URSZULA IDZIAK-SMOCZYNSKA

The theological turn of postmodernity
To be alive again

This article discusses the role of religion in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. The author considers a specifically Christian, affirmative character of deconstruction that is found through the biblical references of Derrida, inspired by his forgotten master Gérard Granel. This line of argument opposes both the presence of Heideggerian death drive in Derrida's subject and advances the possibility of a genuinely Christian rebellious subject as an answer to the question; who comes after the subject? Derrida's thought informs us about the affective and weak concept of subjectivity that might be fruitful for the development of new outlines for the social realm of subjectivity.

The different aspects of the theological turn

Returns to religion or theological turns are so frequent that the phenomenon has lost the character of an anti-secular revolution. More and more thinkers who declare their atheism attempt to pursue insightful exegeses of long passages from the scriptures. Following Walter Benjamin (1974) we can say that most of the 'chess games of philosophy' are played by the hidden dwarf of theology. So far, the encounter of postmodernity and religion has mainly taken place under two headings; anti-idolatry and the Nietzschean 'death of God'. When Jacques Derrida spoke about the common root of knowledge and faith he was also taking part in that line of thought. However this doesn't pinpoint the originality of his thought in the debate about post-secularism. The element of Derrida's philosophy to which this article will draw attention is linked with the often forgotten *affirmative* character of deconstruction and seems to be inherited from a great master of Derrida – Gérard Granel.

Anti-idolatry or thana-theology?

When the other who/which[1] is excluded by the hegemonic discourse (where knowledge merges with power) is written with a capital letter, He is no longer the foundation or the bottom of a possible meta-narrative but the One who resurrects after this same meta-narrative collapse. Therefore the face of God, which philosophy will turn to, would be the one which expresses weakness, exclusion and opposition. Hence the critical thinking of Carl Raschke, who claims that the thanato-theology of the 1970s has been replaced by an 'astheno-theology' (Rashke 2006). No matter whether we share Raschke's critique, which puts postmodernism and religion together under the heading of weakness, it is worth considering the 'weak God' oxymoron, which aims to elude the critique of power. This new type of weakness must resign from power in order to avoid the Nietzschean logic of resentment. Therefore it should remain attached to Good Friday – to the instant of the death of God. This is the line of Gianni Vattimo and of Christianity as the religion of atheism as elaborated by Slavoj Žižek. The Christian death of God is integrated into philosophy through the figure of the twilight of the Great Other (Caputo and Vattimo 2007).

On the other hand, by crossing the expression 'God' in their texts Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion present a gesture of radical anti-idolatry, for the only possible God is expected to be unknown. Marion is one of the few philosophers willing to defend anti-idolatric procedures on the side of power,

1 I take as granted a hypothesis that in post-secularism God changes position from being the sovereign almighty *summum ens*, against whom weakness is taken in defence of the position of the weak Other under different theological figures (*kenosis*, *cimcum*).

rather than weakness. According to him, God is a phenomenon that 'saturates' our intuition (Marion 2002: 237), He is some sort of superabundance, vastly exceeding our cognitive framework. However, what makes Him actually surpass this framework is the Cross, His death, or His incarnated weakness – *vide* the concept of 'negative assurance' (Marion 2010: 20). The new skepticism is ready to borrow negative structures of religion, which guard access to God in accordance with the iconoclastic prohibition of images. This brings about the different marriages of philosophy and negative theology, which results in assigning to God areas governed by silence. However let me stress that Derrida underlined the distinct structure of *différance* and the God of negative theology, noting that negative theology is always subordinate to a positive theology and ultimately refers to a higher upper level, which must remain in default, when we refuse God the names assigned to him according to our measure. Deconstruction turns a blind eye to that level, aware that with any form of negation, paradox, or even antinomy, the same logic occurs: there must be a moment where the Hegelian *Aufhebung* takes place and according to Nietzsche's prophecy God dies, because what we are facing is only an *eidolon* consistent with our measure. We desire to leave something stable or safe (Fr. *sauf*), because we need a fixed pattern from which and toward which we could run our economy. Meanwhile the *oeconomia divina* is governed by different measures. Saved by us it ultimately loses its proper nature.

This anti-idolatric alliance of philosophy and religion leads to allying the Nietzschean 'death of God' with 'the speculative Good Friday' without the horizon of resurrection. For many twentieth-century thinkers, in spite of Nietzsche, it is Christianity that is favoured as the religion which offers an exit from religion (Nancy 2008) while conveying God to the cross. Poststructuralist thought discovers in Christianity immanent structures leading to secularism. Nonetheless there still remains another element linking philosophy and religion – referring neither to secularism nor to idolatry – and that is the one this article will particularly draw attention to. Contrary to the above this element is not negative. Its positive character corresponds to the affirmative character of deconstruction, which was often claimed by Derrida in spite of numerous interpretations and critiques. This element also fits the endlessness of the deconstructive project because of its elusiveness, and it is obvious that the interpretation presented below will revolve around it without coming close enough to call it by its name. The reason is that it's all about the *name*. One of Derrida's titles *Sauf le nom* where 'except' echoes salvation (*sauf* meaning besides, the whole, healthy) encourages this research. *Sauf le nom* together with *Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'* has been published as a trilogy together with *Khora* (the English edition of all three parts has the title *On the Name*, 1995). The first two essays explicitly concern naming and responsibility, but the final part, *Khora*, which pursues the question of difference applied to space or displacement of the platonic Khora has an implicit relation to name, which this article will discuss further on in more detail.

