unthinkable proportions, that the annihilation of the human race is now possible, that homelessness and displaced peoples now roam the earth in unprecedented numbers due to incessant global and local-ethnic wars—is not a matter of thought. The faceless darkness of lethe is a poietic-technological darkening, not the darkness of a murderous heart, not directly, as we both agree, and not as some sort of prior ontological ground, as Richardson argues. To that should be added another and very fundamental disagreement between me and Bill Richardson, which has to do with allowing the very idea of a “clearing” to get off the ground, and to suppose that someone can come along and be in a position to say something “essential” about the Wesen of the Lichtung, as if there were one (as if there were one). That I think is a mistake and an illusion, and it can even be a dangerous idea.

NOTES

2. For my reading of the lectures on Paul and Aristotle in the first Freiburg period, see DH, chs. 2–3.
3. That is the argument of DH, ch. 9, “Heidegger's Gods.”
5. I have analyzed these texts with more care in DH, ch. 7, “Heidegger's Scandal.”
7. For my interpretation of Heidegger's reading of Trakl, see DH, ch. 8, “Heidegger's Poets.”

5 KHIRA OR GOD?

Richard Kearney

In an essay entitled “Dark Heart: Heidegger, Richardson and Evil,” Jack Caputo has this to say about his debt to the great American Heideggerian, Bill Richardson: “If, as Heidegger says, thinking is thanking, then one can offer a work of thought as a bit of gratitude. Derrida, on the other hand, repeats the warning of the circle of the gift according to which, in all gift-giving, something is always returned to the giver. The giver always gets a pay back, a return on the investment, if only (or especially) in the most oblique, the most indirect form, of gratitude. Therefore, the purest gift-giving demands ingratitude, which does not pay the giver back and therefore pay off and nullify his generosity. Since I am in the highest degree the beneficiary of William Richardson’s work and friendship, and more grateful than I am permitted to say, I have undertaken to protect his generosity with a certain ingratitude, precisely understood, with an utterly ungrateful bit of disagreement, not only with him, but also with Heidegger, to whom I have accumulated a life-long debt. So I offer what follows in the spirit of the deepest and most loyal ingratitude, cognizant always of the unworthiness of my ungift, which comes in response to what in a simpler world I would call the richness of the contribution that William Richardson has made to philosophy in America.” Replace the names Richardsons for Caputo—and Derrida for Heidegger—in the above citation, and you will have a reasonable idea of my own “loyal ingratitude” to Jack Caputo here today. Or as Nietzsche put it, in more graphic terms, the best way to thank a mentor is to be a thorn in his flesh.

So here goes. I want to concentrate here on Jack Caputo’s intriguing analysis of the notion of khora in The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion. Though this analysis is deeply indebted to Derrida, and especially his essay of the same name, there is, I submit, something uniquely suggestive and provocative about Caputo’s reading. The first mention of khora in Prayers and Tears occurs in the second page. It arises in the context of Caputo’s discussion of Derrida’s distinction
between the Difference of deconstruction and the "God" of negative theology. This is how Caputo unpacks the distinction: "However high it is esteemed, Difference is not God. Negative theology is always on the track of a hyperessentiality, of something hyper-present, hyper-real or sui-real, so really real that we are never satisfied simply to say that is merely real. Difference, on the other hand, is less than real, not quite real, never gets as far as being or entity or presence, which is why it is emblazoned by insubstantial quasi-beings like ashes and ghosts which flutter between existence and nonexistence, or with humble Khora, say, rather than with the prestigious Platonic sun." (PT, p. 2). Caputo concludes with this typically teasing inversion: Derrida’s difference, he suggests, "is but a quasi-transcendental antireality, not a supersensitive, transcendent ulteriority" (PT, p. 3). So far, so good.

Later in this opening chapter, entitled "God is not Difference," Caputo adds another telling injunction to the point at issue. If God is higher than being, difference is lower than it. If God, like Plato’s agathon, has gone beyond us, difference is more like Plato’s Khora in that it hasn’t yet reached us. It is beneath us, behind us, anterior rather than posterior. This is how Caputo, paraphrasing Derrida, puts it: "God does not merely exist, difference does not quite exist. God is ineffable the way Plato’s agathon is ineffable, beyond being, whereas difference is like the atheological ineffability of Plato’s Khora, beneath being (Khora 300ON, 90)." (PT, p. 10). In other words, unlike the God of theology, Khora is radically anonymous, amorphous, deatary and errant—or as Derrida would say, "déstimmant" (PT, p. 11).

In a subsequent section of the book entitled "Three Ways to Avoid Speaking," Caputo revisits Derrida’s landmark intervention in the negative theology debate "How not to Speak: Denials" (PS, 563). The apophatic tradition of negative speaking—extending from the Greeks to Eckhart and Heidegger—begins with Plato. But Plato was complex in that he pointed to two different "types of negativity." (PS, 563). On the one hand, the famous Good beyond being (epekeina tes oúpases), that so influenced the Christian neo-Platonic heritage of negative theology; on the other, the infamous Khora before being. Or as Derrida himself observes, Khora is without being in that it "eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, all truth." Whereas one is obliged with Khora, as with agathon, to unsay what one has said, the former differs from the latter in that it is not a form, or the Form of all Forms, but proceeds both from and sensibility. Reinterpreted by human language, Khora can only be expressed in a series of tentative analogies or "didactic" metaphors—for example, in Plato’s Timaeus (47e-53b) as space, nurse, mother, matrix, imprint, receptacle, winnowing basket, essence of perfume, etc.—or within philosophy itself as a series of approximative notions such as hyle (Aristotle, Hesiod), extensis (Descartes) or magna (Castoriadis).

