ECKHART, DERRIDA, AND THE GIFT OF LOVE

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As lovers know, ardor is perilously fragile. 'Violent passion' describes both limitless lovemaking and the forcible violation of appropriate limits. Nor should we think that love is immune from violence if it avoids physical violation; subtle forms of psychological violence may erupt unexpectedly. Lest we comfort ourselves by saying that such violence is alien to love - as of course it is - we might wonder whether love knows the difference. We rightly recoil from the idea that the beloved is simply the means to an end, a tool for our use, but perhaps respect for a unique singularity is irreconcilable with the abstracted principles that could exclude violence. If love is, in this sense, blind, then it has an unsettling darkness at its heart: so, at least, I aim to suggest.

This paper aims to illuminate the matter of love by playing upon a surprising affinity between Jacques Derrida and Meister Eckhart. Although they differ in significant respects, I will argue that both Eckhart and Derrida interpret love as a gift that is entirely free of economic exchange, and both conclude on this basis that love eludes recognition and intentionality. For both authors, an insistent negativity is necessary to preserve the possibility of love, yet for both of them the give-and-take of quotidian affection retains a relative validity. In my reading, this hyperbolic conception of love functions not to recommend some behaviors above others but rather to open a space within everyday life for a love that is more than mundane. Although the idea that love does not count or account ought to be unsettling, it may be that love itself calls us to face this danger.

I. AFFIRMATION AND APORIA

Derrida insists that 'deconstruction...is not negative, even though it has often been interpreted as such despite all sorts of warnings...It never proceeds without love.'¹ Against the background of his early discussions of *différance*, dissemination, and the trace, this claim might seem strange; indeed, some have

concluded that his project is purely corrosive.² Derrida claims that even his earliest work on the indeterminacy of textual meaning already carries ethical and political significance,³ and yet the situation becomes even more difficult with his later reflections on justice and democracy, concepts that Derrida argues are aporetic, divided against themselves, and incapable of realization. Despite his insistence upon affirmation, it is difficult to locate an affirmative moment in Derrida's thought, for he allows for no stable space that would be free from the play of meaning and the pull of an impossible responsibility.

Derrida's discussion of the gift exemplifies this difficult situation. Beginning from the intuitive point that the donee ought not simply return a gift to the donor, Derrida develops a radical claim. He writes that 'if there is gift, the given of the gift...must not come back to the giving...It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange.'⁴ This seems reasonable enough, for on the face of it a gift goes beyond simple exchange - which is to say, a gift is somehow gratuitous, representing more than a good deal. However, Derrida goes on to argue that even the return of something different than the gift, even something that is not strictly a thing (such as thanks) is enough to pull the gift back within the ambit of economy; he writes, 'As soon as the donee knows it is a gift, he already thanks the donator, and cancels the gift. As soon as the donor is conscious of giving, he himself thanks himself and again cancels the gift by re-inscribing it into a circle, an economic circle.'⁵ Since any recognition would represent an exchange for the gift, the gift cannot appear as such - neither to the donor nor to the donee, for consciousness in either case would constitute a symbolic exchange.

For this reason, even the greatest generosity is not enough to ensure the gift, and yet Derrida claims nevertheless that 'there is no gift without the intention of giving.'⁶ The gift ought to be intentional - we should know what we do, what we give, and why - and yet conscious intentionality would annul the gift's gratuity. Derrida writes, 'It is a matter...of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the *gift* ("give") as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge).'⁷ We are bound by both demands, and this aporia is paradigmatic of Derrida's ethics; he writes, 'To give in the name of, to give to the name of, the other is what frees my responsibility from knowledge - that is, what brings responsibility unto itself, if there ever is such a thing.'⁸ Where some conclude that Derrida offers only instability, he insists that this difficult situa-

tion is where responsibility and the gift begin, for the call to give is only intensified by the fact that the gift lies beyond our grasp.

Although the gift does not lie within our power, Derrida argues that we may (and perhaps must) nonetheless strain towards it. He writes, 'If the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this *even if* or *because* or *to the extent that we never* encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it.'⁹ The impossibility of the gift serves as the condition of our pursuit of it; indeed, since the gift can never be identified, our desire can never be sated. Nor does this entail mere futility, for the impossibility that Derrida has in view is not a bald not-possible but rather that which is 'more impossible than the impossible if the impossible is the simple negative modality of the possible.'¹⁰ Whereas the not-possible simply negates what is possible, this impossible cannot be excluded, for it is unconstrained by the present conditions of possibility. Derrida explains, 'The possibility of the impossible, of the "more impossible" that as such is also possible ("more impossible than the impossible"), marks an absolute interruption in the regime of the possible that nonetheless remains, if this can be said, in place.'¹¹ The known constraints to possibility retain their validity, and yet their authority is not absolute, for what may come is not limited by what we know.

