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Author(s): Jeffrey F Keuss

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Keuss - Diff'rance That Comes As One Unknown - JCRT 3.1

Diff'rance That Comes As One Unknown: Christology after Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"

Jeffrey F. Keuss
University of Glasgow

...You think ' because it is becoming plain to the modern eye that the ignorant love of his first followers wreathed his life in legend, that therefore you can escape from Jesus of Nazareth, you can put him aside as though he had never been? Folly! Do what you will, you cannot escape him. His life and death underlie our institutions as the alphabet underlies our literature.

The struggle to 'figure the Christ' through various means and media represents a continual search for not only the *content* of the figure in question (what makes up and makes possible this union of human and sacred) but ultimately the *form* within which this figuring is shown and understood. John McIntyre, in his Warfield Lectures delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary, begins his discussion of christology and christocentrism by employing a term not typically used in doctrinal discourse ' *shape*. ' As McIntyre rightly states, "if we were asked to give in a summary form the distinguishing characteristic of Protestant theology in our time, many of us would reply that it is its *christocentric* quality which claims this title. And the evidence would be convincing".¹ As McIntyre goes on to surmise:

It is by this time clear, then, that christology has come to exercise in theology a range of functions for which it was not originally designed: in this range we find exegetical, expository and hermeneutical as well as normative and critical elements' classical christology has come under severe strain in these new settings in which it has of late found itself and a crisis has begun to develop which can only be resolved by a radical reassessment of the basic *shape* of this central doctrine of the Christian faith as today expressed.²

McIntyre rightly notes that there is indeed a continued search for the basic *shape* of this central doctrine of the Christian faith that is the nature of Christ and it goes back to the very foundations of the Church itself.

Interestingly enough, the creed also presents a *condemnation* of those who did not 'fit' Christ into this shape. This is marked in the original form of the Nicene Creed which concludes with a portion originally added as an anathema against the Arians: "But to those who say: 'There is a time when He was not'; and 'He was not before he was made'; and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance or essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable or alterable' they are condemned by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church".³ Where a creed is to be an *assertion* of faith (the term coming from the Latin *credo*, "I believe") this original rendering stands as a statement *against* "I don't believe" as much as a statement *for* certain beliefs.' The poetics thereby

¹John McIntyre, *The Shape Of Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1966) p. 9.

²*ibid.*, p. 11.

³*ibid.*

make claims that overturn the very definition of the genre itself (i.e. what constitutes *Credo*) through its construction *as a work* and the claims it makes on how it is to be read. In this way, the *poetics* of the creed (and of much literature as I will argue throughout this essay) makes claims that at times are more profound than the actual content or genre the work supposedly represents.

As Rushdie correctly surmises, the move into the realm of the fictive that is represented by forms such as the novel is a move *away* from the privileging of “one language above all others” and an approach toward a poetics that acknowledges the hope for “the freedom to portray and analyse the struggle” inherent in such a search.

a full coming together of total opposites, the opposites of total ending and total beginning, and the totally old world or aeon and a totally new aeon or world’s *coincidentia oppositorum* is at the very centre of the Christian epic, as is a calling forth and voyage into an apocalyptic totality, and [the Christian] epic totality is an apocalyptic totality if only because it embodies such a radical and total transformation. Here, this transformation is deepest in envisioning the depths of the Godhead itself, depths that are apocalyptic depths, and hence depths unveiling a new Godhead only by bringing an old Godhead to an end.⁴

This statement bears striking similarity to contemporary post-structuralist writers such as Jacques Derrida, who, while resolutely determined not to be considered as a ‘religious’ writer, actually attempts to form such a poetics that Altizer argues is at the very heart of the person of Jesus. Jesus, as that subject of writing where subjectivity is both constructed and destroyed simultaneously, bears marked resemblance to that which Derrida argues for in his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” from *Writing and Difference*.⁵

Tracy goes on to say that “rather than repeating the domesticated slogans that presume to capture this dialectic (“The [Church] is *in* the world, but not *of* it”), it seems more correct to say that the [Church] is released (the violent imagery is exact) *from* the world, *for* the world”.⁶

the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence ‘*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.’⁷

This power is, on the one hand, rhetorical, yet on the other hand, substantial and real. But words do not necessarily establish what the object is; they instead participate in “a history of meanings”.⁸ Moreover, to make a claim of identity based on signifiers such as Jesus takes the form of both a metaphor (x=y or “this” is to “that”) and a metonymy (a name change, Christ is now Jesus), so that what the import sought through form and content may still be different from what either the metaphor or the metonymy can suggest. The face we may seek for ‘the authentic Jesus’ is not to be found. The face we *do* figure “is neither the face of God nor the figure of man: it is their resemblance.” A resemblance which, however, we must think before, or without, the assistance of the Same”.⁹ We who seek this ‘face’ are in the space between

“We live in and of difference,” according to Derrida. If Derrida’s assertion is true, where does import reside?

