The Strategic Smorgasbord of Postmodernity: Literature and the Christian Critic

Edited by

Deborah C. Bowen

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ......................................................................................................................... viii  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ x  

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1  
Deborah C. Bowen, Redeemer University College  

**Part I. Situating Literature: Constructing Theories**  

Chapter One .................................................................................................................. 16  
"Late Have I Loved You": From Hermeneutics to Love in Augustine's  
*Confessions*  
Gregory Clark, North Park University  

Chapter Two .................................................................................................................. 30  
Placing the Early Modern in Dialogue with the Post Modern:  
Christian Humanism and the Renaissance  
Daniel Knauss, Marquette University  

Chapter Three ............................................................................................................. 49  
Ends as Means: Christian Eschatology as a Critical Tool for Approaching  
Postmodernism  
G. J. Clarke, University of New South Wales, Australia  

Chapter Four ............................................................................................................... 71  
Desiring Faith and the Ethics of Reading  
Randall J. VanderMey, Westmont College  

Chapter Five .............................................................................................................. 87  
Althusser, Foucault, and the Community of the Word  
Liam Corley, Point Loma Nazarene University
CHAPTER SEVEN

SIMON CRITCHELY: THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION, OR METAPHYSICS IN THE DARK

JENS ZIMMERMANN, TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY, AND NORMAN KLASSEN,
ST JEROME’S UNIVERSITY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Introduction

In this paper our goal is to introduce the work of Simon Critchley, a young English academic based at the University of Essex with substantial ties to continental Europe, particularly the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, and a growing reputation both in Europe and in North America. Though blurbs reveal his connections with Departments of Philosophy in the first instance, his work also traverses the boundaries of literary and social theory, literary criticism, politics, and psychoanalysis. Critchley’s work deserves attention, if for no other reason than his important contribution to the debate on literature, philosophy, and ethics. His first major work, The Ethics of Deconstruction (1992/1999), now in its second revised edition, has succeeded in framing postmodern political, philosophical, and literary discussion in the concrete realm of lived ethical experience. The first to do so in a major publication, Critchley points out the original ethical thrust in Derrida’s work and its dependence on Emmanuel Levinas’s “ethics as first philosophy.” He has broadened and deepened the theses of his first book with a concerted effort to bridge philosophy and literature in the form of Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, philosophy, literature (1997) and Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity (1999), as well as a number of collaborative projects and useful popularizing articles such as his fairly regular contributions to The Times Literary Supplement.

The Ethics of Deconstruction

Metaphysics in the Dark

Thanks to Critchley, Derrida’s deconstruction may finally be perceived first and foremost as an ethical claim, perhaps even as an unconditional ethical imperative (Ethics xiii). In what follows we will concentrate on explaining what he means by this claim, which may strike some as bizarre, incongruent with what many people have associated with the name of Derrida over the years: endless deferral of signs, the collapse of structures, and textual play. First, however, we would like to take up an issue of particular relevance to students and critics who approach deconstruction from a position of faith.

This initial issue is, Can people of faith think? According to Martin Heidegger, No, they can’t. This is Critchley’s position too, and he articulates it with typical forthrightness at the outset of Very Little...Almost Nothing:

Heidegger notes in a striking remark from 1925, thinking of Nietzsche, “philosophical research is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself the “arrogance of thinking.” Philosophy is nothing if not arrogant, and furthermore it should be arrogant, a continual arrogation of the human voice... So, in my view, philosophy—at least under modern conditions—is atheism, and to have an experience of faith would mean stopping doing philosophy... stopping immediately... right away. (Italics, emphasisCritchley’s)

For Heidegger and Critchley, the problem with Christians is that they do not confine themselves to the human voice. Critchley’s insistence on deconstruction as ethical may sound congenial to a Christian reader. But, if anything, Critchley is trying to forestall what he thinks are misguided attempts to Christianize the influences upon Derrida, especially that of Levinas. If we want to understand the ethics of deconstruction in Critchley’s terms, we will have to keep theology and even humanism in abeyance. Ultimately, however, we believe the ethical depends on concepts from Jewish thought that encourage rather than resist dialogue with Christian theology, particularly around the enigmatic question of what it means to be human.