Since one cannot know whether one has fulfilled the call to give, the situation is strained, and there is no room for satisfaction. However, Derrida is clear that this ought not entail a resigned passivity, for although the impossible remains beyond our achievement, its coming cannot be precluded. On the contrary, he argues that such impossibility is the stuff of passion; he writes, 'Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there where there is this movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to be known, experienced, nor lived.'¹² When regulated by the strict economy of presence and possibility, desire and thought lack the scope they require, and so it is only in the face of the impossible that they are given range and motility. It is here that the affirmative exigency of deconstruction emerges: although there is an aridity to Derrida's thought, this ascesis aims to open a space for passion and love.

Whereas some suppose that love connotes a wholesome intimacy, Derrida writes that 'a certain departure, a certain separation, an interruption of the bond, a radical un-binding remains...the condition

of the social bond as such. I mean that of love.¹³ In Derrida's account, responsibility requires the recognition that the other remains beyond one's grasp, and love entails the recognition of this irreducible distance. Derrida goes so far as to suggest that the separation between oneself and another constitutes the possibility of a relational bond; he reflects, 'Why would love be only the ardent force of an attraction tending towards fusion, union, and identification? Why would the infinite distance which opens respect up...not open love up as well?'¹⁴ Because respect requires the recognition that the beloved is other, love must resist the impulse to consume its object. Derrida's comment at one point that 'love is narcissistic'¹⁵ acknowledges that we are never free from the impulse to appropriate, just as one can never ensure the escape from economy. But love, as gift, may nonetheless come - this is the possibility Derrida describes in relation to the divided desire of God.

Taking up a figure from Meister Eckhart, Derrida writes that 'the at times oracular tone of apophasis...often resounds in a desert.'¹⁶ Eckhart describes God as 'the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed,...a simple silence, in itself immovable,'¹⁷ and he counsels that we should be similarly empty. This renunciation might seem simply barren, but Derrida notes that it pulls in two directions. It may, he says, 'correspond with the most insatiable desire of God,' while, on the other hand, it 'can remain readily foreign to all desire, in any case to every anthropotheomorphic form of desire.'¹⁸ While the willingness to let go of everything for the sake of God implies an impressive passion, divine distance precludes a narcissistic desire - but is there another sort? Derrida writes, 'Isn't the desert a paradoxical figure of the *aporia*? No marked out or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared, unless the sand has already re-covered them.'¹⁹ Once again we are caught between conflicting demands, renunciation and desire, both taken to their highest pitch, but here as well the *aporia* must be endured for the sake of a difficult affirmation.

Derrida comments in relation to Eckhart, 'Unless I interpret it too freely, this *via negativa* does not only constitute a *movement* or a *moment* of deprivation, an asceticism or a provisional kenosis. The deprivation should remain at work (thus give up the work) for the (loved) other to remain the other.'²⁰ This ascesis is not simply provisional, for it knows no limit, and yet, as such, it is the condition for love, for what is true of God applies generally. Derrida writes, 'Isn't it proper to desire to carry with it its own proper suspension...? To go toward the absolute other, isn't that the extreme tension of a desire that

tries thereby to renounce its own proper momentum, its own movement of appropriation?¹²¹ The divided desire of God articulated by Eckhart describes the aporia that all love must endure, moving toward the other while suspending the impulse to violate a responsible distance, resisting the reversion to economic exchange. Eckhart's passion is paradigmatic of this love in distance; Derrida comments, 'To surrender to the other...would amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming toward the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible.'¹²² Although the two movements are at odds, it is the very impossibility of their coincidence that opens the gift of love.

II. UNSETTLING INDISTINCTION

As others before him had done, Eckhart argues that, since God is beyond the created realm, none of the categories of creaturely thought are adequate to describe the divine. However, since every difference is distinguished against the background of some similarity, Eckhart concludes from the thoroughgoing distinction between God and creation that no difference between them may be identified.²³ Since, Eckhart writes, 'no difference at all is or can be in the One,'²⁴ it follows that 'indistinction belongs properly to God, distinction to creatures.'²⁵ That is, whereas creatures are characterized by their distinction from each other, God is distinguished simply by the fact that no distinction can be drawn, and Eckhart goes further still: 'God, so far as he is God, is not the perfect end of created beings...So therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God.'²⁶ Since any object that we could discern would not be God, Eckhart surmises that God ought not serve as the object of human action and intention. By taking the distinction between God and creatures to the highest pitch, Eckhart calls Christian discourse and practice fundamentally into question.

