philosopher who makes the same kinds of claims and assumptions, in order to claim legitimacy in the Greco-Roman world.

I am keenly interested in the way that philosophy is related to biblical thought, as the scriptures themselves are deeply theological and root theological discourse. The above example makes a critical point in this investigation: that biblical thought is not a

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unified, cohesive whole. As much as theological discourse often refers to the “biblical narrative” as if it were a seamless entity and “systematic theology,” as if it were a highly organized, synthesized endeavor, they are both in fact characterized by a cacophony of voices. Amidst the multiplicity of voices, there are many images, stories, and ultimately, ways of making meaning.

Given the creative tension and syncretistic conflation of western philosophy and Christian thought throughout history, there continue to be ways in which these meeting points are both oppressive and liberative. One of the ways to visit some of these intersections of western philosophy and postmodernism with biblical thought in all its multiplicity, is through exploring the images and ideas that emerge at these meeting points. Such analysis and deconstruction pushes against the confines and limitations of the ways that philosophy and theology make meaning and the implications of structures and images that orient understanding and action. In doing this I hope to offer a helpful critique of the ways systems of thought become oppressive and violent, a deeply running issue faced by the history of Christian theology. Yet, I also want to underscore the positive, liberative undercurrent of deconstruction, seeking to claim and explore postmodern images that explore the ambiguity, passion, welcome, play, and openness that are marginalized by Western thought yet have a beautiful confluence with biblical thought.

In pursuing these deep questions, I draw most significantly from the work of John Caputo as he stands between theology in the Christian tradition and Western philosophy, offering an honest critique of their problematic intertwining. He does this simultaneously with a poetic biblical imagination and a keen eye toward the impact that systems of
thought and images have on our thinking and the way we act as society. It has been through the lens of Caputo’s writings, specifically *The Weakness of God* and *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* that I have explored the images and structures of religion and philosophy’s troubled alliance and shared questions. Additionally, I draw also on the Derrida texts that Caputo is working with, delving into the words and images of one of the major thinkers of postmodern philosophy.

Interestingly enough, the format of this thesis project is not too far removed in form and content from Derrida’s work *Memoirs of the Blind*, a work consisting of curating an art exhibition at the Louvre and a published dialogue on the themes that emerge from the works. I hope that a similar back-and-forth between image and text can emerge in my exploration of philosophic and biblical thought in this project. I will move through my analysis oriented by the various photographic art pieces that I have created, which themselves are a discourse on the very intersections that the writing explores. They will serve as images in both a literal and evocative sense, acting as both touchstones for moving through the different issues at hand as well as worlds of their own that evoke and explore meaning in a parallel wordless discourse.

Finally, I want to recognize that even as I bend towards poststructuralism in these preliminary explorations of theology and philosophy, I have no pretense of escaping the very structures and paradigms of modernist and structuralist thought that I critique. I can only seek to follow the movement of postmodern thinkers: to work a little deconstruction to loosen the grip of the structures and systems that tend to close in, to provide a false security regardless of the violence it costs, and to create openings for the incomings and stirrings of the *wholly other* – the event stirring in the name of God, as Caputo would say.
It is in the poking and prodding, the imaging and imagining, the tears and trembling, that I am seeking to claim a theological conversation with postmodernism.

If the heart of the Christian faith is love, justice, and hope as known and named through the language of God, Jesus, Sprit, then a serious consideration of how these values are upheld and expressed in theological thought is needed. For the very assumptions and structures of Western society that create and feed injustice also infiltrate the paradigms that the Christian tradition often uses to think theologically. In seeking honest theological discourse that longs hopefully for love that eclipses violence, justice in the face of oppression, and hope that opens that which is closed off, I think a bit of deconstruction is in order.
CHAPTER 2

STRUCTURALISM: RUNNING INTO A BRICK WALL

Here is where I will start: squarely within the frame (1). Within the perimeter of
the frame’s four corners, I have placed three images that treat the very notions
undergirding the function of the frame itself: bounded structures that systemize and
enclose. This kind of understanding illustrates the structural assumptions, the “frame” so
to speak, of Western thought. It is exactly this whole tradition of philosophy that
postmodernism is resisting. Yet to appreciate what postmodernism is deconstructing, one
must start with the structures themselves, within the frame. From the ancient Greeks
through modern European philosophy, the goal of Western philosophy was to formulate
systems for understanding the world, accumulating knowledge in certainty, and using the
resulting structures of thought to orient the self and order society.¹ The practice of
philosophy in this history was and is an endeavor to reconcile the unsettling
inconsistencies, instabilities, uncertainties, and fragmentation of human experience by
proposing methods for reconciling them into a cohesive system.²

Take Hegel as an example—a critical one at that. Hegel refers to his project explicitly as
a “system,” and one that results in totality and certainty. Notice the words that Hegel
emphasizes and the way they grasp at stability and concreteness.


² Ibid., 4-5.
1. Exhibit Installation Detail 1
In my view, which can be justified only in the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject. At the same time, it is to be observed that substantiality embraces the universal, or the immediacy of knowledge itself, as well as that which is being or immediacy for knowledge.3

Hegel here clearly articulates that his viewpoint can only be articulated through the systematic explanation of this system and all the concrete working of it and within it.

Mark Taylor spells out some of the implications of giving preference to systems and totality over discreteness and difference in his analysis of Hegel. One is a need to make every phenomenon fit into the system so that nothing is lost or excluded. There must also be an acting subject, responsible for integrating everything into the totality of the system.

Note also the implication that the end result closes off any doubt and uncertainty.

According to Hegel’s notion of Aufhebung, every loss is turned to profit, for that which is negated is also preserved as a necessary moment in the self-realization of the totality of which it is an integral member. By comprehending the logical interrelation of each moment in and member of absolute subjectivity, the philosopher re-collects and inwardizes the externality and exteriority of spatial (natural) and temporal (historical) dispersion in a systemic totality from which nothing is excluded... By developing the manifold implications of the philosophy of the subject, Hegel’s speculative system both constitutes the closure of the search for unity and identity that characterizes Western philosophy, and arrives at a form of certain knowledge that is supposed to overcome the doubt and uncertainty that occasioned Descartes’s inward turn.4

Integral to the entire notion of system, as Hegel develops it, is absolute subjectivity and the necessity of the system to be all encompassing. Having reconciled all things into systematic totality of unity and certainty, the subject effectively comes to closure, unity, certainty, and stability. These characteristics point to the goal and nature of structuralism

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3 G. W. F. Hegel, "Phenomenology of Spirit," ibid., 70.

itself. That said, the idea of *goal* and *end*, or *telos*, is also a major point for Hegel. Take note of the very clear emphasis on such language in this excerpt.

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, vis. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.\(^5\)

Hegel’s total system, his preoccupation with the whole, the movement to perfection, the certainty and concreteness of reality and substance, and the acting subject that reduces all things into self-unity, clearly reflects the major nodes of meaning and understanding that undergird Western thought. The same assumptions and points of understanding can be found among early philosophers in the Greco-Roman world. Take the Stoic school of philosophical thought for example, as Stoicism predominated in the philosophical discourse of the Roman Empire.\(^6\)

Aristotelians and, with particular zest, Stoics denied the existence of void in the cosmos… The Stoics believed that *everything* is body and there is no void.\(^7\)

The Stoics did not even believe that void could exist, seeing everything and necessarily a part of the entire system as understood in terms of “body.” Plutarch spells out more detail on this systematic conception of reality that values unity, cohesion, and substance, just as Hegel does but with much more emphasis on physics.

The Stoics, while calling the four bodies—earth and water and air and fire—primary elements, make some of them, I know not how, simple and pure and others composite and mixed, for they say that earth and water cohibit neither themselves nor other things but maintain their unity by virtue of participation in a pneumatic and fiery power, whereas air and fire because of their intensity are self-...

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sustaining and to the former two, when blended with them, impart tension and permanence and substantiality.\(^8\)

Stoic thought turns on a total universe in which there is no void and no haphazard occurrences; everything is body, made of elements that act according to active and passive forces leading to cohesion, growth, permanence as well as burning consumption that assimilates air, water, and earth into fire.\(^9\) Built into the philosophic conception of the world is that physically and concretely there is not void or undecidability – every bit of reality is made of substance that creates a unified whole, permeated by the active force of Spirit. Yet even beyond the system of physics, there is a totalizing, self-subject focused undercurrent to Stoicism that echoes throughout Western thought. Epictetus, a predominant Stoic philosopher, has a strong orientation on the active subject in his discourses. Notice the similarity in his writing to Hegel on absolute subjectivity and telos.

> But one ought… to be able to be self-sufficient, to be able to commune with oneself; … so ought we also to be able to converse with ourselves, not to be in need of others, not to be at a loss for some way to spend our time; we ought to devote ourselves to the study of the divine governance, and of our relation to all other things; to consider how we used to act toward the things that happen to us, and how we act now; what the things are that still distress us; how these things too can be remedied or how removed; if any of these matters that I mentioned need to be brought to perfection, to perfect them in accordance with the principle of reason inherent in them.\(^{10}\)

It is the acting subject that seeks to understand the relation of the self to all other things, and acting within a concrete systematic framework to reconcile all things and bring them to perfection. The principles of reason and the relation of things constitute a system in

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\(^8\) Ibid., 150. (Original source: Plutarch, *Against the Stoics on Common Conceptions* 1085D.)

\(^9\) Ibid., 147.

which the subject in full independence works towards the telos of self-presence. This looks a great deal like Hegel’s active subject and the closure of the system.

In lieu of posing as an expert on the entirety of philosophic discourse—I am certainly not—I simply expost these few fragments from my own foray into Western philosophy. All of these quotations point to the philosophic structures of a totalizing whole; all-bounding frameworks that encompass and systemize meaning and understanding. Let us return here to the idea of the frame, for a frame does a very similar thing: it encloses, defines, and orients. Kant discusses the frame in *Critique of Judgment* as that which distinguishes work from non-work, allowing the beauty of the artwork to stand on its own accord. Derrida’s analysis of Kant’s discussion points to the fact that the frame as Kant conceives it is necessary in its function of cordonning the work off from its surrounding context.\(^\text{11}\) The frame confines and therefore defines the work, protecting its purity as an object of beauty with intrinsic content. The frame is the point of closure, literally a structure that holds everything—the glass, the matte, the art piece—in place, as well as providing a visual structure for viewing the piece. Finally, it protects the work from the instability and contamination of the outside world, from anything that would threaten to infiltrate or confuse the meaning of the piece. Yet the frame is often hardly noticed, unless perhaps it is a particularly gaudy gold-encrusted thing found outside its typical museum gallery residence. Still, all its assumptions of boundedness underlie the very way we look at art; it is an example of how we pattern experience and understanding. It is here, within the frame, in the face of the structuralism of philosophic thought, that I cannot help but see a brick wall.