While he adopts the Heideggerian position that Christians cannot do philosophy, presumably because contentment is incompatible with a continual arrogation of the human voice, Critchley has come under fire from Richard Rorty for his metaphysics. For Rorty, the arch-pragmatist, Critchley’s atheism is still tainted by traces of humanistic metaphysics. Rorty makes several pointed observations that encompass the work of Levinas, Critchley, and Derrida. Significantly, he calls Derrida a humanist, and the project that includes the others as one of private self-fashioning. While Rorty does not deny the assault on metaphysics in their thought, he argues that Critchley betrays too much interest in ultimate sources and indefeasible presuppositions, and that, contrary to pragmatists who have the attitude “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,”
deconstructionists keep putting things into question.

More generally, Rorty sees European philosophical thought as "still dominated by the Marxist notion of Ideologiekritik, and by the romantic notion of the philosopher as the person who penetrates behind the appearances of present social institutions to their reality" ("Response" 45-6). As a pragmatist, Rorty wants to focus strictly on politics. He bluntly distinguishes between private and public, or between Levinasian ethics and real politics. Politics consists of small reforms and compromises, and the terms for politics must be "much less esoteric than those in which we overcome the metaphysics of presence" ("Remarks" 17).

In Ethics—Politics—Subj ectivity, Critchley responds with a chapter entitled "Metaphysics in the Dark." He insists that Rorty's accusations rest on his refusal to understand the necessary entanglement of any discourse in the linguistic and conceptual heritage of metaphysics (a subject we will take up in detail below). As a result, Rorty's neo-pragmatic attempt to step outside metaphysics, combined with its program of banalizing philosophical language, tends to alienate both philosophers, by his "deflationary redescriptions" of philosophical problems and concepts, and the wider public, by a rather flippant approach to serious ethical concerns (Ethics—Politics 116, 118). Critchley also counter-charges pragmatist liberalism with the failure to be pragmatic "all the way down." By elevating the principle of non-cruelty above the ironic as the basis for morals, as he does, Rorty establishes his own metaphysics, a non-relativizable universal.

Critchley adopts instead Derrida's notion of the closure of metaphysics as the awareness of its linguistic, historical necessity and the simultaneous (and unrealizable) desire to leave metaphysics behind. The only option, then, is metaphysics in the dark, an antifoundationalist, non-essentialist philosophizing which looks at metaphysics as "a souvenir, the reminder of an essential heritage," which cannot be abandoned but must be reworked (Ethics—Politics 119). Doing metaphysics in the dark means working towards an atheistic transcendence, an ethics of finitude, which tries to confront contemporary nihilism with the slightest sliver of hope provided by Derrida's ethics and a reworked Romanticism (imagination). Critchley's minimalist ethic does not "open onto the glory of the infinite or the trace of God, but only onto the night of what Levinas calls the il y a, the infinite time of our dying, our breath panting on in the darkness, a murmur in the mud" (Very Little 28). Into this darkness, however, shines the faint flicker of a "naturalistic reconstruction of Levinasian ethics" (Ethics—Politics 108).

Critchley's metaphysics in the dark, while providing a welcome reminder of our finitude and the provisionality of knowledge, also draws the hermeneutic circle rather narrowly by excluding theology. His position is in itself, of course, indebted to a metaphysical heritage which extends from Nietzsche to Heidegger. And perhaps the frequent references to Pascal in Critchley point to a similar ambiguity that haunts Heidegger's works. Heidegger denies theology the ability to philosophize because the very project of theology is premised upon the biblical answer to philosophy's ultimate question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (An Introduction To Metaphysics 7). We also know, however, that the development of Heidegger's thinking, right down to the use of concepts, depends heavily on theological insights. Perhaps Critchley's advice to Rorty applies here: theological constructs are part of the essential metaphysical heritage and cannot be left behind, especially not when serious ethical reflection is at stake, something Critchley obviously pursues with great concern and seriousness.

The point we want to stress is that metaphysics in the dark need not commence from a disappointment with religion articulated only in secular terms; for as theological literature throughout the Christian tradition makes clear, there is plenty of theological disappointment with religion in theological criticism itself. As Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, has recently pointed out, for the construction of meaning certain interpretive icons are indispensable, and perhaps philosophical discourse could profit much from its theological heritage in this respect.