The conceptual ascesis signaled in this striking expostulation finds its counterpart in an ethical movement by which we are brought into the divine indistinction.²⁷ Eckhart argues that, just as identifying an object of knowledge separates the individual from God, positing a reason for loving God makes the reason the object of a love which is in fact no longer of God. He says, 'You love a cow because of the milk and cheese and because of your own advantage. This is how all those people act who love God because of external riches or because of internal consolation. They do not love God rightly; rather they

love their own advantage.¹²⁸ Whatever object of love that is supposed to induce love of God would consecrate self-love. This resembles Bernard of Clairvaux's claim, a century before Eckhart, that 'God is not loved without reward, even though he should be loved without thought of reward.'¹²⁹ But where Bernard moderately claims that 'true love...has its reward in what it loves,'¹³⁰ Eckhart suggests that a love that would exceed narcissistic reappropriation must be further disoriented, lacking any object whatever. Because nothing we could imagine, however wholesome, could orient the love of God, even Bernard's assurance that the love of God is guaranteed a reward, albeit as its unintended consequence, still promises too much.

In Eckhart's account, those who love God in the expectation of personal benefit are like the fellow Derrida discusses who seeks 'to do a good deed while at the same time making a good deal; to earn forty cents and the heart of God; to win paradise economically.'¹³¹ Eckhart explains, 'Those people are all businessmen who...perform their works for God's glory...because they want to give one thing in return for another, and thus they want to make a business deal with our Lord.'¹³² While it might seem from this that Eckhart (like Bernard) simply requires that love be free of selfish concern, he is clear that love must be purged of intention altogether, for it takes the form of a gift which is beyond economy. He says, 'As long as a person in any of his works seeks anything at all of all that which God can or shall give, he is like these businessmen. If you want to be so completely free of making business deals that God permits you in this temple,...you should be as empty as that nothing is empty which is neither here nor there.'¹³³ Because God cannot be specified or described, any recompense that we might take to be internal to the love of God would offer something else instead, forming the object of an intention that still aims too low.

Such a love is beyond our grasp, for any act of grasping is enough to annul it; instead, it is a gift modeled upon God's own gratuitous love. Eckhart says, 'God seeks nothing of his own. In all his works he is empty and free and works them out of genuine love. This is how the person acts who is united with God. He, too, is empty and free in all his works and he does them only for the glory of God, seeking nothing of his own.'¹³⁴ Just as God gives God's love irrespective of dessert or recompense, the human lover ought to be equally empty, and it is in this mutual emptiness that the final distinctions fade. Eckhart says, 'All things that are in time have a why....But if someone asked a good man: "Why do you love

God?"--"I do not know, because of God."¹³⁵ This love without a why is submerged in God alone, 'it knows nothing but love...It cannot properly form any other word but "love".¹³⁶ Eckhart's gift of love is deprived of words, caught in a love that cannot be grasped, identified, or even experienced.³⁷ Absorbed completely in its object, devoid of intentionality, it is unable to explain itself, for it is immersed in indistinction.

Eckhart's arid negativity is, as Derrida observes, the place of aporia. Since any active seeking and any intentionality reinscribes love within economy, uncalculating emptiness is required - 'to be deprived of God for God's own sake'¹³⁸ - but this implies that even the 'for God's sake' must be relinquished. Just as Eckhart's prayer that God free him of God undercuts itself, here the only way to God is to submit to the deprivation of every intention, but this very submission still intends too much. Eckhart explains, 'A man who would possess this poverty ought to live as if he does not even know that he is not in any way living for himself or for the truth or for God. Rather, he should be so free of all knowing that he does not know or experience or grasp that God lives in him.'¹³⁹ Because intending to live for God remains self-assertion, the truly empty soul will not even aim for God; she then lives without a why, in a certain sort of silence. But such silence is deeply unsettling, for there are conflicting demands at work - intend to love, love without intention - that cannot be resolved.

This tension is neatly illustrated in Eckhart's claim that 'if a man...could remain free of all activities, interior or exterior, he ought to be on his guard in case this very state itself may become a form of activity.'¹⁴⁰ On the one hand, we must attempt to free ourselves from activity, for its intentionality divides us from the divine indistinction; on the other hand, this very attempt displaces the state towards which we are straining. Any means to God inevitably misses God, who admits of no mediation, for 'whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God'¹⁴¹ - and yet the necessary emptiness requires that the relinquishing of ways be relinquished as well. The will is divided against itself with no chance at satisfaction. We can only hope that the gift of God's love will come without our knowing it and continue living in the meantime under the perpetual critique of surreptitious self-fulfillment.⁴²