This first image placed within a frame, *Structuralism* (1), faces straight on the mass and force implicated in a structure itself, in this case a solid brick wall. The pattern of the wall and the pile of bricks stacked in front of it draw attention to its means of assimilating parts into a cohesive whole, filling the frame with concrete, stable, expansive patterns and planes. Within the bounded frame you cannot see any edges or endings, except where it meets its stable cement foundation—within this enclosed square the structure might as well extend and encompass the entire plane of its existence, ordering and stabilizing everything it contains. Not only is an expansive brick wall a bit bleak, it has simultaneously a quiet sadness to its austere security and an almost imperceptible frightening vulnerability that it tries to ignore. Notice the subtle relationships between the poetically poised bricks that have yet to be laid. They rest against one another, simultaneously balanced in their stacks, yet imbalanced and precarious, with spaces between and curvatures in their leanings, their weight not perfectly structured. While simply they are nothing more than bricks, there is poise and play in the interaction between these otherwise mundane objects. The dynamic interplay of weight and leaning creates a sense of relationship emerging between entities, one that evokes a sense of humanity. Viewed with metaphoric empathy, I see a deep melancholy in the assimilation of these bricks into the static, confining mass of the wall just behind them. When assimilated, all the dynamic interplay, the poetic relationality disappears into the austere, stable, predictable structure. It reduces everything to sameness. It embodies the dreams of structuralism, the essence of being in all its static self-presence that reconciles everything into itself.
2. Emilie Bouvier, *Structuralism*, scanned negative
Keep looking. As the eye continues to explore the image in all its structuralism, quiet threats to the structure begin to emerge. A small fissure in a seemingly assured firm foundation unsettles the base. The stability of rigidity is at once undermined by the fact that its inflexibility makes it unable to cope with the shifting earth, the chaos of the elements continually expanding, contracting, and in motion. A stain of sorts, unidentifiable in substance or origin upsets the monotonous shade of the wall in the upper right corner. The entirety of the structure and stability is undercut by the small cracks, the subtle wear from the elements, the feeling of unrest in knowing that the whole thing could, in fact, crumble.

It may seem far-fetched but all of this—bricks, structures, and fissures—have everything to do with Christianity. Stanley Hauerwas, a well-known Christian ethicist, uses the very metaphor of laying brick to describe what the Christian identity and practice is all about—revealing his deep structuralist framework. In an article with a telling title, *Discipleship as Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community*, he uses bricklaying as an extended metaphor for a Christian understanding and practice.

What I propose therefore, is to provide an account of what it means to learn a craft, to learn—for example—how to lay brick, in the hope that we may be able to claim forms of care and discipline unnoticed but nonetheless present in the church. Notice how the goal of Christian communities is oriented around creating a brick structure, and that such a discipline of structure and craft are how he sets up the frame in which one practices care, confession, and forgiveness. Notice the words he uses—telos,

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knowledge, truth, actualization, perfected, and necessity—that are all deeply embedded in
the paradigms of Western philosophic thought, as we just explored.

To lay brick you must be initiated into the crack of bricklaying by a master
craftsman. … In order to be moral, to acquire knowledge about what is true and
good, a person has to be made into a particular kind of person. … This
transformation is like that of making oneself an apprentice to a master of a craft.
Through such an apprenticeship we seek to acquire the intelligence and virtues
necessary to become skilled practitioners. When the moral life is viewed through
the analogy of the craft, we see why we need a teacher to actualize our potential…
Of course, the teachers themselves derive their authority from a conception of
perfected work that serves as the telos of that craft.\textsuperscript{13}

Hauerwas takes the same kind of language and imagery of the philosophic tradition and
here applies it to his understanding of moral life and Christian community. The “moral
life,” the life of faith according to Hauerwas, becomes a hierarchical, structural enterprise
in how it is conceived and practiced. Just like the tradition of the philosophers, patriarchs,
and rulers of the West, in this structural paradigm the Christian community has a clear
telos toward perfection directed by those in positions of power and authority, founded on
the clear and stable ideals of knowledge and truth.

Equally important to understanding that a strong parallel exists between
philosophic and ethical/theological/religious discourse, is unpacking the implications.
Within this approach, people are not only the roles of master and apprentice, they are
treated much like the bricks themselves—of need to be made into something, assimilated
into the plan of the master builder. The apprentices function as recipient while the master
is the active self, doing the teaching, forming, and actualizing. It also goes without saying
that this structure is inherently hierarchical, furthermore it uplifts the philosophic

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
The dichotomy of active/passive rooted in Greco-Roman thought. The entire enterprise is also oriented around a structure of knowledge and virtue, which are necessarily learned; a determinative framework that needs to be applied by an active subject to achieve a perfected telos. Echoes of Hegel ring loud and clear as the massive face of a brick wall emerges as the embodiment of Christian tradition. I find it hard not to see this theological frame as running into a brick wall. Is it any wonder that Christianity forcibly converted and assimilated Native Americans into Western culture, killing those who refused? Is it shocking that Christianity is historically aligned with imperialism, colonization, and the deep violence embedded in these histories? The paradigms of structuralism and assimilation are inherently imbued with a certain violence, a closedness to the marginalized or different, with a tightly clenched fist around the security of sameness, order, and active subject. And yet these are the very paradigms from which much of Christian thought has drawn.

Let us continue with Hauerwas for a moment more, seeing where he ends up at the end of this exposition. He turns to soften the brick wall by evoking “story” and “narrative”—but look closely, as it has the same effect.

It means we must learn the disciplines necessary to worship God. Worship, at least for Christians, is the activity to which all our skills are ordered. … As Christians, our worship is our morality, for it is in worship that we find ourselves engrafted into the story of God. … our lives can be recognized as lives only as we find ourselves constituted by a determinative narrative that has been given to us…

In other words, according to Hauerwas, in order to participate the Christian faith and have access to forgiveness and reconciliation without succumbing to the hierarchical structure


15 Hauerwas, “Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community,” 884.
that orders the craft of such practices and the closed. Not only that, but one must also submit to a determinate narrative structure, to be assimilated—“engrafted”—into the Western onto-theological metanarrative in order for one’s life to even be recognized as lives. Here, narrative becomes filled with manipulation and control over and against those who are at the bottom of the hierarchical structure.

It is exactly at the point of narrative where structuralism and biblical thought meet in Luke-Acts. As I noted earlier, some of the biblical voices have a strong alignment with Western philosophical thought. The author of Luke-Acts, henceforth referred to as “Luke” for simplicity, takes an approach not unlike that of Hauerwas, sharing philosophy’s proclivity for totalizing structure as distilled in narrative. John Squires explores in-depth the distinctively Lukan theme of the “plan of God,” his own version of “determinative narrative,” and the way it undergirds the entirety of the two-volume work of Luke-Acts. Like the philosophers of his day, Luke seeks to emphasize stability and clarity, overcoming doubt and uncertainty by organizing reality into a totalizing whole. He does this through the motif of divine plan. In serving as a totalizing narrative the notion of the plan of God underlies his claims to certainty, structural thought, and conflation with the Hellenistic conventions that were respected in his day.

Luke begins his Gospel narrative indicating his intentions in writing. Notice his emphasis on order and fulfillment, indicating the structural framework of his narrative.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly

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account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Lk 1:1-4)

This prologue clearly has a bit of a structural bent, as it accents careful ordering, truth, and instruction. Yet, it takes on more clearly a structural narrative function when read within the context of Hellenistic historiography, which it parallels quite closely. Take this excerpt from Diodorus Siculus as an example of this context. It is taken from his *Bibliotheke Historike*, his own attempt at writing a universal history.

It is fitting that all men should ever accord great gratitude to those writers who have composed universal histories. Such historians have therein show themselves to be, as it were, minister of divine providence, for just as providence, having brought the orderly arrangement of the visible stars and the natures of men together into one common relationship, continually directs their courses through all eternity, apportioning to each that which falls to it by the direction of fate, so likewise the historians . . . have made of their treatises a single reckoning of past events and a common clearing-house of knowledge concerning them.17

Reading Luke through this context, it is not difficult to see the way that his two volume work serves a similar purpose: an ordered history, told through narrative, in which all things fall into an ordered, divinely-directed whole. Writing out of his Hellenistic context and all its Western philosophical assumptions, Luke adopts the structurally programmatic role of providence in Hellenistic historiography to shape and orient the already existing narrative of the Christian gospel circulating in his time. Luke’s writing is one of the many voices within the cacophony of biblical thought that aligns with the Western philosophic systematic framework for understanding, making meaning, and orienting the self.

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17 Ibid., 15. (Original Citation: Didodorus Siculus *Bibliotheke Historike* 1.1.3)
CHAPTER 3
THE OTHER: STANDING AGAINST THE SYSTEM

Standing out from the brick wall, standing against the system of structuralism, we meet a ghostly form of The Other (2), a form of organic, human curvature, juxtaposed with the rigid gridded pattern in the background. It is the other that sounds against the system of structuralism; it is the other that poses the problem, the spoke in the wheel. For it is the well-being, the humanity, and ultimately the life of the other that is at stake in all the systems and structuralism of orienting life and meaning. Let us return for a moment to some of the quotes from the structures of Western philosophic thought and see how the other is construed within a system that turns on assimilation and the active subject.

Returning to the quote from Epictetus representing ancient Western voices, let us examine how he deals with the question of the other. He certainly does not want to admit a dependence on the other. Yet even further, he fears the distress caused by being in relationship with the other. Epictetus begins the chapter in which this quote appears with reflections on the “forlorn state.” Such a state is that of a person who is without help of another or experiencing the grief of loosing another who one had cared about: “when we have lost a brother, or a son, or a friend with whom we have shared the same bed, we say that we have been left forlorn.”¹ Read then how this threat of distress, of emotionality and

¹ Epictetus, Epictetus: Discourses, Books 3-4, the Encheiridion, 218, 87.
3. Emilie Bouvier, *The Other*, scanned negative
loss of relationship, impacts how one ought to behave with respect to the self and the other.