In the end, I am proposing a rhetorical strategy whereby one actually says more than one

⁴Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997) pp. xiv, xv, xxiii.

⁵A recommended supplement to reading Derrida’s article is Lee Morrissey’s essay entitled “Derrida, Algeria, and ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’” in *Postmodern Culture* Volume 9, Issue 2. Morrissey situates much of Derrida’s reflections in “Structure, Sign, and Play” within Derrida’s own sense of displacement as a Jew in Algeria.

⁶David Tracy, *ibid*.

⁷*ibid*.

⁸*ibid*, p. 279.

⁹Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge Press, 1978) p. 109.

appears to have said. The interplay found in the “rupture” of the signs that denote Jesus whether in the poetic space or within the space of a kerygmatic community can lead to a new space for Jesus to be ‘authentic’ in the full Heideggerian sense.’ In many ways I am arguing for a *poetics of Jesus* where entering within is not certain nor safe, a place that is “the undiscovered country” of Hamlet’s musings and a place that is closest to Derrida’s sense of “autobiography” as writing that is most enigmatic and most open. This is a place that returns to forming questions of life writ large, where people gather and *that* gathering becomes the defining character.” It is a place that is open always to possible destruction of the pre-conceived, yet passionate for the clearing act of being-in-the-world and being-for-the-world.’ As Derrida has said, the space of literature “allows one to say everything.’ To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is also to break out of prohibitions”.¹⁰ In the midst of the “New Quest” for the Historical Jesus, New Testament scholar G’nther Bornkamm stated in the opening sentence of *Jesus of Nazareth* that “no one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus”¹¹. Yet there remains the drive as seen in many contemporary writers to tell, in the words of George Eliot, “the simple story” that is always concerned to tell all stories and ultimately to tell them all through a poetics that finds its form in a poetic incarnation of the one whom Schweitzer felt “comes to us as one unknown”¹²

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3. As one turns to some of the earliest Christian writings, this quest for a *poetics of Jesus* - how the form, content, and import of writing itself makes claims of ‘ultimate concern’¹³ regarding the nature of Christ - we see particular attention paid to the ecumenical creeds. On the occasion of the Council of Nicaea in CE 325, the dispute within the Church regarding questions brought forward by the Arians as to the very form and definition of Christ’s relation to God, gave rise to the need for a poetics. As the Arians argued in favour of a radical doctrine of monotheism,

¹⁰ibid. p. 36.

¹¹G’nther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* trans. I. McLuskey, F. McLuskey, and J.M. Robinson (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960) p. 13.

¹²Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. (London: A & C Black, 1954/1906) p. 401.

¹³To recollect Paul Tillich’s use of the phrase in reference to that which is of highest good and meaning.” In “On the Idea of a Theology of Culture”, Paul Tillich distinguishes between content, form, and import, to which he links the terms autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy. “Substance or import is something different from content.’ By content we mean something objective in its simple existence, which by form is raised up to the intellectual-cultural sphere.’ By substance or import, however, we understand the meaning, the spiritual substantiality, which alone gives form its significance.’ We can therefore say: Substance or import is grasped by means of a form and given expression in a content.’ Content is accidental, substance [or import] essential, and form is the mediating element.’ The form must be appropriate to the content; so there is no opposition between the cultivation of form and the cultivation of content; it is rather that these two represent one extreme, and the cultivation of substance [or import] represents the other.” pp. 165-166.” According to Tillich, a cultural formation in which form predominates over substance is *autonomous*, while one in which import predominates over form is *heteronomous*.’ Form in synergistic balance with import is *theonomous*.’ Theonomous cultural forms (e.g. a poetics of Jesus) are in the nature of the case explicitly open to and disclosive of the unconditioned depth of ultimate meaning.’ The revelation of a predominant import consists in the fact that the form becomes more and more inadequate to the import.’ The import in its overflowing abundance shatters the form meant to contain it.’ For Tillich, this overflowing and shattering of form by import is itself the pre-eminent form of religiously charged cultural products.’ *My use of form, content, and import throughout this thesis are in keeping with Tillich’s definitions and Tillich’s understanding of form in synergistic balance with import as theonomous is central to what I term ‘a poetics of Jesus’*. See Paul Tillich, “On the Idea of a Theology of Culture,” in *What is Religion?* Trans. James L. Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) pp. 165ff, “The Nature of Religious Language” in *Theology of Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 53ff, and “The Spiritual Presence and the Ambiguities of Culture” in *Systematic Theology 3: Life and the Spirit / History and the Kingdom of God*. (London: SCM Press, 1997) pp. 245 ‘ 262.