The aporia of detachment from activity corresponds to Eckhart's reflections on silence, for whereas he suggests that we enter 'the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed,' emptying our-

selves in order to become one with 'a simple silence, in itself immovable,'¹⁴³ he nevertheless proliferates speech. Here as well it is not a matter of choosing between two possibilities, speech and its exclusion, for both the necessity of speech and its admitted inadequacy remain in place. Likewise, Derrida writes that '*there is something secret*. But it does not conceal itself. Heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is nonmanifest in general, it cannot be unveiled.'¹⁴⁴ This is a silence so deep that it can neither be hidden nor revealed, but since it eludes every identification, it cannot be excluded either. Derrida explains, 'My saying, the declaration of love or the call to the friend, the address to the other in the night, the writing that does not resign itself to this unsaid - who could swear that they are consigned to oblivion simply because no said can speak them exhaustively?'¹⁴⁵ Such silence breathes through speech, running beside or beneath it without emerging into conscious identification; however, because it cannot be circumscribed in this way it cannot be said with certainty not to occur.

Like Derrida, Eckhart is clear that the aporia that he describes does not exclude the affirmation of language and love. Much as Derrida argues that the injunction to give must remain in place even though the gift is beyond our achievement, Eckhart says, "'Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself," and this is a command from God.'¹⁴⁶ Since love is free of intention, this command is not something we can fulfill, and yet he continues: 'It is not just a commandment; rather, it is also what God has given and what he has promised to give.'¹⁴⁷ Eckhart insists that our inability to calculate or contain such an occurrence does not entail its bare impossibility; like Derrida, he admits that what exceeds predictable possibility may nonetheless come. He specifies that 'what God has given and what he has promised to give is simply marvelous, incomprehensible, unbelievable,'¹⁴⁸ for a comprehensible gift would be no gift at all, but an unbelievable belief, an incomprehensible love, and a discourse that continues under the sign of relentless self-negation may abide nonetheless.

III. ALTERITY AND AFFECTION

Both Eckhart and Derrida argue that the gift is free from economy, and they both conclude on this basis that it excludes intentionality as well. Where Eckhart is clear that such a gift characterizes love, Derrida's account of love centers instead on the renunciation required to respect the beloved's distance, but in

fact the two themes intersect. Derrida writes, 'A logic of the gift...reorientates friendship, deflecting towards what it should have been - what it immemorially will have been. This logic calls friendship back to non-reciprocity, to dissymmetry or to disproportion, to the impossibility of a return to offered or received hospitality.'⁴⁹ Whereas any concern for return remains on the level of economic circulation, the gift breaks the movement of reappropriation, shattering narcissism, out of respect for alterity. Similarly, for Eckhart the uncalculated gift becomes the model of our relationship with the God who remains beyond our grasp. For both of them, the aporia of the gift is the condition for the affirmation of love.

Although it might seem that Derrida and Eckhart describe loves directed towards different objects, any neat distinction between Derrida's love (of any other at all) and Eckhart's (of God) is complicated by the fact that, for Eckhart, the divine is indistinct. Derrida writes that 'if God is completely other...then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre*.'⁵⁰ As Derrida notes, the French phrase is apparently tautological, but it has the effect of eliding the difference between the divine and everything else - that is, if God is totally other (i.e. '*tout autre*'), then God cannot be distinguished from anything else (i.e. '*tout autre*'). Derrida concludes that, 'since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity,'⁵¹ what can be said about the relation to God can be said about the relation to anyone else, echoing again Eckhart's argument that, if God is entirely different from creatures, then no distinction between God and creatures can be drawn.

In order to rescue Eckhart from such a reading, Denys Turner argues that Eckhart's indistinction shares nothing with Derrida's *tout autre*. Turner claims that 'Derrida's principle, "every other is completely other", is not only a straightforward logical absurdity, it is also an ethically offensive one.'⁵² He complains that Derrida's generalized alterity 'could not be true of any finite relation,'⁵³ and so he concludes that 'I love my "loved ones"...not as a "*wholly* other", for that is to love them into a vacuous non-entity.'⁵⁴ Indeed, Turner's concern has a certain sense, for the familiar loves we experience are directed and distinguished: we love the ones who are close to us, and we love them better than strangers and enemies. Eckhart, however, has a more difficult demand in mind. In an ironic inversion of Turner's argument, Eckhart says, 'For so long as you think better of your own people than you do of the man whom you never saw, you are going quite astray, and you have never had a single glimpse into this simple ground.'⁵⁵ As we have seen, Eckhart takes God's love as the model of our own, but for this reason the

gift of love cannot distinguish, for to calculate entails unloving economy. Thus, he says, 'if you like one person more than another, this is wrong. If you like your father, your mother, and yourself more than some other person, this is wrong.'⁵⁶ It would seem, then, that Derrida is closer to Eckhart on this point than Turner, for Derrida appreciates that Eckhart's negative theology issues in an ethics of indistinction.