Christian or Jewish survival?

In the most important book concerning the theological turn of postmodernity published in Poland "*Na pustyni*": *Krypto-teologie późnej nowoczesności* (In the Desert: The Crypto-theologies of Late Modern Era, 2008), Agata Bielik-Robson remarks that the other/Other is trapped in an ambush of meaning between Hegel's critique of the *Schöne Seele* (beautiful soul), which is an appeal to confront reality and to survive this confrontation. While Hegel promises resurrection after death in the concept, Derrida is charged by Bielik-Robson with responsibility for the fact that the path of confrontation with negativity in language ends in the absence of transition (Bielik-Robson 2008: 108, 130). Every form of transition would be, according to Derrida, a betrayal of the other, another somehow encoded in the idiom, in the trace, in the wound, in the date, and so forth. But this impact on undecipherable coding can be read as a sign of despair over being able to fulfil the promise of a new form of subject which would overcome the impasse of weakness and power.

Contrary to Rashke's and Bielik-Robson's diagnosis – radically different but similar in disapproving the weak and death-driven contemporary philosophical mood – this article argues that Derrida has been quite successful in carrying out an attempt at an affirmative philosophy with a theological background. As he goes about his project to deconstruct the transcendental signifier by working on written language, traces, tropes and interpretations, Derrida has admitted he writes against his desire (Derrida 1986) as if something that exceeds language was for Derrida the desired goal *à rebours* of an anti-logophonocentric philosophy.

As was mentioned at the beginning it is all about the name, because the name given to someone, as

in Maurice Blanchot's novel to a stranger (1951), is one of the best paradigms of the language-power alliance. A given name is a seal involving the possibility to call another by one's name and master the one who is called. After the linguistic turn the problem with the question of who comes after the subject involves the question of naming. If there is a resurrection after the death of the subject how to recognize the one who survived death or who was resurrected after his death? The axis of this dispute consists in the understanding of sacrifice, while the opposing poles would be its Christian and Jewish interpretations. Any form of philosophy aware of the knowledge–power alliance, trying to stay faithful to the otherness of the other must face the sublative movement of sacrifice. It must look for that sort of mechanism in which the confrontation with negativity doesn't end in dust. While Derrida avoids differentiating between Judaism and Christianity, this article will, whilst admitting as its heritage the Judeo-Christian tradition, advocate that his project is more consistent with the dynamics of Christian than Jewish theology. Inversely Bielik-Robson downplays the fecundity of Christian heritage for twentieth century philosophy as a whole, in favour of the Jewish messianic myth. Her point is that Christianity is responsible for the influence of the death drive in philosophy, whereas the only way to get out alive from the confrontation with negativity is to be found in the Jewish tradition. Consequently, Bielik-Robson claims (2008: 134) that Derrida makes an unjustified imposition of the messianic rhetoric – which opens to the coming of the other, and the tragico-thanatic – which recognizes death under this figure of the other. Although she admits that you can find some traces of his attempt to overcome negativity, eventually death is never survived. Against the attitude of lambs going to slaughter, who see in death or beyond death any kind of virtue, Agata Bielik-Robson is looking for a different attitude of faith – 'the desire for stronger, saved life which overcomes death, the way desired by the Messianic Jewish tradition, from St Paul to Walter Benjamin' (407).

Given that Saint Paul is located in the messianic Jewish tradition, one must ask how to determine in this Jewish messianic and thanatic dispute the place of the Christian tradition? We must first refer to Derrida's own partition inside 'Judeo-Christianity'. Derrida combined the messianism of three Abrahamic religions with the Greek figure *epekeina ousias tes*, while opposing them to the 'Khora' (La Khora) (Derrida 1995). On the Greek-monotheism side there is a repeated reference to what exceeds being.

Jacques Derrida. University of Florida College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

This universe also includes some possible comparisons of Derrida's deconstruction with the negative theology, whose negativity, restraint/temperance and anti-idolatry is always motivated by a higher level (hyper-/supra-) that might imply the reconstruction of the temple, the revival of power and of the logic of fortresses closed against the other. Derrida's 'messianism without messianism' also follows the logic of this order by maintaining the most restrained expectations. But all of the aforementioned elements belong to one side of the newly depicted dividing line. On its other side, we encounter Plato's Khora 'who eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, and all truth' (Derrida 1995: 124). This lack of dominance makes it extremely difficult to understand what Khora is. But before this article will offer an explanation it is worth noticing that the book entitled *Khora* appears in the aforementioned triptych, where both *Passions* and *Sauf le nom*, draw on Christian mysticism.

