

The Work of Mourning

Derridean reflections upon the waters

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The Holy Ambiguity of Baptism

There is an holy ambiguity to the sacrament of baptism. On the one hand, the waters represent an original wounding, trauma, and loss—surely the source and wellspring of all that we might refer to, with Jacques Derrida, as ‘the work of mourning’.¹ Yet, on the other hand, the waters are also the power of God to inaugurate a new world, a world that may *appear to be* patterned upon the old, yet is not. For now this world is looked at as if from another person or place, such that our former experience of the world is transfigured into some kind of ‘new experience with experience’, as Jüngel has said.² This because we ourselves have become different or, more strictly speaking, we have finally come to ourselves, our true selves, by becoming another self, the self who is Christ. As St. Paul says in Galatians: ‘Now I live, yet not I; it is Christ who lives within me.’ So there is something, I suggest, of the oft-neglected themes of Holy Saturday in the story or memory of baptism. Only by mourning, by visiting the world of the dead, is Jesus able to gain the power to overcome death. Only by mourning and pining for a world that has *not yet arrived*, only by being prepared to die in the midst of life, do the baptised come face to face with the Christ who can raise them from death into the strange new world of the kingdom of God. In baptism we mourn. Not for the loss of an Eden that has been devastated through sin, flood and fire. In baptism we mourn for a world that has not yet arrived, and can only arrive as we do the work of mourning, that is, speak and act as the material presence of an absent Christ, who died and rose again, and is coming to our world in glory to transform it utterly.

Water is dangerous: it can take one’s life away

One should understand that, in the ancient world, water was not so benign as we regard it today, flowing purely and freely from our taps as it does. In the ancient world, water very often symbolised chaos and evil. On the waves of the sea, many ancient people lost their lives. With the flooding of the rivers, they lost their harvests. In the ancient world, people knew that water was both necessary to life but also the bringer of death. “Fear death by water” said the Buddha

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)

² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983)p 32

in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. What that meant for Eliot, as it means for us, is that the waters of baptism should not be regarded as tame, given only to feed and sustain life as we already know it. The waters of baptism are dangerous: they are designed to take our lives away. Without doing so, they cannot give us a new life. Consider that icon of Jesus' baptism in the traditions of the Eastern Church. Under Christ's feet is Leviathan, an ancient symbol of water's power to kill and destroy. In order to be baptised, Jesus had to be willing to submit himself to the chaotic power of Leviathan. For that is the only way to overcome Leviathan's power. Perhaps we moderns, stuck in the Enlightenment categories of control and safety, may only get in touch with the unsettling *force* of that ancient sensibility when something like a tsunami comes along to confront the heterogeneity of our mythologies.

Derrida: Mourning as the work of any life lived before the Other

Jacque Derrida died just over two years ago. In his last published book, Derrida spoke of mourning as a work (or, in my designation, a liturgy) that is inaugurated at the beginning of life, at the naming of a new life, not at its end with the funeral. For in naming someone we secretly acknowledge that the substance of that person is as much absent to us as it is present. The name can be present where the person is not. The name stands in for a person who is never entirely here with us in the now. The name signifies that the personhood of an/other is able to permanently elude our instinct for presence, still arriving, as it were, from an immemorial past or unimagined future. There is a paradox, therefore, in speaking to, for, or about the other, whether in life or in death. Such speech 'comes to tear itself toward that which, or the one who, can no longer receive it; it rushes toward the impossible'. Still, the impossible sometimes, 'by chance' says Derrida, becomes possible, when the one we name is the one in me, in you, in us.³ As in death, a person whom we regard as very much alive is only ever present to us insofar as he or she works *in* us, in our *interiority*, as a name. So, there is death, and a life that is made possible by death, even from the very first naming.⁴

In Derrida-speak, this paradox is signified by the relationship between two ancient terms, the *punctum*, the prick or wound of the absolutely unique and singular, and the *stadium*, that mythological network of meanings by which we render the world habitable:

The heterogeneity of the *punctum* is rigorous; its originality can bear neither contamination nor concession . . . This absolute other composes with the same, with its absolute other that is thus not its opposite, with the locus of the same and of the *stadium* . . . If the *punctum* is more or less that itself, dissymmetrical—to everything and in

³ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 45

⁴ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 46

itself—then it can invade the field of the *stadium*, to which, strictly speaking, it does not belong.⁵

This means that the *punctum* can ‘induce’ a metonymy. ‘As soon as it allows itself to be drawn into a network of substitutions, it can invade everything, objects as well as affects. This singularity that is nowhere in the field mobilizes everything everywhere; it pluralizes itself.’ This is the force, power, or *dynamis* of the *punctum*.⁶ It is this metonymic force of the *punctum* that allows us to speak of the unique other, to speak of and to it. It makes possible a ‘relation without relation’.⁷ The absent living resist and address our exteriorisations in a way that differs from the non-responsibility of a corpse only, perhaps, as a matter of degree.⁸

Mourning is therefore something that happens everyday. It is a recognition, in the midst of life, that the other who faces me is not one who can be finally be appropriated into my own agenda for life. The other is mysterious, a particularity who resists my rendering of the world by a kind of absence-in-presence. The other, we might say, is like a parable that is able to question my personal mythologies, and in questioning to reconfigure, or reinvigorate, or make the same seem somehow different. Or, in the speech of Derrida, the other may be like a *punctum*, a prick of conscience or a wounding, which makes the lore of the tribe seem completely inadequate. Love, for example, is singular. For Derrida, love is not the love of a universal figure, but the singularity of a relation; ‘it disorganises all studied discourses, all theoretical systems and philosophies.’ The singular other can only appear by disappearing. Such love is, as Blanchot said, an ‘absence-as-presence’. The other who appears this ways is like the Referent in a photo. The Referent is not a real or a present. It is another who appears by not appearing.⁹

That should not be taken to imply, however, that the Christic other encountered in baptism—baptism as a mourning in and with Christ—may be taken as the quasi-transcendental legitimisation of any Nietzschean-styled permissiveness, where individuals may do whatever they want by way of flouting the law of the tribe. There are some, the most radically ‘postmodern’ amongst us, who would perhaps like it to be that way. For isn’t it frankly true that most of us feel legitimately *exempt* from what is socially acceptable? Each of us have a sense of the “higher law” in whose name we regularly break the law or contravene what our tribe would expect of us. Indeed, confessing such transgressions has today become passé. When slightly drunk at dinner parties, we will all put our hands up to confess. Speeding tickets, tax evasion, even sexual misdemeanours, these are ‘no big deal’. If the television show *Seinfeld* is about anything, it is

⁵ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 57

⁶ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 57

⁷ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 58

⁸ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 47

⁹ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p 48

about watching other people actually do what most of us still balk at doing, even though we have no real reason not to. *Seinfeld* is about the 'higher law' to which many of us subscribe today, the Nietzschean law of the will to power which says: I can do anything I like because, in the end, all that matters is what I make of myself.

The Rite of Baptism today: legitimisation or subversion of the *status quo*?

Today the church celebrates baptism within a social and cultural environment where baptism has been largely sanitised of its dangerous and subversive qualities. In the paedobaptist churches the rite is all-too-often reduced to a quaint and pleasant little naming ceremony. Friends and relatives gather in their finery on a bright Sunday morning; the child's forehead is wetted with a few tiny drops of water while his or her godparents are content to make promises they can neither comprehend nor keep. In the so-called 'baptist' churches, the rite is often reduced to its pre-Christian tribal meanings, i.e. baptism as a rite of passage into responsible adult membership of the tribe or congregation. Unfortunately, neither of these practices is adequate to the baptism undergone by Jesus, the baptism that is paradigmatic for Christians. For while the baptisms of the tribe pander to social and anthropological needs, the baptism of Jesus models the rather anti-social action of God, by which the baptised person is torn away from his or her 'natural' tribal roles in favour of a way of life which actually subverts and fractures what is commonly done. Christian baptism, then, is far more than a capitulation to the symbolic 'lore' of the tribe, such that the commonplace commonsense is owned and internalised.

