William Blake, Jacques Derrida and the Secret Heart of Deconstruction

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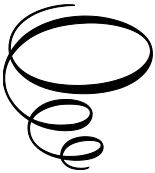
The Dark Back of Time

By

Brendan McNamee

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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Penetrating so many secrets, we cease to believe in the unknowable. But there it sits nevertheless, calmly licking its chops.

—H. L. Mencken

. . . a luminous, active nothingness, vibrating with perpetual possibilities . . .

—Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*

Love, the spirit, is an eternal breeze, fluttering down the empty tubes that we are.

—Mario Levrero, *The Luminous Novel*

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INTRODUCTION

This book offers a reading of Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction seen in the light of William Blake's aphorism from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time".[1] In his lifetime William Blake was widely considered mad. When a Baptist minister of the time was asked if he agreed that the poet was cracked, he replied, "Yes, but his is a crack that lets in the light".[2] The remark calls to mind Leonard Cohen's most oft-quoted line, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in",[3] which I read as a modern rendering of Blake's sentence. Derrida has never been called mad but the accusation of fraud has more than once been levelled at him, due to his opaque and dense style of argumentation and his frequent testing of the boundaries of conventional philosophy. Perhaps fraud is the modern version of mad for anything that dares to peek beyond the walls of common sense. There will be a lot of peeking beyond the walls of common sense in what follows and, for better or worse, Blake and Derrida will be my lodestones. They will be joined by many others, of course. One way to describe this book would be to call it a wide-ranging conversation with a roomful of poets, seers and philosophers past and present, presided over by Blake and Derrida. In a nutshell, I'll be reading deconstruction in the pages that follow as an ongoing attempt to let the light in on outdated or calcified practices, structures and ways of thinking. That light, I'll contend, is Blake's eternity.

For its detractors, deconstruction is often seen as a destructive rejection of cherished beliefs and certainties. But that word "certainties" is the hinge. Certainties have a way of subtly devolving from life-enhancing structures to stifling and destructive oppressions. An attractive form can hide a rotting interior. As the popularity of the Leonard Cohen line quoted above would

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[1] William Blake, *Complete Writings.* (London: OUP, 1966), 151.
[2] G. E. Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 380.
[3] Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" on *The Future*. Columbia Records, 1992.

attest, many people intuitively recognise this; it's one reason for the decline in organised (and the rise in unorganised) religion. Deconstruction in its modern manifestation has to do with close examination of texts in order to uncover hidden contradictions and evasions. This is deconstruction as theory and practice, but unless something other enters the equation, then nothing has really changed. Either one interpretation is simply replaced by another, or the abdication of reason by relativism ensues. (Relativism is itself a form of rigidity if adhered to as a philosophy. Also, its shallowness can be exposed when set against the life of its adherent. As Annie Dillard puts it, "It is always instructive to ask a relativist how he raises his children".[4]) The following essay is an attempt to delineate some of the contours of that mysterious other. I'm looking at deconstruction as a happening rather than as a practice or a theory and examining it against a variety of literary quotations, ranging from Heraclitus to Heaney, which show that the phenomenon has been around for as long as philosophy itself, and that it forms the beating heart of both art and religion. I read it, in fact, as a kind of modern first cousin to mysticism, what the American philosopher John D. Caputo calls "religion without religion".[5] My focus will be on how it provides a clarifying link between a wide range of otherwise quite disparate writers, philosophers and mystics, and, more importantly, on the central role it plays, or should play, in life itself.

The book is not an in-depth study of Derrida's philosophy. A large part of his writings remains inaccessible to me. Derrida once described his experience of reading the fiction of Maurice Blanchot as like being "plunged in a fog out of which only some fascinating glimmers, and sometimes, but at irregular intervals, the light of an invisible lighthouse on the coast reached me".[6] This pretty much echoes my reading of Derrida. The most interesting writers are the ones who fascinate and baffle at the same time. When the fascination outweighs the bafflement you have a writer with the power to enter your bloodstream, to penetrate to the deepest layers of consciousness. (The difficulty involved may well be a necessary

[4] Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1983), 132.
[5] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,1997), xxi.
[6] Benoit Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography.* Trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 268.

part of the process, on the Yeatsian premise of "for that only which comes easily can never be a portion of our being".[7]) So I can rightly be accused of cherry-picking insofar as I rely on those fascinating glimmers and ignore the rest. My justification for this approach is twofold: one, I put more faith in poetic expressions than in rigorously analytic ones. As Yeats said, "You can refute Hegel but not the saint or the song of sixpence".[8] This point addresses the question, which will crop up throughout the essay, of which form of truth has more value: that of logic, or that of experience. In the abstract field of philosophy there isn't an argument in existence that cannot be persuasively countered, so malleable is language and so temperamentally diverse the minds that mould it. I'm happy to take Derrida as more of an artist than a philosopher and treat those of his words that sing for me accordingly. And secondly, I can call on Derrida himself in defence of my more poetically allusive approach, if the following quote from a conversation he had with Maurizio Ferraris can be taken as a guide. In answer to frequent accusations concerning the opaque nature of his writing, he admitted that there was "a paradoxical desire not to be understood. . ." He talks of an "excess" in his writing

> even with respect to what I myself can understand of what I say—the demand that a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come [. . .] If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a leaving to be desired, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation: the other will have to be able to sign in my text. And it is here that the desire not to be understood means, simply, hospitableness to the reading of the other, not the rejection of the other.[9]

Not incidentally, that phrase "leaving to be desired" will prove crucial to my overall thesis, which might best be hinted at here in philosopher E. M.