La Khora

Postmodernity meets religion not only in negative figures of weakness or sacrificial death, but also – as we are establishing – in rival crypto-theological structures of life. Agata Bielik-Robson, depicting the sphere of late modernity with an image of the desert taken from the Book of Numbers opts for Jewish messianism, 'which continues to wade through the endless sands, led by the messianic desire to live' (Bielik-

Robson 2008: 14). Whereas the Christian legacy leaves philosophy stuck in the 'wilderness, persisting in a suspension between life and death' in a defeatist, death-driven approach. Still a third option is given, to: 'go back, like a *prodigal son* of nature, to the "house of bondage fat"' (Bielik-Robson 2008: 15, my emphasis). According to Bielik-Robson, who firmly supports the first attitude, the Derridean Khora corresponds to the last, because it contains some trace of a pagan immanence of the sacred. This article intends to dispute this understanding of Khora, reading this figure, after Gérard Granel, in a radically different way; but it will take for granted the appearance of the prodigal son as the frame of reference. Indeed Khora outlines the collapse of the existing rules exactly like the evangelical parable of the prodigal son.

Let us analyze how Derrida introduces the term borrowed from Plato. He begins with a citation from '*Raisons du mythe*' by Jean-Pierre Vernant about a different logic that is required by the myth – a logic that would escape the binary logic of 'yes' and 'no'. And as he says Khora reaches us under the form of a name because like a name she says more than a name, she refers to something/someone alien whose irruption she announces (Derrida 1995: 111). And in *Timaeus* she 'seems to defy that "logic of noncontradiction of the philosophers" of which Vernant speaks' (Vernant quoted by Derrida 1995: 88). But Derrida notices that this alternation in the logic of logos 'stems perhaps only from … some incapacity for naming':

> We must go back toward a pre-origin which deprives us of this assurance and requires at the same time an impure philosophical discourse, threatened, bastard, hybrid. These traits are not negative. They do not discredit a discourse which would simply be interior to philosophy, for if it is admittedly not true, merely probable, it still tells what is necessary on the subject of necessity … Khora marks a place apart, the spacing which keeps a dissymmetrical relation to all that which, 'in herself', beside or in addition to herself, seems to make a couple with her. In the couple outside of the couple, this strange mother who gives place without engendering can no longer be considered as an origin. … This necessity (Khora is its surname) seems so virginal that it does not even have the figure of a virgin any longer (Derrida 1995: 124, 126).

I quoted these few sentences devoted to Khora in order to demonstrate that it is with Khora (and not with messianism) that Derrida undertakes a 'bastard' philosophical discourse. In the collection dedicated to the memory of Gérard Granel (to which we will return) Derrida describes Khora as follows:

> Khora the way I interpret her and (desert on the desert) is not perhaps on her own, in her own, capable of history, of promise, of flourishing of neither man nor god. First of all she is not herself [*elle-même*]. Not yet any selfhood. She *could have given place* for all that she will never become herself (history, promise, flourishing, man or god etc) but she will never be herself, nor herself this flourishing. The flowers of the desert need her, she does not. She stays, without present time, impassively foreign. It is not a mother, nor a matrix, nor a nurse, nor a metaphorical figure of those congenital women. She ignores mourning and stays forever alone – without ever knowing that she is alone (Derrida 2001: 155).[2]

Derrida's understanding of Khora as not definitely sterile but incapable of becoming herself a florescence dissociates Khora from the figure of the mother. But at the same time as being barren Khora is not conscious of her loneliness. 'Khora' is just the sur-name (meaning here the name which sur-vives) of what she is not, she is the 'desert in the desert', nothing which could be discovered, seen, desired or fought for in the deserted space of postmodernity. 'Flowers of the desert need her, she does not' (Derrida 2001: 155). This sentence seems to be a clue to understanding the difference between Khora and the desert itself. The flower of the desert is the Rose of Jericho that has a remarkable ability to survive drought for months and flourish whenever it gets a bit of water. During dry weather its stems curls into a ball and

2 'Khora, telle que je l'interprète et surnomme ainsi (désert dans le désert) n'est peut-être pas elle-même, en elle-même, capable d'histoire, de promesse, de floraison, d'homme ni de dieu. Elle n'est d'ailleurs pas *elle-même*, d'abord. Point encore d'ipséité. Elle pourrait *donner lieu* à tout ce qu'elle ne sera jamais (l'histoire, la promesse, la floraison, l'homme ou dieu, etc.) mais elle ne sera jamais *elle-même*, ni elle-même cette floraison. Les fleurs du désert ont besoin d'elle, elle non. Elle y reste, sans présent, impassiblement étrangère. Ce n'est pas une mère, ni une matrice, ni une nourrice, ni la figure métaphorique de ces femmes originaires. Elle ignore le deuil et reste seule à jamais – sans même se savoir seule.'