Khora or God? What interests Derrida—and by extension Caputo—is not, however, how Khora came to be said, albeit inexacty, within the language of the logos-centric tradition of metaphysics and metaphors. It is rather how Khora manages to escape this tradition of language, appearing instead as an abso- lute stranger to it—or, to quote Caputo, as an 'outsider with no place to lay her/his head, in philosophy or in mythology, for it is the proper object of nei- ther logos nor mythos.' (PT, p. 35). Caputo claims that this second (more ela- sive and external) trope of negativity is anterior to both being and non-being, the intelligible and the sensible, without being analogous to either. Citing Derrida’s reading of Plato’s reading of Khora, Caputo makes the following suggestive stab at a description of the indescribable: "Khora is neither pre- sent nor absent, active nor passive, the Good nor evil, living nor nonliving (Timaeus, 50c). Neither thermomorphic nor anthropomorphic—but rather atheological and nonhuman—Khora is not even a receptacle, which would also be something that is itself inscribed within it" (PT, p. 36). Nor, insists Caputo, is this discourse metaphorics, "for it does not have to do with a sensi- ble likeness of something supersensible, a relationship that is itself within Khora (PS, 567-68). Khora has no meaning or essence, no identity to fall back upon. She/it receives all without becoming anything, which is why she/it can become the subject of neither a philosopheme nor a mytheme ("Khora" in ON, p. 102). In short, the Khora is tout autre, very." (PT, p. 36).

Now while we might be tempted to think that the Platonic metaphors of matrix, mother, and nurse in the Timaeus, imply a certain act of benevolence or benificence, of nurturing and engendering, Caputo and Derrida are adamant that Khora is no giver of gifts. One cannot say of Khora, as one might say of God or the Good, that it "gives." Khora, Derrida tells us, is "this thing that is nothing of that to which this 'thing' nonetheless seems to 'give place' (donner lieu)—without however, this 'thing' ever giving anything" (PS, p. 566). And even if one can say that Khora "gives place" to something it does so "without the least generosity, either divine or human" (PS, p. 56). Giving place is simply a letting take place that has nothing to do with producing, creating, or existing as such. One cannot even say that Khora is, or is not, only that there is Khora (if y a Khora). But this if y a, as Derrida again insists, "gives nothing in giving place or in giving to think, whereby it is not to be regarded in the equivalent of an ex gift, of the ex gift which remains without a doubt implicated in every negative theology . . ." ("Khora" in ON, p. 96; cited Caputo, PT, p. 36).

In sharp contrast, therefore, to the neo-Platonic/Christian/mythical/metaphysical tradition of One-Good-God beyond being, Khora is not only a-theological but a-donational. It even eschews the more contemporary idioms of transcendence and mystery—the Levantine idiom of infinity (other- wise than being), the Marionesque gesture of donation (God without being).
or the Heideggerian principle of event (the gift of being). It is not even a third kind (genus) beyond the alternatives of being and non-being. It is not a "kind" at all, but a radical singularity of which one might say—what is your name? (ON, p. 11). But khora cannot ever possess a proper or a common name. It is unnameable and unspeakable. And yet, both Derrida and Caputo keep repeating, it is the very impossibility of speaking about khora that is also the necessity of speaking about it!

But how can we do so? How can one say anything at all about khora? What we are seeking seems impossible. And yet, it is (in Derrida's words) something that "beyond all given philosophemes, has nevertheless left in trace in language" (Pay, 566). Plato, for starters, hazarded a guess at this nameless thing by calling it khora, with its attendant bivy of metaphors. And khora, unlike the words God or the Good, is a word-trace that "promises nothing" (PT, p. 37). In sharp contrast to Derrida's or the Heideggerian's version of Greek metaphysics or the Creator God of Judeo-Christian revelation, khora suggests an altogether alternative site—one that is "barren, radically nonhuman and atheological." So that if this "place" called khora can be said, like the God of negative theology, to indeed be "wholly other," it is so in a manner totally different from all theologies, apophatic or otherwise. Its desert is not a dark night of the soul waiting to be redeemed by light but a no-place that remains deserted, just ashes and ashes, without ascensions into heaven. Abyss and abyss without elevation from the void. Il y a la cendre, to cite Caputo's paraphrase of Derrida.

So one is a little surprised then, is one not, to find Caputo suggesting that there is at bottom a certain undecidability between God and khora. Having persuasively demonstrated the radical difference between the two—as exemplified by Levinasian hyperbole on the one hand and Derridean deconstruction on the other—we now have Caputo asking, "what is the wholly other...God or khora? What do I love when love my God, God or khora? How are we to decide? Do we have to choose?" (PT, p. 37). I may be wrong but I suspect that Caputo is suggesting that we don't—since the issue remains radically undecidable. But I would like to disagree at this point and suggest that we do have to choose; and that a religious God is a nonsense unless it calls for such a choice (what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith).

Moreover, Caputo would seem to allow as much himself when he claims that the antithesis between khora and God admits of no "passage" between the two. Whereas the one takes the high road towards the God/Good beyond being, the other sticks to the uncompromising and intransigent emptiness of the abyss. Whereas Dionysius and other mystical-apophatic theologians praise and pray to God, invoking his kēnotic goodness and hyperontological generosity, khora is a very different kettle of fish. It does not command prayer or praise for it is neither good nor generous nor giving. It is radical "destinerrance" and those who end up in its desert always end up lost.

Fair enough. But if this be so, is Caputo justified in claiming that Derrida is at the same time on the side of the original desert fathers, the authentics—or "an-khora-tics" as he rechristens them—with their lean and hungry looks? Can he legitimately nominate, even in jest, the advocate of deconstructive khora as "Saint Jacques. Derrida the Desert Father?" Far, unlike Derrida, the desert fathers did praise and dance and sing before their desert God. Anthony and Jerome, Simon and John Chrysostomum, spent many moons in their caves—to be sure—but they also walked out into the light from time to time and praised their Maker. To do otherwise would for them be to despair, or as Kierkegaard put it in Fear and Trembling, to take only the first step in the two-steps of faith: the step of infinite resignation which gives up creation without taking the second step of wanting it back again. (If Abraham had opted for endless "destinerrance" over religious faith, he would never have ventured his leap of faith and received Isaac back.)