Subjectivity

The full impact of Critchley's introduction of Derrida as an ethical thinker becomes clear when we put his contribution into the context of prevailing theoretical trends. The dominant mode of literary criticism in the last ten to fifteen years has been New Historicism. The emphasis in New Historicism has been the prevailing importance of the cultural embeddedness of texts; it appreciates the various ways in which authors and their works are subject to political forces and themselves variously inform hegemonic practices. Not only has New Historicism habituated us to recognize the traces of power politics, it has also encouraged sensitive and integrated readings through the use of arresting and often disarmingly apposite particularities.

New Historicism's emphasis on politics, however, has produced its own casualties. The author and her intentions have not fared at all well. Reason has been given short shrift, often replaced by a corrosive nominalism or, as Critchley puts it, by "the complacent scepticism of certain philosophically challenged tendencies within contemporary debate" (Very Little 170). We seem to have discarded the tools needed to explore the subtle exchange between author or text and reader or audience in terms that might qualify, or at the very least reveal in more detail, how the political is realized. To summarize, we have shifted our
attention from the author and literary text as object to text as site or medium of hegemonic cultural practices. Unfortunately, deconstruction has played the role of an ally in these politicized hermeneutics of suspicion; it is this reduction of deconstruction that Critchley sets out to correct.

In this context, the ethical turn represents a significant development, an opportunity to supplement the political with a more nuanced understanding of its interdependence with subjectivity and ethics. Critchley's strategy in The Ethics of Deconstruction is to reveal the close relationship between Derrida's work and that of Levinas, and to delineate the specific way in which Levinas understands ethics. On Critchley's reading of Levinas, the term "ethics" needs to be carefully distinguished from its traditional understanding as a branch of philosophy which presupposes a philosophical or metaphysical foundation (Ethics 9). Levinasian ethics is critical of moral philosophy: it occurs as "the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness, or what Levinas, following Plato, calls the Same" (4).

This new subjectivity contains both anti-humanistic and humanistic elements. It is anti-Enlightenment because it no longer believes in an autonomous subject, and it is anti-Heideggerian because it also denounces the "heroic virility" which still characterizes Heidegger's subject. In this limited sense this new subjectivity, whose essential features Critchley finds in Levinas, is anti-humanist. For Levinas, the human is the irreducible particular alterity of the Other which he defends against any totality whatever. Since at least Enlightenment humanism is based on an autonomous self which represents the world of objects to itself, that is, since it reduces all things to the interpretive horizon of the same, such universalist totalization is inhuman. Levinas's ethics is an affirmation of the human in all its particularity against any totalizing and hence dehumanizing system of thought, be it theological, philosophical, or political. In this sense, Levinas's metaphysics is certainly a humanism, and one could well argue that Critchley agrees with a great deal of this humanism. At the same time, however, the term "humanism" usually also connotes human autonomy, the liberation of the human will from any dogma or authority, a freedom usually associated with Enlightenment epistemology and psychology—which is, with an autonomous, unitary subject from which Critchley wants to distance himself:

Levinas's point is that the humanity of the human signifies precisely through this inability to be autarchic [i.e. sovereign] where the subject is overwhelmed by an alterity that it is unable to master. The subject is no longer the self-posting origin of the world; it is a hostage to the other. Humanism should not begin from the datum of the human being as an end-in-itself and the foundation for all knowledge, certainty, and value; rather, the humanity of the human is defined by its service to the other. Levinasian ethics is a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being. (Ethics—Politics 67)

The Levinasian subject, which Critchley embraces, is marked by a passivity towards the ethical claim of the other on me. This pre-cognitive ethical obligation constitutes our subjectivity insofar as it is inescapable. Even our negative reaction to this demand shapes who we are. This radical ethical claim provides a subjectivity which welcomes the deconstruction of the traditional metaphysical subject. The deconstruction of the modernist subject makes possible a new account of the ethical subject, "without identity, an idiot, a creature, a hostage to the other" (Ethics—Politics 70).

