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### **Aesthetics of Text: Creative and Transfigurative *Langue* (in Theory)**

“There is an Indian story – at least I heard it as an Indian story – about an Englishman who, having been told that world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked ... what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? ‘Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.’ Such, indeed, is the condition of things ... I do know that however long [I investigated] I would not get anywhere near to the bottom of it. Nor have I ever gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about.”<sup>1</sup>

Clifford Geertz

“Wisdom, in the end, is tact. That is what we mean, isn’t it, when we say that someone *sensible* is someone *sensitive*: they have ‘the touch.’ As healer, teacher, artist, lover. Just as, by extension, they have the eye, the ear, the nose. They are attentive, tentative, in touch with things. They get it. To have the right touch is to touch and be touched wisely. Touching well is living well. Hermeneutics begins there: in the flesh. And it goes all the way down, from head to foot.”<sup>2</sup>

Richard Kearney

In the quotes above, Geertz and Kearney – I suspect the latter of playing with the former – regard these (in)famous turtles differently. For Geertz, “turtles all the way down” is an image of intractability, the problem of getting “near to the bottom” of an infinite regress. There is something motivating here, but the motivation comes from the quixotic quest: there is always one more thrust to be made against the tower of turtles, or, in Geertz’s own words, “progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.”<sup>3</sup> Vexing and searching are the heart of living discourse, the pokes and prods that ensure reactions from the living-other. But what Geertz has

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: BasicBooks, 1973), 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Geertz, 29. Here Geertz is speaking specifically of “anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology.”

ultimately privileged is the abyss that we glimpse only as the turtles disappear. In contrast, we can look with Kearney to the turtles, and here we must notice that they touch each other. Each turtle, layer upon infinite layer, is touched and touches – all the way down. When we look to the turtles, we can see that living is participation in the world in some tangible way because the turtles, unlike the abyss, are never purely external; the turtles are us and we are the turtles. The palpability of this participation presents itself to us within and through the art of interpretation – the art of living life sensibly. This sense introduces us to the holding together of touching turtles and the breaking that makes it all possible.

In this essay I'd to introduce an aesthetic and rhetoric of "breaking." (For clarity, I mean rhetoric *not* in the classical sense of a persuasive art but in its postmodern application as the *figurative* within language). To break open my title – it is breaking that is aesthetic, providing the alterity of the needed "between" (μεταξύ) of perception and the contingency of pertinent reading.<sup>4</sup> Both of these words, contingent and pertinent, it is worth pointing out, are etymologically related to touching, and touching is breaking, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, "The break is nothing more than a touch, but the touch is not less deep than a wound."<sup>5</sup> The wounding touch and the sensitive wound are here meant to be generative concepts, the pokes and prods of love and life that both break and bind.<sup>6</sup> Αισθητική (Aesthetics) is after all related to the verb αισθάνομαι, "I perceive, I sense," and this sensitivity is the art of tact, as Richard Kearney notes; the asymptotic nature of touch, the contact always-already almost made, always respects

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 133. Here the suspension of the secret, what phenomenally comes from "up in the air," is "as a meteorite" that becomes contingent in its grounding and "pertinent reading."

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 98.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to overlook or make light of Trauma. (I distinguish between trauma, the generative breaks of existence, and Trauma, what we the word means colloquially).

difference. Touch is not fusion; the touching of the turtles is not a fusional foundation but a bound chain of differences.

Here I will touch on many texts. In particular, I want to touch and perceive Genesis 1:1 in a different way, to break open new ground for dissemination. By going to the beginning I want to indicate how such breaking and wounding are the heart of creation and, thereby, suggest a “ground” for the aesthetic mimesis of human work (*poesis*) and creativity. This recognition begins with the figuration of the rhetorical in language and the breaking of grammar and logic by the transfiguration of language by rhetoric.

And before we begin, I want to point out that I am sensitive to the discomfort of thinking about wounding the biblical text. I am no less sensitive to the fact that such a rhetoric of breaking is an open hand of invitation (as opposed to the closed fist of confrontation) to the dirty words of deconstruction and literary theory. Such hospitality is not without risk for biblical theologians. Indeed, no hospitality is without the risk of hostility, but the risk gives rise to the wager. The wager – one more positive, I think, than Pascal’s – is this: if Biblical Studies can free itself from having run aground on the shoals of grammar and logic, to free itself from historical tethers and pseudo-scientific rigors, if we might break out through the breakwater and into the chaos of rhetorical breaking, we will find the opportunity not only for a deeper cast but a greater catch.