they in turn advocated a denial of Christ as being *one* with God, but asserted him to be *created* and therefore *not of the same substance* as God. The Nicene Creed was drafted in response to this assertion. The actual *poetics* of the creed is presented in a manner to assert the orthodox stance of Christ as one who is

only-begotten Son of God;
 Begotten of his Father before all worlds,
 God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God;
 Begotten, not made;
 Being of one substance with the Father;
 By whom all things were made...

4. This elevation of poetics is exemplified regarding the further history of the ecumenical creeds in the Council of Chalcedon in CE 451, where the re-writing of the Nicene Creed as a response to such heresies as Arianism as well as Apollinarianism (the denial of the full humanity of Christ), Nestorianism (the denial of the union of the two natures in Christ), and Eutycheanism (which sought to deny the distinction of the two natures) rendered what is commonly known as the *Symbol of Chalcedon*.¹⁴ The very form and limits within which the Church can work out the orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ, is given in its poetics. As a *symbol*, it operates as a *frame* within which all subsequent statements made regarding Christ can be seen 'that which falls outside the scope of its language and its intent is thereby outside the limits of expression regarding the person of Christ. Due to the density of its very form, the statement forged at Chalcedon is truly more 'symbol' than *credo*.' Throughout the history of the Church, the Symbol of Chalcedon has "never had a wide liturgical or catechetical use because of the complexity of language and intricacy of definition."¹⁴ This "complexity of language" moves the Symbol of Chalcedon *outside* the orality of language and into a realm of form that seeks to judge subsequent language forms and uses, but does not itself participate in, the common life of language in its fullest capacity.¹⁵
5. Figuring a *poetics of Jesus* has continued to challenge subsequent generations in both direct and indirect means, with the search to find a poetics that *opens* rather *closes off* questions of meaning and engagement, allowing for the possibility of the nexus of the sacred and the subject. Such a poetics is explicitly open to and disclosive of the unconditioned import of meaning found in Jesus. Finding such a poetics that *flows* in the act of writing as continuous discovery and engagement with ultimate concern, rather than a poetics that *delimits* and ultimately *constricts* the ultimate concerns of the sacred and the subject behind static renderings of dialectical logocentrism was particularly active in the work of writers in Germany and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the writing of those concerned with philosophy and biblical criticism in the eighteenth century, the role of *history* in the discussions regarding the figuring of Jesus of Nazareth became central to christology' attempting to create a figuring of Jesus who *was* rather than the Christ who *is*.' As stated by Gregory Dawes in *The Historical Jesus Quest*:

¹⁴Hugh Kerr, *Readings in Christian Thought*- 2nd ed.' (Nashville: Abington Press, 1993) p. 75.

¹⁵Walter Ong makes the distinction in the way in which the very content of information shifts its meaning as it inhabits a different medium since different senses are utilised to make 'sense' of the information received.' What Ong terms as a "sensorium" is the constructed form that communication takes in order to gain access to the subject via given senses.' As he notes, the very potency of religion and the message it is trying to convey becomes lost as it moves into a purely literary form since it then becomes delimited by the manifold meanings of language.' See Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) and Robert Detweiler and David Jasper, eds. *Religion and Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) pp. 36-38.