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[7] W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies*. (London: Macmillan, 1982), 332.
[8] Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 289.
[9] Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*. Trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 31-32.

Cioran's evocative phrase, "Everything that breathes feeds on the unverifiable".[10]

That same sense of mystery applies also to art. The mysterious element that makes a work of art breathe is indefinable. You can dissect a work of art into its definable elements, but you'll never unearth its soul, because that soul is not a thing to be found (and hence captured and repeated), it's an event waiting to happen, and requires a recipient of the artwork in order to trigger that happening. The essence of the argument here is that since language, used normally, is descriptive (and thus defining) of the world, language used artistically (in which category I include religious language) is necessarily disruptive, and hence deconstructive, of those definitions. The word "necessarily" in the preceding sentence carries two implications: one, that descriptive language does not fully describe the world as it purports to do; and two, that artistic and religious languages do so describe it. The first implication correctly reflects the underlying philosophy of this essay—that the world as we know it is as much created by us as perceived—but the second does so only partially. Certain instances of artistic and religious language can give a sense of approaching the essence of reality, but no language can ever fully encompass it. "There is no path that goes all the way", as Seamus Heaney puts it.[11] Writing of mystical texts, Shira Wolosky has said: "In mystical texts, language is not that which reveals truth but a 'veil' drawn across its face: it does not reveal what is hidden, but it reveals that something is. Like a kind of buoy, it marks the place of submersion".[12] Poetic language can play a similar role, and the phrase "it does not reveal what is hidden, but it reveals that something is" might serve as a useful working definition of deconstruction itself, as I read it here. There used to be a famous advert for a certain beer which claimed it "reaches the parts the other beers can't". I take the same stance with regard to poetry and literature versus the more straightforward, logically-based discourses: it reaches into parts of the psyche that logic and reason barely recognise the existence of, never mind give credence to. As Charles Taylor

[10] E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), 10.
[11] Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 97.
[12] Priest, Ann-Marie. "'In the Mystic Circle': The Space of the Unspeakable in Henry James's *The Sacred Fount.*" *Style* 34.3 (2000): 421-43.

puts it, "[Poetry can] convince through the force of the experience of connection, which is very different from conviction gained through the force of argument. By its very nature, poetry's reasoning will often be incomplete, tentative, and enigmatic. But its insight is too moving—too obviously true—to be ignored".[13] This is not to say that rational argument has been abandoned, only that on this particular coach, it's riding shotgun rather than driving.

The approach has historical antecedents. Broadening the cultural frame somewhat, in the 12th century theologians began to apply Aristotelian rules of logic to all propositions from scripture. "The attempt was made, by means of distinctions, to eliminate all contradictions". These questers after certainty were opposed by others who feared and distrusted this excessive rationalisation of something that, in essence, lay beyond rationalisation, but they were to lose the battle and "from this period onward theology and spirituality began tragically to grow apart".[14] Substitute science and poetry for theology and spirituality and you have, roughly speaking, the situation that pertains today. Roberto Calasso traces the division back even further. Discussing the inexorable rise of technology, he talks of "a long and extremely slow coup d'etat by which the brain's analogical pole was gradually supplanted by the digital pole".[15] Once, we saw the world as an organism, alive, connected, and inherently mysterious; now we see it as a machine, each part definable and purposeful.

The book divides into three chapters. The first and longest chapter, "Shards From a Shattered Mirror", consists of twenty-two sections (or shards), mostly very short as befits the overall allusive approach to the subject, and looking at the twin central ideas of eternity/time and deconstruction from a variety of angles, ranging from Islamic carpet weavers to modern sport, but mostly hovering around philosophy, religion and literature. Chapter Two, "Irruptions or The Resistance of Existence" briefly examines a range of films, novels and poems, from both high culture

[13] Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment.* (Cambridge, Massachuetts: Belknap Press, 2024), 36.
[14] Kees Waaijman. "Toward a Phenomenological Definition of Spirituality." *Studies in Spirituality.* Vol. 3, 1993: 5.
[15] Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods.* Trans. Tim Parks (London: Vintage, 2001), 56.

and low. These are intended to illustrate much that has been discussed in Chapter One. The works in question are: *The Bourne Trilogy*, *The Sound of Music*, *Ulysses*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Charles Bukowski's poem "no help for that", Kieslowski's film, *Three Colours: Blue*, Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*, A. A. Milne's "Halfway Down", Michel Tournier's *Friday or The Other Island*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. These are not deconstructive readings of the works in question, but rather attempts to show how in themselves they demonstrate deconstruction in action. Chapter Three, "Much Ado About Nothing", will examine the idea of Nothing, to which there is more (or possibly less) than meets the eye. Both scientists and mystics, in their very different ways, have investigated the subject in some depth and the chapter will examine a few of their findings. It will emerge that Nothing may have strong family ties with both deconstruction and eternity. The chapter also doubles as an extended summing up of the essay's themes.