But one ought… to be able to be self-sufficient, to be able to commune with oneself; … so ought we also to be able to converse with ourselves, not to be in need of others, not to be at a loss for some way to spend our time; we ought to devote ourselves to the study of the divine governance, and of our relation to all other things; to consider how we used to act toward the things that happen to us, and how we act now; what the things are that still distress us; how these things too can be remedied or how removed; if any of these matters that I mentioned need to be brought to perfection, to perfect them in accordance with the principle of reason inherent in them.”

Epictetus here subtly argues that in order to achieve the security and peace of self-presence and perfection, the other must be minimized; the threat of relationship curtailed.

There is a resistance to the dependence forged in a mutual caring and the risk in forging an emotional bond that could be broken or lead to loss. The other effectively becomes another distress that ought to be “remedied” or “removed.” The ideal of the acting subject focused on a telos comes at a high cost, fostering a radical individualism and propensity for violence against the other. Indeed, in the face of Epictetus’ subject the other becomes nothing but a source of distress and object to be acted upon, an object reconciled into a system of certainty that protectively closes off the threat of dependence, risk, and loss. Here we see spelled out the implications of self-presence, stability, knowledge, the active/passive dichotomy, and a trajectory toward achieving perfection: a complete resistance of relationality and refusal to recognize the humanity of the other, turning instead to objectification.

These same themes and problems emerge in Hauerwas’ structural image of Christian practice as bricklaying. I discussed earlier, Hauerwas’ model is based on the

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2 Ibid., 89.
structure of *craft* that places certain leaders in positions of authority, acting subjects, charged with the moral development of those in their “care.” While Haurwas uses the image of master/apprentice, as I stated earlier, the *other*, the one outside the acting subject, is treated much like a brick itself: subsumed into the structure without regard for its *self* (its *otherness*) other than what it contributes to the system. Hear again this quote from Hauerwas with an ear toward this objectification of the other: the way that the active subject treats the other as an object of manipulation.

To lay brick you must be initiated into the craft of bricklaying by a master craftsman. … In order to be moral, to acquire knowledge about what is true and good, a person has to be made into a particular kind of person. … This transformation is like that of making oneself an apprentice to a master of a craft. Through such an apprenticeship we seek to acquire the intelligence and virtues necessary to become skilled practitioners. When the moral life is viewed through the analogy of the craft, we see why we need a teacher to actualize our potential... Of course, the teachers themselves derive their authority from a conception of perfected work that serves as the telos of that craft.³

Such a view of the other is of course couched in the metaphysical language of “actualization” and “perfected work” within the structure of *telos, intelligence, knowledge*, and *virtue*. Within this paradigm, the *other* in all their *otherness* poses a threat, a glitch in the system. This can easily be “remedied or removed” however, in the words of Epictetus, or “reconciled” in the words of Hegel. When one rejects the other’s *otherness*—their difference, their uniqueness, their inner value, their humanity—and sees them instead as another object that the active subject can act upon, then they are easily made into one more brick with which to build and support the structure. They are “engrafted” into the “determinate narrative,” and their lives are only recognized as lives

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³ Hauerwas, "Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community," 883.
within the structuralist paradigm, to again use Hauerwas’ language. Structuralism is not a friendly place for the other.

_The Other_ (2) inhabits the tension being drawn between two very different paradigms of thought. On the one hand, the other stands out against the brick wall in stark juxtaposition to structuralism. Yet it also is a headless form, with an unsettling knob sticking out of its neck, a poor substitute. It evokes the lack of and the need for a *human face.* In order assimilate the other, to assimilate them into the existing structure, the other must lose their face, their uniqueness, their alterity. They are clearly still an *other,* but their *otherness,* their individuality and very humanity, has been diminished. In _The Other,* the other wants to speak, to be recognized, to stand out from the wall, yet it has experienced the violence of being denied a face. Its otherness has already been diminished. Like the pile of bricks in front of the wall, it is on the verge of being assimilated into the structure. Yet with its haunting form, its ghostlike stance floating out from the wall, it poses the question—the question of the *other*—to the ways of creating and structuring meaning. It is the ghost that haunts the thinking of philosophers. _The Other* in fact evokes many ghosts rising from the violence and bloodshed allied with structuralism. The question of the other hovers, haunts, and forces the question of *otherness.* The ghost of the other is the very immaterial substance of the _unknown_*—that which is other than knowing, other than ourselves, other than materiality, which is indeed what makes ghosts so frightening.

In light of this haunting image, let us turn to postmodernism’s emphasis on the *otherness,* the _alterity* of the _other.* For while Western philosophy gets a bit spooked by the other, postmodern thinkers invite such a thrill. The question of the other is a focal
point in postmodern thought. In the process of deconstructing, in taking apart the systems, tapping them at weak points, blurring their clearly cut lines, upsetting their obsession with purity and categorization, one also liberates the other. Postmodernism seeks to free the other from the structuralist forces that constrain, marginalize, and violate the other in all their otherness. Yet if not as an object, or opposition to the self, or one that one can impose a structural framework upon, that how does one talk about the mysterious other? How does one approach such otherness that in its very nature cannot be fully understood or controlled? For Emmanuel Levinas, a postmodern philosopher of Jewish ancestry takes on this question as central to his writings. Taken from his work entitled “The Trace of the Other,” listen to how he positively, yet evocatively and mysteriously, speaks about the other. Keep an eye to the radical differences between the discourse in which he is writing and that of the Western philosophic tradition, with which we have been working thus far. Note also that “the alien being” is here interchangeable with “the other.”

The alien being is as it were naturalized as soon as it commits itself with knowledge. In itself—and consequently elsewhere than in thought, other than it—it does not have the wild barbarian character of alterity. It has a meaning. The being is propagated in infinite images which emanate from it; it dilates in a kind of ubiquity though the very plenitude of its alterity overflowed the mystery that harbors it, and pro-duces itself. Though it surprised the I, a being that is in truth does not alter the identity of the I. The obscurity from which it comes is promised to research. It thus opens a future whose night is but the opacity produced by the density of the superimposed transparencies. Memory brings back the past itself and puts it into this future in which research and historical interpretation wander.4

Levinas’ writing here is much more fluid, mystical, and playful than that of the writers in the Western philosophical tradition I have quoted thus far. The first sentence of this

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excerpt lays out directly that knowledge is not what is at interest here, in fact knowledge “naturalizes” the “alien,” that which is other. He then turns to talking about the otherness with language that is not about structure, hierarchy, control, and stability, but rather about emanating mystery, abundance, dissemination, and openness to the future without knowing or seeing what lies ahead. “Research and historical interpretation” are no longer divinely controlled, fixed, and oriented around concrete structures or total systems as in Epictetus, but rather they wander. These images are profoundly different from those of Western philosophic thought. The meaning-making in this discourse turns not on knowledge but on uncertainty and the otherness of the other.

How does this radically different discourse on the other come into dialogue with biblical voices? I find that within the polyphony of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark seems to evoke a similar posture toward the other. Unlike the Gospel story of Luke-Acts, the other is not assimilated into a divinely directed determinative narrative. Rather Mark’s narrative is much more disjointed, episodic, and written in rough and abrupt language, quite unlike the seamless and eloquent telling of Luke in all its Hellenistic historicity. Yet even beyond the structure—or lack thereof—of its narrative form, Mark’s characters act decidedly in the alterity of otherness. Take for example the hemorrhaging woman, who in her disease reached out to touch the cloak of Jesus passing by, trusting that just that touch will make her well, which it does (Mk 5:27-29 NRSV). Turning to the passage itself, notice the way that Jesus responds to this other.

Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned around in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes? And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ” He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had

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5 All biblical citations are from the NRSV translation
happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (5:30-34)

Here Jesus is surprised by the other! He is caught off guard, not knowing exactly what happened or who touched him. Levinas elsewhere has used an image similar to the drama of this biblical story: of the other coming from behind, taking one by surprise. Jesus’ response in his surprise is to listen, to invite the other to speak, and this woman in all her alterity and unexpectedness, tells her story—which Jesus affirms.

Later on in Mark, Jesus is not only surprised but challenged by the otherness of another woman. This woman was a Syrophoenician, of Greek rather than Jewish heritage—certainly an other to the ethnic identity of Jesus. In their exchange, Jesus aligns himself with the structuralist mentality of assimilating Gentiles into the category of disrespect and distrust. He refuses to heal her daughter, replying “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (7:27). Yet she challenges him, making her humanity and alterity known, standing out from and against the confines of the social system that confined and marginalized her: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” she answers (7:28). Again Jesus is surprised, listens to her, and responds to her otherness, offering the healing that he first chose to deny (7:29-30).

Even more surprisingly about Mark however, is that these characters, in all their otherness, are not only recognized by Jesus but seem to have a profound affect on Jesus as well. This is not an explicit theme in the Gospel, but appears subtly in the movement between the beginning and end of Mark. For the Gospel of Mark seems to have two

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major portions. The first half of the book is characterized by scene after scene of healing encounters and fragmented teachings, all in a hurried rush toward the second half, which is characterized by a slow, deliberate portrayal of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Interestingly enough, the Jesus who seems filled with the power of working healings and miracles in the first half of the episodic narrative, ends up in the second half looking much more like those whom he was reaching out to heal. In the passion narrative Jesus is found vulnerable, marginalized, physically suffering, and rejected in his otherness, much like the minor characters he interacted with prior. Yet it is there in the event of the cross, that Jesus is recognized as king, and as God’s Son. Given the deliberation and focal attention that Mark gives to the crucifixion event, he seems to say that Jesus’ identity and significance is linked to cross, the point at which Jesus looks the most like those suffering others, and discloses his own wholly otherness.

Read with an eye toward the other, the Gospel of Mark unfolds as follows. Jesus encounters and recognizes many nameless, marginalized, suffering others, who in turn are the ones (unlike the disciples) who catch a glimpse of who Jesus is in all his otherness—the character of the wholly other, of God. As the story unfolds, in the most climactic moments, Jesus begins to look less and less like a person of power and authority within the social, political, and religious systems. Rather, he begins to look increasingly more like those marginalized others, in all their suffering and in all their alterity that stands out from the social, religious, and political systems of the day. The story then ends abruptly, with a surprise, a ghostly angelic appearance, and an air of undecidability: the women who found the empty tomb run off in terror and amazement, saying nothing. The ending certainly lacks any kind of clarity or closure, a problem that
later editors of the gospel attempted to remedy, though this material is not original to the source.⁷ Mark’s kind of narrative imagery is one that is haunted by alterity, by the otherness of those in need whom Jesus encountered and by the otherness of God as experienced in the life of Jesus and event of the crucifixion. This is not the divinely ordained, Stoic sounding Spirit that directs and orders the determinate narrative of God in Luke-Acts. This spirit is a very holy ghost, the stirring of the wholly other, haunting the episodic, frantic, and fragmented telling of the gospel narrative in unexpected encounters.