If I am right that Turner misconceives the character of Eckhart's ethics, the substance of his concern remains genuinely troubling. If love cannot differentiate in this way, can one love at all? Eckhart insists that 'a man ought gladly to be robbed of all that he has for the love of God, and out of love he should wholly abandon and deny love's consolations,'⁵⁷ but can love endure such a stringent demand? Quotidian love is sustained by mundane pleasures; although such nourishment would seem to be precluded by this account, Derrida and Eckhart both allow for the needs of daily life. Eckhart admits that 'a saint never became so great that he could not be moved,'⁵⁸ and Derrida affirms vulnerability as well, acknowledging upon the death of a friend 'that I love Jean-François, that I miss him, like the words I cannot find, beyond words.'⁵⁹ Since, as we have seen, even the cessation of activity remains one action too many, the exclusion of emotion would not be empty enough. On the contrary, the asceticism Eckhart and Derrida describe allows for the humane practice of life.

Instead of rejecting the rhythms of everyday existence, Eckhart invites a 'being-at-home'⁶⁰ that moves within everyday life while acknowledging, under the critical power of aporia, that ultimate significance is not in our power. Eckhart explains, 'A man cannot learn this by running away, by shunning things and shutting himself up in an external solitude; but he must practice a solitude of the spirit, wherever or with whomever he is.'⁶¹ Just as the requisite silence runs through speech itself, here Eckhart suggests that there may be a sort of disjunction even in society. He says, 'You stand in the midst of things, but they do not reside in you; and those are careful who go about unimpeded in all their daily pursuits....Such people stand in the midst of things, but not *in* things.'⁶² Rather than requiring some arcane spiritual exercise, Eckhart's unsettling indistinction operates within the imperfect practice of everyday life. This critique does not demand particular activities but rather opens a space within the quotidian for something more.

Likewise, although Derrida argues that love is in certain respects indiscriminate, he is clear that it need not displace lived relationships, for it operates within them. He writes, 'The logic of the gift...calls friendship back to the irreducible presence of the other'⁶³ insofar as the aporia of the gift serves to intensify, not preclude, attention to particular others. Since such attention distinguishes an object and interprets the give-and-take of encounter, it does not fulfill the conditions for the indiscriminate gift, but Derrida acknowledges that calculation must continue. He writes, 'Justice and gift should go beyond calculation. This does not mean that we should not calculate. We have to calculate as rigorously as possible. But there is a point or a limit beyond which calculation must fail, and we must recognize that.'⁶⁴ Calculation is necessary, not only because it is structurally unavoidable but also because prudence is important in the realm of politics and personal relationship. On Derrida's account, such considerations ought to continue; his account of the gift is intended only to open a space for something beyond calculation within life itself.⁶⁵

For this reason, the frequently-repeated claim that Derrida ultimately rejects Eckhart's religiosity is misguided. Many readings of Derrida and Eckhart center upon Derrida's suggestion that 'what I write is not "negative theology"...in the measure to which "negative theology" seems to reserve...some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being.'⁶⁶ Derrida's concern is that Eckhart (et al.) retain an ultimate affirmation concerning what is ostensibly inconceivable, which leads John Caputo to conclude (as many do⁶⁷) that this represents Derrida's final judgment. Although Caputo says that 'the Meister is a salient example of the recognition that...language keeps unsaying what it says,' he adds that 'to be sure, Eckhart did all of this in the name of a super-essential being'⁶⁸ - which is to say, Eckhart's negativity is disingenuous after all. However, this fails to account for the fact that Derrida makes this claim in a modality ('in the measure to which') that indicates that other readings are possible.⁶⁹ Derrida finds in Eckhart's paradoxical formulations 'a principle of multiplication of voices and discourses, of disappropriation and reappropriation of utterances'⁷⁰ that allows Derrida to claim, as we have seen, that the very ambivalence of Eckhart's negative theology describes the condition of love.

For this reason, Caputo's claim that 'deconstruction differs from the Christian mystical theology...of Meister Eckhart as an indeterminate differs from a determinate affirmation of the impossible'⁷¹ is wrong on both counts. On the one hand, insofar as Eckhart categorically denies that any speech or ac-

tivity is adequate to God, he requires an indeterminacy as rigorous as that of Derrida. On the other hand, it is nonsensical to valorize Derrida in this fashion, for Derrida is clear that the required indeterminacy cannot be attained.⁷² Whereas Caputo assumes that Derrida dwells in the pure indeterminacy of a 'religion without religion' while Eckhart is sullied by his association with a particular tradition, Derrida acknowledges that determinate affirmations can and should continue.⁷³ Each author works within a tradition that inflects their work, and the differences between them should not be elided. Nevertheless, their differing commitments do not preclude the reading I have developed, for they both recognize that such calculations are inevitably provisional. They both articulate the character of love as best they can, but they both agree that the gift of love opens within the quotidian calculation that it invariably exceeds.