I am suggesting, in short, that Caputo cannot have it both ways. He cannot claim on the one hand that Derrida takes the path of a-theological deserrification and then reclaim him as a saintly authentic father. Nor will it do to refuse the two alternatives altogether and declare the issue undecidable—God and/or/without khora? That too is having it both ways. Not an option, I would submit, for the believer. (Though a perfectly consistent one for the deconstructionist).

By believer I mean, incidentally, not just a believer in God but also—why not?—a believer in khora. Perhaps khora is no less an interpretative leap is the dark than religious faith is? God and khora are conceivably two different names for the same thing—the same nameless, indescribable experience of the abyss. But the choice between names is not insignificant. Which direction you leap in surely matters? For while the former heretic option sees the experience in the empty desert as "a dark night of the soul" on the way towards the encounter with God, the latter sees it rather as a night without end, a place where prayer, promise, praise, or faith is not applicable. Not a place the desert fathers would want to hang around for very long, I suspect.

In the khora desert it is always inevitable that one loses one's way. Isn't that what the deconstructive commitment to "destinerrance" means? But in the authentics wilderness—traversed by the desert fathers and subsequent mystics like Eckhart, Teresa, Silesius, or St John of the Cross—the journey through desolation is made in the fervent hope that one will find a path to God, that the lost sheep will be found and brought home to the Father. (A prospect that must be anathema to all deconstructors, isn't there? There is a genuine difference between authentics fathers and deconstructive sons. A healthy difference to be sure; but one that can't be magicked away or turned into a

It boils down to this, as I see it. Deconstruction isn't just describing khora as one might describe a sunset or a storm at sea. It is describing it in the same way it describes difference or pharmakon or supplement or architecture etc. That is, it appears to express a marked preference for khora, and its allies, over its opponents. Not moral preference, granted, but in some minimal and irreducible sense, an evaluative preference nonetheless. As one reads Caputo one cannot help surmising that for him khora is—at bottom and when all our metaphorical and other illusions are stripped away—the way things are. It is a better and deeper and more profound way of viewing things than its theological rivals, for example. It is, in the heel of the hunt, closer to the "reality" of things than all known non-khore alternatives. In that sense, yes, deconstruction does appear to take sides even when it is doing its most non-consonantal side-step of neither/nor/both/and. Deconstruction makes a preferential option for khora, while not denying of course (it would never be so intolerant) that non-khoreans can be nice guys too, people with the best of intentions, questioners who might even find their way back to the no-place of deconstruction, eventually.

But that is not the only disagreement I have with my two favorite khoristoi—Jack and Jacques. I have a much deeper reservation about the nature of khora itself—if taken as the most anterior and irreducible site of sites. While I acknowledge that it is a place/no-place each of us must encounter, come to terms with, traverse sometime in our lives, I do not think it is the best place to spend our lives, or to encourage others to spend theirs indefinitely. (I am not talking here, I hasten to add, of Plato's purely cosmological notion of khora; nor indeed of Kristeva's psycho-linguistic one: for neither of these, as I read them, see khora as an alternative to a theistic God). No. I am speaking here of khora, as described by Caputo, in terms of an empty desert abyss, a no-place we experience in the fear-and-trembling moment of uncertainty and loss, a dark night of the soul waiting without response (or what Levinas terms the "mute, absolutely indeterminate moment" of the "there is"—the "horror" of "nocturnal space"). And Levinas leaves us in little doubt as to the a-theistic nature of this experience: "Rather than to a God, the notion of the there is leads us to the absence of God, the absence of any being... before the light comes."

Yes, I do acknowledge this experience of khora as part and parcel of human existence. I do not deny that all of us have some experience of khora as y as the "horror" of the night with "no exits" which "does not answerable...". But I'm not sure I want to celebrate it as the best we can do. And I certainly wouldn't want to recommend it as an on-going mode vivendi for those who are suffering its darkness. If com-

pered, I'd personally opt for Levinas' move from the 'y a of irremissible existence to the illese of ethical transcendence.

But what is khora in more familiar language? For most non-philosophers, khora is experienced as misery, terror, loss and desolation. Khora is Odipus without eyes, Sappho in laces. Prometheus in chains. Euphignenia in waiting. Khora is the toha toha before creation; it is Job in agony. Joseph in the belly of the whale. Joseph at the bottom of the well. Jesus abandoned on the cross (crying out to the father) or descended into hell. It is Conrad's "heart of darkness." Hamlet's "flat state and unprofitable" world. Monte Cristo's prison cell. Primo Levi's camp. Or to put it in more contemporary khora, it is Brian Keenan (the Irish teacher held hostage in Lebanon) locked in a hole in the ground, it is a Tutsi or a Turkish child trapped under rubb-

ler, a cornered East Timor prisoner, waiting, waiting, waiting, wishing for the relief of death to end the intolerable dark. Or more banally, more basically, more quotidianly—any one of us faced with the meaningless void of our existence and wondering why we should bother going on. Now, gives the fact that some of my best friends are existentialists and deconstructionists, I am the last person in the world to want to deny the reality of these kinds of experiences. They may well be the most "real" (at least in Lacan's sense) of all our human experiences, the most unpeopledly traumatic "limit experiences" of something that exceeds our understanding. The most sublime of horrors. But I'd find it hard to make a preferential option for them and suggest that others do likewise.