CHAPTER ONE

SHARDS FROM A SHATTERED MIRROR

Are we perhaps condemned to wholeness, and every fragmentation, every quartering, will only be a pretence, will happen on the surface, underneath which, however, the plan remains intact, unalterable? Does even the smallest fragment still belong to the whole? If the world, like a great glass orb, falls and shatters into a million pieces—doesn't something great, powerful and infinite remain a whole in this?[16]

Mirror is light. A tiny piece of mirror is always the whole mirror[17]

What exactly is meant by the word "eternity"? Today, it is commonly taken to mean simply an infinite stretch of time (*oh, that sermon went on for an eternity!*), but its original meaning refers to the very converse of this: an absence of time (or, perhaps more accurately, an absence of the sense of time). But this is too abstract: given that time, along with space, comprise the totality of where we live, how on earth do you conceive, or imagine, an absence of time and space? This difficulty is what makes the word so beloved of writers with a spiritual bent. They take the world we live in—time and space—and simply set this word eternity against it as a stand-in for. . . well, for that strange indefinable intuition, so common among artists and believers, and based mostly on various types of uncanny experience, that time and space are *not* the totality of where we live, that there is something more. That "something more" (akin perhaps to Wordsworth's "something evermore about to be") often goes under the name of God, but

[16] Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights.* Trans. Jennifer Croft (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), 218.
[17] Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva.* Trans. Stefan Toblar (London: Penguin, 2014), 71.

the word God has been subject to the same reductionism as the word eternity and has come to be altogether too defined—in a welter of conflicting ways. Since this essay will wind up more or less equating deconstruction with the crack that lets in the light of eternity, getting a firmer grip on the word itself might be a good place to start. I would begin, then, by equating eternity with expanded consciousness.

Without consciousness, expanded or otherwise, there is, to all human intents and purposes, no world. On that basis, it can be asserted that all time is contained in the present, the past as memory, the future as anticipation. But, by the same token, it can also be argued that there is no such thing as the present, that, second by second, the future jumps straight into the past, barely glancing at this extraordinary edifice all around us that springs from the junction between consciousness and nature. In one sense, then, that junction doesn't exist; in another sense it is everything that exists. Isn't this what Clarice Lispector is lamenting when she says, "My unreachable present is my paradise lost".[18] And Milan Kundera echoes the point: "There would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable than the present moment. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact".[19] That paradox will lurk at the heart of this essay.

Leaving this complexity aside for the moment and concentrating on ordinary everyday consciousness, we can aver that the present, existent or non-existent, seems to consist of two elements: consciousness and nature, the world within and the world without, subject and object (this division may not be as fundamental as it seems but, again, that's a discussion best left for later). The world without we call "actuality", all the stuff that makes up the visible universe. We see it through this phenomenon called consciousness (but who is this "we" if it is not consciousness itself?). The stuff changes all the time, grows and dies; the phenomenon by which we receive it remains the same. We change too, of course (whoever we may finally be), over time. As temporal beings we grow and die like everything else. Nature changes, and we change, but what never changes is the phenomenon of consciousness that underwrites all this ceaseless activity.

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[18] Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.* Trans. Idra Novey (London: Penguin, 2012), 157.
[19] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 24.

Consciousness underwrites all its individual manifestations in the same way that the concept of money, say, underlies actual cash, or the concept of language underlies actual words and sentences. And just as the concept of money disappears from mind in the course of a daily monetary transaction (but must always be there in the background), or the concept of language disappears while you're making a particular point (but whose unseen presence is what allows you to make the point), so too with the underlying phenomenon of consciousness itself. Consciousness, in this sense, cannot be thought about because it is what allows you to think to begin with. But are you and I not thinking about it now while writing/reading this? Yes, we are, but the mysterious entity (if such it be) that allows us to engage in this thinking forever and forever shies away from a direct glance, like a barely perceptible blur at the corner of your vision. If you're thinking about consciousness, and consciousness *is* thinking, then what is it that is thinking about this consciousness that is thinking? And so on ad infinitum.

Is it perhaps something else then? something behind consciousness? This is where you can get lost in a welter of pseudonyms—God, the Absolute, Eternity, the Void, Nirvana, Will—none of which mean anything in any tangible sense, until you undergo one of those unfathomable experiences that, depending on your cultural and psychic placing in the world, will impel you to call on some such word in an attempt to, if not describe (widely considered impossible), then at least label it. Call it an absent presence, like a "silence beyond silence listened for".[20] We'll stick with the word consciousness, then, keeping in mind its possible role as a

[20] Seamus Heaney, "Clearances" in *The Haw Lantern*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 34. To give some idea of the nature of such experiences, consider this extract from 19th century poet, J. A. Symonds, as quoted by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> [The experience] consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multifarious factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. The universe became without form and void of content. But Self persisted, formidable in its vivid keenness. . . (376).