For Levinas there is an alterity, an other, that is completely Other, and whereas the ego seeks to reduce all otherness to itself, ethics occurs when that liberty and spontaneity are critiqued. Within the Same there may be an awareness of otherness, but it is not other enough: the Same maintains a relationship with the other, the distance between Same and Other is reduced, the opposition fades. The difference may be described by contrasting ethics and morality: the latter describes the particular instantiation of the earlier universal ethical demand. For Levinas, as Critchley puts it, "the construction of a system, or procedure, for formulating and testing the moral acceptability of certain maxims or judgments relating to social action and civic duty is itself derived and distinct from a primordial ethical experience that Levinas's work seeks to describe" (Ethics 3).

Epistemology and ontology, two labels Levinas gives to the tendency to reduce Other to Same, operate in several different ways. In this "economy of the same," the self represents things to itself, comprehends (comprendre) which it is, tries to grasp and represent other beings in their totality. For Levinas, totalizing Western epistemology depends on an economy of the Same over the Other which denies transcendence. A better idea of transcendence is found in the religious idea of revelation, in which meaning is derived from our relation to an absolute exteriority or alterity that resists complete absorption into our frame of reference (Totality 97). While Levinas is not interested in revelatory religion in the commonly understood sense either, he wants to preserve the radical otherness or alterity that such religion conveys. For him, the human other (l'Autre), like God, is irreducible to an interpretive theme and encounters me as exterior, radical otherness (80). To use Critchley's succinct summary of Levinas' concern: "Levinas's big idea is that the relation to the other cannot be reduced to comprehension and that this relation is ethical, structuring the experience of what we think of as self or subject" (Cambridge Companion 25).

In similar fashion to the discussion of Other and Same, Levinas distinguishes between the categories of Saying and Said. This distinction folds into his emphasis on the otherness of the Other. Critchley explains the ethical importance of Saying:
The Saying is my exposure—corporeal, sensible— to the Other, my inability to refuse the other’s approach. It is the performative staking, proposing, or expressive position of myself facing the Other. It is a verbal or non-verbal ethical performance, whose essence cannot be caught in contentious propositions. (Ethics 7)

Ontology sets in when the Saying becomes Said, taking the form of propositions and assertions. Statements with linking verbs (S is P) typify such totalizing ontology: “One might say that the content of my words, their identifiable meaning is the Said, while the Saying consists in the fact that these words are being addressed to an interlocutor” (Ethics 7). It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this distinction between Saying and Said in Levinas’s conception of ethics. Critchley will deploy it in many different contexts, including his analysis of the philosophical tradition and his understanding of Romanticism and the role of ambiguity in literature.

**Saying and Said: The Double Bind**

The writing of books suggests the betrayal of Saying for the Said. Critchley gives shape to the problem with the question, “But is there not a real danger here of betraying the very subject that I am trying to elucidate?” (Ethics 13). This difficulty, of which Levinas and Derrida are, for Critchley, abundantly aware, leads to a philosophical commitment and a manner of expressing themselves to which Critchley gives various labels, such as “double-handed” and “clôture” reading or the phenomenon of the “double bind.” Levinasian ethics engages this self-reflexive difficulty, always attempting to return the Said to Saying, to leave a residue, to invite interruption. A deconstructive and ethical reading must operate (and here Critchley quotes Derrida) with “Two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening” (14). Only in this way will one read responsibly and will the familiar and the commonplace become wholly other (15-17). It is indeed impossible not to write, not to try to elucidate; for this reason ethical reading will proceed in a double-handed manner. Language is used, not least the language of the tradition of metaphysics, but it could hardly be otherwise: “the ethical Saying must proceed through an abuse of language” (18). If we find the language of Levinas and Derrida suggestive of metaphysics (for example, in the form of negative theology), for Critchley that merely indicates the necessity of using language; such language still needs to be subjected to double-handed reading.