Well, I know Jack Caputo will throw his hand in the air and say, on reading this kind of list, "that is not what I meant at all! We know that the khora is unlivable; we know—with Eliot—that human kind cannot bear too much real-

ity; we accept that people need to climb out of the khora into the light of everyday connotations and pastimes and distractions (call it the 'they-world,' the 'natural attitude,' the 'metaphysics of presence,' or any number of reli-

gious beliefs in God as some saving, healing, loving, benevolent grace). All we are saying is—give khora a chance. Because even though it may not be livable it is what life is ultimately and inevitably and at bottom about." As fend, sans fend, il y a khora. That's how I imagine Jack replying. (But he'll speak for him-

self in a moment, if he's still speaking to me...)

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting we flow the shallow at the heart of existence. I'm not saying we shouldn't face up to the horrors and horrors and absurdities of the world and do so in fear in trembling. If we do not acknowledge the existence of irrefutably emptiness and meaningless torment—how can we ever speak about it or go beyond it. As Camus rightly said, you must live the absurd in order to light it. Agreed. But is that what Caputo is saying about khora? That we should confront it in order to struggle against it, go...
b-thetic, a-theological, deconstructive prayer: not at all like Dionysius' “Christian prayer, directed to the Trinity" (p. 39). This latter prayer—the kind invoked in the title of JC’s book—is not one addressed to God “the saving name, the giver of all good gifts” (ibid). It does not seek to keep itself “safe from the abyss of khora” (ibid) by having recourse to something else beyond that formidable anonymous "spacing" or "interval" within which all things find their place (Khora," ON, 125). Here prayer is no "desert guide" but an unconsoling, uncompromising and, as JC notes, "slightly sinful" mode of address—for it addresses an alterity in each and everything so terrifyingly sublime, so textually irreducible, that there is no exit (short of some quick backflip into theology/ideology/logocentrism—or some common sense of presence. An option for the faithhearted). This is why JC can agree with JD that khora has very little to do with a theistic divinity and everything to do with the "very spacing of de-construction" (ON, p. 30): something like a "sur-name for difference" (PT, p. 40).

For me, if I may repeat myself, the problem with JC’s approach here—and I am not saying it is identical with JD’s—is that it sets deconstruction/difference/khora up as an alternative to, even perhaps an adversary of, theology (apophatic or otherwise). Either khora or God. Either Dionysius or Derrida. (Or as he rephrases the alternative in a later chapter: either the “angelic doctor” from Aquinas or the “devilish deconstructors” from the Rue d’Uso p. 168-169). On the left side of the ring, Caputo marches the idioms of the originary Father—fusion, presence, union, circularity, totality, economy, samesness. On the right, over and against him, he places the clearly preferred idiom of the “more maternal simulacrum” of khora—"allevatory gratuitousness and anarchic abandon” (p. 169). If you say thanks to God the giver, concedes Caputo, you do "not say thanks" to khora (ibid). "If you khora," he goes on to explain, "but she("t) does not generously ‘give’ anything. and is not ‘the gesture of a donor subject’ (Khora, 37-38ON, 100). "Rather she is the spacing within which an unlimited number of events take place, in herlits place" (p. 169).

I have a problem with this kind of antithesis which risks turning theology (negative and positive) into a caricature and seems to assume that most canonicized saints were either curia hacks or obsessive neurotics—seekers for ecclesiastical certainty and closure (as he implies of Thomus Aquinas after he had seen the light) (PT, p. 60-61). Not all mystical experience is "naive" and fustian, as JC seems to imply in such passages. Certainly not the experiences of Teresa of Lisieux, Angelas Silesius, or Meister Eckhart. And not every notion of the Christian Trinitarian God—not to mention the Jewish Yahweh or Muslim Allah—in a paralyzing fetish of presence or hypervolence. What of Eckhart’s God beyond God? Silesius’ rose without why? Casnamo’s Posset. Or the wonderfully dudic notion of the three persons dancing around an empty
space in respective acts of deprivation—perichoresis (translated by the Latin as circumcrescere): an event of loving letting-be stunningly captured in Andrei Rublev's icon of the three angels? (The early Jack Caputo knew far more than most about these things).

This is all a far cry, is it not, from the metaphysical chestnuts of pure self-identical presence: ens causae sui, ipsum esse subsistentes, actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate? Holy chestnuts which we should all be grateful were cracked open, over various fires, by the likes of Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Sartre, and Derrida.

What I am trying to say, by way of conclusion, is that I think Caputo, and also at times Derrida, has a tendency to set up a somewhat precipitous and over-dramatic polarity between God (equated with fustans/anion/essence/presence) and its deconstructive opposite (khora/difference/eritron/epipharmakon). While I can see the temptation to do this from a pedagogical point of view—we all need some black and white distinctions—it is rather surprising coming from the maestros of deconstruction themselves. And surely something of a compromise of the celebrated deconstructive logic of both/amothermore?

To avoid such polarizing gestures, I would suggest that there are many degrees of latitude and longitude between the north pole of God (qua pure hyper-existence) and the south pole of khora (qua irreducible anonymous abyss). My shorthand above, ranging from Eckhart to perichoresis, mentions just a few of these possible "three-ways" beyond such polarity. Indeed I would suggest that we might go further still. Beyond two- and even three-fold approaches to a four-fold one including in its chiasmic interplay the following players: khora, God, being, and the Good. But that is for another day of dialogue and disputatio with my dear colleague and friend, Jack Caputo.