Mark is not alone in his orientation toward the other. Caputo draws deep connections between otherness and Christian theology as well. He draws not only from Levinas, but also on Derrida, who draws out the evocative idea that every other is wholly other, or in the French, tout autre est tout autre. He connects the otherness of the other to the otherness that we understand to be God—the divine, the wholly other, the numinous, the holy or any of its other names.

The other, that is, God or no matter who, precisely, any singularity whatsoever, as soon as every other is wholly other (tout autre est tout autre). For the most difficult, indeed the impossible, dwells there: there where the other looses his name or is able to change it in order to become no matter what other.⁸ Here the other is conceived not as a problem to the system, in need of assimilation, but as something wholly other, a singularity, an experience of the impossible—and as thus sharing the same characteristic of transcendence of the “I,” the same alterity, the same opening, as the name of God. Derrida continues, “one should say of no matter what or no matter whom what one says of God or some other thing.”⁹ There is a link between the

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⁹ Ibid., 52.
name of God and the face of the other. This kind of connection is one that resists the ordering structuralism that assimilates the other in violence under the name of divine providence. Rather, the other and the wholly other are deeply interconnected, and are both easily divested of their alterity, closed in, and closed off by the totality of Western philosophic structuralist thought.
Feeling the brick walls closing in, the oppressive weight of the structures that in their totality close off the possibility of something new or something other, I look for an opening in the structure. And I find it, An Opening (3), in a window ajar and a glimpse of sky. For those three squares of light reflected on the window, come from somewhere, outside the structures that fill and close the square window within the frame. The light is a reflection of the sky above; it is the point where the walls stop, opening to the sky above the courtyard. This subtle detail is no small matter – it challenges the very notion of what would otherwise be an all-encompassing and totalizing structure. It points to something other, something outside the system. Even as the walls close in, one can try to open a window. One can look expectantly, searching the panes of glass for a glimpse of sky.

This is what deconstruction is all about in the writings of Caputo. It is a hoping, a longing for an opening in the systems and structures that bend toward the violence of closure and assimilation. To challenge the assumptions of philosophic paradigms, to follow the fissures and push their structures to the points of breaking, rending, and opening, is to practice hope. For there would be no hope if everything were already fixed, determinate, and structured. If the story stops at the brick wall, if the closure of the system remains as secure and certain as metaphysics would have it, if the future is nothing but repeating the confines of the sameness in a destruction of difference, then
4. Emilie Bouvier, *An Opening*, scanned negative
there is a tragic loss at hand. Where is the humanity of the self and the other? Where is the good news—the gospel in all its newness and surprise? If the divine is construed as nothing other than that which orders, maintains, and directs reality, where is promise? Where are hope and faith if everything is certain, deterministic, and based in static knowledge?

Postmodernism’s deconstructive bent is not destructive as many often assume. Deconstruction is all about creating openings for the incoming of something new, of promise, of difference. It looks in fact, quite similar to the practice of faith. Listen to the passion and hope in the way that Caputo approaches deconstruction.

Deconstruction is so deeply and abidingly affirmative—of something new, of something coming—that it finally breaks out in a vast and sweeping amen, a great oui, oui—à l’impossible, in a great burst of passion for the impossible.

“The impossible” is a beautiful way of talking about that which is beyond the metaphysics of possibility, that which is other than the structural totalities that characterize Western thought. Caputo spends much of his time praying for, longing for, hoping for, inviting, calling, summoning the impossible, the incoming of the wholly other, the happening of the event stirring in the name of God—that which breaks open the structure and sameness. These positive themes in postmodernism I find to speak new life and meaning into the Christian paradigms of faith, love, hope, and justice that have been so often coopted and diminished by systems of western philosophic thought. The images or frameworks that one uses to create meaning and orient experience have a deeply important impact on the themes that the Christian tradition holds as central. The play and prodding of deconstruction can open up the discourse on meaning to an imaginative

1 Ibid., 3.
exploration, one that invites difference, ignites a passion, and drives a longing—in hope and faith—for the impossible.

Caputo draws out the confluence of this approach with certain strains of biblical thought by creatively exploring the notions of the messianic, the apocalyptic, and the prophetic in Christian thought. He picks up and draws out these biblical themes because they involve a structural openness the to the future. In Derrida’s characteristically linguistic way, he writes continually about the future, l’avenir, with all of its extending and associated meanings: in-venir, venue, à-venir, aventure, é-venir. Caputo spells out these Derridian futural strands and associates them with a certain messianic pull.

Deconstruction is engaged in and by the in-venir, the incoming, the arrival (venue), of what is coming, what is to come (à-venir), in and by the future (l’avenir) and the adventure (aventure) of the future… That is Derrida’s desire, the passion of Derrida or of deconstruction for the impossible, the unbelievable. For dreams and desires, prayers and passions, belong together in the overreaching, messianic and slightly Jewish expectant trespassing that deconstruction “is,” if it is.²

All this longing and inviting of the future is not unlike the messianic stirrings that long for God to break into, break open the present horizons, a longing for something of God’s promise, God’s justice, the messiah, to come. After all, do we not continuously pray “Come, Lord Jesus?” in a messianic longing and hope? For Derrida and Caputo alike, such an invitation and longing, such an opening, a prayer perhaps, is the phrase viens!, come! It is almost a punctuation, though one not of closure but an end of continual openness, viens, oui, oui. It becomes almost a meditation in its repetition throughout Caputo’s writing, a wash of continually confessing expectancy and longing.

² Ibid., 72-73.
It is in this same vein of a futural focus and openness to the unknown that Caputo picks up on a certain *apocalyptic* tone of postmodern thinking as well. Though to be clear, not the kind of apocalypse associated with predicting the end time or being privy to a certain revelation of knowledge. Rather, he traces an apocalyptic undercurrent that is much more about anticipation and the arrival of something *wholly other* that disrupts all sense of normalcy—and the cataclysmic confusion that ensues. Deconstruction certainly seems to have a bit of an apocalyptic bent in this regard, opening the systems to disruption and confusion of all certainty, a breaking up and breaking open of the structures that bind the *other*, structures that try their best to close off the possibility of such an *incoming*.

In taking such a turn away from Western thought and in speaking with a quasi-messianic and apocalyptic tone, deconstruction is also a bit *prophetic*. Especially with respect to its concern for the *other*, its crying out against the deeply embedded violence done within the totalizing systems of Western philosophy, the voice of postmodern writings is nothing short of prophetic. Indeed, the prophets held nothing back in boldly naming the injustices of the systems of society in their day as they continually cried out for the incoming of God, the *wholly other*, longing and weeping for justice to come. This sounds strikingly similar to the side of Derrida found in his later, more personal writings. There we discover a philosopher who is a bit weepy, like Augustine, standing in a similar sort of fear and trembling as Kierkegaard, who gives us a more autobiographic glimpse of the longing and weeping that circumscribe all his deconstructionist writings. In Derrida’s final work, *Circumfession*, he writes with a *quasi-prophetic/messianic/apocalyptic* tone evocatively ringing out.
... you have spent your whole life
inviting calling promising
hoping sighing dreaming,
convoking invoking provoking
constituting engendering producing
naming assigning demanding
prescribing commanding sacrificing.

Caputo calls this poetic excerpt “eighteen ways to pray and weep, to dream of the innumerable, to desire the promise of something unimaginable, to be impassioned by the impossible.”4 This is Caputo’s hypothesis of sorts, his underlying purpose in writing one of his books: to see the prayers and tears behind Derrida, and behind deconstruction in general. Caputo sees these prayers and tears as an invitation, a prayer, a meditation, and a critique, daring to dream of religion sans its destructive alliance with the concreteness and closedness of Western philosophic thought. Caputo sees the slightly hidden and anything but absolute and systematic spirituality of Derrida, who is “quite rightly called an atheist” and claimed by the secularists.5 He sees the prayers and weeping of this man who grew up a Jew in Algeria, who has a broken alliance with Judaism, yet who is continuously writing viens! and oui, oui, perhaps as prayer. In Circumfession Derrida confesses that his Hebrew name is Elijah, that he has this secret name of “Elie” known only in his family circles, a secret that he himself did not discover until later on.6 It is this secret, surprising side of Derrida in the identity of “Elie” and the name “Elijah” that further invites reading Derrida in a prophetic light. Derrida/Elie is in fact, one continually pointing to the future, writing with a quasi-messianic longing, inviting the tout autre with


5 Ibid., xvii-xviii.

6 Ibid., 282.
the hope that the concrete structures and certain knowledge might fall apart in the quasi-apocalyptic kind of *event* that deconstruction provokes.

Derrida, Caputo, and the discourse of deconstruction quite generally share a similar prophetic, messianic, and apocalyptic bent that emerge in the search for an *opening*, an inviting of something *tout autre* to upset the closure of the structuralism. Returning to *An Opening* (3), one sees this type of movement taking place. What at first appears as the walls of structuralism closing in holds also a glimpse of sky, perhaps an open window behind a screen, the square of light that points to something *beyond*. Such an opening in the photograph draws the eye up and out of the system that encloses, out of the bounds. From the bright square upward to the two above, the glimpse of sky reflected on the windows forms a visual path leading the viewer’s eye directly upward and out of the photo. As a good student of photography, I know full well that this is something photographers never want to do. My photography professor Meg Ojala would constantly be reminding our class to pay attention to the edges of the composition, making sure that there is nothing distracting that would draw the eye away from the subject or out of the frame. Part of editing photographs is keeping white away from the edge, for any white would disrupt the edge of print and blend into the white paper surrounding the photo. Such an error would be a blurring and distraction, threatening to draw the viewer’s eye out of the photo. But this is exactly what this photo *wants* to do – to offer an escape, a longing for sky, for an opening in the system, an exit from walls closing in. The glimpse is an opening up and out of the system. With the eye drawn out by some error of the structural bounds, we find ourselves in the white intermediary plane of the matte. Having been drawn out of the photo here we are confronted again by the boundary of the frame.
It may seem that we have returned to where we began: with image the frame. Yet this return to the beginning would serve only to reinforce the confining nature of the philosophic tradition that seeks to continually return to the beginning in a cyclical pattern closed off to newness and openness; such a move is nothing but a repetition of sameness, gathering and reconciling all difficulties, difference, and challenge into oneself along the way. Yet having thus far worked within with and pushed back against the structuralism that frame reinforces—against all the assumptions, traditions, and framework of Western philosophic thought—we return to the frame with a new understanding and deconstructive spirit. Such a return is not one of submitting to the structuralist paradigm of the frame, underscoring its significance, but coming back to the image of the frame itself to look for the fissures in the structure that we might trace. Here we can look for an opening of a different kind, one that would destabilize that which seems like quite a clear-cut enclosing boarder.