Critchley leads us to consider context and closure as important sites for the implications of double-handed reading. He shows how for Derrida indeed all knowledge is contextual (there is nothing outside the text) and that “the border of the context always entails a clause of non-closure” (32). While cultural critics affirm the first part because it serves their reduction of texts to politics, they overlook the second, which reveals what Critchley calls Derrida’s ethical imperative: the demand for justice. Derrida can equate deconstruction with justice because justice is a hermeneutic which always remains open to the alterity already contained in the context. Neither context nor its disruption requires something outside, such as God, but context itself already contains that which interrupts the closure of a determinate context, making that context an open structure. The ethical imperative is “an unconditional affirmation that intervenes in this context” (32). In other words, Derrida simply applies to texts the Levinasian call for ethics: just as for Levinas the face of the other contains something which escapes my interpretive grasp, so every text contains something irreducibly other. Thus writing shows the limitations of a conventional understanding of context, where writing initially simply replaces the voice, and the voice simply communicates an idea through a sign. Instead, writing exceeds an immediate context, both for the author and for the recipient. Again, Derrida relies heavily on Levinas, who coined the term “trace”: that which resists final interpretation in the other person, that which describes its irreducible ethic of otherness. For Derrida, this ethic also applies to the linguistic sign.

While we require interpretation, each interpretation on its own is unjust; it forecloses by definition, as it were, other interpretive possibilities which demand a hearing. This means that a text cannot simply be interpreted once and for all but demands, much like human interaction, continuous renewed interpretation. Where many students of deconstruction and many arch-historicists stumble is to collapse Derrida’s careful philosophical use of context. They ignore the claim, shared by both Levinas and Derrida, that “the word ‘text’ does not suspend reference ‘to history, to the world, to reality, to being and especially not to the other,’” but rather includes all of these things, particularly in political and ethical terms (Ethics 39, emphasis Critchley’s).

We wish to emphasize that clôture reading begins with a careful, attentive reading of the text which respects the author’s intention. Ethical or clôture reading will consist of both faithful commentary and the discovery of a “moment of alterity” that opens up a text to “a wholly other reading” (89). It is thus not deconstruction but New Historicism which encourages violent interpretation with its pseudo-political stance of blind suspicion. Clôture reading, by contrast, does not choose between the enclosed and the “wholly other” option, but rather must be undecided, hesitant—this indecision is the ethics of deconstruction (95). The indecision and hesitancy paradoxically announce “the unreachable priority of a decision,” a decision which is “almost nothing” (here Critchley is quoting Derrida) and a community that is only the promise of a community, perhaps only a sighting of the promised land (96). The politics of deconstruction, like its ethics, emphasizes the need not to ruin
openness to the truth through the systematizing and enclosing tendency of philosophy.

As an example of clôture reading, Critchley approaches the problem of tradition in terms of both faithful commentary and radical re-reading. He observes that the western philosophical tradition has, since the eighteenth century, come to have a particular lineage, namely Greco-European at the expense of African and Asian roots, because a certain view of the lineage of philosophy went well with imperialistic ambitions. Ethical obligation makes possible the double-handed engagement of a tradition with such a lineage. Given that philosophy constantly critiques tradition, then “one might say that the philosophical tradition is a tradition of de-traditionalization” (Ethics—Politics 124). Is this enough? Critchley wants to know if he can extract himself from the problem of tradition and the way it has gone in its Greco-European lineage. This concern is a variant of the problem of having to use the language of metaphysics:

Could it ever be otherwise? That is, would it be conceivable for philosophy, or at least for “we European philosophers,” to be in a position to repeat another origin? Wouldn’t this be precisely the fantasy of believing oneself to speak from the standpoint of the excluded without being excluded...? (129)

Critchley effectively closes off the path to a facile critique of the imperialistic philosophical lineage and situates the deconstructionist, himself included, in the double bind.

As interesting as this problem is, it will not be new to anyone who has reflected on the problem of owning the “faith of one’s fathers.” The problem is built into the history of the church, and has received exemplary theological treatment recently from Rowan Williams. For Williams, Christian faith “is a task which every generation has to undertake again... each believer making his or her own that engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith which is so evident in the classical documents of Christian belief” (1). Simply to bear in mind the religious analogue to the question Critchley poses can demystify it and help us to concentrate on the way he expresses the problem without adoring the emperor’s new clothes. There may even be a structural affinity: Critchley’s clôture hermeneutic does, in fact, resemble somewhat the patterns of theological exegetics, commentary and gloss, where faithful reproduction is followed and interrupted by the text itself. Christians can welcome a double-handed ethical approach because we always need to guard against a naïve understanding of religious faith as unmediated return to New Testament times or church history.