EPILOGUES

To be entirely fair to Jack, the arguments rehearsed above, do not perhaps tell the whole story of his approach to the khora/God relation. (Indeed how could it if this testimonial to Jack Caputo's wonderful book is to be more than servile paraphrase). In certain other passages of Prayers and Tears, it does appear that Caputo is offering a different take on this relation, but without acknowledging it as different (even incomparable). Whether it is a case of not noticing his own textual inconsistencies or of wanting to have it both ways, or simply being too dialectically subtle for the likes of me, none is really the theme. The important thing to note is that, at times, JC does acknowledge that khora may be an ally as much as an adversary of God. On one occasion, for instance, he even sees khora as a precondition of genuine theistic faith. Khora, he concedes here, is a "general condition of any 'belief' "; adding: "How could Derrida—for whom everything depends upon faith—rule out religious faith?" Why would Derrida want to ban the name of God, a name he dearly loves (p. 59). Caputo even appears, in this passage, to equate Derrida's version of khora with Kierkegaard's version of theistic faith: "Derrida does no more than follow Johannes de Silemus, Abraham's poet, from whose fear and trembling we learn that faith 'must never be a certainty' but a passion, the 'highest passion' that... still has the heart to push ahead (DM, 78/GD 80), which is the repetition forward and the marble" (p. 50). But that is a change of note, is it not, from the more prevalent tune of either—either khora or God—rehearsed above?

A curious thing about Caputo's approach to khora and Derrida's is that the latter often seems more ready to make bridges (however provisional) between the engulfing khora and the saving God. It's as if Caputo, a crypto-theist, is desperately trying not to evangelize deconstruction by turning it into a crypto-theology. A case of the theist does protest too much? Whereas Derrida, a self-declared atheist, has far less difficulty throwing ropes across the unbridgeable gap between the ungodly khora and God. (Note that he has as little compunction about cutting these cords also!) While making sure never to identify God directly with Khora, Derrida seems prepared at times to go some considerable way in acknowledging unexpected analogies and overlaps between the two. Let me cite some startling passages from his famous "Post-Scriptum" to Derrida and Negative Theology, subtitled "Aporia, Ways and Voiers."

I begin with his more than sympathetic commentary of the Christian mystic, Angelus Silesius: "God 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language" (p. 301)—a name which is, at the same time, interpreted by Silesius as "the divinity of God as gift" (p. 308). Derrida proceeds to relate this God of Silemus—a God whom he, Silesius, pray to give himself to the prayer—to "some khora (interval, place, spacing)" (p. 301). Everything, says Derrida, "is played out here" (ibid.). And to Silemus' equation of the "Place" (Ort) and the "world" (Wort)—"Der Ort und's Wort ist Eins"—Derrida adjoins this reflection: "It is not that in which is found a subject or an object. It is found in us... The here of eternity is situated there, already, already there, it situates this throwing or this throwing up... but first of all that puts outside, that produces the outside and thus space..." (p. 301). Later in the same "Post-Scriptum," Derrida displays a deep fascination with Silemus' approach to God's giving in terms of Gelassenheit and play. (The verse of Silemus he is commenting reads: "God plays with creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself," ibid.)
But before we lapse into ecumenical euphoria, Derrida puts an end to equivocation by marking a clear and unbridgeable difference—an abyss in fact—between the reading of place as God and as khora. As this statement of Derrida's position is crucial I quote the passage in full: “Der Ort ist das Wort (1:205) indeed affirms the place as word of God.—Is it part of the play? Or else is it God himself? Or even what precedes, in order to make them possible, both God and his Play? In other words, it remains to be known if this nonsensible (invisible and inaudible) place is opened by God, by the name of God (which would again be some other thing, perhaps), or if it is ‘other’ than the time of creation, than time itself, than history, narrative, word, etc. It remains to be known (beyond knowing) if the place is opened by appeal (response, the event that calls for the response, revelation, history, etc.), or if it remains imperceptibly foreign, like Khora, to everything that takes its place and replaces itself and plays within this place, including what is named God” (pp. 314).

Derrida leaves us in little doubt that a choice is called for here between two rival, incompatible, and mutually exclusive notions of place. “Do we have any choice? Why choose between the two? Is it possible?” he asks rhetorically. To which he proffers the following altogether non-rhetorical answer: “But it is true that these two ‘places’, these two experiences of place, these two ways are no doubt of an absolute heterogeneity. One place excludes the other, one usurps the other, one does without the other, one is, absolutely, without the other” (p. 315). And so we have the antithesis: “on one side, on one way, a profound and abyssal eternity, fundamental but accessible to the teleo-eschatological narrative and to a certain experience or historical (or historical) revelation; on the other side, on the other way, the nontemporality of an abyss without bottom or surface, an absolute impossi-

As I read him, Derrida is on the side of the latter—the nontemporal, bottomless, impenetrable abyss, that does the work of khora and difference. To be sure, Derrida does admit to a certain relation between these two ‘places’ in terms of an ‘exemplarium’ of conjunction-disjunction vis-à-vis the term “without”; but this highly complex notion cannot really distinguish from the fundamental opposition between the two senses of “place,” nor can it mitigate or abrogate Derrida’s fundamental choice (as I see it) for Khora over God. A choice I respect, even admire, but do not share.

To repeat: despite numerous analogies, there is a radical difference, in the heel of a foot, between Derrida and Silesius. Silesius sees our experience of the place of play as “one abyss calling to the other” (as in Psalm 41)—the void within us crying out to the unformable deep of God. (Silesius: “The abyss of my spirit always6 involves with cries/The abyss of God: say which may be deeper?”) By contrast, Derrida construes the place as the “indestructible Khora . . . the very spacing of de-construction” (p. 316).

Where Silesius God promises peace and healing, Derrida’s Khora is “guilt and chaos” (p. 321). The choice is, at bottom, between theism and athe-

“Khora or God?”

Notes

2. J. Caputo, FT.
4. J. Derrida, PS.
6. Plato, Timaeus and Critias. Trans. H. Lev. (Penguin, 1965). In the Timaeus 48–53, Plato describes the khora as follows: “it is the receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change (49) . . . anything that is to receive in itself every kind of character must be devoid of all characters. Manufacturers of scent contain the same initial conditions when they make leprous which are to receive the scent as odorless as possible . . . In the same way that which is going to receive properly and uniformly all the finenesses of the intelligible and eternal things must itself be devoid of all character. Therefore we must not call the mother and receptacle of visible and sensible things either earth or air or fire or water . . . but we shall not be wrong if we describe it as invisible and formless, all embracing, possessed in a most prizing way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp (51) . . . It is spare which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in—wet look at it indeed in a kind of dream . . . (52).”