www.gérardgranel.com

Gérard Granel and Martin Heidegger, Séminaire du Thor, 1968.

live above ground as a tumbleweed. It needs only moisture in order to turn green and uncurl itself. Therefore Khora could have some affinity with water as the source of life. But a Rose of Jericho which derives its name from the town that had the ability to rebuild itself from the ashes, is not a simple plant, her other name is *siempre viva* or 'resurrection plant'. If this regenerative form of life *needs* Khora, it rather means that Khora consists in this hidden life in the desert when a tumbleweed is blown through sands of the desert and seems lifeless. Khora is described as a mother who ignores motherhood, both flourishing and mourning, but still being undubitably linked to life. Resurrection does not need a mother, only if under the form of a mother's desire.

The desert

This landscape where everything has turned to dust is indeed a good metaphor for postmodern thinking. Each resurgent order must be taken for a potential mirage, which is only a function of desire. The metaphorical desert of Judeo-Christian crypto-theology is suspended between these two points: Egypt, symbolizing 'the darkness of faith', and the Promised Land forever disappearing on the horizon – desired but never achieved. According to the Torah, the exodus from Egypt is a symbol of the process of birth where the child is liberated from the already too narrow womb. The difficulties encountered in the desert symbolize the infancy of Judaism, which like a newborn wouldn't survive without manna sent from heaven.

Therefore it symbolizes the infancy of a people whose faith is not strong enough to go on without proofs or miracles, which needs supernatural signs and ultimately a brazen serpent to proceed on its way. To learn to live in the desert means to learn to live without foundation, without a locatable enemy, without temples. Indeed the desert is not a path clearly leading to some goal. Different forces operate here, including those that suggest a return to the fertile Nile valley. According to Gérard Granel philosophy should keep in mind the continuous assertion of an 'exit from Egypt' because it will 'prevent that any fertile valley could develop without the breath of the Spirit' (Granel 1990: 199). This metaphorical *exodus* of philosophy corresponds to the bastard or ambiguous logic that Derrida was looking for behind Khora. Granel explains his notion of exodus thus:

> this is what *separates* the logical fecundity of a culture from a *land* of knowledge and from an entire philosophical *reign* which organizes and dominates the variety of 'fields', territories, domains … and it enjoins us to conceive (this logical fecundity) not on the model of the fertile, but as a figure of *flourishing in the desert*. Because if the 'wind [spirit] blows wherever it pleases' it doesn't mean 'no one knows where'; on the contrary one knows: it blows in the desert, from the desert and for the desert. But *what* he blows is neither sterile, nor fertile, the difference of which, the blend of which, the predominance, depends on the answer that inhabits our listening and gives it its limit of openness(Granel 1990: 199).[3]

Granel insists that contrary to a philosophy which has grown on a fertile ground of culture, the philosophy of the desert only flourishes contingent upon our responsiveness; it 'inhabits our listening'. The

3   '[c]ela *sépare* désormais la fécondité logique de toute culture d'une *terre* de connaissance et de tout *règne* philosophique organisant et dominant la diversité des 'champs', 'territoires', 'domaines' et nous enjoint de la concevoir, non sur le modèle de la vallée fertile, mais sous la figure de la *floraison du désert*. Car si l'Esprit 'souffle où il veut', cela ne veut pas dire 'on ne sait où': on le sait, au contraire: il souffle du désert, dans le désert et pour le désert. *Ce qu*'il souffle n'est cependant ni le stérile, ni le fertile, dont la différence, le mélange, la prédominance dépendent de la réponse qui habite déjà notre écoute et lui donne sa limite d'ouverture.'

Christian-Jewish dispute, which interweaves in the philosophies of Granel and Derrida is concerned with this new life after the departure from Egypt – the life of flowers in the desert that is strictly linked to our listening. Accordingly, Khora would correspond to that listening, the listening of 'mothers who wake up *together* with the weak sound of the child' (Granel 1990: 199). While using this Heideggerian figure Granel is quick to add that it is not because they hear a sound that interrupts their sleep but 'the language of desire in that sound finds in [the mothers] a listening that has been not turned off by their rest' (*ibid.*).

Discussing the blessing

The desert where philosophy has fled the 'house of bondage fat' in the fertile Nile valley has up to now revealed very different options of survival – the first described by Agata Bielik-Robson is messianic and remains attached to the idea of the Promised Land. The second corresponds to the Khora and her relation to the flowers of the desert – in this case life or resurrection corresponds to desire and listening. While in the first metaphor truth is expected, in the second it is desired, yet desire is not projected into the future, but corresponds to an opening inside the desert – for and from the desert.