It exactly this characteristic of the frame—its location at the boarder—that questions the frame’s identity in all its supposed concreteness, stability, and boundedness. As I discussed previously, Kant in *Critique of Judgment* writes about the frame and its role in confining and defining a work of art, acting as a stable boundary that cordons off the purity of the artwork from the surrounding context that threatens to infiltrate the meaning of the work. The frame intrigues Derrida because it is a boundary, an edge, and
according to Kant, an entity that seeks to enclose and stabilize. Yet Derrida’s analysis of Kant’s writing on the frame in *The Truth in Painting* pushes Kant’s conception to the wavering edge of stability. You see, Kant is fixated on making clear-cut distinctions about the central essence of the work of art, distinguishing between the *ergon*, the body proper of the work, and the *parergon*, that which is merely extra, exterior, and external to the proper field.\(^7\) Examples of *parergon* are the clothes of statues, the columns of buildings, and of course, the frame of paintings.\(^8\) While Kant makes such distinctions in order to secure the identity and stability of the frame, Derrida points out that the external boundary of the frame stands at fairly muddled crossroads in fact. The frame’s location at the *edge*, at the *boundary*, does not mark it as “detached but on the contrary [it is] more difficult to detach”\(^9\) — it simultaneously is separate from the work but necessary to it in order to define and contain it. As the frame separates the the integral inside from the outside wall and context and “then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription” of the wider context, the frame also lacks a stable identity in the in-between.\(^10\) It stands out against the grounds of each of these two planes—the work and its context—yet it belongs to each, both a part of the external setting of the work yet integral to the defining of the work itself, standing at the ground where the two merge and meld into one another.\(^11\) In this way the boundary seems to become muddied, destabilized, the frame at once held together and falling open. Its very identity of the

\(^7\) Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 56.

\(^8\) Ibid., 57-63.

\(^9\) Ibid., 59.

\(^10\) Ibid., 61.

\(^11\) Ibid.
clear border becomes a bit less clear, a bit more fragile and contradictory. This returning to the frame thus does not hold up a rigid all-encompassing image to give a framework and sense of conclusion the whole discussion, is not the origin and telos of a cyclical conversation, but rather draws us to the edge, to the border, where our understanding is no longer about closure but rather wavers and falls open.
CHAPTER 5
COMING FACE TO FACE: IMAGES BEYOND BORDERS

With the boundary open, all rigidity and boundedness thrown to the wind, we turn to a very different kind of discourse, one no longer about the frame or confined within the frame, but emerging in the flux of such a boundary falling open. No longer in the plane of straight lines, what had once seemed decidedly fixed becomes an ever receding horizon to be explored. Such a play of images, filled with openness and wavering undecidability, invites a discourse on seeing without seeing, light and blindness, a torn edge, and eyes filling with tears. You see, Postmodern thinkers not only respond to the structuralism of Western thought but to the undergirding language of austere writing that is allergic to the undecidability of pathos and poetry. There is no room for poetics or playfulness in the craft of bricklaying. Postmodern writing has its own characteristic style and imagery that practices the very values and paradigms about which it writes in the writing itself. Postmodern writing is not only about negative maneuvers in deconstructing the stark structures of Western thought, but doing so with a play of language and images that also claims its own positive imagination—drawing images and themes that I find positively captivating.

Postmodernism burns with a passion for the impossible, exuding faintly glimmering flecks of fire, smoldering cinders that leave but a trace, embracing the darkness, and disseminating ashes on the wind, the wind of perhaps a certain ruach that is not fearful of the void but gently caresses the face of the deep. Wandering through these
images we find ourselves struck a little blind as Caputo would say, hands outstretched, groping in the obscurity, eyes seeing only through tears, bearing faces that come to face the other, confronted with transcendent mystery. All these images converge and play off one another in the series of traces and faces that make up the rest of the visual and textual exploration. Unlike the first three photographs that began this study, the images that appear in *Face to Face: Fragments 1-5* (5, 8-10, 21) do not occur within a frame. They are unbounded and in fact, depend on a certain structural openness—on the negative space between the glass and the tear of the paper behind, on the interplay between lights and darkened glass, seen only through a bit of blindness. Don’t worry, I will explain. All of this will soon become clear. Or perhaps so clear that in a transparency it will open to the beyond and dissolve into uncertainty. Who knows. *Je ne sais pas. On (ne pas) verra.* We’ll see (or not).

*Seeing* is in fact one of the defining characteristics of the face: both the functionality of vision and the sense of identity that it shapes in rendering itself visible, that is the face not only *sees* but *is seen.* The face is the site of giving and receiving information, experience, and communication. The face is not only an indicator of a person’s identity but also of their thoughts and emotions, an accompanying text to language. We read faces constantly in our interactions, be they momentous or minute—and we read them using the faculties of our own faces. Such a practice is quite routine and usually subconscious, though interestingly enough it was taken on with all the systematic structure and rigidity of Western thought by a second century Greek philosopher named Polemon. His work, *Physiognomy,* was a methodically produced manual for reading the appearance of faces. Such an approach is indicative of popular
5. Emilie Bouvier, *Face to Face: Fragment 1*, liquid emulsion on glass
thought in his day and in its historical import shows that it continued to enjoy popularity and influence through the Medieval period.¹

*Physiognomy* is a fascinating work to read because it carefully, categorically, systematically goes through different physical characteristics in minute detail and various combinations, giving a one-to-one correspondence between these physical traits and character judgments. Polemon, a philosopher of traditional Western thought, *clearly* wants to take the face at face value. He seeks to apply a practical structure of meaning to obtain certain knowledge, subjecting the face to his assumptions of concreteness, predictability, and universals. This short excerpt is one tiny fragment from his extensive systematic work that gives a sense of the piece. Take this tiny fragment in conjunction with a chart compiled just on the characteristics of eyes drawn from the work by scholar and translator Robert Hoyland (4-5).²

If you see that the eye closes evenly and has moisture, and it is large and clear, and the forehead is soft and slack, judge for him great modesty, good intentions, and knowledge. But if you see that the eye is dry, and it closes and remains so, then opens, assume for people with it boldness, evil intentions, and bravery. If you see, together with these signs, that the forehead is handsome, the eyebrows turn down, and the eyelids are rough, then associate with its owner fierce anger and an advanced state of evil. If you see that everything about the eye is soft, judge for it goodness without equal in other eyes.³

While it seems silly and extreme to our contemporary and scientific ears, Polemon’s writings were not outside of the assumptions of readability, reliability, and structural

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hierarchy that Western thought continues to value. Of course, we do not continue such extreme systematic physical readings of people today. Yet we do read faces in all their expressiveness as a screen of symbols, a visual text of disclosure—and we put a great deal of trust into these readings. We automatically take the signifiers we receive from the face at face value. And if we find those signs were deceitful, then we say that person who displayed such falsity immediately loses face.

Caputo writes about such ill-considered trust put into the readability and reliability of the face in his book *Radical Hermeneutics*. He resists the emphasis placed on concreteness and systemizing in a Western approach to looking at faces. Much more in line with Levinas’ mystical view, he points to the surprise, mystery, and uncertainty of the face. He quite evocatively paints the question at hand, as I see it.

The face is a shadowy place, a flickering region where we cannot always trust our eyes. And my interest lies not in reducing this ambiguity but in exploiting it. There is a lot of what Derrida calls undecidability and dissemination written all over the face, which is a tricky place, full of ambiguous signals and conflicting messages. We speak of something being true or false “on its face” (*super-faciem*, *sur-face*), and that means in an entirely manifest way, with nothing hidden, left behind, concealed. But of course the human face is anything but that. It is, on the contrary, a hall of mirrors, a play of reflections, a place of dissemblance and dissimulation, sometimes a place which we manipulate in order to produce an effect, sometimes a place where the truth gets out of the bag on us against our will. Sometimes our face betrays us, and sometimes we give the lie to others by putting on a convincing face. The human face is anything but simple and unambiguous, anything but just surface. It is streaked with hidden depths and concealed motives.⁴

The face is a screen of symbols that we can neither read with certainty nor project ourselves with certainty. The signs of the face are so many and complex that it cannot be subjected to a simple—though in Polemon’s case certainly not brief—formula to extract a

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8. Emilie Bouvier, *Face to Face: Fragment 2*, liquid emulsion on glass
concrete meaning. It is an evocative, mysterious place, both in the other and even in the self. I know I am not alone in experiencing the unsettling shock of seeing one’s one facial expressions reflected back to me in a photograph, a mirror, or a video. One’s self-representation does not directly correlate to what one thinks one exudes or even what one intended. There is so much dissemblance, much that is revealed and much that is concealed, a mix of truth and deceit, that obscures the face.

Such uncertainties and instabilities run counter to Western philosophy’s obsession with secure structure and sure knowledge. We would rather see the face, see the eye, see seeing itself, as an assured endeavor, one of illumination, communication, and disclosure, rather than an elusive withdrawing into the tumultuous state of undecidability. Simon Swains’ compilation of scholarly analysis on Polemon’s work *Physiognomy* is entitled *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul*—reflective of Western assumptions about seeing and understanding. “The eyes are the gateway to the soul” is common saying even today, following in the tradition. Does not even the word “Enlightenment” itself assume a certain image of seeing associated with light and clarity? One becomes illuminated with *knowledge, truth, and understanding* as if the “essence” of these abstract certainties were revealed in a shining light, luminously emerging from the darkness of uncertainty. *This* is the image orienting the Western philosophic tradition. Derrida draws up two counter images—burning cinders and faces—that evoke *blindness* and run completely contrary to the assumptions and values of this philosophic tradition.