kind of threshold between two worlds, one of which we know absolutely nothing about, except for a widely shared certainty that it is there, because if it wasn't, then neither would we be.[21] That dimly-intuited awareness is the beginning of an expansion that may well be infinite, and it is in this sense that consciousness can be taken as equating with eternity. Everyday consciousness, eyes firmly fixed on the possibly illusory timeline of past, present and future, is not in essence different from this expanded consciousness, it's just less, in the same way that two dimensions are less than three but three must contain two in order to be three. Eternity/consciousness underwrites time and the stuff of the world. Blake catches the idea in these lines from Jerusalem: "As the Pilgrim passes while the Country permanent remains / So Men pass on, but States remain permanent forever".[22] And, similarly, Hermann Broch in *The Death of Virgil*: "Men relieve one another, their mortal bodies follow, one after the other; perception alone flows on as an entity . . .".[23] Broch's "perception", Blake's "States", are consciousness as I will read it in this essay.

So wherever there is consciousness, it is always now, whether we are aware of it or not. But because this consciousness only knows itself by its productions, the productions themselves come to be considered paramount, come to be thought of as reality itself. And, from a human survival point of view, they *are* necessary. Crops must be planted, cities built, cultures and laws devised. Structure reigns. To begin with, this love affair between consciousness/eternity and the stuff of the world is beautiful and bright. But with time the structures become stifling, burdensome, tedious—the weight of tradition, the boredom of habit. The mirror becomes fogged. Deconstruction is the wiping of the mirror, the marriage counsellor between

[21] You can empathise, to some extent, with the hero of Richard Powers' novel, *Plowing the Dark*, who, after undergoing a horrendous kidnapping experience, has a mystic moment of revelation about which he remarks: "For God's sake, call it God. That's what we've called it forever, and it's so cheap, so self-promoting, to invent new vocabulary for every goddamned thing, at this late a date" (414). But words are just words, they get tired and have to be continually re-invented in the on-going effort to stay alive to the unsayable force that underwrites them all. Otherwise, that unsayable force gets reified and deified and the god of Christ devolves into the god of the Inquisitors.

[22] Blake, *Complete Works*, 714.

[23] Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil.* Trans. Jean Starr Untermeyer (London: OUP, 1983), 270.

heaven and hell. Deconstruction is eternity gasping for breath, the relentless struggle of a third dimension to make itself felt in a world of two-dimensional beings.

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Asked once in an interview whether he believed in God, Vladimir Nabokov gave this intriguing reply: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more".[24]

Is this what lies at the heart of deconstruction? A sense that the world as it is described in language is missing some vital element, some element that cannot be captured in language, but the vague awareness of which is what largely drives that described world of language to begin with? The theologian Paul Tillich spells out the idea in this passage:

> The word "expression" requires some consideration. First, it is obvious that if something expresses something else—as, for instance, language expresses thought—they are not the same. There is a gap between that which expresses and that which is expressed. But there is also a point of identity between them. *It is the riddle and the depth of all expression that it both reveals and hides at the same time*. And if we say that the universe is an expression of ultimate reality, we say that the universe and everything in it both reveals and hides ultimate reality. This should prevent us from a religious glorification of the world as well as from an anti-religious profanisation of the world. There is ultimate reality in this stone and this tree and this man. They are translucent toward ultimate reality, but they are also opaque. They prevent it from shining through them. They try to exclude it. (Italics added.)[25]

[24] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, Vintage International, 1990), 45. Kant wondered about this too: "There must be a condition that precedes all experience and renders the latter itself possible" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 136).
[25] Tillich, Paul. "Art and Ultimate Reality." In *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred,* ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 221.

Derrida echoes that idea in these words: "We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it".[26] Poetic language could be seen as both a lament at this dispossession and a desperate attempt to overcome it all in one. Poetry is a manifestation and intensification of "some reality which before was at best on the edge of awareness".[27] And I see a direct connection (if they are not in fact the same thing) between this "riddle and depth of all expression" and the conundrum regarding the present spoken of in the previous section, the paradoxical way in which, seen through the eyes of common sense and everyday experience, the present is just there, thoroughly unproblematic, whereas searched for through more poetic, sensitive eyes, as evidenced by Lispector and Kundera, it seems thoroughly unreachable. (Perhaps they shouldn't be looking. Lispector again: "One way of obtaining is not to search, one way of possessing is not to ask".[28])

You can extrapolate from Nabokov's sentence to life itself: "I *am* more than I can express in words, and the little that I can express could not be expressed, were I not more." That "more" is what divides the world between materialists and idealists. For materialists, the world we see around us—the one described in language—is quite fascinating and real enough (Wittgenstein's "The world is all that is the case".[29]); for idealists there is something essential missing. For idealists (believers and non-believers alike), that indefinable "more" is what keeps the ship afloat. Like a string on a well-tuned guitar it keeps life at a tension, a tension necessary to create the music of life itself. "The harmony past knowing sounds more deeply than the known", as Heraclitus has said.[30] Isn't this what art is for? As Steve Toltz puts it, "We make art because being alive is a hostage situation in which our abductors are silent and we cannot even intuit their demands".[31]

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[26] Derrida, Jacques. ". . .That Dangerous Supplement. . ." In *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 78.
[27] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections,* 18.
[28] Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, 14.
[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), 1.
[30] Heraclitus. *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus.* Trans. Brooks Haxton (New York: Viking, 2001), 31.
[31] Steve Toltz, *Quicksand* (London: Sceptre, 2016), 16.