Agata Bielik-Robson has illustrated her hostility to the death drive of post-Heideggerian philosophy with one of the episodes of Peniel in which Jacob fights with the Angel Sammael, who is responsible for bringing death sentences, and he wins (Bielik-Robson 2008: 5, 534). In *In the Desert* this fight becomes the emblem of the vital crypto-theological Judaism for those thinkers who are capable of disapproving the death sentence which has been passed on philosophy. Nevertheless the same passage of Genesis is important to poststructuralism because of Roland Barthes, who in 1972 presented its own comment, at the same time instituting a return of the biblical text as the basis for much of postmodern literature (Jobling *et al.* 2001). Jacob in his struggle with God was for Barthes the figure of interpretation, which must be heterodox, because it wins within the aura of the defeated God. Referring to Derrida's deconstruction of the transcendental/final signified, Barthes described Scripture as 'privileged domain for this problem'. He wrote:

> [t]he metaphysical definition or the semantic definition of theology is to postulate the Last Signified; and because, on the other hand, the

very notion of Scripture, the fact that the Bible is called Scripture, Writing, would orient us toward a more ambiguous comprehension of the problems, as if effectively, and theologically too, the base, the *princeps,* were still a Writing, and always a Writing (Barthes 1994: 242).

While Barthes eschews the discussion about the transcendental signifier, he nonetheless does not avoid this reflection about the fruitfulness of a narrative theory of Scripture. Adopting early biblical scholarship methods (*lexia*) he develops a very interesting analysis of Genesis 32. His interpretation of the event which takes place by the river Jabbok, and which has served as an emblem for the philosophical struggle for the blessing of life, will provide us with the element so far lacking for understanding the Derridean Khora.

God (The Great Other) through the process of interpellation establishes its poles – Himself and the interpellated subject – but also institutes the linguistic game between them. Jacob's struggle with the angel is in fact the most appropriate figure, but because of this there is an ambiguity which keeps us asking *who* fought with Jacob? Provided that the angel was God himself, how is it possible that Jacob won? Still, if it were Satan, why didn't he answer the question about his name, and why, after being asked, did he bestow a blessing? The Jewish tradition of a dispute with God over the right to interpret the Torah, is indeed consistent with the demands of a loosening of the linkage between signifier and signified, but it involves a dangerous element from the point of view of postmodernism, which is the original blessing. For, while linking the episode of Peniel with the issue of the conflict over their birthright between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:29–34) (as it is before the meeting with Esau that Jacob fearing his revenge fought with an unknown force, and once again 'won' a blessing), we see the controversial tension between the human and the divine plans. Who is in charge of suturing the signifier and the signified? Who has the power over the blessing? Barthes is depicting the struggle of Peniel as the dislocation of the conflict between the brothers. He writes:

> … traditionally, the line of brothers is in principle balanced (they are all located on the same level in relation to the parents); equigeniture is normally unbalanced by the right of primogeniture: the oldest is marked; now, in the story of Jacob, there is an inversion mark, there is a

counter-mark: it is the youngest who supplants the oldest (Gen. 27:36) … we can say in a sense that A (God) is the substitute of the oldest Brother, who is once again defeated by the youngest: the conflict with Esau is *displaced*… (Barthes 1994: 254).

Barthes notices that the natural balance of equigeniture is unbalanced by the law of primogeniture which would normally give Esau, the oldest brother, birthright privileges. But God inverts the laws of primogeniture by bestowing the blessing on Jacob. Therefore when Jacob wins the blessing for the second time wrestling with 'one', who is called neither God nor angel until he receives the blessing and retroactively calls the place Peniel 'because [he has] seen God face to face … and [he has] survived' (Gen. 27:31). God plays the role of the older brother Esau. The basis is again equigeniture, on which the divine's inscription serves as a counter-mark.

> [B]y marking Jacob (Israel), God (or Narrative) permits an anagogic development of meaning: he creates the formal conditions for the functioning of a new 'language', of which Israel's election is the 'message', God is a logothete, Jacob is here a 'morpheme' of the new language (Barthes 1994: 255).

The neutral is, of course, Barthes' strongest desire, it escapes any binary opposition, resisting mastery, resisting speech and decision and remaining in a state he calls in French 'non-vouloir-saisir' (Barthes 2007: 257). The Derridian Khora, defined by a resistance to the logic of binary oppositions seems similar to this neutral substrate. Her motherly figure would correspond to the figure of a mother who equally loves her sons. Conflict arises only with interest, with the act of gaining a birthright or blessing. Thus the conflict arises with realizing one's weakness, which establishes hierarchy and the existence of higher instances, or the desire to get rid of this projection by the acceptance of weakness. According to Barthes the balance which is disturbed by the introduction of a new signifier, a 'Name' is also 'the promotion of a new status, of new powers; Naming is obviously linked to Blessing: to bless (to receive the homage of a kneeling suppliant) and to name are a suzerain's actions' (Barthes 1994: 255). Along with the name, on this neutral ground appears the order of the father (see Lacanian *non/nom du père*), the order of interest and power.