Derrida’s *Cinders* is a piece of writing that I found entirely captivating, leading me in fascination through a poetic textual summoning of images and voices. The book turns on the image/phrase *il y a là cindres*, invoked continuously throughout the text. It is
a fragment of language, an evocative image, treated as if it is its own character, something that just came upon Derrida, not that he invented, but that somehow has a life of its own. The phrase has a double meaning. Its translation *there are cinders*, can either refer to the fact that *there are* cinders as opposed to an absence, or that *there are* cinders, referring to a place, over there not here, that is the place of the cinders. In this way, not just the nature of cinders themselves but also the double meaning of the phrase *il y a là cindres*, evokes a space between presence and absence, between being and nonbeing. Cinders are there, yet they are continually burning up. They are giving off light, yet lost in engulfing return of darkness after the fire. Cinders *are there*, yet they are not *here*, they are beyond; they are burning and scattering, carried off by the wind. They are vaguely present yet they point to the fire that has already past.

The fire: what one cannot extinguish in this trace among others that is a cinder. Memory or oblivion, as you wish, but of the fire, trait that still relates to the burning. No doubt the fire has withdrawn, the conflagration has been subdued, but if there are cinders (*il y a là cindres*), it is because the fire remains in retreat… it disguises itself, beneath the multiplicity, the dust, the makeup powder, the insistent pharmakon of a plural body that no longer belongs to itself – not to remain nearby itself, not to belong to itself, there is the essence of the cinder, its cinder itself.

Cinders are but a disfigured remnant of an event, a trace, a memory, disseminated yet perhaps still smoldering, their very being withering way, here yet there, constantly in retreat, veiled with mystery.

The French title of the book is similarly evocative. *Feu la cindre* is a phrase with a similar double meaning dependent on whether it is spoken or read. Spoken it sounds

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6 Translation mine

7 Derrida, *Cinders*, 61. (Translation modified)
like *cinders were*, as *feu* (fire) sounds like *fût*, the subjunctive imperfect tense of the verb *être*, “to be.” When read however, it translates to *fire cinders*, summoning the link between cinders and the fire that came before, the fire that *fût*, the fire that was. Such an image and its textual description play off such undecidability, mystery, and absenting presence, running counter to the stability and clarity associated with the enlightening light of Western thought. Hear this excerpt as well, which has an “ear for the flame”:

> I hear well, I hear it, for I still have an ear for the flame even if a cinder is silent, as if he burned paper at a distance, with a lens, a concentration of light as a result of seeing in order not to see, writing in the passion of non-knowledge rather than of the secret. I would say, for the protection and illustration of its own sentence, “I” the cinder would say that his (Derrida’s) writing is not interested in knowledge. The raw cinder, that is more to his taste.  

Here the text written by Derrida is unsettlingly separated from Derrida himself, absenting from the first person the text speaks of Derrida’s tendencies to side with the *unknown*. Clearly writing against the thinking of *enlightenment* (in all the layered meaning of that word), Derrida does not get rid of the image of light but drastically re-images/imagines it by daring to “run the risk of a poem of the cinder.”

The poetic image of cinders runs completely counter to the radiant beams of illuminating light that come to mind with “Enlightenment” or the Christian equivalent of “Light of the World.” Cinders are still a *light*, yet one that is dim and smoldering, threatening to fade and disappear at any moment, wavering in instability. Cinders will soon become nothing but ashes. Cinders don’t shed a light of understanding but one of confusion and scattering; their meaning is still there, yet over there, just out of reach, with certitude held under the erasure of the burning light of a fire. Yet as Caputo is quick to

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8 Ibid., 75.

9 Ibid., 31.
point out, such an image kindles the imagination and ignites a burning passion for the
impossible, for an opening and incoming, for a disruption of the confines of sameness
that an all-illuminating stability has want to construct.

Derrida opens a similar discourse, one that also runs counter to seeing, by
considering the pervasiveness of blindness. His work Memoirs of the Blind is written
around a series of images—famous works of art compiled into exhibition at the Louvre,
which Derrida himself curated. All these images are about notions of blindness that upset
the Western obsession with sight: the witness of many blind men in the Bible, the
blindness of drawing itself, and the blindness of eyes veiled with tears. Derrida
mentioned in the work that his first thought for the title of the exhibition was L’ouvre où
ne pas voir, The Open Where Not to See.10 The word for “open” in the original French
title, l’ouvre, in its vocal pronunciation sounds like “Louvre,” the location of the
exhibition and a place that is without a doubt a place for seeing. The word is also spelled
similarly to the word œuvre, which refers to a body of artistic work. To argue that visual
art turns on blindness would have been (and still is!) a bold and contrary claim to what
one would assume arriving at the Louvre to look at numerous collections of art. Still,
Derrida picks up instead on a counter-current within the great collection of the Louvre’s
holdings—one that sketches out blindness. While Derrida chose instead Memoirs of the
Blind as the title of the exhibition, as it emphasizing memory, history, and the inclusion
of his own memoirs, I still find his first idea of a title to be quite evocative. It is this non-
title, this almost title that I adopted as my own.

9. Emilie Bouvier, *Face to Face: Fragment 3*, liquid emulsion on glass
Derrida begins his analysis of art in *Memoirs of the Blind* with a series of drawings depicting biblical stories of blindness and healings, along with a couple of Coypel’s drawing that are isolated “studies” of blind men (indeed, in the literary tradition the blind characters are in fact almost always men). These paintings, the depictions of blind men and their healings, assume that blindness is a defect, an instability that upsets the established order. Derrida underlines this point of Western assumptions about blindness:

Sin, fault, or error—the fall also means that blindness *violates* what could be here called Nature. It is an accident that interrupts the regular course of things or transgresses natural laws. It sometimes leads one to think that the affliction affects both Nature and a nature of the will, the will to know [*savoir*] as the will to see [*voir*] … Idein, eidos, *idea*: the whole history, the whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy, as we know—as we see—relates seeing to knowing.\(^{11}\)

You see, the whole way language is formed around seeing, the very place of sight in the popular imagination and discourse of the Western world, is characterized by knowing. Thus, to *not* see, to hold the condition of *blindness*, either physically, metaphorically, rhetorically, or allegorically, is assumed to be either unnatural and thus tragic or the willingness of a *bad will* that chose to close one’s eyes.\(^{12}\)

Derrida picks up the assumptions of blindness in the tradition of Western thought and explores the very *unnatural* spaces of blindness. He notices in all the drawings of blindness that there is a fascinating study of blindness playing out in the artist’s representation of the *hands* of the blind, evoking particular characteristics of blindness. The hands are at times drawn back, drawn together in a pious prayer, depicting the blind

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
as passive, the receiver of healing. Yet many representations depict quite active hands, after all, the reaching of one’s hands, or a cane extending from the hand, is characteristic of blindness. The hands of blind are often open in the drawings Derrida analyzes, “begging, praying, supplicating, imploring, praising,” to borrow his description. Coypel’s drawings that are studies of blindness show even more dramatic representations of the hands of the blind—they are often foregrounded, reaching, fingers outstretched, straining forward, flexed in motion. The fingers outstretched trace the air, the hands feel and gesture; Derrida is very clear that these hands do something. In a sense, Derrida argues that these open, reaching hands go even beyond seeing, further than sight. It is not hard to see how Caputo picks up on such activity as that of faith, an unseeing that reaches out into the unknown, going into the beyond that is not associated with the paradigms of certainty and knowledge. There is a faithfulness, a hope, a passion that emerges from these extended hands, imploring, extending, making gestures of prayer and openness, reaching, touching, tracing, and courageously embracing the unknown, keeping on ahead, feeling one’s way…

Such behavior of the hands, the extending out ahead of seeing and knowing, marks the characteristic of blindness that is not simply an unnatural exception but a condition that pervades our experience. How often one finds oneself reaching for something without looking, scribbling notes absently, groping blindly with eyes preoccupied elsewhere. I often find myself scribbling down notes onto sticky notes, hands reaching and imploring the ideas, obscured in the blindness of not yet knowing, not looking to see, or haphazardly jotting down a dream in the unseeing darkness of night,

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13 Ibid., 9.
still in the daze of half-sleep. The hands reaching, unseeing, tracing in blindness is, Derrida argues, the very condition of drawing itself—such an art that associated with the clarity and precision of sight. Yet one can never see both the subject/scene and the paper on which one draws at the same time; the eye is always turned to one, blind to the other. One holds the gap between these two visions in the trace of memory. Having explored drawn portrayals of blind men and the blindness of drawing itself, Derrida turns to the blindness of tears. We will turn a blind eye to this final image however, for just a moment, to invite the voices of biblical writings, which indeed have a great deal to say about blindness.

Rather than comparing two different pieces of biblical literature when it comes to seeing light and blindness, I want to look at two contrasting voices within one portion of biblical text: the Gospel of John. I find this Gospel to be quite interesting in fact that it holds together very different streams of thought and writing in its nature as a composition of sources. Most scholars agree that the author of the Gospel of John was working with several sources including one usually referred to as a “Signs Gospel” or “sign source.”

In my own careful reading of John’s Gospel, I notice these passages that refer to the miracles or “signs” that Jesus performs, and the general difference in tone between the passages portraying Jesus as the great worker of miracles and Jesus as the one who is in communion with his disciples. In chapter six, just after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus has an intriguing conversation with the disciples. When Jesus tells them “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn 6:29), they ask him:

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“What signs are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” (Jn 6:30-31)

The disciples are directly asking for signs, and Jesus responds saying “I am the bread of life,” (6:35) continuing with talk about how those who take part in him, take part in the Father, with whom he has an intimate connection. I find it significant that just after the feeding of the five thousand and the invocation of the sign of manna from heaven in the time of Moses that Jesus does not do another bread-related miracle, rather he talks about a strange mystical union and sharing that happens in receiving his flesh as bread.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” (6:56-57)

This kind of koinonia, or communion based in dwelling and flesh defies the logic of knowing, seeing, and signs. In fact the religious leaders, who, in the Gospel of John are associated with the Greco-Roman logic of the Empire to which they were bound, ask the very logical question “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52). Thinking back to the beginning of the passage where we began, the episode starts out with a certain logical quest. The disciples ask what God wants – and Jesus responds with “belief.” In response the disciples ask for a sign, after all it seems to be a hallmark of the tradition they have been working with considering all the miracles and sign source material. The readers in the Johnnine community might have had that expectation themselves even, seeing as they would have been working within the tradition of the Gospel of Signs. But then Jesus responds not with a sign but this strange and “difficult” teaching (6:60) that is less about seeing a miracle or assenting to some sort of knowledge, but being drawn into
this mystical communion with the embodiment of God, drawn into an illogical, experiential *koinonia*, a mystical sharing of all things.