The drive, which are ‘energy’ charges as well as ‘psychical’ marks.
articulate what we call a chorē: a non-expressive totality formed by the drivers and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. We borrow the term chorē from Plato’s Timaeus to denote an essentially mobile and extremely prescriptive articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral states. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate articulation from a disposition that already depends on representation—the chorē, as rupture and articulation rhythm, precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—newness with and against the chorē in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and resists it. Although the chorē can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitely pointed: as a result, one can simulate the chorē and, if necessary, lead it to a topology, but one can never give it an axiomatic form” (pp. 93–94). Blending Plato with Klein, Kristeva goes on to argue that it is in this same “rhythmic space” of chorē, devoid of thesis or position, which constitutes significance. Plato himself, she points out, “leads us to such a process when he calls the receptacle or chorē nourishing and material, not yet unified in an ordered whole because deity is absent from it” (p. 94). And yet, though deprived of identity, unity, and divinity, the chorē is “in subject to a regulative process which is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again” (p. 94). The khora thus emerges for Kristeva as a “pre-verbal semantic space,” before language, law, or cognition proper. As a psychosomatic modality of signifying, “anterior to sign and syntax,” it is not something that can be assumed by a knowing, constituted subject but rather governs the very connections “between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects and the protagonists of family structures” (p. 90). Thus while the semantic khora—as the place of innumerate, pre-cognitive, pre-verbal drives—is “on the path of destruction, aggressiveness and death,” it is also, insists Kristeva, the locus of a maternal “ordering principle.” She explains the paradox thus: “This is to say that the semantic chorē is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succeeds before the process of charges and states that produce him” (p. 90). And yet the very semantic processes and relations that make up the space of chorē are only, Kristeva admits, properly addressed in its “dream logic” (here she agrees with Plato, Timaeus, 52a) or in the semantic rhythms of the literary text: “Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlies the writing it rhythmically, indifferent, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment...” (p. 97). For Kristeva, the chorē, Plato, Klein, Derrida, and Caputo—show brushes against the limits of logic and language (what Lacan calls the symbolic order).

8. E. Levinas, “There is existence without existents,” first published in 1946 as a section of *De l’existence a l’existant* (Vrin, Paris) and republished in the The Levinas Reader, ed. S. Hand, Blackwell, (London, 1986), pp. 32–33. Elsewhere in this same passage, which first outlines his original and highly influential notion of the there is a, Levinas writes: “...the night and the silence of nothingness. This impersonal, anonymous, yet inescapable ‘consummation’ of being, which immerses in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term there is... The any anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing... We could say that the night is the very experience of the there is, if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light” (p. 30). In terms reminiscent of Derrida’s/Caputo’s khora, Levinas goes on to explain the inarticulable link between the there is and darkness: “When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night... invades like a presence. In the night, where we are even to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness: there is no longer this or that, there is not something...” It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us but this silence: the voice of this silence is understood and frightens us like the silence of those infinite spaces” (p. 30). But so far as the there is is an impersonal form, like it rains, or it warms, its anonymity serves to de-subjectivize and de-personalize the human self. “What we call the I,” says Levinas, “is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it” (p. 31). Without actually invoking the aboriginal notion of khora, Levinas claims: If y a is bears many of its traces qua dark and undifferentiated ‘background of existence’” (p. 32). But Levinas, like Derrida and Caputo after him, will add certain existential aspects to this pre-conditioning, anonymous, nocturnal space: “It makes things appear to us, in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia” (p. 32). And this bearing down takes the form not just of fear and trembling but of horror itself. “Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very ‘subjectivity’... It is terror, the subject is depersonalized” (p. 32). But this horror is exacerbated by the fact that the there is has no roots. It is more horrifying than death, indeed, for unlike death, it offers no escape. As the lethal event of the night, the if y a is, concludes Levinas, “like the density of the void, like a mixture of silence... Darkness is the very play of existence which would play itself out even if there were nothing. It is to express just this paradoxical existence that we have introduced the term there is” (p. 32). Levinas’ notion of the there is was to exert a deep influence on subsequent thinkers, informing not only Blanchot’s concept of “disaster” but also Derrida’s and Caputo’s reading of khora. Sean Hand offers this highly suggestive account of this enigmatic and elusive phenomenon: “There is is anonymous and impersonal in being in general... It exists prior even to nothingness, the crumbling within silence that one hears when putting a shell to one’s ear, the horrifying silence confronting the vigilant insomniae who is and is not an I” (Introduction to There Is, The Levinas Reader, p. 20). “The if y a a recurs throughout Levinas’ oeuvre—There and the Other, Totality and Infinity, Difficult Proof—receiving this final formulation in Levinas’ last major publication, Autrement qu’être ou de l’absence (Niloff, The Hague, 1974, p. 207). “Mais l’essence imperturbable, égale et indifférente à toute responsabilité que, désormais, elle englobe, vive comme, dans l’insonnante, de cette neutralité et de cette égalité, en monstruosité, en anonymat, en iniquité, en bouffonnerie incessante que rien ne peut plus arrêter et qui absorbe toute signification, puisse elle d’autant envenir-manger une unité. L’existence vient indéfiniment sans retour, sans interruption possible... sans repit, sans suspension possible... c’est si y a un honteux derrière toute finitude propre de notre thématisation...”

9. E. Levinas, “There is,” op. cit., p. 34.
10. If hermeneutics always begins with an element of misreading or misunderstanding—as Gadamer reminds us—then there is, I suspect, both a certain creative mis-prism in Cassirer’s reading of Derrida on *khora* as there is in Derrida’s reading of Plato on *khora*, and in my reading of both of their readings. But the buck stops momentarily at least, somewhere. Otherwise we could never begin or end.