Take Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The most famous aspect of this play is the fact that Godot never arrives. What is not so widely remarked is the necessary correlation to this: the tramps don't leave. They keep threatening to leave, but they never do, and the significance of their stance is highlighted by both acts of the play ending in precisely the same way: they decide to leave, and then don't.

> Estragon: Well, shall we go?
> Vladimir: Yes, let's go.
> [They do not move.][32]

The essence of Godot is his non-arrival, just as, perhaps, the essence of God is his unknowability, his unattainability, and, almost certainly, his non-existence. By his non-existence I mean that God may simply be the idea of God. Or, put it this way, God doesn't exist because that's our job. It may be that to use the word "exist" as we understand it, with reference to God, is what's known as a category error. As Henri de Lubac says, "We do not have desire for God; we are that desire. It is imprinted on our created nature".[33] Whatever the source or nature of it may be, the human psyche does appear to be saddled/blessed with a seemingly unquenchable yearning. Exasperated by the endless interpretations being put on his play, Beckett once said that all he wanted to do was express some fundamental sounds about life. Interpretations aside, those sounds arise from the two fundamental and unassailable facts outlined above: Godot doesn't come, and the tramps don't leave. And everything that the play contains, all those fundamental sounds of life—humour, tragedy, farce, boredom, poetry, oppression, slavery, theology, philosophy, peace, music, friendship—are strung on the taut wire stretched between those two poles. The tramps don't leave because Godot might just come. And just as the absence of Godot is needed to keep the tramps on stage, so is the idea of God (or whatever unattainable ideal one substitutes for God) needed to keep us all trudging through the wastes of time and space. Something evermore about to be. Absence pervades presence, may indeed be the larger part of presence, a

[32] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 47, 87.
[33] Henri de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 176-77.

psychic correlation to the way that dark energy, so the physicists tell us, may be the larger part of the universe, even though it cannot be detected.

Seen through pessimistic eyes like Beckett's this situation is often viewed as tragic, but that's a matter of temperament. It can just as easily be seen as the source of life's wonder. It may be what is needed to transform those wastes of time into something more akin to a garden. That yearning for paradise may be the closest we can get to paradise, and in that sense may be called a blessing as well as a curse. True religion, like true art, is alchemy. The effect of great art, regardless of what actual events are being portrayed, is exhilaration, as any Beckett lover will attest. In this sense, all great artists are mystics, and art is the most accessible form of mysticism we have, and one of the most effective mirror-cleaners we have. John Updike expresses the idea in a way that may be more amenable to the modern secular mind:

> Yet it remains curiously true that the literary artist, to achieve full effectiveness, must assume a religious state of mind—a state that looks beyond worldly standards of success and failure. A mood of exaltation should possess the language, a vatic tension and rapture. Even a grimly tragic view, like that of King Lear, Samuel Beckett, Celine, and Hermann Melville, must be expounded with a certain rapt celebrative air. The work of literary art springs from the world and adheres to it but is distinctly different in substance. We enter it, as readers, expecting an intensity and shapeliness absent in our lives. A realm above nature is posed—a supernatural, in short. Aesthetic pleasure, like religious ecstasy, is a matter of inwardness, elevation, and escape.[34]

And philosopher W. T. Stace has pointed out that "there are underground connections between the mystical and the aesthetic (whether in poetry or in other forms of art) which are at present obscure and unexplained".[35] One purpose of the present essay is to help clarify some of that obscurity.

Seen in this light, both art and religion are forms of deconstruction. Seen in another light, of course—when form overrides mystery, when significance solidifies into meaning, and from there devolves into certainty and then complacency—they are very much in need of deconstruction. Again, Blake

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[34] John Updike, *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 62.
[35] W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 81.

comes to mind with this couplet from "The Everlasting Gospel": "The vision of Christ that thou dost see / Is my vision's greatest enemy"[36] A large part of Blake's creative energies were directed against the institutional element of religion too often focussed on by the established church of his day ("the vision of Christ that thou dost see"), which amounted to little more than a branch of the State, and was content to see all manner of social inequities around them as long the dogmas and the ritualistic and social proprieties were observed.

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In his book, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John D. Caputo quotes Derrida calling deconstruction love: "Deconstruction is love, the love of something unforeseeable, unforegraspable, something to come, absolutely, something undeconstructible and impossible, something nameless".[37] Love itself cannot be deconstructed because it is not constructed to begin with, it is not static. Love happens. (Derrida: "I often say that deconstruction is what happens".[38]) How many stories there are that demonstrate this by showing love as a disruptive force, upsetting all manner of complacent certainties: love across the race divide, the class divide, the cultural divide, always disrupting accepted "truths" of life, which of course are not truths at all but merely psychological comfort blankets masquerading as truths.[39] Love underlies all social and cultural expressions of it, which are just that: tangible manifestations of an intangible reality, but not the thing itself (much like eternity and the productions of time, or that "condition that precedes all experience" of which Kant speaks).