The question of the historical Jesus is such a familiar one today that it is difficult for us to realise how recent a question it is.' For more than 1600 years the idea of asking such a question never arose. More precisely, in the minds of the Christian interpreters of the Bible there was no difference between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Church's proclamation. Insofar as the Christian scriptures spoke of the incarnation of God at a particular point in human affairs, the accuracy of their reports was taken for granted.¹⁶

6. The challenge to traditional understandings of the person of Jesus during this period is exemplified in the pioneering work of the late seventeenth century philosopher and ethicist Benedict de Spinoza. In his "Of the Interpretation of Scripture" from Chapter Seven of *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza argues that the biblical interpreter is interested in discovering only 'the meaning' of the biblical texts and not their 'truth':

But for this task [of interpreting scripture] we need a method and order similar to that which we employ in interpreting Nature from the facts presented before us' we must first seek from our study of Scripture that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundation of all Scripture; in short, that which is commended in Scripture by all the prophets as doctrine eternal and most profitable for all mankind' Scripture does not teach formally, and as eternal doctrine. On the contrary, we have clearly shown that the prophets themselves were not in agreement on these matters, and therefore on topics of this kind we should make no assertion that claims to be the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, even though the natural light of reason may be quite decisive on that point. ' with regard to the meaning of revelation, it should be observed that this method only teaches us how to discover what the prophets really saw or heard, and not what they intended to signify or represent by the symbols in question. The latter we can only guess at, not infer with certainty from the basis of Scripture.¹⁷ (emphasis added)

7. One can hear strains of the eighteenth century writer Hermann Samuel Reimarus in Spinoza's conclusions. In his *Fragments* written in 1777 and first published posthumously by Lessing as fragments of unknown origin found in the Duke of Brunswick's library at Wolfenb'ttel (*Fragments of the Wolfenb'ttel Unknown*), Reimarus argues for scripture itself as a thoroughly rewritten genre 'constantly revised and reshaped through the years - thereby overturning both a historical grounding in an 'original' text and at the same time supporting, albeit by inference, a view of scripture as a re-imagined space. With regard to Jesus' parables, Reimarus writes:

But since these secrets [the secrets of the Kingdom of God disclosed in Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10] consist merely of an explanation of figurative concepts and the explanation, insofar as it is stripped of parable, in turn contains nothing more than the common knowledge of the promised Kingdom of God under the Messiah, one must confess that no really new or incomprehensible precepts are to be found among these secrets.' *Take note from this, to what extent people let themselves be deceived by words!*' Today we are accustomed to understanding by the word 'faith' or 'gospel' the whole body of Christian doctrine that we are to believe, or all the articles

¹⁶Gregory W. Dawes, ed. *The Historical Jesus Quest: A Foundational Anthology* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999) p. 1.

¹⁷Benedictus Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989) p. 140.

of the Christian faith in their interconnection, the entire catechism and the creed, and we particularly call 'mysteries' those doctrines that surpass understanding and that are neither to be understood or proved by reason alone.¹⁸

8. The notion of Jesus as a person of history whose (to use Spinoza's term) *certainty* as the Christ could not be supported by questions put forward by biblical criticism continued in the days following writers such as Spinoza, Reimarus, and Kant. This left a new generation of writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century suspicious of so-called idle claims regarding the historicity of Jesus, but looking at the effects that such epistemological fractures would have upon the grounding of poetics both in theology and literature, after history, is rendered non-essential.
9. One shift in the wake of separating the Jesus of history from the Jesus of the Church's proclamation lay in the notion of *Jesus as the great metaphysical idea* that became an alternative means to support Jesus as the Christ in a new fashion.' This opens the opportunity for fiction to be a possible space for the figuring of the nexus of subject and sacred.' As Lessing spoke of the "ugly, broad ditch"¹⁹ that existed between the certainty of history and the certainty of reason, he saw the resolution to this proverbial chasm in the advocating for a purely *spiritual* understanding of Christology.²⁰ This move is further articulated by J.G. Fichte in his statement that "the metaphysical only, and not the historical, can give us blessedness; the latter can only give us understanding".²¹ Schelling asserts this notion of the purely metaphysical and idealised rendering of Christ as Idea in his "On the Study of Theology" where he makes the assertion that the 'Christ idea' is the "incarnation of eternity" in which "the culmination of this process is Christ assuming visible human form [appearance as the opposite concept to idea], and for this reason it is also its beginning".²² This 'beginning which is also the end' in Schelling's thought prompts the speculative christology of Kant and Hegel.' As noted by Otto Weber in his *Dogmatics*, this 'speculative Christology' is that which "understood the Christ-idea as the code, disguise, expression, or manifestation of the unity of the absolute, which is realising itself in history, with the relative [the world, man, the human race]".²³ In Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the designation 'Son of God' is aligned with the "ideal of a humanity well pleasing to God."²⁴ This notion is in keeping with Hegel's later

¹⁸Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments of the Wolfenb'ittel Unknown* 'in *Reimarus: Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1970) Part I, section 9, p. 75.