**ABYSSUS ABYSSUM INVOCAT:**
**A RESPONSE TO KEARNEY**

—John D. Caputo

A year or so after *Against Ethics* appeared I received a letter from a former student who, having absorbed its last chapter on suicide and worms inching their way to silent graves was moved to ask me whether something had gone dreadfully wrong in my life! Not to worry, I said. I have always been fascinated—or bound—by the abyss, an abyss, some abyss, from the **Abgrund** of the Godhead in Meister Eckhart, the abyss of Being in Heidegger, the *dyv* in Levinas, to Derrida’s *khora*, abyss calling to abyss (Pav. 427), as the puns point out, ceaselessly it seems, wherever I turned. Such flirtation with the abyss was trouble enough on its own but it was bound to buy me still more trouble from my readers, to expose my futile to the exquisite needling of the sort to which I am subjected by Kearney, Westphal, and Ayres. But this is important needling, because the work that the abyss does, or undoes, cannot be ducked. Abysses are tricky things, stretching as they do the all way from the *khora* in the *Timaeus* “up” to the mystical abyss of the Godhead beyond God, and they sometimes fall into a “possible confusion” with one another, as Levinas says. There are two tropes of negativity, Derrida said: “at least,” I would add. Consider that when you say “the rose is without why,” you might mean that love or the gift is without why, which has all the makings of a lovely and benign abyss, or you might mean a Nietzschean play of forces, the great cosmic stupidity, which sounds downright nihilistic.

So the abyss, if there is one, repays reflection. But I do not think there is one, only one. The troubling thing about the abyss is precisely that this phenomenon lies at the outer limits of our experience, while our phenomenological powers function best with the medium sized things of quotidian life, in the temperate zones between the opposite poles of space. But the abyss lies at the outer limits, above or below, *au-delà de l’être ou au-dessous*, like the *agathos* or *khora*, or like God or *khora*, where there is, following Levinas, a possible confusion, or, following Derrida, a certain undecidability.

Like God or *khora* that is the precise point of insertion for Richard Kearney’s pointed blade. Richard Kearney, from whose brilliant “poetics of the possible” we have all so greatly profited, is worried about monsters. Good
friend that he is, he is worried about me, worried that I am left by this unde-
cidability to twist slowly in the winds of indecision, one more despairing des-
tinctant deconstructionist wandering in the desert, a lost a-khôra-tìe sau
faith, an anchorite sans anchor, not a desert father but a stray son.

Richard Kearney does not want to be consumed by monsters. Who does?
But he tends to trim together very disparate phenomena, like madness, terror,
if y e and khôra/difference, which are hardly synonymous. They variously
point to an underlying stratam of anomie that inhabits and disturbs our
world from within, but in very different ways. Richard tends to single out
the most extreme states of madness, misery, terror, torture, depression, and deso-
lation, like the nightmare of a prisoner trapped in the ground or a child
crushed by rubble. But these phenomena would certainly need to be differ-
entiated from difference, the play of differences in virtue of which we make
any distinctions or differentiations at all. Difference, while maddening enough
at times, does not constitute a state of madness, insanity, or terror, let alone
of torture or imprisonment, but rather of the inexplicable “spacing,” the play
of traces, within which we constitute or “forge” our beliefs and practices, some
of which are quite cheery, sane, and wholesome. Difference is that condition
in virtue of which whatever meaning we constitute is made possible, but also
impossible, that is, the quasi-transcendental condition which sees to it that a
meaning is a temporary unity that is forged from the flux of signifiers or traces
and that lasts just as long as the purpose it serves and the contexts endure in
which it can function. It is in virtue of difference that whatever we can do with
words can also come undone. That is at times awefully annoying, but it is hardly
madness, torture, dejection, or imprisonment.

Khôra, Derrida says, is a “synonym for difference,” that is, khôra is a fig-
ure found in the history of philosophy, in Plato’s Timaeus, where the brute “out of which” quality that simulates difference shows through the seams of
metaphysics, even here, in the founding moment of metaphysics, Plato him-
self. The khôra thus constitutes a kind of counter-part to a Levinasian move,
when Levinas said that this very Jewish tout autant shows up occasionally in
philosophy, most notably in the agathon. So khôra is a counter-image of what
is not beyond nous but below it, a structure that falls below the level of
meaning and being, rather than exceeding them. Thus it is used by Derrida
to show how difference insinuates itself into everything. Whatever we say or
pray, think or believe, dream or desire, is inscribed in the shifting sands of
difference, that is, inscribed in khôra. I emphasize Derrida’s interest in the
mirror-image effect of the Platonic agathon and khôra, in the way that the
beyond-being and below-being mirror each other. Now put that beside Lev-
inas’s observation that diète (which is his way of appropriating the agathon)
is so far beyond the other one (autrat), so other than the other one (autre qu’autrat), that it begins to fall into a “possible confusion” with if y e. By

putting these two mirror effects side by side, we see that there is a certain
ambiguity or undecidability between the two. They share common charac-
teristics that, neither belongs to the medium sized phenomena of daily life,
neither has the determinacy, the form, the structure of a definite thing or
being. That is why in the middle ages David of Dinant made the argument
that God is prime matter, because God does not have and cannot be
restricted by “form.” Thomas Aquinas thought that was a particularly stupid
thing to say and that David should have distinguished the way ipsum esse
subsistens is beyond form from the way prime matter is below form. While
Thomas was right to say that we can keep these concepts apart, I would say
that David had hit upon a phenomenological point, that our experiences of
the two are not necessarily so widely divided, for in both cases we experience
a certain confusion (Levinas), a kind of bedazzlement (Marion), or what Der-
rida and I with him would call an “undecidability,” which I think can only be
resolved by faith.