There's a scene in a recent sitcom, called *Hold the Sunset*, which subtly illustrates this idea. John Cleese plays a crusty old codger with a reputation for sarcasm. One of his neighbours, often the butt of his jokes, is a dog

[36] Blake, *Complete Works*, 748.
[37] John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2021), 173.
[38] Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret,* 64. Something that mystics say a lot, too: "the mystical state is most often not something achieved but something that happens" (Sammons 39).
[39] As Nietzsche puts it: "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of living being could not live".

lover. One day the Cleese character encounters this neighbour out walking accompanied only by the dog's leash. A brief conversation conveys the information that the dog has died, but the neighbour hasn't quite got over it yet and it comforts him to walk with the leash. Cleese makes some sympathetic comment about this, which the man, knowing Cleese's general outlook, takes to be mockery, but Cleese hastens to assure him that it isn't, that he understands fully the man's actions, that love is love, whatever the nature or character of the recipient. Finally, the neighbour gets his point and says, "You mean, love can't tell the difference".[40]

Love can't tell the difference. In that sense, love doesn't actually exist (unless as an absence, an undefined longing, a potential existence) until it finds a recipient, just as deconstruction is not a "thing", and doesn't actually exist until it has some established "truth" to work on. Just as eternity doesn't exist until it finds an expression through the productions of time. "Nothing transcends without that which it transcends", as Adorno puts it.[41] But if I'm equating eternity with consciousness, then this amounts to saying that consciousness itself doesn't exist until it has something (the productions of time, the stuff of the world) of which to be conscious. This is certainly the position of normal everyday consciousness but if the mystics are to be believed it is not the whole story. (I go into this in some detail later in the essay.) Perhaps the word "exist" is the problem. As touched upon earlier in questioning the use of the word in connection with God, things that exist seem to be haunted by an element essential to the existing thing, something that makes the existing thing what it is, but to which the word existence does not seem to apply. The laws of physics, for instance. We know about the laws of physics because they are enacted through the actions of the natural

[40] Charles McKeown, *Hold the Sunset* (BBC Worldwide, 2018), episode 3. Cleese didn't write this sitcom, which certainly won't go down as one of the classics, but I have a strong suspicion that he may have instigated this particular episode. It stands out from the rest of the six-part series as the sole point where the dialogue takes a sudden unexpected leap into metaphysics, and it's clear from interviews he's given in the past that Cleese has a strong interest in such questions, along with a distinct leaning toward the mystical. His explanation to his neighbour here begins with the sentence: "Death is indivisible". Not the kind of sentence you expect to hear in a sitcom, British or otherwise.

[41] Theodore Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (London: Polity, 2015), 72.

world, which are subject to them, and hence, deriving from them. But would the laws exist if there were no such actions to manifest them? It seems they would have to, since they are what is expressed through those actions, but in what sense would they exist since it is only their manifestation in the physical world that allows them to enter the realm where the idea of existence has any meaning? The word "exist" doesn't quite seem to fit the case, unless the word can be expanded to include an absence as well as a presence, a potential behind every actual.

The problem might best be approached through the idea of differentiation. Consciousness can only be aware of any thing by virtue of that thing's differentiation from everything that it is not, otherwise all would be a chaotic mishmash, akin to how a new-born baby might see the world. Differentiation puts order on our awareness of the world. And by "awareness" here, I mean ordinary human consciousness, with its apparently fundamental division into subject and object, the world within against the world without. But what if there were another level of consciousness, one wherein such an apparently fundamental division no longer held sway, a level above that of ordered differentiation rather than below it? A level of consciousness where, perhaps, the mysterious words of the 13th century French mystic Marguerite Porete might pertain: where there might be "an awakening without an awakener".[42] The idea of "an awakening without an awakener" means that the implicit assumption underwriting the business of everyday, subject/object consciousness has disappeared: there is no longer a "you", in the commonly understood sense of the term, standing off against a separate "thing", and so enabled to perceive that thing. The very idea of conceiving itself will have disappeared. And yet, something, it would seem, remains. What is it? Is it "nothing?"

In a 2002 documentary film about Derrida, the philosopher was asked about love. He wondered if, when we say we love someone, do we love the "who" or the "what"? Do we love the person in question (the "who"), or do we love various qualities that said person seems to embody (the "what")? Can these be separated? The qualities, whatever they may be, are virtually non-existent (or just virtual, a potential, like the physicist's laws) until they find themselves manifested in an individual, and yet they cannot be said to

[42] Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 214.

be uniquely identical with that individual. There are only a few dozen identifiable qualities in the world, but untold millions of individuals through whom those qualities are manifested. So the qualities, it might be ventured, are non-existent without the solid individual through whom they find their expression. But equally impossible to imagine is an individual devoid of all qualities, good, bad or indifferent. So which comes first? Are the qualities wandering a ghostly otherworld, like Yeats's "passions", yearning for a solid embodiment to give them a taste of life, or do they come into existence as creations of the material beings through whom they manifest? Or, more likely perhaps, is it mistaken even to think in terms of time if the first term, the "what" is a form of nothing without its material manifestation in time and space. Nothing, in itself, has no need of time and space unless it's not really nothing but only appears so from our limited perspective. We see through a glass, darkly. In short, all these nothings may be forms of eternity yearning to be given substance through the medium of time and space, and the materiality that goes with it.