¹⁹Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and Power" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956) p. 55.

²⁰In the early 20th century Karl Barth would later remark that "the Lessing question" regarding this "ugly, broad ditch" was within a much larger context of what Barth termed "the problem of distance" which is the question of the "real" distance that humankind is in relation to God (citing Luke 5:8). For Barth, Christ is the first truly recognisable manifestation of both the problem of this distance and its ultimate resolution.' In short, Barth takes Lessing's dilemma beyond the philosophical boundaries and places it into what Barth sees as the larger context, that of the salvific. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969) part , pp. 287ff.'

²¹J. G. Fichte, *The Way Toward the Blessed Life, or, The Doctrine of Religion* ' 1806 trans. W. Smith (London: Chapman, 1849) p. 107.

²²Schelling, "On the Study of Theology", in *On University Studies*, trans. E.S. Morgan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966) p. 94.

²³Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics Vol. 2* ' trans. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983) p. 3.

²⁴Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T.M. Greene (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) pp. 54ff.' This use of Kant's correlation of the 'Son of God' with the "ideal" is manifested in Herder and in a more 'emphatic' way in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1928) pp. 377ff.

conclusions regarding Christ as “a history for the spiritual community because it is absolutely adequate [as] idea”.²⁵ With the notion of the ‘idea’ having the weight of truth that rivalled that of historical fact, the importance of a poetics becomes more apparent. Since it is ‘the possible’ and ‘the imagined’ as well as ‘the factual’ that can frame the potential of the sacred meeting the subject, the central issue moves beyond *what* is written and read to *how* writing and reading is done.

10. As suggested in such works as *Towards a Christian Poetics*²⁶ by Michael Edwards, the rendering of a poetics that acknowledges the full ramifications of an answer to that question posed to Peter “who do you say that I am?” remains scarce in contemporary poetics, nowhere more so than in the very arena where such a poetics should arise, namely New Testament scholarship. In their recent book entitled *The Meaning of Jesus’ Two Visions*, New Testament Scholars N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg come together as representatives of traditionalist and liberal scholarship respectively, in an attempt to dissolve the tensions that surround current academic debates regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth which have become “acrimonious, with a good deal of name calling and angry polemic in both public and private discourse”.²⁷ The ultimate aim of this ‘open discussion’ is to provide a way through such forms of discussion and hopefully to demonstrate a means by which scholarly discussions surrounding the person of Jesus can take place. As the subtitle of the book denotes, both Wright and Borg attempt to approach the task as ‘visionaries’ of sorts, hoping to guide a new generation toward developing a ‘new vision’ of how one communicates the nature and person of Jesus. What one finds at the end of this attempt is merely a rendering anew of forms and analogies that bring about a closed christology, one that bears little or no resemblance to the Christ they purport to acknowledge and ultimately seek to locate.²⁸
11. In his 1990 lecture published in *Granta* entitled “Is Nothing Sacred?” Salman Rushdie discusses the irony whereby traditionally ‘religious’ writing seems to be anything but religious, whilst those who dwell in the space of fiction seem to find openings where the possibility of the sacred is seen. As he compares the genres of ‘religion’ and ‘literature’ he notes that:

Between religion and literature ‘there is a linguistically based dispute. But it is not a dispute of simple opposites. Because whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one set of values above all others, one text above all others, the novel has always been about the way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel, and about the shifting relations between them, which are relations of power.’ The novel does not seek to establish a privileged language,

²⁵G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, trans. E.S. Haldane (New York: Humanities Press, 1968) pp. 72ff.