The dislocation that puts the angel/God in the place of Esau comes together with a new name – Israel (Gen. 32:29). It might be understood as God's counter-signment for the previous inversion of the father's blessing (27). In that story the mother, Rebecca, performs an act of treachery in order to steal a blessing for the son she loves most. Therefore the critical question concerns the subject of this rebellion against God ('you have been strong against God', 32:29).

Is this rebellion against the law, against birthright, exclusivity, choice and ultimately against power effectuated in one's own name? Is it a rebellion of man against God, life against death (for which paradigmatic figure we agreed to accept the struggle of Jacob with the Angel) or is it, after Hegel, the immanent logic of opposition carried by history (prophecy)? Or, finally, should we envisage a different possibility, which would avoid the effect of the *Aufhebung* – that makes the otherness fall into the logic of the same? If we accept the first solution a paradox immediately appears, which transforms the weakness into power. Indeed an effective opposition defending the other triggers at once a new hegemonic order in which another other becomes the new excluded, in which the beloved son must take the distant place of the prodigal son.

The Jewish and Christian will to live

In order to discuss Bielik-Robson's reading of Derrida and answer who comes after the subject I would like to draw attention to Derrida's counter-phenomenology of the blind, visibly absent from *In the Desert,* and the role of blindness in Derrida's philosophy. *The Memoirs of the Blind* (Derrida 1993) are written in the shadow of two sources of blindness: one resulting from a short-lived facial palsy, which deprived Derrida of the possibility of closing one eye for a few days, the other, permanent, psychological, generated by a visually talented brother, whose drawings were decorating the walls of their family home.

> The experience of this shameful infirmity comes right out of a family romance, from which I will retain only a trait, a weapon and a symptom, no doubt, as well as a cause: wounded jealousy before an older brother whom I admired, as did everyone around him, for his talent as draftsman – and for his eye, in short, which has no doubt never ceased to bring out and accuse in me, deep down in me, *apart from me*, a fratricidal desire (Derrida 1993: 37).

This relationship of two brothers bears a resemblance to the biblical struggle for a birthright. In his childhood as Derrida was trying to imitate his artistically talented older brother, he not only experienced the feeling of being deprived of some special faculty but at the same time one of being excluded from the sphere of sight itself. For it is the incapacity of simultaneous seeing and drawing that made Derrida incapable even of making the most miserable copies. At the same time, as with any sort of curse, Derrida noticed the blessing it carries. This curse/blessing has given shape to his philosophical inquires. He wrote:

> … a pitiable awkwardness confirmed for me the double certainty of having been punished, deprived, cheated, but also, and because of this even, secretly chosen. I had sent to myself, who did not yet exist, the undecipherable message of a convocation. As if in place of drawing, which the blind man in me had renounced for life, I was called by another *trait* this graphics of invisible words, this accord of time and voice, that is called (the) word – or writing, scripture (Derrida 1993: 37).

The eclipse that accompanied the movement of the pencil on a sheet of paper has inspired the idea of the primacy of writing, of the primacy of that which doesn't allow primacy because it always defers. In this fraternal competition for being chosen, or for talent, Derrida discovered the double logic of the *pharmakon*, in which the true witness, the true seer, the true artist, is the one who does not see.

Invited by the Louvre Museum to create his own exposition, Derrida writes his *Memoirs of the Blind*. His clue-concept is blindness, but most of the chosen drawings, apart from some mythological themes, concern biblical figures. It is the old and blind Isaac, who before his death blesses Jacob instead of Esau, but also Tobias, who having lost his eyesight accuses his wife of stealing. In both cases, along with a disability – a physically conditioned loss of power – appears a rift for the implementation of a different plan. The plan of old Tobias, who was willing to

Jacek Malczewski: *Paysage avec Tobias (printemps),* 1904. Museum of Poznan.

suffer as long as he was following the letter of the law, breaks down when he 'unjustly' accuses and is himself accused by his wife Anna (Tobit 2:14). Therefore the collapse of the principles of justice doesn't happen along with an external oppression, or life among the Gentiles, or loneliness in the profession of the Mosaic laws. It happens within its own house, at the moment when Tobias hears 'unfair reproaches' and his sense of justice suffers harm. Readers acknowledge this while hearing two different prayers, one after another, of similar structures: Tobias prays with these words: 'command my spirit to be taken from me … for it is profitable for me to die rather than to live, because I have heard false reproaches' (Tobit 3:6). And further we read that 'the same day, … in Ecbatane, a city of Media Sara, the daughter of Raguel was also reproached' and she went begging to the Lord thus: 'Take me out of the earth, that I may hear no more the reproach' (Tobit 3:7.13). The collapse within what is one's *own*, what is *internal*, what is *subordinated*, and finally within *the law* itself – this is how the tragic discourse perforates the messianic discourse.