Romanticism, Ambiguity, and Literature

For Critchley, the double bind illustrates the natural link between philosophy and literature. Critchley appropriates the term “Romanticism” as another synonym for double-handedness, the double bind, clôture reading. He offers an impressive historical overview of the influence of early German Romanticism, the gathering of a small group of young thinkers in the town of Jena who struggled with “what might count meaningful of life, after one has rejected the founding certainties of religion” (Very Little 86). In the abandoning of religion but the remaining of its central questions Critchley locates the overlap of philosophy, theology and literature. He offers a parallel between his own ethics of deconstruction and Jena Romanticism—specifically, the work of Schlegel and the publication of Athenäum between 1798 and 1809—in terms of the double bind of deconstruction: the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy, which consistently interrupts Critchley’s work. He simultaneously elaborates early Romanticism and the relationship between literature and philosophy as another site of clôture reading, identifying early Romanticism as “the only attempt to heal the wound [between philosophy and poetry] which has been festering since Plato’s republic between the claims of philosophy and literature” (Very Little 85). The young Jena Romantics are faced with nihilism, and their naïve hope is to address the modern world in art.

Romanticism still has value as a movement because it combines the impulses of systematization and anti-systematization, notably through the form it promulgated, the literary fragment. For Critchley, the fragment embodies literary ambiguity, comprised of the potent combination of philosophy and poetry. The fragment is a miniature work of art, standing alone, complete, yet at the same time, in Schlegel’s phrasing, “the subjective embryo of a developing object” (qtd. in Very Little 110). Through the fragment, Romanticism engages in “a continual process of self-creation and self-destruction” (111). Critchley wants to preserve the naïveté of Romanticism, but he wants a “re-worked” Romanticism less concerned with the complete transformation of life and culture, more accepting of our finitude. He sees the goal of Romanticism as achieving meaningfulness.

Historically speaking, Romanticism is the name of our double bind: it is both the movement that opened up the modern era that led to a debilitating nihilism, and at the same time it is the only possible response to nihilism. The power of Romanticism lies in its belief in the imagination. Critchley argues that were we to give up on Romanticism’s belief in the power of the imagination and of literature as a political force, we would see the total professionalization of politics and the complete banalization of everyday life: “Romantic naïveté is the consciousness of the tranquilized bustle and anaemic pallor of everyday life,
and the attempt to resist the disenchantment of the everyday with the violence of the imagination” (99). Critchley calls on poetry to find a language that does not take flight from the real, but which adheres to and resists it in the fictions it writes (102). To give up the power of poetic resistance would mean to surrender to Rorty’s pragmatism, that is, “the end of philosophy understood as the imaginative effort to link the public and the private” (98).

Critchley proffers Samuel Beckett’s work as representative of such a re-worked, post-romantic Romanticism. The analysis of Beckett is perhaps the least clôtuval of Critchley’s readings because what he uncovers in the form of commentary so closely approximates what he wants to pursue—not the celebration of meaninglessness, exactly, but the careful delineation of meaninglessness. Critchley spends considerable time on Beckett’s playful use of the word “aporetic” to accentuate the theme of ambiguity in literature: “Beckett’s aporetics are a performative and quasi-methodological expression of... the impossibility and necessity of narration: we have to go on and yet we can’t go on (and yet we can’t not go on)” (166). Beckett fills his writing with antitheses, paradoxes, oxymorons. Beckett uses literature in such a way as to reveal the double bind of aesthetic autonomy: literature gets its own sphere of judgment but cannot appeal to a universal core of rationality. Critchley wants to push this paradox even further, to suggest that Beckett enacts a critical history of the relations of literature to life. His aporetic strategies dismantle the illusions of everyday life and offer “the faintest glimmer of a world transfigured by a messianic light” (171). Here we can see the metaphysician at work in the dark. That messianic light shows the extraordinariness of the ordinary which is otherwise obstructed by competing metanarratives:

we suffocate under the combined weight of the various narratives of redemption—whether they are religious, socio-economic, political, aesthetic or philosophical. What passes for the ordinary is cluttered with illusory narratives of redemption that conceal the very extraordinariness of the ordinary. (Very Little 179)

Metaphysics in the dark wants to arrive at a celebration of the ordinary.