²⁶Michael Edwards, *Toward a Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1984). In his address to the conference on Christianity and Literature at Macquarrie University, 5-8 July 1999 in Sydney, Australia entitled “Can We Speak of a Christian Poetics?”, David Jasper cited Edward’s work as “in Pascal’s phrase, *un monstre incompréhensible* ‘a monster that passes all understanding’ because it remains so deeply embedded within the established traditions of Christianity and its theology, his reading of literature exercised only in terms of Christianity, failing to make the radical move which acknowledges the true poet who overturns language which sustains such theology, moving on the boundaries of a silence which, like Augustine, opens our ears and eyes to the profound dichotomy between nature and grace” “Can We Speak of a Christian Poetics?” *Literature and Religion’ The Korean Society of Literature and Religion*. (Vol. 5, No. 1 Summer 2000) pp. 139, 140.

²⁷N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus’ Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999) p. x.

²⁸Attempts by New Testament scholars to figure the Christ has also seen attempts at fictional accounts with such recent works as Gerard Sloyan’s *Jesus in Focus* and Gerd Theissen’s *The Shadow of the Galilean*. While these seek to project a re-figured Christ, these fall back onto poetics that limits and is primarily dependent upon historical inquiry.

but it insists upon the freedom to portray and analyse the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges.²⁹

12. In order to locate such a poetics of Jesus ' a poetics that is free to portray and analyse the struggle of figuring the nexus of the subject and sacred - one must place such possibility of a poetics where it is called into judgement before such a poetics can be figured ' a disfiguring and figuring at once. This entry into such a poetics is ultimately a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Thomas Altizer asserts that such a space evokes the following:
13. As Altizer maintains, at the centre of the Christian epic, that is, the centre of writing that brings to mind the person of Christ, one must acknowledge that the question of the person of Jesus is the ultimate *coincidentia oppositorum*, a disturbing centre-point to all concerns.' This acknowledgement is one of, as Altizer argues, "eschatological proclamation and parabolic enactment" that, like the true Jesus, will "reverse every given form of God and the world".

To enter this parabolic enactment through the medium of literature is to take on a *poetics of Jesus* which will reverse every image of Jesus we have known if we are to be open to his contemporary and apocalyptic presence.' Just such a reversal has continually occurred in the Christian imagination, a reversal not only of given images of Jesus, but also, and even thereby, a reversal of all given Christian images of God.³⁰

14. In this essay, Derrida is seeking to situate ultimate subjectivity as it is to be determined by a given subject in a place beyond language. Seeking not to destroy the subject, his stated wish is to "'situate it.... [This ultimately is] a question of knowing *where* it [the subject] comes from".³¹ In this way, the origin of a subject before language is "named" by it, prior to seeking definition of pre-existent terms. This point of origin is where one draws meaning from the "history of meanings" which form our understanding. This is what Derrida terms "centre". As one follows his argument, this "centre" resembles the "centre" argued by Altizer to be that of Jesus.
15. Jean Hyppolite, author of *Logic and Existence*³², posed the question to Derrida regarding his lecture on "Structure, Sign, and Play" as to "what a *centre* might mean"³³. In Hyppolite's words, is "the centre the knowledge of the general rules which, after a fashion, allow us to understand the interplay of the elements? Or is the centre certain elements which enjoy a particular privilege with the ensemble?"³⁴. Derrida's answer was as follows: "I don't mean to say that I thought of approaching an idea of the centre that would be an affirmation".³⁵ The centre of which he speaks is not a certain place as we shall see, not a place to be affirmed and locked into meaning, for this would do to the word "centre" what Derrida says the term

²⁹Salman Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred?" ' Herbert Read Memorial Lecture in *Granta* 31, Spring 1990 pp. 102, 103.'

³⁰*ibid.*, p. xxv.

³¹Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge Press, 1978) pp. 278ff.

³²Jean Hyppolite, *Logic & Existence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

³³Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds. *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) pp. 265ff.' Lee Morrissey makes interesting comparisons between the questions raised by Derrida in "Structure, Sign, and Play" and the political undertones of the essay.' See Lee Morrissey, "Derrida, Algeria, and "Structure, Sign, and Play" *Postmodern Culture* Volume 9, Issue 2.