The desert where the battle for life also takes place does not introduce an external enemy – the people of Israel stand alone in front of themselves. The hunger and fear which they are experiencing are their own desires. The collapse of faith in the sense of

Karel Dujardin: *Hagar and Ishmael in the Wilderness*, c. 1662. Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota.

their leave-taking from Egypt is their own crisis. In the story from the Book of Numbers, where a continual listing of the tribes of Israel helps to establish the order of walking through the desert, the goal of the crossing/journey vanishes. God, mediated by Moses (or Moses mediated by God), is constantly at war with his rebellious and impatient people; sending plagues, punishing the disobedient with death. The conflict relates to life – which is constantly under threat in the desert (Num. 14:3) and Israel is over and over again trying to extort an assurance of survival. Meanwhile, God has the face of a father, who leads and feeds, but also punishes every sign of disobedience when his sons want to throw off the yoke of the paternal power. Every form of reassuring idolatry created from their valuables will be turned to dust.

La guerre en Dieu

Contrary to Bielik-Robson's interpretation of the Christian and Derridean 'consent to death' this article argues for a different path through the crypto-theological in order to survive. One of its cornerstones won't be a place named Peniel (which means 'God sees'), where Jacob won his blessing, but Lachaj-Roj, the place where Hagar, chased by Sarah into the desert, saw the God who sees her ('thou God seest me', Gen. 16:13). Therefore it will also be a way of rebellion (Hagar), of fight (Ishmael) and finally the way of those who are blessed at the end when God hears them crying. It is this crypto-theological tradition that informs the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. The basic elements of this theology will be similar: the figure of the mother (Hagar), the first-born-but-deprived-of-his-birthright son (Ishmael), the desert (Beer Sheba, Parran) and the shadow of death: but the resistance against death won't be a resistance against the law of the father but the resistance of the mother, who doesn't want to see her son dying.

> And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept (Gen. 21:15–16).

The desert represents here this neutral ground, which precedes the need to choose, the need to struggle for a blessing. The rebellion against death does not appear in the name of the principle of individuation, but in

the name of love. It is not directed against God, but is discovered within God himself – 'non pas le Dieu de la guerre, mais la guerre en Dieu' – as Derrida wrote in *Ulysses Gramophone* (Derrida 1987: 46).

The critique of logocentrism is governed by the principle according to which each element of language in the play of meaning reaches the wrong place or reaches the right place only by going wrong. This deviation along the route between the sender and the addressee Derrida calls using the word *destinnerrance* (linking *errance*, meaning wandering, and *destination*). We succumb to the illusion that the word reaches its goal, that the author of given words can control their meaning, whereas writing is not a poor substitute for memory as we were reading in Plato, but makes us realize that there is no absolute power over meaning (the signified) which means that the signifier is always running his own independent game. This game is shown by the deconstructive reading of any text. Deconstruction (which is a neologism borrowed from the French translation of the Heideggerian term *Abbau*) is not the destruction, but contains a double prefix, which gives it a more complex nature: *de-con-struere*. What is dismantled by the prefix *de-* at the same time serves the con-struction, which means a new assembling. *Abbau* is not only the disassembly, but also the exploitation, so you can say that Derrida makes the reading an exploitation of new meanings from the same set of signifiers.

This is the aim of the extraction of concepts such as 'sign' in Husserl, 'Pharmakon' in Plato, or 'supplement' in Rousseau. Rather than destroying the author's intention and discrediting him with their ambiguity they bear different fruits than the one advocated by the author or a well-established line of interpretation. We might explain this mechanism by means of the metaphor of grafting. The incisions made by Derrida in the corpus of philosophical works allow for a grafting on to adult trees the scions of different kinds of fruits. There is no reason why the roots, the rootstock of a plant should provide for only one kind of fruit. On the contrary, you can even say that this type of uniformity can be harmful in agriculture. But it is important to note that this practice requires the cutting not only of the grafted branches (scion – new interpretation), but also the stock, in order to allow both tissues to fuse with one another. This incision has more than one name in the writings of Derrida: the wound, the date, the pronunciation… . The one which bears the strongest religious connotation in this case is 'circumcision', from the 'Circumfession' written together with Geoffrey Bennington (see Ben-

nington and Derrida 1993) and from 'Shibbolet for Paul Celan' (Derrida 1994). Derrida is making an inverse *epochè* from the one we know from Husserl: along with the suspension of natural attitude, he is bracketing the meaning, emphasizing the pronunciation, the shape, the singularity. He remains as long as is possible in the moment of baptism, of circumcision, when the foundation of meaning takes place, when the signifier and the signified are sutured. This moment must have the character of wound. The difference is a wound. 'It is this differential mark which it is not enough to know like a theorem which is the secret' (Derrida 1994: 28–9).