IV. ELUSIVE LOVE

The construal of love that emerges from my reading of Eckhart and Derrida is admittedly hyperbolic, demanding as it does an ethics of indistinction, but both authors acknowledge that the provisional calculations of everyday life retain their validity. Although the reading I have developed bears implications for the interpretation of both authors, the primary concern of this paper is to discern whether this constructive account of love might be viable. After all, the case is not clear, for such love retains an irreducible danger. John Milbank writes, 'As against a logic which would associate a purity of love with unilateral action, it seems not insignificant that within romantic love an asymmetry of giving, where only one partner gives presents and favors, suggests not at all freedom and gratuitousness, but rather an obsessive admiration that subsists only at a willfully melancholic distance.'⁷⁴ Indeed, if one attempted to directly realize the love Derrida and Eckhart describe, the result would be lamentable - not unilateral but a-lateral, free of any direction or intention at all, destabilized by an apparent insanity. Milbank concludes that 'a good, a sensible gift, always does receive something back: if not the gratitude of another and delight in her pleasure...then at least the self-awareness that we have sought to do so,'⁷⁵ and such an economy is reasonable and recognizable from daily life, apparently avoiding the violence threatened by aneconomic love.

There is something insane in the insistence that love must be unknowing, for the absence of reciprocity is often pure abuse. Derrida writes, 'For an event to happen, the possibility of the worst, of radical evil, must remain a possibility, something that may indeed happen. Otherwise the good event...could not happen either.'⁷⁶ On Derrida's account, the gift holds a space open for alterity, one that he argues is essential to preserving the possibility of a love beyond economy, and indeed this is risky. But Milbank is wrong to say that 'for Derrida, the desire to give is the ethical impulse as such. But...it cannot ever be realized in any act. It cannot *be*.'⁷⁷ In the first place, it is not the desire to give which is basically ethical for Derrida, it is the gift itself. (As we have seen, the gift is irreducible to the desire to give, for it eludes all intentionality.) In the second place, that the gift cannot be achieved by action does not entail that it cannot be. Derrida explains, 'I tried to precisely displace the problematic of the gift, to take it out of the circle of economy, of exchange, but not to conclude, from the impossibility for the gift to appear as such...to its absolute impossibility.'⁷⁸ Indeed, the gift is a key figure for Derrida for the coming of the impossible, which intervenes in excess of intentional action.

It is for this reason that Derrida may say, 'This principle of ruin at the heart of the most utterly new...could never be eluded or denied. And yet. At the heart of this acquiescence...an empty space would be left...Favorable to friendship and like friendship, the friendship that would then deserve its just name.'⁷⁹ The unforeseeable newness of an indiscriminate gift holds terrible ruin at its heart, but it is by enduring this danger that space opens for a love and friendship that goes beyond self-regard. For his part, Eckhart is clear that a love that is more than self-interested economy offers no respite: 'Thus,' he says, 'a person must be killed and be completely dead, and must be nothing in himself.'⁸⁰ Self-abnegation is not the whole story, for the economic avoidance of abuse remains urgently important, and yet love nonetheless consists in an unsettling demand. As Derrida says, 'What is it that makes us tremble in the *mysterium tremendum*? It is the gift of infinite love.'⁸¹

As I have argued, Eckhart and Derrida may be seen to share a challenging construal of love. Their difficult negativity finds an affirmative counterpoint in the opening created by aporia for forms of relationship that remain uncontained by quotidian accounting. Because identifying the gift, before or after the fact, entails economic calculation, the gift is divided against itself and beyond our achievement, but

both authors argue that this impossible gift may nonetheless come. Both of them are clear that the aporia they articulate only heightens responsibility; after all, for both of them the failure of discourse does not entail the interdiction of speech. We must continue to speak and to give as best we can, but the fact that our efforts are insufficient opens the prospect of something better than what we are able to realize of ourselves. Love represents such a beyond, and as such it is deeply dangerous - but perhaps, despite its darkness, it remains alluring.

On the one hand, one might wonder what the stringent formality of this account has to do with the mutual pleasure, give-and-take, push-and-pull, of experienced love. Love is a fragile thing and must be carefully nourished, and it offers consolations a-plenty, after all. Derrida and Eckhart do not do much to illuminate this quotidian attention, and that is a weakness of their account, for, whatever else it may be, love-making is an art that is patiently learned, one that requires a sustaining sensitivity to the well-being of oneself and another. Denys Turner is right to note that it is perverse to insist that we love everyone indiscriminately, for such a love would be unsustainable and unreal. John Milbank is right that a unilateral gift would risk the worst abuse, both in its neglect of self-protection and its potentially obsessive neglect of the beloved himself. Lovers, then - which indeed we all are - will remain deeply unsatisfied.