Conclusion

It should be clear from this short introduction to Critchley’s thought that his thinking is crucial for the concerns mentioned in the introduction to this book. Critchley’s primary importance lies in uncovering the principally ethical dimension of deconstruction, a movement very much at the heart of postmodernity. With Critchley it becomes impossible to drag out the old canard that deconstruction treats texts flippantly. The inherently ethical nature of deconstruction respects the traditional interpretation of texts and at the same
time stresses the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities. Critchley demonstrates this attitude by offering patient, detailed commentary on the positions of key and difficult writers such as Derrida and Levinas.

While the minimalist ethics of Critchley’s metaphysics in the dark may not seem a strong enough response to nihilism, at least it recognizes the importance of literature for the critique of philosophy. The philosophical and literary ambitions of Romanticism provide Critchley with an important link between literary and philosophical history. Critchley appeals to literature to support his philosophical commitment to the extraordinariness of the ordinary.

Moreover, Romanticism’s belief in the power of the imagination as a source for criticism and renewal is his main source in responding to nihilism. Even more importantly, Critchley reminds us of power literature and the imagination have as a political force. The ethics of deconstruction abolish the gap between private and public we so easily reinforce by the association of literature and philosophy with the private and decisions with public life. However hesitant clôtuval reading practices may be, they announce the priority of a decision, and making decisions takes us into the realm of the political and the promise of community. While a thorough exploration of the political dimensions of Critchley’s thought is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that the ethics of deconstruction extend necessarily to the political.

While Critchley’s idea of atheistic transcendence provides a welcome bulwark against Rorty’s ultimately static and boring nominalism, this metaphysics in the dark nonetheless continues in a philosophical tradition that is deeply suspicious of theology. One could only wish that a thinker of Critchley’s calibre could open himself to the vast and non-fundamentalistic theological resources of thought which share his concerns for a rationality more human than modernist conceptions of knowledge and truth allow. It may well be that a certain convergence is possible between metaphysics in the dark and a metaphysics less at home with darkness. None of Critchley’s observations necessitate the abrogation of belief. In fact, not only does clôtuval reading resemble responsible reading within the tradition, but it is this very tradition which provides the actual grounding for deconstructionist ethics, the demand of the other who is made in the image of God. Critchley’s inclination to de-theologize Levinas is unwarranted and only weakens his argument. While Critchley cannot convince us of the necessity of an atheistic starting point for ethics and politics, he demonstrates persuasively the need for crossing boundaries in philosophy and literary studies in the recognition that both draw on the language of metaphysics, which shapes our realities. His work challenges the Christian reader not to foreclose on multiple interpretive possibilities and to bridge the gap between private reading and ethico-political demands. These demands arise from the face of the other made in the image of the triune God.
CHAPTER EIGHT

WORD AND FLESH: READING LUCE IRIGARAY

AN EXAMINATION OF LUCE IRIGARAY’S READING OF THE INCARNATION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY OF READING FROM AN EXPlicit POSITION OF FAITH

ADA S. JAARSMA, SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

"How can you read deconstruction as a Christian and not do violence to the text?" This question was posed to me in graduate school several years ago by one of my professors, and the assumptions behind it continue to perplex me and motivate me to search for an answer. This professor made two implicit claims in her question: first, that there is a form of contemporary philosophy, called deconstruction, whose theoretical assertions about language and knowledge cannot be commensurable with Christianity. I will be exploring some of these assertions below, looking at several of the thinkers who are most closely associated with the term “deconstruction.” This approach to philosophy corresponds to the qualities of postmodern thought described by Deborah Bowen in the Introduction to this volume as an epistemological turn to perspectivalism and an ethical attentiveness to marginalized voices. The significance of describing deconstruction as philosophically incompatible with Christianity lies in the second implicit claim of my professor. According to this claim, faith acts inevitably as a colonizing force when brought to bear upon a text that does not share its religious perspective. An individual reading from a perspective of faith is capable only of invading that text rather than actually engaging with it. My professor was speaking out of the deep conviction that violence can be done through the act of reading itself. This essay will first attempt to make sense of this charge and will then suggest at least one possibility for redeeming the act of reading by proposing a methodology of reading that emerges from an explicit position of faith.

It is important to recognize that my professor’s intuition that reading can be a violent act opens up another possibility. If reading from a religious worldview...