³⁴*ibid.*

³⁵*ibid.*

centre now *does* - making a “substitution of *linguistic* centre for *true* centre” - so that “the centre receives different forms or names” and we ultimately lose that which we seek.’ Derrida’s definition of “centre” constitutes abstracted definitions of a communally concerned identity: “The centre, which is by definition unique, constitutes that very thing within a structure which while *governing* that structure, *escapes* structurality”.³⁶

16. In the fight to define, definition in its truest sense is lost. To say, for example, that theology has the exclusive role and location for the spiritual formation in people’s lives overturns the basic claims of Christianity itself. As noted by David Tracy:³⁷

...the [Church] lives in a strange and healing paradox disclosed’ throughout the scriptures: so deeply into one’s existence does the unmasking radicality of the Word strike that the radical contingency and ambiguity of all culture, all civilisation, all institutions, even nature itself [in sum, the “world”] are unmasked by the same Word which commands and enables work *for* the world, and more concretely for the neighbour.’ This Christian insight into the conventionality, the arbitrariness, the radical contingency of all culture, all nature and all institutions has a reverse side: the radical ambiguity of all culture, nature, institutions ‘all the world’ and their constant temptation to self-aggrandisement and self-delusion.’ Yet this very same insight into the radical contingency and real ambiguity of the world posits itself not only by negating all “worldly” pretensions to divinity, atemporality, eternity, but also by positing the command and the possibility of living in and for this contingent, ambiguous, created and divinely beloved “world”.³⁸

17. Attempts to figure Jesus in poetics will *always* have to fight the tendency to build walls and choose a fixed centre rather than an organic one ‘a poetics that is delimited, static and closed rather than one that provokes eschatological proclamation and parabolic enactment that, like the true Jesus, will reverse every given form of God and the world.’³⁹ As Derrida notes, we seek delimited structures such as a closed and static poetics through a fixed unchanging centerpoint which ultimately “neutralises’ [and] reduces” the truth of a subject into merely “a point of presence, a fixed origin”.⁴⁰ It is this false centre then that controls, in the sense of containing, the structurality of the structure, reducing it. Thus the extremes are neutralised by the centre.
18. In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida emphasises that true centre is “not a fixed locus but a *function*”.⁴¹ In one sense, then, centering as function, or *import* to recall Tillich’s category, need not be put in one place; the function can be distributed throughout the structure. This is another way of understanding that the centre is not the centre; the centre as import need not be at the central place. Moreover, if the centre as import is not a place, then it is highly variable; not only can the function or import be fulfilled from different places, but different centres can fulfil the same function. Derrida states that “if this is so, the entire history of the

³⁶Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 279.

³⁷I am using the notion of the Church collective [Church] as comparable to Tracy’s use of the individual christian.

³⁸David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1981) p. 48.

³⁹In his most recent book, *Cities of God*, Graham Ward states that “the logic of Christ as Logos is the logic of *différance*’ the deferral of identity and the non-identical repetition which institutes and perpetuates alterity: this is not that, or, more accurately, this is not only that.” Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 110.

⁴⁰Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 278

⁴¹*ibid.*, p. 280.

concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre".⁴² In short, the functionality of what is 'centre' is itself just a substitute for a previous centre; the 'function' remains the same even if the centre has moved.

19. As Derrida notes, "the history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of metaphors and metonymies".⁴³ Derrida goes on to state that, "we have no language -no syntax and no lexicon- which is foreign to this history" of metaphors and metonymies.⁴⁴ For example, in claims such as the seeing the sign/signifier Jesus as the "historical Jesus", the "kerygmatic Jesus", the "apocalyptic Jesus", the "liberation Jesus", or what have you, we must realise that it is only being in the form of metaphors and metonymies.' Although metaphors claim to state that "this is that", or while metonymies, as the root indicates, make possible changes of names ("we will now re-name this *to be called* that"), they are nothing but descriptions and ultimately barriers. This is central to Derrida's project in "Structure, Sign, and Play" in his arguing that we need to look beyond our need in Western metaphysics to fight for

the difference between the same and the other, which is not a difference or a relation among others, has no meaning in the infinite' this horizon is not the horizon of the infinitely other, but of a reign in which the difference between the same and the other, *differ'nce*, would no longer be valid, that is, of a reign in which peace itself will no longer have meaning.⁴⁵