On the other hand, such dissatisfaction is demanded by the very logic of my argument. If love is so elusive a thing as I have suggested, then no single account of it can be adequate. If, as Derrida says, genuine giving is not aware of itself, then a love free of narcissistic re-appropriation could neither be identified nor delineated. If, as Eckhart argues, love must be free of intentionality, then even the best account of such indistinction would remain too definite, still circumscribing its object according to a particular intention. Both authors claim that love cannot attain self-satisfaction, but in this they implicitly admit that their own accounts fail. For this reason, their interpretation of love could not claim final authority, for it remains within the domain of provisional calculation. By the same token, the gift of love that they describe is not an ideal to be realized directly, as if it could overrule love's familiar manifestations. Since such love cannot be manifest as such, it can only come within, underneath, and alongside experienced passions.

This is thus not the whole story, nor could it be. Since love is many-splendored and blind, there are many stories to be told. The point of this particular telling is to hold open the prospect of a love that is absorbed in its beloved, unconcerned with personal gain. Although all we see is economy, perhaps lovers still hope that there may be something more. Although we reasonably desire a love that is whole-some and safe, perhaps we still suspect that love ought to be more than a mutually convenient arrangement. Although interpreting love as gift raises the specter of terrible violence, to deny this danger would leave only loveless self-interest. The choice remains open, and it is not certain which is better. Nevertheless, in the spirit of hope, we may perhaps be inspired to keep faith with such unsettling love.

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Almost Nothing of the Unpresentable,' in Elisabeth Weber (ed), *Points...*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 83.

² Michael Horton claims that 'in deconstruction...absolute teleology is exchanged for absolute purposelessness' ('Eschatology After Nietzsche: Apollonian, Dionysian or Pauline?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2.1 [Mar 2000], p. 35). Such judgments are often careless: in this article, five footnotes (35-38 and 40) attribute to Derrida words that were written by John Caputo, and footnote 39 awards Derrida the authorship of a work by Emmanuel Levinas.

³ See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 39.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, 'On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,' in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 59.

⁶ Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 69.

⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum),' *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹² Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 29.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, 'Abraham, the Other,' in Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly (eds), *Judeities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 5.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 255.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Points...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 199.

¹⁶ Derrida, 'Sauf le nom,' p. 80.

¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 48,' in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (eds), *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 198.

¹⁸ Derrida, 'Sauf le nom,' p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²³ Although I diverge from Denys Turner below, his discussion of this point is uniquely helpful. See, for instance, Denys Turner, 'The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism,' *Modern Theology* 14.4 (October 1998), pp. 477-9.

²⁴ Meister Eckhart, 'Commentary on Exodus,' in Bernard McGinn (ed), *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New York, Paulist Press), 1986, p. 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁶ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 52,' *Meister Eckhart*, p. 200. Translation modified: As Michael Sells argues, the translator's interpolated quotation marks around 'God' undercuts Eckhart's radicality (*Mystical Languages of Unsayings* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], pp. 188-192).

²⁷ Amy Hollywood comments, 'Detachment, then, is both an epistemological and an ethical movement; to know God is to share in the divine being, marked by equality and justice' (Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001], p. 157).

²⁸ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 16b,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 278.

²⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Counterfeit Money,' quoted in Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 32.

³² Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 1,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 240.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