The mourning that makes us genuinely *Christian* in the sacrament of baptism is infinitely more difficult than the choice for either the lore of the tribe or the higher law of the will-to-power. Why? Because in baptism we confess a profounder and more painful truth: that *neither the 'symbolic' law of the tribe, nor the 'higher' law of the will-to-power* are able to accomplish a self that is capable of that freedom we call *joy*. The law of the tribe can only ever accomplish our guilt, while the higher law is simply a *fetish we have made for ourselves* in a desperate attempt to escape the horror of subject-less anonymity of which Emmanuel Lévinas wrote so profoundly.¹⁰ In theological perspective, the impossible journey towards joy (or, in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*) goes by no other way than by a literally *unbearable* encounter with God who was in Christ. In this perspective, we can never really become ourselves apart from the traumatic interventions that the Bible calls creation and redemption. Christian baptism is therefore painful in the extreme because here we admit that it is not ourselves but another, God, who gives our life and

¹⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 61.

livelihood; that we are not the masters of our destiny or the makers of our own salvation; that our fetishized lives therefore have no more substance than a house of cards.

To confess or avow the truth which comes from another, rather than from ourselves alone, is painful in the extreme, for here we touch the raw wound of that founding *trauma* that most of us spend our whole lives running from. *The founding trauma who is God*. “In the beginning,” says the Book of Genesis, the universe was a void and formless waste. It was a watery Nothing. But over this dark Nothingness the Spirit of God brooded, and that Spirit spoke. “Let there be light!” and there was. This is a story about the making of the world, certainly, but it is also about the making of the human self. It tells us that the Self is never itself without the traumatic intervention or presence of another. The call or voice of this other summons us from the womb-like Nothing of infinite solipsism into the real world of consciousness, inter-dependence and relationship. Thus, we are called to ourselves by an intervention, a creation, an interrupting trauma that leaves its mark on us forever.

In this, says Slavoj Žižek, Christianity and psychoanalysis are agreed: that the first event is the traumatic arrival of another, and that most of us spend our lives running away from this event, pretending that we can find ourselves, or make our own salvation.¹¹ Ironically, the way to healing is to return to the founding trauma, and find there a God who is irrevocably *for* us, who longs for and promises our liberation. For Christians, this constitutes a return to the violence of the cross, that sacrifice to end all sacrifices in which is revealed, as René Girard has said, a God who asks for the worship of mercy rather than sacrificial appeasement.¹² This is not to say that a return to the founding trauma can be accomplished by human beings in and of themselves. For a trauma is exactly that archaic or eschatological event which *cannot* be in/corporated or re/membered. Yet, God is one who makes the return possible from the side of divinity. In the Spirit, God makes of Christ the *traverse* between the founding event and the event of baptism, such that baptism becomes a precisely *real* submersion of the self in the *yet more real* selfhood of Christ in his accomplished humanity, a humanity finally competent to perform the unique mercy of God. Here the human self is both lost and recovered more wholly than ever before; trauma is transfigured into joy. Joy, of course, is a vocative language, a language of prayer. Its primary motivation is neither to constitute the other as a version of the same, nor to reduce the transcendence of the other to a particular appearance. Joy simply *celebrates* the always-already-accomplished fact of the other as the salvific centre of the self.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 47.

¹² René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London/New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 210.

Mourning and hope

In this we catch a glimpse of the absurdly paradoxical *hope* inscribed in Christian baptism. For baptism is not only a letting-go of the fantasy-self, the lie of a self that is its own law and judge, but also the arrival of another self, a truer self given in love by God. Such arrivals are inscribed everywhere in Mark's story of Jesus' baptism, literally everywhere. The river in which Jesus is baptised is the Jordan. It is the river that, in the memory of Israel, marks their exodus from the land of slavery into the land of promise, their transformation from a loose collection of tribal nomads into a federated nation with a land and a holy vocation given by Yahweh. The baptism therefore recalls that God is one who liberates, who takes a broken people to his breast and gives them both a new name, and a new purpose. Note, also, that the baptism of Jesus is placed by Mark alongside a memory of the exile in Babylon. Isaiah interpreted that event as an intervention by God to change the people's hearts. The city's nobles had become obsessed with their own power and prestige. They had forgotten the claims of charity and mercy, and so God destroyed the city. In that context, the baptism of Jesus can be read as a renewal of the work of God in human society: after destruction and exile comes forgiveness and a new covenant, the advent of a new relationship between God and the people of God's affection.