Yet even some of the sign source material that at first seems to clearly be about clear seeing and knowing, is complicated and turned on its head at particular moments by the Gospel writer. I find the story about the blind man who receives sight to be particularly compelling in this respect. While on the surface, it looks like it fits into the paradigms of seeing and knowing that mark the assumptions of the Gospel of Signs and Western philosophy alike, I find that there is something *other* than this stirring on the margins of the episode. The segment itself is a lengthy text, comprising the entirety of the ninth chapter of the Gospel. It begins with the very assumption that Derrida brings up in *Memoirs of the Blind*, that blindness is unnatural, a kind of *violation* or *transgression*, named in religious contexts as *sin*. The disciples suppose this premise ask the question of whose *sin* it was that caused the man’s blindness (Jn 9:2). Jesus rejects this notion, replying:

> “Neither this man nor is parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (Jn 9:3-5)

This response, while it rejects the paradigm of blindness as unnatural and sinful, still seems to fall into the kind of language of the sign source and Western thought—that this man’s condition of blindness is an opportunity to display for all to *see* and *know* the power of God, emphasized further by the imagery of Jesus as light, juxtaposed with the darkness. Yet this is just the opening of the drama, let’s *see* where the story ends up.

For as much as this episode seems to be a straightforward miracle or sign, meant to be seen and believed, there is a surprising undercurrent of *unseeing* and *unknowing*
that stirs in the unfolding events. After Jesus heals the man by spitting on the ground to
make mud and telling him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, which he does, there is much
confusion (9:6-7).

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is
this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Other
were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.”
(9:8-9)

Notice how even those who can see are uncertain; sight itself is fallible and the neighbors
find themselves in the blindness of uncertainty. They were some of the closest witnesses
to the miracle, yet they could not clearly see it. There was confusion and uncertainty even
in such a sign! Notice also, the preoccupation of those who have sight with the certainty
of knowing that they are lacking.

But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered,
“The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to
Siloam and Wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” Then they
said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” (9:10-12)

Interestingly enough, throughout the unfolding of the story the blind man who can now
see is not the perfect model of enlightenment. He bears witness to the healing, to the
event, marked by physical sight, yet there is still so much blindness and uncertainty that
permeates his experience. I find it intriguing that he is explaining to those questioning
him for clarity the details and logistics of the healing, yet when all this business of saliva
and mud was happening, he could not actually see for himself clearly what was going
on—he was still completely blind at that point! His witness is one of only later seeing, of
touch, of experience, of feeling his eyes traced by the fingers of Jesus, an intimate
encounter with a man who he did not actually see. All this feeling, bodily encounter, and
tracing of fingers bring to mind the play of images in Derrida’s gloss on the blindness of
drawing, of hands moving out ahead of certainty, and of the mystical bodily communion that we just discussed with respect to John’s Jesus. After such an event as this, the result is not an enlightened being that enjoys clarity of sight and knowledge henceforth. Notice in the segment above the blind man’s outright statement “I do not know” when he is questioned about the whereabouts of Jesus (9:12). Such unknowingness is paralleled by the Pharisees, the religious leaders who seem in this story quite consumed with the anxiety of uncertainty. The parents of the man as well are perplexed and terrified by the interrogation of the logic-oriented caricature of temple leadership, adding to the chorus: “…we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes” (9:21, emphasis mine).

Finally, after some more disputes about knowing, Jesus, and the healing that took place, the previously blind man is driven out of town and Jesus seeks him out. Yet amazingly, the man who is the very character representative of receiving sight does not even recognize Jesus when he sees him (9:35-38)! The man is not suddenly all-seeing and all-knowing, he still lives in the blindness of human experience. The previously blind man can now see, but seeing does not involve knowing all the answers or even having total clarity of vision. Rather this man’s newfound sight involves speaking out of the obscurity of experience, out of memory, of wondering, not knowing, and believing amidst it all. Such a story doesn’t equate belief here to seeing and clarity, but rather is continually caught up in uncertainty and obscurity even after the miracle of sight. What Jesus says next however, directly upends assumptions of seeing and knowing.

Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them,
‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains. (9:39-41)

In a dramatic inverting of expectations, it is those who try to see clearly whom Jesus calls blind. Further, it is the one who lived out of physical blindness, who continues to live in the uncertainty of experience and belief, that sees. To pick up Caputo’s language of “crossing the wires”\(^\text{15}\), a biblical voice other than the sign source in Gospel of John disconnects the paradigm of “seeing” from the obsession with clarity and knowledge of the Greco-Roman-philosophic tradition that the sign source supports and hooks up instead to a certain unknowingness and experience in a story that is imbued with blindness. Sight in this story is not antithetical to blindness and unknowingness—it is pervaded by them.

Like the blind man who receives sight and like the fine artists who draw beautiful portraits, at first glance, photography is also assumed to be an artistic medium that turns entirely on the clarity, certitude, and knowledge of seeing. The camera acts almost as an extension of the eye, magnifying and hyper-aware, a tool used to capture, shoot, or take a photograph, as if it violently seizes all that one can with the capacity of sight, distilled in a moment. In fact, photography has a function entirely apart from art as evidence and documentation, viewed as a clear and static reproduction of factuality. Yet, just like the act of drawing and the story of the blind man, a closer look obscures all such assumptions. Our eyes are drawn to the edges, where blindness and uncertainty reside, often overlooked yet constantly, hauntingly lingering.

10. Emilie Bouvier, *Face to Face: Fragment 4*, liquid emulsion on glass
As an artist working in historic process photography, that is, photography done using historic methods rather than solely digital technology, I find that there is a great deal of blindness involved in making photographic images. In shooting photos with a film camera, one must close one eye, straining the other through a small window, to frame and focus the image. Fingers move along the dials, adjusting without always looking, measuring the light, making calculations but also taking a blind guess at how the photograph will look. Then with the press of a button, the finger invokes an event: the snap of a shutter, the moment of light entering the dark chamber inside the camera. A fraction of a second later, one is left with the trace of an image inscribed on the film. It is a trace hidden in the darkness, unable to be seen until one spends many hours in blindness, developing and printing the film in the obscurity of the darkroom.

In this photographic process, there are cinders. Il y a là cindres. In all of the photographs that make up this exhibition, the images are made of cinders—the lingering trace of an event of burning. Unlike digital photography that records the incoming light into computer data organized by pixels, historic process photography depends upon the interaction between light and the physical material called emulsion, a silver-based chemical compound that is “light-sensitive.” When the light hits the emulsion, the interaction is one of burning. With respect to the film in the camera, when the shutter opens the places where the bright burns into the emulsion are dark and the spaces of dark shadow that block the light, remain light and transparent on the film—this creates the negative image on the film. When light is then projected through the negative in the darkroom onto a photographic paper also containing a surface layer of emulsion, the process is repeated. The light shines through the transparent spaces and is blocked by the
opaque darkness, the light burns into the paper, and the image is inverted into a positive print. The blindness, the squinting, darkness, obscurity, inversions, and burning all chaotically underlie the seeing of the image in the end. The photograph is not the all-seeing light of certain knowledge but rather the cindery trace of that the light left behind, the smoldering ashes lingering after the event, a fragment, a glimpse, at what was, as it emerges from the chambers and darkness. My experience of making photographs has been as much characterized by blindness as it is has by sight.

Turning to see the resulting images in *Face to Face: Fragments 1-5* (5, 8-10, 21), you see that seeing the image is not so clear-cut. The clear glass here is the site of the cinders, not the stable paper or delineating matte and frame, but rather a transparent, floating image. You can only see the image if you also see through the image, beyond the image. The eye cannot fully stop at the surface; it must waver between the image on the glass and the space beyond. In such an interaction, the image changes, becomes more or less clear, as one walks around it. This sort of print would be a nightmare for Kant, as it is continually being infiltrated and contaminated by the surrounding context on which it entirely depends in order to be seen. It is caught in all the complex webs of meaning that context brings with it, not sheltered in aesthetic purity but recognized as participating in the constructs of meaning that we grasp in the flux of life. They float like ghosts, no longer stable entities but vague outlines that surprise and frighten us with all their uncertainty. They cannot even be seen apart from floating in space—if the glass was right next to the wall, the image would be obscured by its own shadows as the light passes
11. Exhibit Installation Detail 2

12. Exhibit Installation Detail 3
through it. Yet even floating at a distance, the shadows are still there. See? Its own image disseminates further, casting more shadows, a positive image that acts as a negative through which light continually burns… scattering ashes, lingering cinders carried off into the distance, cast across the walls, bounding faintly along the floor.

What it is that one sees in these images? A face. Many faces. Eyes looking into our own eyes, questioning the seeing of sight itself. Faces that beacon us to face them—here we find ourselves *face to face*. It is in such an evocative, mysterious encounter with the face that we return again to the question of the other, who in turn continues the questioning and probing of *seeing*.

His [the other’s] presence consists in coming to unto us, *making an entry*. This can be stated in this way: the phenomenon which is the apparition of the other is also a *face*.¹⁶

For Levinas, the face is the place of encounter with the *other*, the place in which the other most resists being reduced into sameness, assimilated into the brick wall. The face is everything that the ghostly mannequin standing out from the brick wall was lacking in *The Other* (²)—the signifier that overwhelms the cold structuralism with humanity and otherness. Levinas emphasizes that the *otherness* of the other as experienced in the face, goes even *beyond* the image of the face; it has both immanence and transcendence.¹⁷

Notice how Levinas plays with both the manifestation and dissimulation of *otherness* that comes to bear on the surface of the face:

Again to show this entry at every moment into the imminence and historicity of the phenomenon, we can say: the epiphany of the face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form in which every entity, when it enters into immanence, that is, when it exposes itself as a theme, is already dissimulated. The other who

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¹⁶ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 351.