This is 'secrecy without a secret' because it has no other content than the only coding fact. But in turning attention away from meaning and turning it toward the 'significant form', 'it becomes a password, a mark of belonging, the manifestation of an alliance' (Derrida 1994: 21). Derrida did not forget about the other except from language. The structure of the religious alliance he was turning to – the bodily sign (circumcision), the sanctity of the letter etc. – Derrida wanted to hold up close to the sign, the name, the date, or writing, arguing against their easy sublation. They remain undecipherable, unique, idiomatic, and alien because of the suffering that was inflicted on them. The cut does not constitute a manifestation of the romantic desire to leave a trace, but takes the form of a wound and refers to the other. It is itself a trace of the other, to which we can be faithful only in this fissuring; thus not making from this wound a sacrifice which has any general idealistic aim.

Conclusion

Drawing to a close we can say that while the Hegelian consciousness was corresponding to the kind of messianism that accomplishes the conditions of the prophecies in order to accelerate the fulfilment of the messianic promise (hastening the course of history), Derrida's 'messianicity without messianism' is more aware of the victims than such an accomplishment requires. Derrida remains sensible to the painful aspect of the sacrifice, attaching deconstruction to those elements and those figures that enhance the sacrifice which is to take place. But if a real passage through suffering or despair is the condition of a true sacrifice, such a messianism without messianic consciousness is required.

By contrast with a characteristically Heideggerian interpretation of Christianity as being-toward-death, we encounter within Christianity this sort of

messianicity. The night in Gethsemane; the words 'God, God, why have you abandoned me?' is one of its figures. What is the difference between the dissent *against* death 'in the name of God, who knows everyone by his own name' and this dissent *within* the death of God which is necessary for resurrection? Using the language of philosophy we can say that the latter corresponds to the fidelity to the signifier, not to the signified. The agon called for by Agata Bielik-Robson, which means a fight for survival in language, thus surviving in the world where all that is solid 'vanishes into air' is a struggle for self-creation. It is therefore Nietzschean *par excellence* and calls upon man to become god. Meanwhile, the Christian agon would be consistent with the commitment to the signifier, whose singular aspect is not the object of worship, but an expression of suffering. Singularity is not an 'I' maintaining itself at the surface, but an Other in his un-understandability and un-nameability – an other, who cannot be reassured. No resurrection – in the flesh, or in the concept – gives it justice. This kind of rebellion or struggle is different from the struggle of Jacob with the angel, by virtue of remaining un-named. Any name that would be given to the reasons for this fight would not be the one.

Derrida has admitted several times that he writes against his own desire, because he desires presence and desires *something other than* language. His affirmation of writing, text, and the infinite ambiguities of interpretation was not an expression of joyful relativism, but mourning – 'mourning after the reading'. Every understanding, to which we are condemned by our lecture, should be covered with sadness because of a loss of the singularity. In the 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan', Derrida wrote:

> There must be circumcision, circumcision of the word, writing, and it must take place once, precisely, each time one time, the one time only. This time awaits its coming as its vicissitude. It awaits a date, and this date can only be poetic, an incision in the body of language. … It opens the word to the other, and the door, it opens history and the poem and philosophy and hermeneutics and religion (Derrida 1994: 68).

This circumcision of a word has to be understood precisely as a slit which in the existing corpus (body, text, tradition) allows for the grasping of a new branch. However, this messianism is built on a previous opposition, aware that the incision means suffering. How not to overpass singularity in the name of a higher reason – a more powerful life, a survival or a resurrection? This question cannot be the equivalent of: how to emerge victorious from the confrontation with negativity? There is no question of victory. Replying to the question of who comes after the subject, we discover in Derrida's work a new logic of life. It doesn't anchor the game of signifiers in a will to live. It doesn't steal the blessing. Rather it stands next to the order of filiation, which is the order of the father, the name and the law. It corresponds to the neutrality of Khora, to the balanced relationship toward children of a mother who does not have to choose. Therefore this logic will be feminine. Her rebellion will be only a revolt against the suffering of her son (Hagar) – performed *in his name*. And her desire will be so pure that it is incapable of being decently implemented. The life of which she will be the figure, won't be a life 'stronger and saved' (Bielik-Robson), but brittle. It will not be conquering but accepted like the flowers of the desert – 'resurrected'. ∎

Urszula Idziak-Smoczynska PhD, is currently working as Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow Poland in the Institute of Religious Studies. She is mostly interested in the theological turn of contemporary philosophy especially in the thought of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Luc Nancy, but also religious issues in late Wittgenstein. She has published a book concerning the discussion about the category of giving between Derrida and Marion (*Dar. Spór między Jacquesem Derridą and Jean-Luc Marionem*, Kraków 2009). Email: urszulaidziak(at)yahoo.com

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