20. For Derrida, given this distinction drawn between true identity and metaphor, it is to be concluded that identity ultimately only exists in "difference" between meaning and the label placed upon it. These labels of metaphors and metonymies only have meaning in their ability to assuage and master a certain degree of anxiety, probably the anxiety of difference, which is also the anxiety of similarity.' Anxiety as to what lies behind the veil of signifiers such as Jesus in whatever manifestation, forces institutions to double efforts to re-interpret terms as well as look through these signs to what is beyond. This shift, according to Derrida, is the point of "rupture".
21. "Rupture comes about when the structurality of the structure had to begin to be thought".⁴⁶ Once we begin to recognise that the structure of any given sign is merely a structure, and nothing else, a rupture *can* occur. Derrida claims that "perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an event" where "its exterior form would be that of a rupture".⁴⁷ Prior to this realisation, when people believe that the structure is something *other* than a structure, they have chosen a mere metaphor instead of import, and in short, chosen form rather than meaning.
22. According to Lee Morrissey, one way of framing Derrida's attempt in "Structure, Sign, and Play" could be understood as part of what Hal Foster in *Return of the Real* describes as "a shift

⁴²ibid., p. 278.

⁴³ibid., p. 279.

⁴⁴ibid., p. 280.

⁴⁵Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁶Jacques Derrida, "Sign, Structure, and Play", *ibid.*, p. 280.

⁴⁷Macksey and Donato, *ibid.*, p. 278.

in conception - ' from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma,"⁴⁸ that is, the 'real' is something that is beyond critique as 'the traumatic' is beyond category and escapes language altogether. This 'shift in conception' is an attempt to see *with* reality, not merely form *a* reality to be seen. Similarly, for the question of a *poetics of Jesus* to be resolved, a rupture is needed in the false ways that meaning is made and supported. The reality that there is *no* institution, be it the church or the academy, whose task it is to preserve separate fixed centering points needs to be affirmed. Rather, *all* are part of a larger enterprise whose "centre" is shared beyond definition. This calls to mind Thomas Altizer's challenge to seek "a Jesus who was the first truly apocalyptic prophet, the one who first enacted a total apocalyptic ending ' but an apocalyptic ending that is an apocalyptic beginning, a beginning that has been renewed again and again by those who embody him, or those who embody his acts and words".⁴⁹

23. In an interview, Derrida stated that "what interests me today is not strictly called either literature or philosophy, I'm amused by the idea that my adolescent desire ' let's called it that ' should have directed me toward something in writing which is neither the one or the other. What is it?' *Autobiography* is perhaps the least adequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today"⁵⁰. This is where I suggest the centering character begins - at its most authentic point.' This point which is "the most enigmatic, the most open" is where writing becomes an act of self-creating and encountering that brings such open and enigmatic authenticity is characteristic of a poetics of Jesus.' Victorian writer George Eliot noted in one of her letters that writing which is truly autobiographical shows how a writer's mind "grew, how it was determined by the joys, sorrows and other influences of childhood and youth ' that is a precious contribution to knowledge".⁵¹ In this way, the genre of the Gospels is the true fiction as that which figures the self and the sacred at once, whose story is unique and universal in its writing and, to cite Heidegger, strives to 'unname naming' by providing an apocalyptic beginning that has been renewed again and again by those who embody it as an act of 'remembrance': re-membering the broken through *poiesis*.
24. Ultimately, a poetics of Jesus is never *formed*, always *on the way*, but never *there*, thus beginning this dialogue is not an easy one. As Derrida himself notes in "Structure, Sign, and Play", "there is too much, more than one can say".⁵² It is a continuous process that must not be static nor fixed if we are to "recast, if not rigorously refound a discourse

... One has to go through the experience of deconstruction"⁵³ to find another way, a new way, all the time.

⁴⁸Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996) p. 146.' Foster maintains that this idea of *trauma* is central to critical theory after postmodernity: "Across artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures (in Soho, at Yale, on *Oprah*) there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma' Here is indeed a traumatic subject, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not." p. 168.

⁴⁹Thomas J. J. Altizer, op. cit., p. 17.

⁵⁰Jacques Derrida, " 'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida". *Acts of Literature/Jacques Derrida*. ed. Derek Attridge. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 34.

⁵¹George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters* ed. George S. Haight (London: Oxford University Press, 1954-1956) vol. 7, p. 230.

⁵²Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play", *ibid.*, p. 289.

⁵³Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", *ibid.*, pp. 33ff.

Notes

Jeffrey F. Keuss, (Ph.D. Glasgow) is Lecturer of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. His books include *A Poetics of Jesus* and *The Sacred and The Profane: Current Demands on Hermeneutics* (ed.).

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