

# A Conclusion without Conclusion

A GOD EVEN NIETZSCHE COULD LOVE

Now that we have heard from all the big names in hermeneutics today, heard most of their big ideas and observed the way hermeneutics plays itself out in our postmodern and increasingly post-human world, let's listen in again on the dialogue between me and a sceptic about hermeneutics that started us off.

*Having reached the end of this book, are not philosophers supposed to say something about the secret of life?*

If so, then I would say the secret is there is no Secret, no Secret Truth or Key which unlocks the mystery. That was one of the reasons Derrida avoided the word 'hermeneutics', but in the postmodern interpretation of interpretation cultivated here, we make no attempts to break a code or to find a secret meaning. The secret is a *structural* secret.

*And 'structural' here means what?*

It means that it's built into the system. It's not like somebody knows the secret and is withholding it from us. It is beyond access, in recess, in principle, withheld from all of us. The ark of the covenant is empty; there is nothing there. Imagine a portrait for which there was no model, a copy for which there was no original. It's portraits, copies, substitutes, supplements, all the way down. The Secret is not hidden somewhere until someone discovers it or until it is revealed to us from on high. It is what is always lacking in every interpretation. So, the best we can do is to stay in play with the ambience and ambiguity, the open-endedness and unprogrammability, that permeates the hermeneutic condition.

*That's exactly why a lot of people, hearing all that ambiguity, turn to God.*

God is not the Secret but a symbol of the Secret. Still, symbols are important. So, if I don't have a Secret to pass on, I do have something of a surprise – I have not quite given up on God, or, let's say, on the name (of) 'God'. I think it might still have some life left in it, and of that God Nietzsche is the prophet.

*Nietzsche? Who said that God is dead?*

The very same, and I agree, the God whom Nietzsche criticized is well and truly dead. But Nietzsche once had his Zarathustra ask, If there is a God, what would there be left for me to create?<sup>1</sup> That's a great question. For Nietzsche, the death of God meant the birth of human creativity. Without God, everything is possible. But I take Nietzsche's objection to God and turn it into a great theological breakthrough. What if, I ask in return, *that* is what God *is*? What if the name of God were the name of everything that is *possible*, up to and including the impossible?<sup>2</sup>

*And you think Nietzsche could live with this God?*

The problem with God for Nietzsche, for a lot of philosophers, has always been that God is something of a conversation stopper, a force meant to arrest the play of interpretation, which is why Nietzsche was, let's say, dead set against God. I've been saying that there is an analogy between God's Providence and the Computer Program-to-come, between the Superbeing and the Supercomputer, Yahweh and Watson, so to speak. But my proposal here is to take Nietzsche at his word, take him as the prophet

of a new species of theologians – which I would tweak by adding theologians who together foretell a coming God.

*And who or what is the coming God?*

The God who is taken not as Divine Providence but *as event*; not as the sure hand at the wheel of history but as the promise of the future, which, like any promise, cannot be protected from the threat; not as the enemy of invention but as the very possibility of inventiveness; not as menace to interpretive creativity but its *agent provocateur*; not as the final Why in the sky but as the ‘Why not?’ This God is not the ‘necessary being’ of the old philosophers but the may-being of the coming philosophers, new philosophers and theologians of the ultimate ‘perhaps’ inscribed in things. Then God would be the very thing Nietzsche is calling for in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the very thing prophesied by the ‘philosophers of the dangerous “perhaps”’.<sup>3</sup> This is a God even Nietzsche could love.

*Maybe, but then what would this God have to do with the Bible?*

More than you might think. Time and again, the Scriptures say that, with God, everything is possible. The ‘kingdom of God’ in the Scriptures is full of all kinds of impossible things, miracles and wonders, one amazing turn of events after another. But remember, the Scriptures are ‘good news’, stories, not newspaper reports. The evangelists are not journalists. The Scriptures are songs of hope, calling for the coming of the kingdom, which is always to-come. They are a *poetics* where the name of God is a stand-in, a trope, a symbol, in Tillich’s sense.

*A symbol of what?*

Of hope. The name of God is a nickname for hope, for hope against hope. The future is always better, not because it is, but because that is our hope. At bottom, religion, if that word is still worth saving (and I am not certain that it is), does not have to do with *beliefs* but with our primal *faith* in the world; it does not have to do with *dogma* but with our deepest *desire*. The name of God is a stand-in for something that we desire with a desire beyond desire. This is not the desire for this or that, but the desire for something, I know not what, which pries open our more particular desires, which maintains the open-endedness of desire itself, of unconditional desire, keeping it always and already exposed to the future. Faith deeper than

belief, hope against hope, desire beyond desire, not the possibility of this or that, but the possible, the perhaps *itself* – ‘if there is such a thing’, as Derrida always adds.

*And this is hermeneutics why?*

It is a hermeneutics of our primal point of engagement with the world, which we are always trying to wrestle into words, to go back to the young Heidegger. It is a hermeneutics of the ‘dangerous “perhaps”’, of the promise/threat, in which the name of God functions as a place-holder for the hermeneutical imperative. The name (of) ‘God’ is an envoy, an icon of the call to interpret the endlessly reinterpretable. That means to think the unthinkable, to conceive the inconceivable, to speak the ineffable, to imagine the unimaginable, to do the undoable, to go where we cannot go. It makes us restless with the present and drives our faculties to their limits. It names a limit state we never reach. It does service for something for which we pray and weep.

*Pray? Are you serious?*

Perfectly. Part of the perversity of my proposal is that I am not willing to give the old species of theologians exclusive rights to the word ‘prayer’. Prayer is part of our elemental condition. To pray is to pay quiet and resolute attention to our elemental condition. We are always praying, with or without religion. Indeed, prayer really only kicks into gear when we pray without any of religion’s assurances, without the least assurance that there is anyone to pray to, anyone to hear our prayers, anyone with the power to answer our prayers, and without a precise idea of what we are praying for.

*But what would such a prayer look like?*

I think the ultimate prayer is to say ‘yes’ to the world, like Molly Bloom’s fetching soliloquy in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, ‘and yes I said yes I will Yes’.<sup>4</sup> Even, especially, if this is the last thing we say on earth, as in the example of the string quartet on the *Titanic*. Yes, yes, amen – to the future, to the promise of the world, to the endless interpretability and reinterpretable of the world.

*So, in the end ...*

... there is no end in sight. The hermeneutic beat goes on, like an infinite improvisation. There is no Final Interpretation that puts an end to other

interpretations. Interpretations live on in the plural and the lower case, always exposed to the dangerous 'perhaps'. We pass our lives mingling with the mystery, discerning what is being asked of us, struggling to name the shifting shapes of the clouds, now a man with a long nose, now a horse. Every interpretation is exposed to an interpretation to come, that is always to-come, that never shows up. That endlessness does not discourage us. It lures us on and keeps the future open. It sustains the questionability. Hermeneutics is conducted in the language of the supplement, of the stand-in, of the symbol, of the substitute.

*Of the substitute for ...?*

... something, I know not what. It depends upon the interpretation.

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 'Upon the Blessed Isles', 87.
2. I have proposed such a postmodern version of God in John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1973), 16.
4. Available online at:  
[https://archive.org/stream/MollyBloomMonologEnd/MollyBloomMonologhyEnd\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/MollyBloomMonologEnd/MollyBloomMonologhyEnd_djvu.txt).