Still, the most potent trace of arriving hope, in Mark's story, is when the heavens are ripped open as Jesus comes out of the water, and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove. Again, one does not necessarily understand these symbols unless one knows the stories of the Hebrew Bible. There one reads of a God who dwells in a holy of holies, an ark that is placed behind a curtain in the innermost chamber of the temple. Only the High Priest, or some specially appointed leader like Moses, may approach God there, and usually only once per year at *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. To my mind, the theatre of these Jewish rituals is about the irreducible otherness of God, the danger of assuming too close a familiarity with God. God is in heaven, hidden behind a veil that we may not open from our side. Yet, here in the baptism of Jesus, the veil that separates God from ourselves is not simply put aside, but *ripped to pieces*. Furthermore, it is done by *God*, from God's 'side,' if you like. In the Spirit, God actually *leaves* the holy of holies in heaven, and comes to dwell within the heart and spirit of one who is not simply a prophet, but a Son, a beloved one. No longer is God to be understood as the other beyond us, beyond our being in the heavens. From now on God is to be understood as the *other who is Christ*, a human being who walks amongst us, who speaks our language, who shows us what God is like as a child reveals the form and character of his or her parent. That is to renounce a religion of the 'sublime' in favour of what Žižek calls a radical religion of 'desublimation':

not desublimation in the sense of a simple reduction of God to man, but desublimation in the sense of the decedence of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level. Christ is a

“ready-made God” (as Boris Groys put it), he is fully human, inherently indistinguishable from other humans in exactly the same way Judy is indistinguishable from Madeleine in [Hitchcock’s] *Vertigo* . . . it is only the imperceptible “something,” a pure appearance which cannot ever be grounded in a substantial property, that makes him divine.¹³

To put all this another way, what Mark proclaims about what happened to Christ is also something that may happen to all of us. After the collapse and breakdown of the false self that is part of a genuinely baptismal avowal, God promises to come to us with the gift of a new self: a self forged within by the cruciform activity of the Spirit who was in Christ and now bears, forever, Christ’s form and character. In the Spirit, Christ himself comes to us as the love and vitality that empowers us to put off the old and embrace the gift of the new and truer self. Galatians again: ‘Now I live, and yet not I; it is Christ who lives within me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me’ (2.20).

Mark’s story confronts the commonplace understanding and practice of baptism in two ways. First, it tells us that there is no such thing as a Christian baptism without the hard and soul-destroying work of what I have been calling mourning. In the first centuries of the Christian church, this was taken very seriously. Several years were given over to the catechumenal learning of the faith. Through a process of action and reflection, the catechumens wrestled against the demons of both self and tribe; and they did so in the power of a newly arriving self, figured for them in the mentor or sponsor who was, themselves, a figure of Christ. Second, the story tells us that baptism will bear its human fruit not because of our own will or determination, but because *God is faithful*. The Father sends the Spirit, the Spirit of his son Jesus, to hollow out the old self from the inside out, and replace it with a selfhood of God’s own making and design. In this sense, baptism is not simply about the ceremonial occasion itself. It is rather a cipher and a ritual performance of the Christian life as a whole: a calling and a pledge to leave the false self behind, and to wrestle always to find the truth about things which is God’s gift to everyone who asks for it. This second movement confronts our fantasies about either absorption into the tribe or the will-to-power. For here we learn the difficult and liberating truth that we have never been on our own, that even the breath that we take this moment is possible only because *God* has made it possible.

Baptism, then, is a mourning and a building, it is mourning *as* building. It is the Christian life. It is a promise from *God* that may only be received and performed by means of a *human* promising: to walk the way of the cross by which trauma is transfigured into joy. All of which is to say that it is perhaps the memory in me, in my body, of the encounter with Christ in baptism that gives me the courage to live responsibly. For what is my life if not a response and a metonymic

¹³ Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 90.

substitution for these memories, memories so powerful and present that they make for me, and for all they love in me, a future?

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