And time, in reply, thoroughly fed up with all this decay and death, is yearning for the permanence enjoyed by eternity. (As E. M. Cioran poetically puts it, "While men are haunted by the memory of paradise, angels are tormented by longing for this world"[43]—an idea beautifully played out in the Wim Wenders film, *Wings of Desire*.) There's a line from Hemingway that has stuck in my mind for years: "A man should search for things he can't lose".[44] Is there anything that one can't lose? Not as long as you think in terms of your individual "self" as fundamental and inherently separate from all that is not-self, the world around you. As long as you think in those terms, then there is no getting around the inevitability of loss of everything you hold dear, even if it's only in the last stages of dying. From this viewpoint, everything you hold dear is only so because of its relationship to this apparently fundamental self, and so it all dies when you do. If, on the other hand, you could turn things around and identify your "self" with whatever is that strange force within that causes you to appreciate these things to begin with, and realise that "you" are just a temporary expression of that force, a holding cell, as it were (which manifests

[43] E. M. Cioran, *Tears and Saints*. Trans. Llinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 58.
[44] Ernest Hemingway, *Men Without Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 49.

itself in you as love of—and yearning for—various aspects of the world, and is also the source of whatever qualities—the "what"—you possess), and that that same force carries on being expressed through other holding cells after you've gone, then you have effectively cheated death, removed its sting, because life and all it contains can't be "lost" if it was never "owned" in the first place.[45] (This is, of course, easy to posit but incredibly hard to achieve, and is one of the main aims, I imagine, of the rigorous spiritual disciplines prescribed by all the chief religions.) You can even hear a faint echo of this bedrock of eternity in what is arguably Philip Larkin's bleakest poem, "Aubade". On the face of it the poem is a howl of despair at the thought of death ("Most things may never happen: this one will") but the final two lines read: "Work must be done. / Postmen like doctors go from house to house".[46] Life goes on. Doctors, yes, harbingers of individual mortality, but also postmen, symbols of connecting forces, carriers of messages both sacred and profane that underlie—that constitute, even—the individual writers and recipients of those messages. Successors to Hermes, herald of the gods.

People often have an intuitive recognition of this underlying truth, even without thinking consciously and philosophically about it. A niece of mine, a very down-to-earth, pragmatic young woman, once sent me a postcard from America showing a picture of a giant Californian redwood tree and on the back of it she'd written that knowing this tree, which was over 3,000 years old, had survived all the interceding events of history gave her a sense of the marvellous, and a calm acceptance, a hope even, that this tree would outlive her and everyone she knew. I'd call that an intimation of

[45] In an exchange of letters with Michel Houellebecq, Bernard Henri-Levy echoes this idea in discussing the beginning of Genesis when he talks of *ruah*, the divine breath of life, and how it infuses small material piles of earth to create humans, "instances of compenetration between the packages of earth and the *ruah*. [. . .] To the extent that the *ruah* comes from outside and is a breath breathed by the one you dare not name Yahweh, you retain the idea of life as a reprieve, something borrowed that you'll have to return. . . This has never been better expressed than by the Jew Luke, some thousands of years later, when he whispered to the dying, 'Tonight, you'll be asked to return your soul'". If the dying person realised that that soul was their true self, then they could make such a return with equanimity. (Houellebecq and Henri-Levy, *Public Enemies*), 127.

[46] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 208.

immortality, an intuition that, despite appearances, the life that powers a self is, in essence, the same life that powers a three thousand year old tree. And just recently I heard a writer on the radio—a granddaughter of Mary Lavin's, as it happens—talking about the sadness of losing her father, and she said that gazing at a certain lake in the west of Ireland and thinking about how it would survive her gave her a sense of comfort rather than distress. That's essentially the same intuition. It's the life underlying all the ephemeral manifestations of life that constitute the true reality. The unmanifest.

(On the other hand . . .

The true reality? But what good would that be if it never made the trip over to the manifest, the trip that creates all the glorious, uniquely individual stuff of the world? Giorgio Agamben has an intriguing sentence in an essay called "Creation and Salvation": "That which precedes in rank and dignity derives from that which is its inferior".[47] The discussion a few pages back about the relationship between the laws of physics and the manifestations of those laws would be an instance of this. The laws need their manifestations in order to *be* laws. Another analogy might be the idea of royalty. Royalty is revered (traditionally speaking) by the people, and is seen as taking precedence in both rank and dignity, but without that reverence from the people, its precedence melts away to nothing. Royalty's sense of rank and dignity (the unmanifest, as it were) is entirely dependent on—created by, even—the manifested fact of reverence from the people, even though that reverence is regarded as dependent on, and thus inferior to it. (We'll encounter this idea again in Roberto Calasso's interpretations of the Hindu Vedas and in the thoughts of Meister Eckhart and John Scotus Eriugena on the intertwined nature of God and man.) So to call this unmanifest the *true* reality is perhaps overstepping the mark. For all its troubles, it's as solid a marriage as you'll find, this entwinement of eternity and time. Moments of eternity may be the highlights of life, but they need the life in which they are embedded in order to *be* highlights.)