But Richard has not discriminated the chiefly semiotic and quasi-trans-
scendental function of difference as “spacing” from terror, torture, and deso-
lation. Then, judging on that ambiguity, he says that Derrida and I have
consigned us all to live in an unlivable desert space called khôra, without
hope or faith, wallowing without decision in the waters of undecidability.
Kearney argues that Caputo and Derrida think that khôra—conceived now
as terror—is what is really real, what is really there, that every sense or mean-
ing is a forgery, a fake, a simulacrum, an impostor, a fiction stretched over a
void, and that all there is is the anonymous muttering of the there is that is
eventually going to gobbles us up or turn us to ash, if y e fa cente. He thinks
that Caputo and Derrida have not been able to reassure us that khôra
is “temporary” and that we can “get beyond it,” and that they have not shown us
how we can be saved. They would rather be one of those hearty chevaliers,
those knights, not of faith, but of nocturnal khôra who go down to chum with
the abyss and try to stare it down. For the true anchors (a-khôra-ties), on the
other hand, the desert was a medium through which they must pass on the
way to redemption. You must first lose your self if you would save your-
self according to the ancient economy. (Kearney wants to emphasize the
ancient economy, that you get something out of this, whereas Thomas Carlson
wants to see if we can de-emphasize that and make the Neoplatonic God
look more like khôra.) Caputo and Derrida are knights of infinite resignation,
whereas it is only the knight of faith that gets Isaac back.

But, I would say, Richard’s argument falls wide of the mark on two counts.
(1) He has consistently reduced undecidability to indecision, instead of rec-
ognizing that undecidability is precisely the condition of possibility of a deci-
ision. The opposite of undecidability is not a decision or decisiveness but
rather “programmability.” If you get rid of undecidability you would not get a
decision but a computer program. If a situation were not inhabited by undecidability then the decision could be made by a decision procedure, by a program or an algorithm that would process the components of the problem and render the decision in a strictly rule-governed formalizable process. Undecidability means that human judgment and decision-making are required, which means entering into an idiosyncratic situation that is not covered by the rules. Undecidability was first recognized by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, where phronesis was precisely the acquired skill of figuring out what to do in situations that are unique enough to fall below the radar of rules and universals. The emphasis on singularity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and in Derrida and Levinas, is it seems, a rationalization of Aristotle’s point, which Gadamer also took up, which is why there are days when I am willing to describe deconstruction as a form of radical hermeneutics.”

Hence when I say that as we approach the God who comes after metaphysics, we enter a region where we do not know whether it is “God or khora.” I am not leaving us twisting slowly in the winds of indecision. Rather, I am describing the desert sphere in which any genuine decision or movement of faith is to be made, where God and khora bleed into each other and create an element of ambiguity and undecidability within which the movement of faith is made, which shows up in mysticism as a dark night of the soul, which I also mention in response to Carlson below, where the mystic does not know if she believes in God. Without khora, we would be programmed to seek God, divine automatons hard wired to the divine being, devoid of responsibility, decision, judgment—and faith. (2) Because Richard has misconstrued undecidability as indecision, he thinks that the movement of decision, here faith in God, would somehow or another extinguish khora; get us past it, put it behind us. That view goes along with a “linear” interpretation of Levinas that I reject, that we can so decisively surmise if y a that it goes away, that we can get on top of it or beyond it, dominate it and drive it off for good, and then, resting from a hard day’s work, get a good night’s sleep safe from its insomnia. I on the other hand think the ghost of y a is inextricable and irreplaceable, that it disturbs our days and haunts our nights, and that as such it is precisely the condition of possibility of the ethical decision. In other words, in rigorously Derridean fashion, if y a is the very thing that makes ethical transcendence possible and impossible. It makes ethics possible, by confronting it with something to be overcome, and impossible, by defining ethics as the ever haunting possibility of the anonymous that never goes away, that refused to be banished, that returns night after night. That is why ethics is a beau rire.”

Without y a there is no rire, just the beam.

Without khora there is no faith, just the beam.

Without khora there is no triumphalism, dogmatism, the illusion that we have been granted a secret access to the Secret. That is the illusion that makes religion dangerous and that fires the fundamentalist religious hallucination. That is why religious people think that they have been hand-wired to the Almighty, that they know in some privileged way the Secret that has been communicated to them—because God prefers them to others. Jews to Egyptians, or Christians to Jews, or Muslims to Christians and Jews, Protestants to Catholics. Or whatever! It goes on and on.

Without khora, there is no “impossible,” no poetics of the possible, no poetics of the possibility of the impossible, because there would be nothing to drive us to the impossible. Without khora we would know what we need to know, and we would not be pushed to the point of keeping faith alive just when faith seems incredible and impossible. After all, believing only what is highly credible is the mark of a mediocre follower, rather than a beau rire, it always bets on the favorite horse, as Tom Carson might want to say. Without khora, we would have every reason to think that we will succeed and we would not be forced into the impossible situation of hoping against hope, hoping when hope is impossible.

Without khora, the situation which evokes the impossible, which demands the impossible of us, which elicits faith, hope and charity would not obtain. Khora is the felix culpa of a passion for the impossible, the happy fault of a poet’s possible, the heartless heart of an ethical and religious eschatology. Khora is the devil that justifies demons we give his due.

NOTES


3. Derrida, ON, p. 128; for a commentary, see ON, pp. 90-105.

A Passion for the Impossible

JOHN D. CAPUTO IN FOCUS

Lewis Ayres, John D. Caputo,
Thomas A. Carlson, W. Norris Clarke,
Jacques Derrida, Mark Dooley,
Thomas R. Flynn, Richard Kearney,
Cris McNally Kearns,
R. Keith Pugl, William J. Richardson,
Mirjana Westphal, and Edith Wyschogrod

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