But to venture out we still need a vessel, and there is no seemingly sturdier construct than the *trivium* disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. But the *trivium* has never been a unity; it has always-already been broken. The vessel of our venture, the boat, is really just a void, a displacing abyss. In other words, pertinent reading is the negative process of leaping into and being suspended in the abyss of this brokenness. Paul de Man’s seminally important essay,

“Resistance to Theory”<sup>7</sup> points out that the figurative capacity of language has always been in tension with logic and grammar.<sup>8</sup> There is, after all, nothing logical about the grammatical equation of terms in a metaphor; to logically dissect a metaphor is an act of not-reading, a failure to touch and handle the text appropriately.

As we turn to “the beginning” in Genesis we need to make one further assertion. The text demands a rhetorical reading. Creation is not presented as a scientific treatise nor as an historical articulation of actuality; it comes to us as story, myth, and, more broadly, as literature. And literature is what most clearly introduces us to the breaking and voiding within language, as de Man asserts, “Literature is the voiding, rather than the affirmation, of aesthetic categories ... It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”<sup>9</sup> Because fiction is ultimately the only honest truth, and because it is breaking that introduces the necessary void, breaking is essential to the aesthetic recovery of the literariness of literature’s self-reflection on its own language. Thus, figuration as rhetoric is truly the transfiguration of truth through the literariness of literature. And, to borrow the catch-all phrase of medieval thinkers, *it is fitting* that “in the beginning God created” in story and language.

And it is all the more fitting that we are suspended in the first clause of the Bible because there are two missing words that are quite literally “lost in translation,” two gaps, two open

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<sup>7</sup> Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 33; Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 2012), 3-20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17: “This undoing of theory, this disturbance of the stable cognitive field that extends from grammar to logic to a general science of man and of the phenomenal world, can in its turn be made into a theoretical project of rhetorical analysis that will reveal the inadequacy of grammatical models of non-reading. Rhetoric, by its actively negative relationship to grammar and to logic, certainly undoes the claims of the *trivium* (and by extension, of language) to be an epistemologically stable construct ... Since grammar as well as figuration is an integral part of reading, it follows that reading will be a negative process in which grammatical cognition is undone, at all times, by its rhetorical displacement. The model of the *trivium* contains within itself the pseudo-dialectic of its own undoing and its history tells the story of this dialectic.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

mouths that must be allowed to speak.<sup>10</sup> This translation issue can be easily forgiven. Not only is all translation an “abyssal risk,”<sup>11</sup> but the two lost words are not really words at all but a grammatical idiom, and (I will assert) a visual and linguistic symbol that can only be read by breaking into and wounding our treasured translation.

So what then is the sign that justifies our cutting? The Hebrew of the first verse of the Bible is this:

בְּרֵשִׁית	בָּרָא	אֱלֹהִים	אֶת	הַשָּׁמַיִם	וְאֶת	הָאָרֶץ
b'rēšît	bārā	'ēlōhîm	'ēt	haššāmayim	w'ēt	ha'āreṣ
In the beginning	he created	God/gods		the heavens and		the earth

The Hebrew "word" that doesn't translate is bolded. The "word" is constructed of two consonants the aleph (first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) and the tav (the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet); we might liken it to seeing AZ, in English, or more to the point – ΑΩ, in Greek. That "word" has a grammatical purpose in this sentence as the "direct object marker". Hebrew doesn't have noun cases and word order is not absolute, so the direct object marker clarifies the logic: that God created the heavens and the earth (and not the other way around). As we move then to the figurative in-breaking, it is important to note that we began in a gap – a word without referential meaning – in a word that doesn't point

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 152-153: “The experience that I call disseminal undergoes and takes on, in and through the hermeneutic moment in itself, the test of an interruption, of a caesura or of an ellipsis, of an inaugural cut or opening. Such a gaping belongs neither to the meaning, nor to the phenomenon, nor to the truth, but by making these possible in their remaining, it marks in the poem the hiatus of a wound whose lips will never close, will never draw together. These lips form around a speaking mouth that, even when it keeps silent, appeals to the other without condition, in the language of a hospitality that can no longer be subject to a decision. Because these lips will never again join, because the joining-together of what is to be joined no longer benefits from the assurance of a storable context, the process remains forever infinite, certainly, but this time in a discontinuous fashion. That is to say differently finite and infinite. It is perhaps there that, alone in the distancing of the world, the poem hails or blesses, bears (trägt) the other, I mean “you” – as one might bear the grief of mourning or else bear a child, from conception through gestation to its delivery in the world. In gestation. This poem is the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ that is addressed to ‘you,’ but also to any other.” Such a long quotation from Derrida is necessary due to his style, but also because this quotation is perhaps the seminal influence of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

to a thing but to a grammatical operation of relation. This grammatical foundation gives rise to the possibility of the figurative in-breaking.