And isn't this what Christ means by "love others as you love yourself". You love yourself because that's the deepest life instinct there is, to preserve your self, because your self is the carrier, the expression, the manifestation

[47] Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*. Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 5.

of this mysterious force.[48] But if the mysterious force, which underlies all of life, trees and people included, is the true self, and if you could tap into it, then you might well discover that the other *is* yourself, and so it would be the most natural thing in the world to love it *as* yourself. Christ's injunction, you might think, is an impossible demand, and strictly for saints; impossible, perhaps, but always there in the background as an aspiration essential to our taking the everyday business of living seriously. You find the same insight in Zen. Frederick Franck posits a number of definitions of Zen, one of which reads: "Zen is the living life in me, aware of itself as the life that is shared by all beings."[49]

To return to the image of expanded consciousness as a three-dimensional awareness breaking into the habitual two-dimensional track of time in which we seem to be enmeshed: a major part of that two-dimensional track is our awareness of our selves as separate egos, looking out on the world of actuality, measuring and defining it. From the three-dimensional perspective, such divisions and definitions, it would seem, disappear. The idea lands us squarely in the realm of mysticism, and well beyond the grasp of language, unless language is used metaphorically, as in mythology and literature (and even then it's not so much a grasp as a fleeting glimpse). The closest philosophy can come is to talk of the "nothingness" from which all things emerge, the Void of the Buddhists, Derrida's "chora". Such ideas can be convincing if such is your temperamental bent,[50] and even enthralling, if you're of a temperament to be enthralled by ideas, which

[48] Actually, the love of a mother for her children is possibly deeper but that fact in itself is yet another expression of that underlying life force taking precedence over the preservation of the self; the species overriding the individual. And even the idea of dying for a cause, for a country, say, is putting an idea, an imaginative reality, on a higher plane than individual physical survival. Not always a good thing, of course, as it's the generating force of all political terrorism.

[49] Frederick Franck, *Messenger of the Heart: The Book of Angelus Silesius*. (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom), 17.

[50] In Benoit Peeters' biography of Derrida, he quotes a letter from Jean Genet to the philosopher in which Genet wonders how one comes to a decision on such deep philosophical questions as determinism or Communism: "In my view, one first naturally inclines towards it and then finds reasons for it" (159). Nietzsche thought so too: "Most of a philosopher's conscious thinking is secretly directed and compelled into definite channels by his instincts" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 35). The present essay is a good example of this process.

many people are not. For all those who are not, mythology, stories, and art in general do the work that philosophy and theology does for the small band of enthusiasts for such subjects. The beauty of mythology and stories is that they can captivate and enthral without the need to convince in any strictly rational way. They by-pass the rational, and by so doing hint at rationality's shortcomings. Take, for instance, Daniil Kharm's wonderful piece of illogic, "Blue Notebook, No. 10, (or The Red-Haired Man)":

> There was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. Neither did he have any hair, so he was called red-haired theoretically.
>
> He couldn't speak, since he didn't have a mouth. Neither did he have a nose.
>
> He didn't even have any arms or legs. He had no stomach and he had no back and he had no spine and he had no innards whatsoever. He had nothing at all! Therefore there's no knowing whom we are even talking about.
>
> In fact it's better that we don't say any more about him.[51]

This is what you might call luminous nonsense. Like a Zen koan, there is no point in asking what it means, it's what it does that counts. And what it does, at least for me, is generate a sense of mysterious exhilaration. As far as I can tell, this exhilaration derives from the thorough mingling of absence and presence in the passage. Absence has become presence and presence, absence. Paradox is the parasite in language laughing at its straitlaced rationally-based host. Paradox is also a kind of deconstruction in that it is non-existent until language comes into being, and it points to language's inherent instability and seems to mock its claims to be a fundamental conveyor of reality. Something of the same quality of existence/non-existence can be discerned, in a more down-to-earth and emotionally tangible way, in these lines from a Leonard Cohen song called, "Heart With No Companion": "I sing this for the captain / whose ship has not been built. / For the mother in confusion, / her cradle still unfilled".[52] That yearning which animates the captain and the mother is, in a sense, nothing, and therefore non-existent, but it's also something, or a something-in-waiting, for which the captain and the mother, perhaps consciously unbeknownst to themselves, are to act as channels.

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[51] Daniil Kharms, *Incidences*. Trans.Neil Cornwell (London: Serpent's Tail, 2006), 49.
[52] Leonard Cohen, *Various Positions* (Columbia Records, 1984).