- ³⁵ Meister Eckhart, 'Woman, the Hour is Coming,' in Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), p. 54.
- ³⁶ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 71,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 322.
- ³⁷ Eckhart says, 'Whoever sees anything or if anything comes to your attention, it is not God' (*Ibid.*, p. 323); because experience too falls under critique, Eckhart is not a 'mystic' in the attenuated sense in which that term is often taken today.
- ³⁸ Meister Eckhart, 'The Book of "Benedictus,"' *Meister Eckhart*, p. 217.
- ³⁹ Eckhart, 'Sermon 52,' p. 201.
- ⁴⁰ Meister Eckhart, 'Counsels on Discernment,' *Meister Eckhart*, p. 280.
- ⁴¹ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 5b,' *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 183-184.
- ⁴² For more on this conception of hope, see (for instance) David Newheiser, "Eschatology and the Areopagite: Interpreting the Dionysian Hierarchies in Terms of Time." *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming).
- ⁴³ Eckhart, 'Sermon 48,' p. 198.
- ⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Passions,' *On the Name*, p. 26.
- ⁴⁵ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 70.
- ⁴⁶ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 30,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 294.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- ⁴⁹ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 63.
- ⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 77-8.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁵² Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 167. Turner's scintillating oeuvre is littered with misguided complaints against Derrida. See, for instance, Denys Turner, 'Tradition and Faith,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6.1 (Jan 2004), pp. 25-6 and 30-1; Denys Turner, 'How to Read the pseudo-Denys Today?,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.4 (Oct 2005), pp. 428-9; and Turner, 'Art of Unknowing,' p. 482-3 and 487-8.
- ⁵³ Turner, *FREG*, p. 167. Of course, forty years earlier Derrida himself had written: 'That the other appears as such only in its relationship to the same, is a self-evidence' (Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' *Writing and Difference* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 129).
- ⁵⁴ Turner, *FREG*, p. 167. Brian Treanor makes a similar argument in 'Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder,' in Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (eds), *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 143. For the reasons I describe immediately below, he too is wrong.
- ⁵⁵ Eckhart, 'Sermon 5b,' p. 182.
- ⁵⁶ Eckhart, 'Sermon 30,' p. 294.
- ⁵⁷ Eckhart, 'Counsels on Discernment,' p. 259.
- ⁵⁸ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 86,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 343.
- ⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 215. Cf. Martin Häglund's illuminating, though exaggerated, reflections on love and mortality in Derrida (*Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008], p. 114ff). Although Häglund's reading of Derrida is generally sound, his argument suffers considerably from clumsy generalizations concerning 'the' (ostensibly univocal) 'entire religious tradition' (*ibid.*, p. 113).
- ⁶⁰ Eckhart, 'Sermon 86,' p. 341.
- ⁶¹ Eckhart, 'Counsels on Discernment,' p. 253.
- ⁶² Eckhart, 'Sermon 86,' p. 340.
- ⁶³ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 63.
- ⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,' in John D. Caputo (ed), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 19.
- ⁶⁵ Mark Jordan's reflections concerning a negative theology of marriage exemplify the significance of this critical gesture (*Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], pp. 39, 49, 113-6). Jordan trenchantly argues the obscurity of divine manifestation in human relationship precludes the simplifications that beset the debate over same-sex unions. By the same token, he resists privileging psychological analysis in the evaluation of same-sex relationships, which echoes one implication of my argument - that love exists in excess of its therapeutic effects.
- ⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,' in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 77.
- ⁶⁷ See, for instance, Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p. 96; and Shira Wolosky, 'An "Other" Negative Theology: On Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,"' *Poetics Today* 19.2 (Summer 1998), p. 263. A notable exception here is Arthur Bradley, whose reading of Derrida's complex relationship with negative theology is among the best available in print (see Arthur Bradley, 'Without Negative Theology: Deconstruction and the Politics of Negative Theology,' *Heythrop Journal* 42 [2001], pp. 133-147).
- ⁶⁸ John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 253.
- ⁶⁹ Although Caputo sometimes acknowledges that negative theology is not univocal (e.g. John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], p. 8), he nevertheless claims that 'negative theology is always a higher, more refined way of affirming that God exists, or hyperexists' (*ibid.*, p. 7). Apart from the fact that these two claims are contradictory, the latter statement represents an exaggeration that mars Caputo's frequently helpful interpretation of Derrida. Derrida, for his part, knew better, as I have argued in David Newheiser, "Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius," in Scot Douglass and Morwenna Ludlow (eds), *Reading the Church Fathers* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 23-43.
- ⁷⁰ Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking,' p. 113.
- ⁷¹ John Caputo, 'Apostles of the Impossible,' *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, p. 198.

⁷² Likewise, Ian Almond incorrectly identifies 'the fundamental difference between the reasons why Eckhart and Derrida put their concepts of God/sign under erasure, the former choosing to do so...because of an inarticulable presence, the latter because of an ineluctable absence' (Ian Almond, 'Negative Theology, Derrida and the Critique of Presence: A Poststructuralist Reading of Meister Eckhart,' *The Heythrop Journal* 40.2 [1999], p. 163). Almond is wrong on both counts: Derrida's account of love is oriented by the presence of the other, while Eckhart nowhere claims that God's presence can be achieved.

⁷³ It is this reflexive negativity that preserves Derrida from the excesses of the triumphalist 'postmodernism' I discuss elsewhere; cf. David Newheiser, 'Conceiving Transformation without Triumphalism: Joachim of Fiore against Gianni Vattimo,' *Heythrop Journal*, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2265.2011.00690.x.

⁷⁴ John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,' *Modern Theology* 11.1 (Jan 1995), p. 124.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida and Alexander Garcia Düttmann, 'Perhaps or Maybe,' *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (Summer 1997), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given?', p. 130.

⁷⁸ Derrida, 'On the Gift,' p. 59.

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 66.

⁸⁰ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 29,' *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 290. Eckhart adds, 'Then he is really like God' - but presumably (being dead) he would then not know it.

⁸¹ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, p. 55. Although Harry Frankfurt's *Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) is judicious and engaging, my account diverges from his affirmation of normalization (p. 36), his allergy to aporia (p. 65), and his privileging of self-satisfaction (p. 97).