Rhetorically (and theologically) every "jot and tittle" (Mt 5:18) is significant. Here I suggest that the grammatical marker is a sign. "In the beginning God created aleph-tav," where aleph-tav is a merism for the alphabet and a synecdoche for language. The aleph-tav appears twice because, grammatically, there are two noun objects. In the second instance it mediates (with the conjunction) "the heavens" and "the earth." Language graphically, perceptively and tactfully – and thus, aesthetically and rhetorically – holds together the heavens and the earth. The erotic play of language operates primordially to hold together two oppositions stuck in the undifferentiated Θάνατος (death) of the void.

If I could hazard a more interpretive translation, I would suggest a reading like "At the origins (of time), God created *langue*, and the heavens and the earth with *langue*," where I have expanded the play of the aleph-tav – the word in Hebrew sometimes plays as a preposition, translated "with." This transfiguration of the first verse establishes the creation that follows in the rest of the priestly creation myth. Dramatically, over the formless void (תְּהוֹ וְבֹהוּ), the *tohu ve-bohu*) the breath, Spirit, רוּחַ (*ruach*) of God hovers tremulously. Time and *langue* are in a sense simultaneous first-creations, and now with the admixture of breath, *langue* participates with chronic force and is expressed as *parole* ("speech"), where God speaks and creation responds with its own counter-signature in the praxis of becoming.

We can break again. The letters, *aleph* and *tav*, are themselves significant signs. The paleo-Hebrew glyph of *aleph* is the bull, a figure of strength and force. The letter name *aleph* retains this trace, meaning cattle (Ps 8:8), but carrying the figure forward to also mean thousand, tribe. Its verbal form continues in a causative fashion – to produce a thousand-fold (Ps 144:13) –

and far more evocatively, it can also mean to learn and teach (Pr 22:25; Jb 15:5). *Tav* is slightly more complex. In paleo-Hebrew the glyph was two crossed sticks, originally looking like a cross and later like an “x.” The letter name *tav* is not itself a word, but the only associated candidate is the verb תָּוַן, meaning to make a mark, scribble, and, in the hiphil, it is used *figuratively* meaning “to wound” (Ps 78:41).<sup>12</sup> The force of writing is the force of the wound bearing the trace of the original touch of *langue*. *Langue* then can be seen as a primordial force, the already-always there of language fully constituted, a force that seeks enfleshment, the in-gathering of breath and the movement of contingency in time. Parole is then modeled by God where its full creative power remains always-already present in the playing out (and playfulness), the dynamic poiesis of creation.

Breaking at the beginning is of course only the beginning. Jesus himself is broken-open at the Transfiguration. There is more than the lifting of the veil; Christ is splintered, exposing the shards: Moses the writing prophet and Elijah the prophet of spoken words. The Logos, the ΑΩ, the תא, is revealed as text, not a dead text but a living text; in his enfleshed body live the traces of speech and writing. This is an aesthetics of breaking: the literal transfiguration of figure, rhetorical or otherwise. And it need not stop there: O Lord, “let the bones which you have broken rejoice” (Ps 51:8). In breaking, idols and walls are broken down (Ex 23:24, Dt 7:5; Judg 8:9; Isa 5:5, 22:5; etc.), the light of day breaks through – as Rumi reminds us, “the wound is the place where the light enters you” – the Temple curtains are cut open ((Mk 15:38 // Mt 27:51 // Lk 23:45), and, in the end as in the beginning, the old heavens and earth are cut open and folded up (Rev 6:4). Most especially, an aesthetics of breaking draws our attention to the activity of language and the Logos of God, the wounding and breaking of that very Logos on the cross, and

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<sup>12</sup> At least in the LXX translation (παρώξυναν).

most especially how the Logos was made known in the way to Emmaus in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:35).

The privilege of breaking is the vocation of artists and poets, readers and writers, learners and teachers. The time has now come for biblical scholars to put aside the practice of not-reading, to break free of the bindings of the closed-fisted grasp on a singular meaning, and to pray with an open hand for the blessing of the perceptive touch of rhetorical recognition. The improbability of this wager remains its most secret gift. If we can find the touch of the turtles, we can sense the break, foregoing the grasp for a solid footing for a more dynamic mimesis of divine *langue*. And if we can remember that we are the turtles, the weight of an interpretation that goes all the way down becomes the shared joyful onus of a communal dance that engages each of us, head to feet.