¹⁷ Ibid.
manifests himself in the face as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like someone who opens a window on which his figure is outlined. His presence consists in *divesting* himself of the form which, however, manifests him. His manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of manifestation. This is what the formula “the face speaks” expresses. The manifestation of a face is the first discourse. To speak is before all this way of coming from behind one’s appearance, behind one’s form—an opening in the openness.\(^{18}\)

I can’t help but hear the words of Derrida here: *l’ouvre où ne pas voir*, the open where not to see. The other’s face is an opening, but not one of seeing and all its confining assumptions of knowledge, control, and certainty. This opening of the face is seen by Levinas rather as a place of otherness, of the incoming of the transcendent, of both imminent signification and excess, of mystery and dissimulation. *Face to Face: Fragments 1-5* (5, 8-10, 21) act similarly as a *window*, one that opens to experience the other yet traces the very limits of the form as the face, inviting an opening of that window on which it drawn, an opening to the otherness beyond. Levinas is continually playing between the face itself as a signifier and the *otherness* of the other that transcends it. For Levinas, the face of the other is not a text to be read but an encounter of seeing that goes beyond seeing, into a mystical space of otherness, excess, and undecidability.

Continuing to explore the confluence of modern and postmodern images with biblical thought, let us turn to a genuine Pauline text that also deals with *seeing* and the *face of the other*. Having heard two different voices in tension within the text of John—dueling biblical voices in one instable piece of writing, a very Derridian notion—we turn to face another text that is up for debate. Let us turn an eye to two different readings of Paul’s well-known text about seeing *face to face*.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 351-52.
For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:12-13)

The way I have heard this text most often read is a juxtaposition between many of the images we have looked at thus far—darkness and light, uncertainty and knowledge, obscurity and clarity, blindness and sight. In these comparisons, I continuously hear God associated with latter of each pair, and our poor human experience of the “now” being unfortunately characterized by the former. In this regard, face to face becomes an image of seeing and knowing, of an intimate encounter in which nothing is hidden or obscured. As opposed to seeing in a mirror, the typical interpretation of face to face is that it promises immediacy and presence, not a mere reflection. Let us take another look at this verse however, hoping that in being again drawn to the margins of the text, probing beyond the surface, something other might break in. In visiting the Greek text, I was struck by a word lost in translation. The word αἰνίγµατι, usually translated “dimly” or “darkly,” actually means “in an enigma.” In the resulting reading, “For now we see in a mirror, in an enigma,” I can’t help but see the French literary image to which Derrida often refers: a mise en abîme. This French phrase describes a puzzling visual image in which the image repeats itself infinitely. It is, in fact, the experience of standing between two mirrors, seeing the images play back and forth into an abyss, the abîme. In the installation of the exhibition The Open Where Not to See, I hung a mirror with a small mirror fragment hanging in front of it. Its label invites the viewer to line up the mirrors, finding and experiencing the play of reflections in a mise en abîme (15-16).

20. Exhibit Installation Detail 10
The *mise en abîme* can also happen without a mirror however, when the image repeats itself through a trick of the eye, repeating again and again into itself. Such an image is clearly—or perhaps not so clearly—an enigma as tricks and confuses our eye that is caught in its play, drawn unknowingly, unsettlingly into the abyss. Either way, such an image, while delightfully destabilizing, still struggles against the repetition of sameness that carries it off beyond sight. Yet, the notion of *face to face*, which follows also a repetitive back-and forth dynamic, I envision not as clarity but the openness of otherness that breaks the bounds of confining, repetitive sameness. Turning again to Levinas’ notion of the face of the other, we see that coming face to face invokes a constant play between the interaction of signifiers, of the face’s physical immanence, and the otherness that continues to exceed it. The other is, after all, wholly other, *tout autre est tout autre*, as Derrida writes. The otherness of the other is the same total otherness that we ascribe to God, the very notion that informs our understanding, or lack thereof, of the divine. So moving from the visual puzzle of the mirror to standing face to face with another—be it God or any other—there is an experience of infinite otherness, of an event breaking the endless repetitions of sameness, that draws one into an openness and interactivity. For Levinas is speaking counter to all the systems of ethics that structure a response to the face of the other, and invites instead an interactivity that simply responds, breaking even consciousness.

…a face is imposed on me without my being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it, that is, without my being able to cease to be held responsible for its wretchedness. Consciousness loses its first place. … The epiphany of the absolutely other is a face in which the other calls to me and signifies an order to me by its nudity, its denuding…The I does not simply become conscious of this
necessity to answer, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty which it would have to decide of.\textsuperscript{19}

The faces haunt us. They confront and beckon us to respond. Faces work their way powerfully into memory. Yet \textit{face to face} can stir up not only the notion of responding to the call of a stranger in need, to the humanity of others, but also evoke the notion of intimate encounters, bringing to mind the \textit{eros} permeating Paul’s writings. The face is not only linked to the call of the other but also to desire.

To desire is to burn with another fire than that of need which saturation puts out, to think beyond what one conceives. Because of this unassimilable surplus, this beyond, we have called the relationship which attaches the I to the other the idea of infinity.\textsuperscript{20}

Drawn into infinity, into the infinite experience of \textit{otherness} between the I and the other, I cannot help but see the uncontainable abyssal opening to the otherness of God, one experiences the burning passion of the impossible. The event of divine in-breaking, the brush of \textit{otherness} that breaks the confining repetition of sameness happens in all sorts of \textit{otherness}. The point is not the identity of the \textit{other}—be it a homeless blind man or God herself—but that the experience of \textit{every other}, is one of the \textit{wholly other}, of the divine.

\textit{Tout autre est tout autre}. Such \textit{otherness} is manifest alike in the passing glance exchanged with the stranger, in the deep questioning stare of a lover, and in the passionate longing for future that is completely unimaginable. Such interaction, the back and forth seeing and being seen that happens in standing face to face, is so much deeper and complex than an enigma, yet opening and hopeful, filled with longing and desire.

Only when I am at this point, the point of non-arrival, the place of wandering among the

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 352-53.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 353.
cinders and traces released in the burning event, the feeling of continual longing for communion with the other who is simultaneously present yet withdrawn in mystery behind the façade, do I find that “faith, hope, and love abide” (1 Cor 13:13). For what is faith if there is nothing but certainty, no abyssal instability seemingly structured sameness and no passionate longing for a future, a promised communion that is anything but static? What is love if the otherness of the neighbor, the lover, the stranger, and God are all reduced and confined to the sameness of our expectations, subjected to disfigurement—defacement—of being put under systematic scrutiny of a systematic reading to extract certain knowledge and stability? Rather than a giving clarity of sight and stability of knowing, if coming face to face is a continual opening to the otherness, it becomes the very setting, a sort of khôral place, for faith, hope, and love to abide.

Still, the face is the site/sight of another otherness—that of tears. Derrida is quick to point this out, though he saves it for last, as have I. All the seeing and blindness, all the compelling expressiveness of the face, the nature of opening, come to bear in apparition of tears. For tears are an emotive opening, they not entirely active nor passive yet involve a certain imploring, longing, hoping, praying that brings to mind again the excerpt that Caputo holds as exemplifying the prayers and tears of Derrida:

inviting calling promising
hoping sighing dreaming,
convoking invoking provoking

Tears are a longing prayer, an expression of raw vulnerability and openness. Interestingly enough, tears coming to the eyes veil their sight. Tears do not help one see clearly, in fact they obscure and avert one’s vision. Notice how the last of the Faces (9) is one of tears,

21. Emilie Bouvier, *Face to Face: Fragment 5*, liquid emulsion on glass
of eyes not looking ahead, but away, seeing only through the obscurity of tears welling up. Tears disrupt the function of vision; their deep act of opening and inviting is contrary to sight. Yet this is what Derrida claims to be the very character of the eye: not the clarity and knowledge of vision but the unknowing, vulnerable openness of tears. In evoking this final disruption of all of Western philosophy’s assumptions about eyes, from clarity of sight to the face of the other, Derrida turns to a poem by Andrew Marvell:

How wisely Nature did decree,
With the same eye to weep and see!
That having viewed the object vain,
We might be ready to complain

Open then, mine eyes, your double sluice,
And practice so your noblest use;
For others too can see, or sleep,
But only human eyes can weep.

Thus let your streams overflow your springs,
Till eyes and tears be the same things.
And each the other’s difference bears;
These weeping eyes, those seeing tears.22

Such poetics evoke a challenge to the notion of the eye as that which sees in reminding the reader that what makes human eyes human is their capacity to weep. Perhaps in the non-seeing of tears, in their tearing open, in their invitation and imploration, they reach something beyond what Western Philosophy seeks to grasp. These eyes that “viewed the object vain,” that faced the cracks stretching up the secure walls of structuralist thought, come to bear the difference experienced in the disjointed fractures of meaning and experience. Derrida references this poem as a final challenge to Western Philosophy’s obsession with clarity and knowledge associated with the eye. He does this using the very

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22 Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins, 128-29.
language of Western philosophy, *truth, destiny, essence, nature* but turning it on its head—suggesting that all these great terms suggesting ultimacy and structure find their locus not in the eye’s capacity for *sight* but its capacity for *tears*:

Now if tears *come to the eyes*, if they *well up in them*, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, in the coursing of water, an essence of the eye, of man’s eye, in any case, the eye understood in the anthropo-theological space of the sacred allegory. Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye… the *truth* of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or a gaze.²³

On the verge of tears, I once again draw to the edge, the torn boundary—a *tear*. For tears welling up in the eyes feel not unlike a *tearing* open of something inside. The homophone renders a double entendre: tears and tears. It is this *tear*, this torn edge, *does* something, in its rending it reveals, disfigures, transforms, upends, and opens to something *other*. Drawn to this edge, this negative tear *creates* an opening, the broken boundary between a stable plane and the void beyond. Seeing *through* the eyes of these transparent faces, is some unchanging soul or stable entity, nor a map of character correlating to the signifiers of the surface of the face, but a *tear*, an edge and an opening. The very boundaries of the face, its image and form rendered in photographic art, is not the frame but the *tear*, the open space or void between the glass and the torn paper, the fragmented margins that refuse to enclose. Instead the boundaries are a place of the *tear*, of a wavering undecidability and openness. An open where not to see. A place of seeing through, seeing beyond, seeing without sight. A place of tears, of impassioned longing, praying, hoping, imploring for the *tout autre*, the wholly other. *Viens! Oui, oui.*

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²³ Ibid., 126.
22. Exhibit Installation Detail 11


**Works Consulted**

